

"Treasure in jars of clay"

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[0:00] And Heavenly Father, as we look into your word together now, we pray that you would speak to us through it, to challenge us, to humble us, and to encourage us through Jesus our Lord.

! Amen. Well, I've got two or three slides this morning, and I'd like to show you the first of them now, which takes a little bit of, and the next one, please, as well.

This might take a wee bit of explaining. I was watching an archaeology program recently, and it featured what's known as the Harpole Treasure, which includes an amazing Saxon cross that was made around about 650 AD.

So it's getting on for 1,400 years old. And it had been lost, and it had been buried in compacted mud for all those centuries. And what you've got on the slide is, on the left-hand side, is what it looks like at the moment.

And you can just make out that there's a red jewel that's poking through. That's the red thing on the left-hand side. On the right-hand side is an X-ray of the same picture, so you can actually see what's encased in the mud.

[1:12] And when all the mud's been cleared away, you can see there's going to be an absolutely stunning silver cross exposed. The conservator who's working on it explained that it would take her many months to remove all the mud, bit by bit, because it is so fine, it is so finely wrought, so precious, and so fragile.

But she was really looking forward to doing it, and she was pretty confident that every day's work would reveal something new until the whole thing is revealed. But, as I say, the X-ray gives a preview of how intricate and beautiful it is.

And they reckon, the archaeologists reckon, that it probably belonged to a very high-ranking abbess, possibly even to a Saxon princess. And here, the hardened mud that has buried it for all those centuries is in the way.

It's the cross alone that matters. That hardened mud is just in the way, and it's going to take months to get rid of it all, so that we can see the treasure that's inside.

And from our text in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, that picture, if we relate it to our reading from 2 Corinthians 4, really puts us in our place.

[2:32] Paul reminds us that we do not preach ourselves. We're not on an ego trip. We're not the ones that matter. We are just the casing for the treasure that lies within.

Paul writes, The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. He then goes on to say, We don't preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as servants for Jesus' sake.

And then our main text, We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

It's a harsh point to make if we make that comparison. But we are made for the glory of God, but it is all about Jesus. It's all about Christ.

It's all about his image. It's not at all about us. And Paul says that people who don't believe in Jesus, in a sense, have had their eyes blinded.

[3:40] They can't see the light. And this raises the question, Are we, like this hardened mud, Are we in the way, getting in the way, So that people can't see Jesus, They can't see the light, They can't see the glory within.

And do we just need to be simply got out of the way, Because we obscure God's glory, Until that glory is revealed. And there is a point in which that is true.

We can sometimes be so full of ourselves, And so proud, And so it's all about me, That we can get in the way. And it is sometimes that we need that humbling message that says, Look, don't think too highly about yourself.

It's all about Jesus. It's not about us. And there are plenty of huge egos in and around the church, That perhaps need to learn that lesson.

And we all sometimes need taking down a peg or two. Because we are so often tempted to make it all about us. And I think there are times when we need to take that lesson to heart.

[4:48] And it does fit the idea of treasure in an earthen vessel. But did Paul mean that alone, When he wrote about treasure hidden in clay?

And actually he doesn't. There's an encouragement along with that as well. Because by God's grace and God's love, We are given something better than that.

And as Paul begins this chapter, He writes, Therefore, since through God's power, mercy, We have this ministry, We do not lose heart.

Paul is writing to encourage the Corinthians, Not to crush them. This is an encouragement, Finally, not a put down. And our gospel, As we look in the gospels as well, We see how Jesus had so much more, So much more of great richness to share in his love for us.

If we'd had, for example, John 17 as our main reading, Jesus is there talking about how much he loves the disciples, And those who come to believe through them.

[5:57] And how he wants them to be one with the Father, And to share that experience of the love of God with them. Jesus has got so much that he wants to share with us.

And that says that his plans and his purpose for us Are more than being mere mud. And coming back to what I was sharing with the children earlier, Or trying to, We are more than the mere packaging.

God has got a great plan and purpose for us, That we're not just the packaging to be torn apart and ditched. God's got something more for us. But the emphasis is always, Always on the treasure that is within.

I've got another slide to show you. And I wonder, Can anybody tell me who this is? Anybody recognize this lady? How many film buffs here?

A lot of puzzled looking faces here. If I give you her name, I wonder if that will help. Anyone heard of Margaret Dumont? Still not.

[7:08] No. Okay, Margaret Dumont, Not surprisingly, Is a very, or was, A very underrated actress. And when I tell you What she was famed for, You might begin to think, Oh, right.

Yes, I know who you mean now. She was known as almost The fifth Marx brother. She was the very stately looking lady That was usually the butt Of Groucho Marx's jokes.

And she was basically His sort of straight man. She was the foil to Groucho Marx In so many of their films. And the joke was That she never got his humor.

Groucho Marx would say terrible things to her, Terrible things about her. She was incredibly rude. And she would just stand there And not understand. She wouldn't get the joke.

And actually, Later on Groucho Marx said in life She never got the joke either. Which was a bit harsh. Because she was interviewed And she said this About her role as an actress.

[8:14] Script writers build up to a laugh. But they don't allow any pause for it. And that's where I come in. I ad lib. It doesn't matter what I say.

Just to kill a few seconds So you can enjoy the gag. I have to sense When the big laughs are going to come. And I have to fill in. Or the audience will be drowning out The next gag With its own laughter.

So she sort of slows things down So that everybody can enjoy the joke. But I'm not a stooge. I'm a straight lady. There's an art to playing straight. You must build up your man But never top him.

Never steal the laughs from him. So she was actually Everybody laughed at her. But she was a really skilled actress Who had such incredible comic timing To make sure that everybody had time To enjoy the jokes Before moving on to the next scene.

And she knew exactly what she was doing. I would like to suggest Isn't in a sense That is our role With Jesus. That we are given a real And an important And a significant part to play.

[9:28] But it's to point to Jesus Because he's the one that matters. Not to draw the attention To ourselves. We are here To point to Jesus Not to draw attention To ourselves.

But as Margaret Dumont Would have said It was a significant role That she was given And it needed to be done well. Of course We don't know Exactly What the clay pots were That Paul was referring to.

They might have been Literal jars You know The Roman amphorae That were used To contain olive oil And other things as well. And the Romans Made great use Of clay pots And jars And containers Of all shapes and sizes To store their valuables in.

And I think There was actually Just this last week Wasn't there A major discovery Of coins On the news 1,500 silver coins That somebody With a metal detector found. And you could see The pot That they'd been stored in.

And actually If I'd been quicker Off the mark I should have replaced One of the slides With that Because it's even more True to life. 1,500 Someone's absolute fortune Of 1,500 coins Stored In a clay pot About that sort of size.

[10:48] And on the outside On one side It's still an intact pot But on the other side It's cracked open So you can see It's absolutely Stuffed full of coins. So it might have been that.

Some years ago I was looking after An elderly uncle Uncle Albert Who we loved dearly And I spent a lot of time Chasing down All the way down to Kent To care for him Because I was next of kin. And on one occasion We were horrified To discover That he was storing A significant amount Of his savings In a biscuit tin. And we found Something like 3,000 pounds In this biscuit tin On the top shelf Of the kitchen cupboard.

It's safe now So I can tell you. He is sadly Long gone The house is sold And the money Is now Went straight into the bank With his agreement. But he He wanted a bit Put by And I think Hadn't realised Just how much He got stashed away There and In one or two Other places.

Old biscuit tins In the kitchen I suppose An unassuming place To put them But it wasn't The biscuits In that mattered It was the contents Significant contents You might remember Having a piggy bank As a child And again The piggy bank Is clay Pot Usually pottery But it's the money Inside That you wanted Or As with the next Slide We might think In terms of those Many many many Oil lamps That were so Popular In ancient times Paul might be Describing one of those That you've got The clay container And inside You've got the oil That produces A light And so many Households Use those For their everyday Lighting Again There's not much On the outside If you dropped one You broke it You could easily Get another But they did contain It was what they contained That was of value And of course That's a useful Illustration

[12:50] Because these clay Containers Shed light So again A different value So the emphasis Is always On the treasure Inside But the container Has got in a sense A privileged role Of being the container The receptacle For that treasure And that Paul says Is for Our encouragement But as we read on We realise That again Paul is saying That we're not Just the packaging To be Take the stuff out And throw it away Because this Doesn't really matter We are more like Margaret Dumont In having that Straight role To play In pointing to The person Who really matters But Paul takes it Further still That we can be More than clay And I've used That illustration Of a light there For a reason Because if we look Back a little bit Further And remember

That in the Bible The chapter numbers Weren't originally there Paul didn't think Chapter 4 verse 1 Let's start a new subject He was writing Continuously All the way through We have a wonderful Reminder Of something That happened In the Old Testament That makes this lamp A suitable illustration Paul remembers An account Of how Moses When he came up Went up The Mount Sinai To receive The Ten Commandments Spent so long In the presence Of the glory of God That when he came down He was physically Literally glowing Moses comes down From Mount Sinai And he is luminous And it scares The Israelites Everyone else Is saying What's happened To Moses He's physically glowing We don't understand this We're not sure And they were frightened And so Moses

Actually covered himself up He wore a veil For a while Until the effect Wore off And Paul uses that And he says Even to this day About Moses and the veil And we who With unveiled faces All reflect The Lord's glory Are being transformed Into his likeness With ever increasing glory We might not Physically glow in the dark But the more we spend With God Time we spend with God The closer we get To the Lord Jesus The more like him We should be And the more That people When they see us Should be able to say There is something About them Something about you Something about me That reminds us of Jesus These people Have been spending time With Jesus And it shows And that's the point That Paul is making here That in a sense We are more like That lamp Because through time With Jesus And knowing the Lord Something of the Lord Should rub off On us And we Should be reflecting His light We can shine

For Jesus Not just in the sense Of children's songs But literally In the way That we live Our lives It's a metaphor And so Paul is building On that When he begins What we know As chapter 4 He begins With a therefore Because of what God is wanting To do in our lives And how he wants Us to be shining For Jesus And reflecting His goodness We do not Lose heart We can be encouraged That this is the way The Lord wants To use you And me And as we read Through this passage In chapter 4 Paul repeats That in verse 6 God who said Let light shine Out of darkness Has made his light Shine in our hearts To give us The light Of the knowledge Of the glory Of God In the face Of Christ And then he goes On to say But We have this treasure

And it's this light That is the treasure In jars of clay To show that This all-surpassing Power is from God Not from us Do you see How it all Holds together That God wants To do something Wonderful in your life But he doesn't Want you to get Too proud As a result of it And so there Is this reminder That nevertheless We are just jars Of clay Be encouraged Be blessed Be excited Be thrilled Shine for Jesus But don't let it Go to your head That's what Paul Is really saying here And that light Can encourage us And strengthen us And enable us To serve Jesus Even in the face Of opposition Paul goes on To talk about The sufferings That he's experienced As an apostle But that what Jesus has given him Enables him To carry on And be faithful And even more As we read on further That life that Jesus

[17:55] Has That he makes over to us Will even carry us In the face of death Verse 11 and 15 We who are alive Are always being Given over to death For Jesus' sake So that his life May be revealed In our mortal body Verse 16 We do not therefore Lose heart Outwardly We are wasting away Yet inwardly We're being renewed And even further Yes we are jars of clay We are subject to death We're subject to decay We grow old We grow frail We know what life is like But that isn't The final outcome Again I'll use this poor old Amazon package again When it's done its job I throw that away It'll probably become Kindling For our wood burner But that's not The plan and purpose That God has got For you Humanly speaking We are frail We are mortal But when we've done

Our job God has got something Better for us And that is what He finishes This passage with So Our light and momentary Troubles are achieving For us An eternal glory So we fix our eyes Not on what is seen But what is unseen For what is seen Is temporary Or temporal But what is unseen Is eternal Yet we are jars of clay We are the packaging In a sense We don't matter It's the treasure within But God Has amazingly Chosen To house his treasure Within us And He has got this Wonderful destiny For us Afterwards But Don't let it go To your head We should always Leave no one in doubt That this is God's goodness And God's mercy And God's love And He Is where the true glory Comes from Amen Shall we pray together

Lord we pray That you'd help us To take that to heart To balance A sense of Wonder And amazement And joy With a due Sense of humility That we know This is your love For us That gives us So much And we always Want to acknowledge It is From you And we We don't matter But we thank you Lord that you love us So much Even so Amen To be