

The Treasure and The Jar

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[0 : 00] You'll find a Bible in the rack in the seat in front of you if you would open to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 on page 965-966.

This is a brilliant passage to look at for Thanksgiving Sunday. Not because it's full of spiritual food, but because it shows how different and unique Christian Thanksgiving is.

So just look down the passage at verse 15 on 966. The Apostle Paul says, This week in the Vancouver Sun, the food critic wrote an article where the headline was, Give thanks, some of you have read it, I can hear it, give thanks to vegetables.

You know, vegetables are no longer just the accompaniment, they're the star of our meals. And it's good that she's thankful, better to be grateful than grumpy. But to give thanks to the vegetables is a basic confusion between the giver and the gift, don't you think?

And gratitude, as you may know, is having a huge comeback these days. Forget about mindfulness or cognitive behavioural therapy.

[1 : 37] Gratitude is having a global renaissance, say psychologists. The current number 10 bestseller on the New York bestseller list is called The Gratitude Diaries by Janice Kaplan.

She decided to spend a year being grateful. And she argues that being grateful can make you more successful at work, happier in your life, you can become a better parent and better friend, and it'll make you healthier and thinner.

And it has a gratitude cooking guide and it has a seven-day gratitude challenge. And she says in the book, I wanted to understand the neuroscience behind gratitude, how we could use it to get control of our lives.

And I read about this in an article. A journalist in the London Telegraph tried the seven-day gratitude challenge. She said on the first day of the challenge, her husband kept looking at her suspiciously because she was so grateful for everything.

He was a bit surprised by it. And on the second day, she wrote to the owner of a newly opened cafe down the road. And I'll quote her. She says, it felt good at the time, but it's now a source of irrational disappointment because there was no response.

[2 : 57] She said, it worked for a while, but later that evening, Alfie, my son who's won, fell down the stairs and chipped a front tooth. And it was guilt that I felt for not being there to catch him, not gratitude that he hadn't fallen further.

Well, you could probably all do a gratitude challenge and it may help. But Christian gratitude is very different. It's not trying to work up a positive attitude in the face of difficulty.

It's not trying to be thankful because something worse didn't happen. Don't you hate that when people say, well, at least this didn't happen. It's not drawing all your inner strength to become more buoyant or more resilient.

It's not pretending in suffering that things are going well, nor is it being thankful for the suffering itself. Christian thankfulness is knowing the one who stands behind everything in your life, whether it's soaring success or searing suffering, knowing that every gift that you have, both the ones that you want and the ones you'd rather not have, come from him because he loves us and he wants the best for us.

And the basis of Christian gratitude is just, I think it's a bit of a sense of amazement, that God's grace overflows toward you, in you, and through you to others, even though you've done nothing to deserve it.

[4 : 27] If anything, we've done the opposite. This attitude got right up the nose of Paul's opponents in Corinth. They were exasperated.

These new Christian teachers believed there is no place really for suffering, that the Christian life and the Christian church ought to look more successful outwardly.

It ought to be more impressive and inspiring and, or at least imposing. It ought to be more concerned about life now and how things appear outwardly.

If you read through this letter, you'll know that Paul is painfully open about his weaknesses, his sufferings, and his difficulties. But since chapter 2, 14, there's been a sudden positive turn.

Paul is delighted and amazed that God not only pours his grace into our lives to give us strength and comfort to cope. The thing that makes Paul so amazed is that God brings people to know him through us.

[5 : 33] You remember chapter 2, 14? Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.

And do you remember when we looked at that? We saw that God spreads the aroma of Jesus through us, whether we have it together or not, whether we know the answers or not.

He continues to do this because we belong to Christ. So I love the way Paul puts this at the beginning of chapter 4. Actually, he puts it right at the beginning of our passage and at the end of our passage.

At the start and the end, he says, we do not lose heart. You see verse 1 and verse 16? He says, we do not lose heart.

My experience with Christians, and particularly other clergy, is when you ask them how they are, they say, I'm encouraged. Things are going well. I love the way Paul says this, we don't lose heart, because it means that he's very aware of his own personal inadequacies and he's tempted to lose heart.

[6 : 47] And when he looks at the difficulties that surround him, they are beyond him. And so what he does in this passage is he puts before us the two reasons why he does not lose heart and the two reasons which are the bases of Christian thanksgiving.

And I thought it would be good to look at these today. The first in verses 1 to 6 is because of God's mercy, God's mercy makes us into Christian lights.

Not Christmas lights, Christian lights. Just turn back to chapter 4, verse 1, please. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

Mercy here is a verb. It's not a noun. It's a doing thing. It's not an object. It ought to be having this ministry as God shows his mercy or by God showing his mercy.

For Paul, this ministry was specifically for him preaching the gospel. That was his apostolic ministry. But the word ministry applies more widely to every Christian.

[7 : 57] It doesn't matter what your ministry is. It doesn't matter how you serve Jesus. God spreads and shows his mercy through you and through me as we seek to serve him.

So just think of some of the New Testament ministries that are mentioned. hospitality, showing mercy, financial generosity, giving leadership, encouraging others.

I know many of you are involved in these things. These are New Testament ministries. And God, through them and through you, as you serve in those ministries, God changes others.

And you are a light. And you may not feel very lightish. You may, I think, if anything, you may feel your own weakness and inadequacy and failure.

And the lovely thing that Paul is very honest about this in verse 2, he says, well, the opponents have more success and numbers and they just seem not to suffer.

[9 : 07] And if you look at verse 2, he says, my temptation as a preacher is to skirt the truth or is to sugarcoat the truth or it's to use the truth to gain a big following or it's to dilute the truth or distort the truth.

You know, to add to the gospel or subtract from the gospel, to water it down so it becomes more acceptable to the hearers, to leave out the nasty bits like judgment and repentance.

And a preacher can do that with great skill and fill churches. And the reason for this emphasis is that it is in the preaching of the gospel that God heals our spiritual blindness and enables us to see who Jesus is.

You see, the gospel is veiled to those who don't believe. It's a veil of pride and it's a veil of self-worship. It's like a spiritual glaucoma. And it cannot be overcome except by a miracle of God's shining.

It's a veil of pride. Were you not a little shocked when we read verses 3 and 4? We talk about the work of Satan, which is much worse than a veil.

[10:19] It says in verse 4, Blinded is a terrible and a gruesome word.

It means putting out the eyes. And that's why the gospel, that's why it has to be the glory of God and not our own glory that shines.

Humanly speaking, there's nothing that you and I could do to repair someone's spiritual sight. You could live the most saintly life. You could make the most brilliant arguments. But it'll still make it take a miracle from God before someone sees the light of Christ.

That's why the gospel is never going to be overwhelmingly popular. It's why people are never naturally drawn to Christianity. It's why people can't believe on their own.

And it's why witness is so hard. And if you look in verse 6, it takes the same kind of power that God unleashed at creation when he said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[11:32] So God who shines and gives the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. So that if you look at Jesus Christ and if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior and the Son of God, it means that God has done a miracle in your heart.

He has shone and given you that sight. And it's very interesting when you look at the order of this first section, the way that God does this, the way that God shines into people's hearts, comes in verse 5.

In verse 4, Satan blinds. In verse 6, God shines. But in verse 5, we preach. What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

In other words, the bridge between spiritual blindness and God shining his light is the preaching of Jesus Christ as Lord. I read a number of books on communication.

Communication books have a very low view of preaching. It's not really a social media. They regard it as a one-way communication exercise. And the preacher can never change the opinions of their hearers.

[12:49] And that's Paul's point. And that's why he's thankful. Because the preacher cannot make any difference and change in the person. They can't overcome consumer resistance.

They just don't have that power. Conversion doesn't come about through moving human arguments. It comes about by a direct miracle of God's grace. Which I think is a direct rebuke to the opponents in Corinth, the critics who love the spotlight.

And it's a rebuke to all of us who think that God would just work better if we used different techniques and different style, if we could be more persuasive or popular. You know, if the preacher told more stories about it, people love stories.

But we don't preach ourselves. We preach Jesus Christ as Lord. Last week you looked at that wonderful verse, verse 18 of chapter 3. And this verse has more in it.

In fact, we could spend a series going through this verse. Let me just remind you, verse 18 of chapter 3. And we all, that is all believers, not just an elite few, with unfailed, unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

[14:15] Now the word beholding can also mean reflecting. In other words, we are transformed not just as we gaze at Christ, but as we reflect the light of Christ to others deliberately and accidentally.

The grace of God is not meant to stop with you and me. It's meant to flow through you to other people. And the more you become like Christ, God shines through you and makes you a light to others.

That's how God shows his mercy. That's why we don't lose heart. It's not we're always happy and encouraged and resilient and buoyant and doing a 37-day gratitude challenge or whatever.

But it's the reality of the fact that God is working through you to shine his light into the lives of others. Not because of your transformness or because of your goodness, but it's as he works through you to shine into others, he transforms you into the image of Christ.

So that's the first reason to give thanks. God's mercy makes us Christian lights. And the second, in verses 7 to the end of our little passage, God's power makes us clay pots.

[15:30] And of course, all the commentaries say cracked pots. There's 7 to 16. So Paul is not only aware of the privilege of proclaiming the gospel and God shining through him, but of his own weakness.

Privilege of shining, sense of his own weakness. And it is the combination of those two things that make the basis of Christian thanksgiving.

Because it's only the combination of God's transforming power and our suffering and weakness that reflect the image of Jesus. This must be one of the most favourite Christian verses.

Chapter 4, verse 7. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

This is a massive contrast that every true Christian experiences. And it is between the glory of God and the face of Jesus Christ, verse 6. And that treasure being in us as clay pots.

[16 : 36] And it's a double contrast because clay pots were both very cheap in the ancient world and fragile. They were just a convenient place to store your treasure.

So the glory of Christ, which is worth more than all the universe, God chooses to keep it in crack pots like you and me. The glory of Christ, which will outlast the universe, is held in our fragile bodies.

Paul's not saying your body is just a neutral envelope for the soul, as the Greeks believe. He's saying the opposite. He's saying God places the eternal glory of Jesus Christ into our fragile, temporary human bodies.

Why does he do this? It's to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The way God's arranged it is to make it very obvious that the power belongs to him.

I don't know about you, but I am constantly tempted to think that we need to do something different to move the church forward. And I see this being reflected all around me.

[17 : 45] What we really need, what St John's really need, is a team of ministers who are number one movie stars, or at least world athletes who can draw a crowd, right?

And Dan's good, but he's not quite that good. Or at least someone who's been a successful CEO. And do you know what that thinking is?

That's spiritual blindness talking. As one person says, one commentator says, God keeps raising up servants with clay feet and clay legs and clay bodies and clay heads so he'll get the glory.

That's why serving Jesus, no matter what your ministry is, is always beyond us. You always have this sense you're out of your depth. I certainly do.

I mean, look at verses 8 onwards. Paul says, we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair.

[18 : 47] Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus, literally, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies.

Again, Paul's not saying what we need is a sunny, positive disposition and have positive thoughts. He says it's precisely because the treasure of the infinite glory of Christ is in clay jars that those jars are not crushed.

It's like the high school experiment, you know, where you take a can and put a bit of water in it, heat it up and put it into cold water. It's immediately crushed. It's by God's mercy and by God's power, the glory of Christ in us sustains us.

And I think this is so helpful. I find it helpful. I mean, you feel your own weakness even to the point of despair. Do you? I mean, you find yourself doing things that puzzle yourself and make no sense to yourself.

And you ask God for help with something difficult, but it just keeps going. And you think, Lord, if only you could make it simpler. I've finished learning that lesson. I just want to rest for a little while before I learn a new one.

[20 : 04] But serving Christ, doing any form of serving of other people, is always beyond our ability. Just as it is beyond our ability to shine light and change other people's hearts.

In fact, I think if you don't feel out of your depth, you're probably not doing New Testament ministry. But if you do feel out of your depth, it's because we have this treasure in jars of clay.

And the great thing about jars is that if you crack them, the more that you crack them, the more that you can see what's inside them. I once heard a preacher use the illustration of a torn plastic bag. I think he held it in front of the congregation, this wretched plastic bag. And it had tears in it and something very valuable inside it. And as he tore more strips off the plastic bag to make the point, you're more interested in what the treasure was than what the bag was.

This is what the apostle says in the words of another commentator. We are the fragile paper wrapped around the precious jewel of the gospel. We are the frayed cable through which the gospel

message comes.

[21 : 15] But don't mistake this. Paul's not a sadist. He's not a masochist. It's not Christian to deliberately seek out suffering as though there was something intrinsically good in suffering on its own.

There's nothing spiritually helpful about pain or suffering by itself. Paul does not boast in weakness for its own sake. He doesn't give thanks for the sufferings themselves.

To giving up your rights makes no change for anyone else by itself. On its own, our weakness is not power. On its own, crucifixion is not glorious.

Death is not life. But what changes suffering from meaningless pain to being the channel of blessing and glory is precisely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And this is where Paul goes. Just take one of those couples, the beginning of verse 9, where Paul says, persecuted but not forsaken. Let's take that one. Persecuted means hunted.

[22 : 23] Chased down. It means it's the picture of when you've got a group of people around you who are watching you to see if you're going to slip up and fall. And when you're at the weakest, they'll jump on you when you're down.

Paul says not forsaken. Never forsaken. Never abandoned by God. Sometimes God intervenes to rescue us. Sometimes he comes into the context with us to comfort us in the chase.

Sometimes those who are after you are one to Christ. But whatever happens, you will never be completely forsaken by God because Christ was.

Remember when Jesus cried on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He was forsaken by God so that we would never be.

I think there's a great deal of pretending around suffering and death in our culture and sometimes in the church. You may have heard it said, you know, death is a friend and you can hear poems at funerals, don't mourn for me, I've gone into the next room, I'll appear in the rainbow and that sort of stuff.

[23 : 31] They're lies, friends, and they're cruel lies. It's only the mercy and power of God in the death of Jesus Christ that can transform death into resurrection.

And it's only that same mercy and power that can transform your suffering and my weakness into something of God's glory. So look at verse 11 and 12.

I'll finish with this. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifest.

That's a word to shine in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us but life in you. Isn't that amazing?

And I think this is an entirely different compass for living. I think this is an entirely different compass it's not trying to live as long as possible or being preoccupied with being as healthy as possible or as wealthy as possible.

[24 : 34] It's having a different point of bearing. It's that through Jesus Christ the glory of God will shine even through our cracks. And as we choose to die and to serve, to die to our own safety or comfort or whatever, the life of Jesus is reflected and spread to others.

And that is how thanksgiving increases for the glory of God. God works his glory through us as we reflect Jesus Christ. As clay pots with many cracks.

The thing is that his glory, it's not diminished or diluted or defiled as it passes through us because it's his glory. It's the glory of the crucified king.

And it's in the weaknesses and the suffering and it's in the cracks where the glory shines most brightly. So verse 15, it's all for your sake so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

And when you take the turkey and the cranberry sauce this afternoon, think about the unique reasons for Christian thanksgiving. Let's kneel and pray.