

Treasure In Earthen Vessels
Valley Center September 1, 2007
II Corinthians 4:7

Have you ever dreamed of finding treasure? On January 6 of this year 60-year-old David Whelan and his 35-year old son Andrew were exploring on an English farm when their metal detector squealed. Just a foot below the surface, they unearthed a silver bowl, part of a Viking treasure that had been there for 1,000 years. The bowl was filled with 600 coins, dozens of other objects including a gold armband and silver ingots. Can you imagine their excitement as they realized what they found!

Last Sunday 16 of us had the privilege of seeing the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit in San Diego. We spent nearly three hours in the exhibit, and I consider the money for the ticket well spent. It was a chance to see history, sacred history, right before our eyes. Looking at the inscribed parchment, I tried to visualize the scribe who sat and patiently wrote the letters that are still visible 2,000 years later. It was literally, "treasure in earthen vessels." We saw the matchboxes and cigarette cases that had been used to carry fragments of the scrolls. When it was understood that these fragments were worth month to the antique dealers, the Bedouins would tear off small scraps and bring them into town and get money for them, thus complicating the eventual restoration process.

I truly believe that the Lord had His hand in the secreting of those sacred documents just before the Romans came on their destructive rampage, and placing them where the dry, arid environment would contribute to their preservation. I believe He covered the buried library with His hand and did not permit them to be discovered until 1947. In the centuries since their being hidden, how many shepherd boys brought their goats through those hills? But if they had been discovered 300 or 400 years ago, I doubt very seriously that we would have them today. As soon as the lids to those jars were opened, the clock announcing their disintegration began clicking very rapidly!

We saw a picture of the one who discovered the scrolls, the shepherd lad who tossed a rock that changed history, and a film of one who had first translated them. It was literally, "treasure in earthen vessels."

But, when Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth about the "treasure in earthen vessels," as mentioned in our Scripture lesson, he wasn't talking about the Dead Sea Scrolls, as apt an application as that might be. I'd like to suggest three ways of understanding what he was speaking about when he referred to the "treasure" in earthen vessels.

First of all, consider the "treasure" as representing the Scriptures, available to you and to me today. Do you consider the Word of God as treasure? Do you sense their value, as buried Viking gold? Listen to what David said. "I rejoice at Your word as one who finds great treasure." Psalm 119:162. Job echoes this thought: "I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food." Job 23:12.

There are four Greek words in this beautiful verse that you know. You may not know that you know them, but I'm guessing that you are familiar with these words, at least the English words that come from them. The first is the word translated "treasure." If you're writing a paper or composing an essay and you want to find that "special word" to express your thought, there's a book you might consult. It's not a dictionary, but book that has synonyms in it. A man by the name of Roget put one together that is often used. What is the name of that book? It's called a "thesaurus," isn't it? That's the word that is used for "treasure" in this verse. If you were reading this text in the original, you would read "We have this 'thesaurus' in earthen vessels." These days, you can hit a key on your computer and access a thesaurus to help in your writing.

The Scriptures are a treasure house of truth, more valuable than the treasure buried in land or sea. There are people like David Whelan and his son who spend their whole lifetime in search of such treasures. They make it their business to locate and extract things of value from the past. Sometimes they spend months, even years in search of a particular find, at times without success. Undaunted, they continue on in the hope of finding that one big discovery. Here's the question for us: are we as serious in searching for the real treasure, the treasure that will lead us to eternal life?

Jesus used this very word to describe the Scriptures. Take a look at Matthew 13:52: "Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his *treasure* things new and old." I like that phrase "new and old". It goes along with the conviction that I have that no matter how many times you

read the Bible, God will show you something new. You may have read that particular passage before, but it means something new to you now, maybe because you're on a stretch of road in your journey of life that you hadn't walked before.

Last Thursday was an important day for me, because that morning I finished reading the Bible, closing with the book of Revelation. As He does every day I read, God showed me "something new" that day when I read chapter 20:3. It says that at the beginning of the millennium, right after Jesus comes back to this earth and takes us to that home He's prepared, the devil is cast into a pit and a seal is put on him. It says, "He cast him into the bottomless pit and shut him up." I know it's not the primary meaning of the text, but that last phrase "jumped out" at me when I read it. "He shut him up."

Why does that have meaning for me? It's because the devil has been hurling accusations since the beginning of his rebellion. He's accused God of being a despotic tyrant. One day he's going to be silenced. He's been busy accusing all of God's children of their wrong doings. One day he's going to be quieted. The Lord will "shut him up." When Moses was raised from the dead, the devil was there to contend and argue that He didn't have the right to do it, but then Jesus silenced him and said "The Lord rebuke you!" Jude 9. One day soon that scene will be repeated on a global basis. From all over the earth Jesus will bring to life His children, and will forever quiet the devil. Are you tired of hearing the devil's temptations, discouragements and accusations? One day the Lord will "shut him up." That thought was valuable to me, like hidden treasure!

The Bible is a treasure that has something new and something old. Sometimes we don't need a startling new revelation, but a confirmation of truths we've already known. We need to be reminded, to have our memories refreshed about things that we've known for a long time.

There's a treasure of hope, promise and truth in this Book, if we'll open its pages. If you read only three or four chapters a day, you'll read it through in a year. Then what should you do? Congratulate yourself and put the Book back on its shelf? No, start again! Why? Because God will have something new and something old for you in it the next time! I can tell you that this practice has changed my life, my way of thinking.

So the Scriptures are the “treasure.” Secondly, let’s think about the “gospel” as the “treasure.” This is in keeping with the context of Paul’s argument in this passage. He says in verses three and four, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.” What is the gospel? It is the good news of salvation! When writing to the Romans, Paul said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.” Romans 1:16.

According to the Bible, God’s Good News proclaims that He has power to forgive every past sin, He has power to help us overcome present sin, and soon, He will come in power and glory and take us from the very presence of sin. All this is possible because of what He has done for us, in us and through us. In an earlier letter to the saints at Corinth Paul advised, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. I Cor. 15:1-4.

The good news is more valuable than earthly treasure, because it opens the door to a life that will outlast any earthly treasure. It’s more valuable than a winning lottery ticket, more valuable than winning a jackpot in the “temple” down the street. Its value can’t be set. It is equal with the life of the Son of God. Do you appreciate the value that was placed on your life by Jesus’ blood, as affirmed by the Good News?

We’ve seen this word “treasure” representing the Scriptures as a whole, the Good News that the Scriptures proclaim, and thirdly, let’s think about the treasure as being the Good News about God. Yes, the Gospel is Good News for us. The Gospel teaches us that we can be saved and enjoy eternal life, but it’s more than that. The Gospel is the Truth about Him, the gracious Person that He is. After all, of what value would eternal life be if you had to spend it with the Person that Satan says God is? From the beginning of his betrayal, Satan has made it his policy to smear the reputation of God. The devil says, “He’s hard to get along with. He’s stern and exacting.” The truth of God’s benevolent character is the central truth of this Book. “God is love,” is inscribed on every one of its pages.

We need to learn and portray to others the graciousness and love of our Lord. Merely preaching correct doctrines isn't going to win many hearts. Sharing that there is a Eternal, powerful God Who takes a personal interest in our lives and wants desperately to bring us to His house forever, and loved us sinners so much He came and died the death that we deserve so that we can enjoy the life that He deserves--that's Good News!

I'm impressed by the comment that the Lord had concerning the friends of Job, the "comforters" who came to visit him in his misery. They weren't very good comforters, were they! They came to console him and were silent the first week; that's when they were at their best! Then they spent the rest of the time pointing out Job's supposed sins and accusing him of unrighteousness. When it was all done, the Lord came and set the record straight. He had some words for Job, but listen particularly to the words He had for the friends. "And so it was, after the LORD had spoken these words to Job, that the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not *spoken of Me what is right*, as My servant Job has.'" We need to speak of Him what is right, don't we! We need to live and share the truth about God in a way that people can see a family resemblance between our Father and us! If we don't have joy and peace in our lives, how many will be attracted to our religion?

We have this treasure, the Scriptures, the Gospel, the truth about God, in earthen vessels. The central point of this verse is the contrast between the invaluable treasure and the container that houses it. What are the earthen vessels? The earthen vessels represent us. The earthen vessels represent the **reality of our mortal physical bodies**, the **ideal of our spiritual existence**, and the **hope of our restoration**.

Let's think of the earthen vessels first as portraying our mortal bodies. When Paul wrote, one of the most common ways of storing material was in jars made of pottery. There was no Tupperware back then, no glass jars with screw lids. And so it was very common and inexpensive to make vessels out of clay. In archeological digs, pottery fragments compose the largest quantity of material. Because they were cheap and easily broken, when they failed the shards were tossed in the garbage heap, usually outside the city. Here's the second word in this text that you know. It's the word that is translated "earthen vessels." In the original it's *ostrakinois*. Now you may say, "I don't believe I know that word." Think of it this way. When the pottery

fragments were deemed useless they were cast out of the city into the dumpsite. The verb to describe that action is the root of our word "ostracize," which means to "shun," or "put away from society." To "ostracize" is to "discard like a piece of broken pottery."

Paul says that we have the treasure in "earthen vessels". There are three things I would like to point out from this imagery. First, He refers to our mortal bodies as being like earthen jars. He confesses the weaknesses of our present mortal condition. He says, "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." II Cor. 4:8-10. Our human bodies are frail and subject to decay like the clay vessels of Paul's day. Does anyone need to be reminded of that? In the last few days, I've been reminded of that sad truth four different times. I've been involved in two memorials in the last few days, and just last Wednesday learned of the passing of a parent of two other dear friends.

Do we need reminding that our bodies are like earthen vessels? That phrase recalls our origin and God's tragic prophecy, "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19. Paul goes on to present the glorious hope of immortality, which will be received at Christ's coming. He says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day." II Cor. 4:16. He says in the next chapter, "In this (present mortality) we groan." II Cor. 5:2. Paul knew much of the burdens of this present life. He himself suffered what he called a "thorn in the flesh," which many feel was diminished eyesight.

What is a present reality in the mortal body should also be our ideal in the spiritual sense. That is, just as Paul described the container housing the "treasure" as being an earthen vessel, so it should be the objective of the Christian that self be hidden and Christ glorified. "He must increase and I must decrease" should be the goal of every Christian. When we walk into this sanctuary to worship, what are the words above the doors? "Not I but Christ." This is the contrast that Paul is bringing to light in our verse. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." Did you know that the word "humility" and the word "humus" share a common background? The lesson there is that one who is truly humble realizes he or she is but an "earthen" vessel.

The world is immersed in another way of life and thinking. Glorification of self in attitude, in dress, in materialism is the mantra of the modern age. "Look at me" is the predominate motivation. Years ago a young man was busy perfecting his ability to ride a bicycle without the use of his hands. Going down the street, now confident that his skill was up to the challenge, he turned around to his friends and shouted, "Look at me," not realizing that a parked bakery truck would put a very sudden stop to his exhibition. I can tell you from personal experience that the pain was emotional as well as physical!

"Look at me" the world is crying out when we should be declaring "look to Him." That's what this verse is shouting! That was John the Baptist's message, wasn't it? "Behold the Lamb of God." We can say "look at me" in so many ways, by all of the choices of life. But we need to recognize that we are earthen vessels, plain and temporary. The emphasis should be on Jesus. He is the great attraction. When in a few minutes we partake of those delicious fellowship dinner delights, what is more important—the food or the casserole dish; the container or what is contained?

Back in the days of the Judges, the Lord commissioned Gideon to fight His battle. Gideon really didn't "fight"; he gathered 300 soldiers and they split up into groups of 100 and encamped on the hillsides surrounding the Midianites. They went to war with very strange equipment; they each carried a torch, which was hidden within a pitcher, an "earthen vessel." At a given signal, the pitchers were broken, the light shone forth, and the cry was given, "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon." The enemy was thrown into confusion, and Israel prevailed.

I think the message of that story goes along well with our text today. Think of that story as compared with our verse of II Cor. 4:6, 7. "For it is the God who commanded light to 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. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." When did Gideon gain the victory? It was when the earthen vessels were broken, taken out of the way and the light burst forth. Likewise, it is when self is put aside, when the heart is broken, when the "earthen vessel" is removed from prominence so that the Light of the Gospel can shine, that victory can be ours.

We can even be tempted in our worship to make ourselves prominent. Preachers can get the wrong idea as to whom the "star" is.

I would think it would be the highest compliment if someone were asked about the church service by somebody else, who wasn't there, and they said it was worthwhile. And when asked who did the speaking, the respondent would say, "You know, I don't really remember, but it was a great blessing." To be an invisible conduit of God's grace—what an achievement!

We've seen then, that the term "earthen vessel" describes our present mortal condition and the ideal of self being hidden. Thirdly, the "earthen vessel" is a promise of restoration. We recall the story of Jeremiah, who was invited to visit a potter at his wheel. As Jeremiah poked his head into the potter's workshop, he noticed that the craftsman made a mistake in the soft clay. What would he do? What he toss the clay out and reach for some more? "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make." Jeremiah 18:4. He didn't throw the clay away, he reformed it to be something useful! Lest the prophet not catch the beautiful truth thus portrayed, the Lord said, "'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!'" Jeremiah 18:6. What a glorious message there is in the "earthen vessel" symbol! God is able to make us again! No matter what mistakes we've made, no matter what poor choices we've made, He can give us a new start!

So we've seen that the "earthen vessel" image teaches us about our present physical mortality, the ideal of how we should view ourselves, and the promise of God's restoring us.

The third word we'll take a look at in this passage is translated "excellence." "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the *excellence* of the power may be of God and not of us." The word translated "excellence" means literally "cast beyond." Our word "hyperbole" comes from this word. In Galatians 1:13 it is translated "beyond measure". And what is it that is "beyond measure"? It is God's power. Paul is referring to His "beyond measurement" power. This is another word you know. Our words "dynamite" and "dynamo" come from this word. God's power is without comparison. It cannot be measured or tabulated. It was exhibited at Creation. Of equal importance, it is demonstrated in changed lives all around us. Only God can change the way someone thinks. But when someone gives Him permission, and He causes a different way of thinking to remold a person, a changed life is the result. He can do this! God's "beyond

measurement dynamite like power” can accomplish this! He can do everything He has promised to do, in preparing us for the life ahead.

In this life we are burdened with physical constraints because the life we have now is contained in a vessel made of earth and subject to decay. God knows this: “He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” Psalm 103:14. But according to the wonderful treasure, the Scriptures declare the Good News of salvation and the truth about God, and we look forward to that Day when He makes all things new.