

# The Treasure and The Jar

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[ 0 : 00 ] There's one question that keeps kind of flowing through my mind as I look over this passage over and over and over again, and it's simply this. How can Paul possibly say what he says in this passage?

How can he say it? And how can he mean it? And how can he expect us to read it and to agree with him and mean it? Our passage is framed by this little phrase of five words, so we do not lose heart. Look at verse 1. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. And then if you skip to verse 16, you see Paul says, so we do not lose heart.

And so my first instinct to ask Paul is, why, Paul? How in the world can you say that we do not lose heart? Do you understand how difficult it is not to lose heart during some of the most intense periods of life?

It's not easy, Paul, to follow Jesus in the midst of resistance. It's not easy, Paul, to serve Jesus in the midst of weakness. How can we say this?

[ 1 : 16 ] You see, I think Paul puts his finger on one of the temptations and one of the struggles that Christians will face at least at some point in their lives. The temptation to lose heart in God.

The temptation to lose heart in the simple truth about Jesus. The temptation to lose heart in the fact that God says his gospel can transform lives.

And it can really work in the world. The thing is, I don't think Paul was very far from losing heart many times in his life. He mentions in chapter 1 that he struggled so much and felt burdened so much that he actually came to the point of despairing of life itself.

It seemed like he almost lost heart. And if you know a bit about Paul's context, you know that he has lots of reasons to lose heart. He has cultural reasons. He is doing ministry, writing to the city of Corinth, people in the city of Corinth who worship wealth and affluence and status and power and physical beauty and fitness.

And he is going to these people proclaiming the gospel of a crucified Savior and Lord. And they're looking at him going, you've got to be kidding me. This is utter foolishness.

[ 2 : 34 ] Paul's got pastoral reasons as well. He's writing to a church that he's had a long, complicated relationship with. He has anxiety over their growth as people.

He has plenty of painful, strained relationships. And this is a church that questions his authority and questions his judgment on many, many accounts. So Paul has lots of reasons to lose heart pastorally.

But then there's personally. If you read through the book of 2 Corinthians, you discover right away that Paul is a burdened man. He talks about experiencing deep anxiety.

He talks about experiencing deep depression. He talks about experiencing financial insecurity. He talks about experiencing the daily pressures of life so much so that he can't sleep at night.

He has many sleepless nights. You see, Paul has lots of reasons to lose heart in God and the transforming power of God's gospel.

[ 3 : 36 ] But somehow he says we do not lose heart. And the question I want to ask tonight is simply how can Paul say that and how can we possibly say that in our own lives? I think a passage can be divided into two sections roughly.

Verses 1 to 6. Don't lose heart in the midst of resistance. And then verses 7 to 12. Don't lose heart in the midst of weakness.

First, don't lose heart in the midst of resistance. You don't need me to tell you that we live in a culture of widespread, consistent resistance to the message of Jesus.

It makes us doubt and question oftentimes. If you have somebody question your beliefs consistently enough and strongly enough and long enough, then you start to doubt whether you should actually

believe those things about who Jesus is.

You start to question, is Jesus really who he said he is or have I been fooled and duped? Is he really worth following? If he is so great, then why have so many people rejected him?

[ 4 : 43 ] And why should I follow him? And over time, this resistance can wear us down, tire us out, and we can become sick of swimming upstream so much.

And what Paul is doing is he's looking in the face of resistance because people are resisting his message about Jesus Christ. And he's saying, we do not lose heart and you don't need to lose heart.

Because there's more going on here than meets the eye. There's a spiritual battle and there's a spiritual blindness. Look at verses 3 and 4. Paul says, Even if our gospel is veiled, it's only veiled to those who are perishing.

In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers. Here it is, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

The God of this world. It's a clear reference to Satan. Better translation would be the God of this age. It's not referring to location. It's referring to a time period.

[ 5 : 48 ] The God of this particular age. Paul's trying to say, Satan has some power right now, but he's got a short shelf life. So he's not going to have power forever. Then he tells us, what does the God of this age do?

In verse 4, he says, he blinds the minds of unbelievers from seeing the glory of Christ. Glory is simply the Bible word for beauty. So to put it simply, Satan does anything he can to make sure that people do not see the beauty and attractiveness of Jesus Christ.

Now in the modern world, talk of Satan and evil spiritual forces sounds a bit foreign and archaic, doesn't it? We don't talk about Satan and the devil very much.

Gone are the days when we put gargoyles on our buildings. And one of the books that's been most helpful for me in kind of wrestling with this understanding of evil spiritual forces has actually been a book by C.S. Lewis, a little book, called Screwtape Letters.

And it's a very interesting book. In the preface to the book, C.S. Lewis says this. He says, In this book, the Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis writes 31 letters from a guy named Uncle Screwtape, who's an older, experienced devil.

[ 7 : 37 ] And he's writing to Wormwood, who's a young, inexperienced apprentice devil. And he needs to be taught the way about deceiving human beings away from God, who's the enemy.

He kind of needs to learn the tricks of the trade from somebody who's older and wiser. So there's 31 letters teaching him how to deceive humanity. I recommend you read it.

Not to learn how to deceive humanity. But maybe God might use it to give you some insight. When I first read this book, it was about eight years ago.

I read it over the summer. And I literally could only read one five-page chapter a day. Because it was so convicting and insightful for me. I had to... It was intense.

And in chapter 4, C.S. Lewis says this brilliant thing that I think captures what Paul is actually saying in our passage. Actually, Mr. Screwtape says it to Wormwood.

[ 8 : 33 ] He says, See, I think that's what Paul says Satan actually does.

Satan often doesn't put thoughts into our minds. He spends a lot more time making sure that the thoughts about the glory and beauty of Jesus stay out of our minds. Because he knows...

Chapter 3, verse 18. He knows that if we see the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit working upon our hearts, he knows we will be changed people and we will want nothing to do with him and his ways.

And so he wants to keep us from seeing that glory. At this point, you may be wondering, how do you not lose heart when Satan is at work like this?

And the great good news of this passage is in verse 6, is that God can overcome the resistance and the blindness of the human heart. Look at verse 6.

[ 9 : 44 ] For God who said light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Paul's basically saying, God can turn the lights on and overcome blindness in people's hearts.

And notice how he describes God. He says, Let light shine out of darkness. That God has shone in our hearts. And this is drawing on two Old Testament passages. The first one is Genesis 1.

You guys know it. There was darkness over the face of the earth. It was formless and void. And God said, Let there be light. And there was light. Night and day.

It's an image of new creation. God renews our hearts and he deals with all the darkness and all the chaos and all the emptiness. But this image is also picked up from Isaiah chapter 9.

In Isaiah chapter 9, God's people are imaginatively sitting in deep darkness. They've been exiled from their homes. They're sitting in a foreign land. They have oppressive enemies ruling over them. [10:49] And they're wondering, When in the world is God going to show up and rescue us? And there's this beautiful prophetic passage that talks about a child being born unto us who is actually going to shine light in the midst of the darkness.

And it talks about this child coming and setting the captives free and conquering the oppressors. And he's called a wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace. Because he brings his liberating reign into his people's lives. And so you get an image of liberation. God's light shining into our hearts and dealing with the sin and the shame and with the evil one himself.

God who said that light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And what Paul is saying is that the power that God unleashed into the darkness of the universe is the same power that's being unleashed into our hearts.

And when that power is unleashed, we behold something more magnificent than we have ever beheld before. Not the majesty of mountains and not the beauty of sunsets and not the glory of a painting, but we encounter a living and breathing human person, Jesus Christ.

[12:13] And we see in him the glory of God meeting us face to face. A second century bishop called St. Irenaeus wrote this line that many of you will know.

I think it's quite profound. He says, The glory of God is a fully alive human being. It's Jesus Christ. That's the glory of God.

But he makes a second statement following it, which not many of us know. He says, And the true life of humanity consists in beholding God. So he says, The glory of God is this living, breathing human being, Jesus Christ.

But the true life of the rest of us humans consists in beholding God in the face of this human being. And friends, I want to say to you that this is where the healing of the soul happens.

This is where the renovation of the heart happens. This is where real renewal and liberation happens. But if you're anything like me, you go, This sounds great.

[13:20] But you also know how easily your heart grows cold and numb to Jesus. And how often you don't think his glory is all that glorious.

Brothers and sisters, I want to say to you very practically tonight, if that's where you're at, and I often get there in my own life, I just want to commend to you one very practical thing I do. If I'm numb to the glory of Jesus, I just say, Alright, it's time to read a gospel.

And I go to the gospel of Luke, and I say, I'm going to read one chapter a day for the next three weeks. And I'm going to pray one thing every day before I read it.

And I'm just going to say, God, show me your glory. And would you revive my heart again? I challenge you to do that this month. I think what you'll discover is that the glory of Jesus catches you off guard.

You think you know what it's going to be, and then it catches you off guard, and it's something completely different. A man sleeping in a boat during a life-threatening storm. His friends wake him up frantic.

[14:27] He seems very unconcerned, and he stands up and says, Peace, be still. And all of a sudden, the wind and the waves are still in a second. It's glory.

A man walking through a crowded street. He's on his way to another city. And a woman who has had a disease of bleeding for 12 years sneaks up behind him and touches just the edge of his garment.

And boom, instantly she is healed of her disease that she's had for 12 years. Jesus stops walking. He hushes the crowd, and he says, Who touched my garment? And he insists on calling her out in front of everybody and meeting her face to face.

That's the glory of Jesus. A prostitute interrupts an elite dinner that Jesus is at. A prostitute comes into an elite dinner with all these political religious leaders, and she starts washing Jesus' feet with

expensive ointment.

The host of the party is very mad that Jesus is associating with this woman. And Jesus gets up, and everybody in the room expects him to reprimand this woman for ever associating with him.

[15:34] And what does Jesus do? He commends her action. He says, This woman loves much because she's forgiven much, and that's a lot more than the rest of you can say. It's amazing glory.

Jesus dying on the cross in agony. People mocking him. And Jesus prays for them, and he says, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

It's astonishing glory. And brothers and sisters, if you behold that glory in the face of Jesus Christ, your life will never be the same. We don't lose heart in the midst of resistance because God's light can overcome resistance and shine in our hearts and change us forever.

That's verses 1 to 6. Verses 7 to 12, Paul says, Don't lose heart in the midst of weakness either.

Verse 7, But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Think about this image of a jar of clay. In the ancient world, they had metal jars and they had clay jars. Metal jars were sturdy and they lasted a long time. And clay jars weren't so sturdy.

[16:51] They would break easily, they were fragile, and they were a sign of weakness. My family and I took a trip to Greece when I was about 14 years old. And we wanted to buy a replica of one of these ancient clay jars because we thought that would be really cool.

And literally, it broke. It was sitting on a table and it just got pushed over from the table. It didn't get dropped or anything.

It just got barely tapped over and pushed over. And the thing shattered. It's so fragile. And what Paul is saying is that we're like jars of clay.

We have this tremendous treasure, yet we're so fragile. And we're so broken and we're so weak.

Paul describes what this looks like for himself in verses 8 and 9.

He says, We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to spare.

Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed.

[17:54] And, and look at the second couplet. It's perplexed. I think this is very interesting because Paul is saying in our weakness, we don't often know what God is doing or how God is at work.

And that's often part of the pain of being in a place of weakness and brokenness is that we're perplexed by it. I was meeting with a guy about a month ago, a young man. I was having coffee with him and he's been experiencing chronic pain, really intense chronic pain, debilitating for about three to four years.

And we're talking about how he feels helpless and useless in the midst of it. And one of the questions that he was wrestling with is not only what is God doing in my life through this, but he wanted to know how in the world is God going to use me for any good in the world when I'm this weak, when I'm suffering this much?

Is this, am I going to be of help any good to anybody? And it was amazing because I'm sitting there and he's doubting whether he's of any good to anybody because of his pain and his weakness. And I'm looking at him thinking of all the people that come to mind that he has been a tremendous blessing to just by clinging to Jesus for life in the midst of his pain.

So many people whose faith he has strengthened just by his witness. But he had a hard time seeing it. In the midst of his weakness he was perplexed.

[19:25] And Paul goes on to explain that in the midst of weakness we experience death but somehow other people end up experiencing life. Look at verses 10 to 11.

Always caring about the body, the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies. Yes. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may also be manifest in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us but life in you. See, Paul has a very realistic understanding of the Christian life.

He says, when this glory shines into your heart and changes your life it's not going to mean perfect serenity and perfect success and perfect strength. It's often going to mean weakness and an experience of dying.

But what it's going to mean is that God's life is at work in you and his power is at work through you to bless other people. So he says, don't lose heart. I had a professor years ago who was also a pastor.

[ 20 : 38 ] He started a job as a head pastor. He just started a job at head pastor at a big church and I was taking a course of his on pastoral care. A course of his on pastoral care and just six weeks earlier before I started this course his son had died.

His son committed suicide. And so I got to watch this man as I took a class on pastoral care from him go through grief and agony over his son's death for about four months.

And he told us many times about how hard it was for him to get out of bed every day. He's like, I just didn't want to go anywhere. I just wanted to curl up. But he had just become the head pastor of this new church and so he had to get up and preach every Sunday.

And he talks about how after 35 years of pastoral ministry experience this was the most difficult three months of his entire life preaching. And he said his preaching has never had a more powerful impact on people in his whole entire ministry than during those three months of agony and suffering.

He said he could not explain it other than in his dying somehow the life of Jesus Christ was flowing to other people as he continued to cling to Jesus.

[ 22 : 00 ] See, I think we tend to think that weakness and suffering somehow makes us unfruitful and disqualifies us for the work that God wants to do with us and through us. How can God work through me when I'm in this dark place?

But I think what Paul is saying to us is when we are in that dark place of weakness and suffering that's exactly the place where God can say my grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in your weakness.

One of the most astonishing things about the Paul that we see in 2 Corinthians is that he is not this big macho fiery feisty has it all together apostle.

He's a guy who's suffering and in weakness and he's open and honest about it and he clings to Jesus the whole entire way. Brothers and sisters, I wonder if this is an example for us to follow.

What Vancouver does not need is St. John's to be a church of a bunch of strong people who have it all together. What Vancouver needs is St. John's to be a group of people who are honest about their weakness and yet full of hope because they believe that God is working through them to bless others.

[ 23 : 19 ] brothers and sisters, if you've come here weak and broken tonight, whatever the reason is, maybe you're struggling with a wayward child, you're raw after a broken relationship, anxiety and depression have come at you once again, maybe you're fighting cancer, maybe you're feeling lonely and isolated, I have come here tonight to tell you one thing, that you should not lose heart in the midst of weakness because we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

And when we cling to that, then grace extends through us to people. People experience God's grace and they give thanks to God and God receives all the glory for it.

So brothers and sisters, having this ministry by the mercy of God, let us not lose heart. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.