

Treasure in Earthen Vessels!

Psalm 116:1-19; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

October 25, 1998

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” No sooner have we heard this than we have to ask, “What treasure?” The earthen vessels part is plain enough, but “What treasure?” Of course we live in finite, flawed, and fragile bodies of clay, destined to die, earth to earth, but “What treasure?” Is it simply our minds, our souls, our spirits? No, something more. Is it our own charm or wit? Of course not. Is it some spark of the divine within us? No, not at all. What, then, is it?

When Paul writes, “We have *this* treasure in earthen vessels,” he gives us a clue. The word “this” points back to something he has already said. In this case, it refers to the end of the previous verse: “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” This is our treasure: “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” So we ourselves are not the treasure, but we do have the treasure by the grace of God. Deep within us, we have this treasure of knowing God through Jesus Christ.

What a great joy this is! By way of contrast, the earthen vessels of our bodies finally disappoint and betray us. Though once they were young and strong, finally they become old and weak. Perhaps the most striking thing about John Glenn’s return to space as an old man, which is the way the whole thing is being promoted, is that it does not seem like very long to me since we first went up and orbited the earth three times as a young man. I remember it clearly, then you turn around, and he is going back as an old man. This has impressed upon me more firmly than ever the brevity of life. We have very little time here, at best. It is hard to prepare for, let alone to accomplish, anything significant. These wonderful earthen vessels simply do not last very long.

Add to this brevity of life the difficulties of life, especially for Christians. Paul writes, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” Life is hard for a Christian. Life is hard for the church. Why? Because the forces of evil and the powers of the world are always bearing down upon us all. Sin is always tempting us. Even the forces of death, our final enemy, are moving among us and trying to disrupt the faith of Christians and the life of the church.

And yet, the transcendent power of God carries us through it all. God may not, and usually does not, end all the problems, or take them away, or let us avoid them, but God does carry us through safe to the other side. And as we suffer more and more of these assaults, as we take on more and more of the death of Christ, we share and communicate all the more the triumphant life of the risen Christ with those about us.

So it is that within this transient life, within these fleeting moments, we have a wonderful glimpse of eternity. “For it is the God who 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.” This is the treasure we carry and cherish. It is the God who created the world and placed us in it who has spoken this word to us. It is the hidden God who sustains the universe who now chooses to reveal himself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There we find the treasure, and in it we find the good hope that this earthen vessel is not all there is, in it we find the promise of the resurrection, and in it we find the lively expectation of the life and the world to come. God has not abandoned us here, but instead has chosen to be with us in Christ, so that we might carry around within us this treasure of the knowledge of God in Christ.

What are the implications of this gospel today, for you and me? As Paul writes, “Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, ‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ we too believe, and so we speak.” Because Paul believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, he preached it to others. He could do no other. So do we, having received the gospel, share it with others. Having believed the good news, we tell it to others. This is not just the preachers Paul is talking about. This applies to the whole Christian church. To have the treasure is to share it, for to fail to share it is not to have it at all.

All who have ever received the gospel through all the centuries and millennia have done so because they have heard it proclaimed in some way. It may have been a preacher, it may have been a Sunday School teacher, it may have been a parent or a grandparent, it may have been a youth leader, and it likely was a combination of some or all of the above. Some how, some way, everyone who has ever received and believed the good news of Jesus Christ has done so because he or she has heard it proclaimed in some way.

And I submit to you that this message, heard, received, and believed, is also to be obeyed and shared. It is a part of the content and substance of the message that it is to go on. If the good news is not passed on, it must not ever have been received. For the truth of the message is uncontainable. It cannot be kept inside. It cannot be reserved for oneself.

This good news must be proclaimed, shouted from the rooftops, on every continent, in every land, in every language, in every city, town, village, and home in the world. We who are recipients of the good news and beneficiaries of its blessings are to become, as a very part of our hearing and receiving it, agents of its farther spread and proclamation. Rejoice in the treasure we have received, and act on that as the motivation for all of us to share the good news, to love one another, to reach out and include people in the body of Christ.

What happens when the gospel is proclaimed and the treasure is shared? As Paul writes, “It is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” The expected outcome, the natural result of the proclamation of the gospel, is that more and more people will hear and believe it, more and more people shall receive the grace of God, more and more people will give praise and thanksgiving to God, and the church will grow and grow and grow and grow. The more people there are in church to hear the gospel, the more there are to believe, obey, live, and share the gospel with others. Then, of course, the cycle begins all over again, so that the growth continues exponentially.

Paul continues, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” All the burdens of the Christian life are portrayed by Paul as a slight, momentary affliction. What a way to keep things in perspective! This, too, shall pass. The promises of God shall be fulfilled. The work of Christ has not been, and shall not be, in vain. The treasure now hidden within us shall shine forth brightly.

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. . . . So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight, momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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