

Women's Bible Study – Spring 2008

Shared Lives: *The Relationship Between a Pastor and His People*

Shared Grace: 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

February 27, 2008

Jann Wright



On Wednesday February 6 I turned on the television about 6:00 a.m. to see the morning news. Normally, I don't turn on the news so early; but I was checking for the late night election returns from California from Super Tuesday. That objective quickly faded as my eyes locked onto these images flashing across the screen.

I could hardly believe my eyes. This looked like a war zone. The pictures you are seeing are of the Campus of Union University, a Christian College in Jackson, Tennessee. On Tuesday February 5th at about 7:00 p.m. a massive tornado struck the campus. Buildings that had stood for decades were crumbled as though they were made of children's building blocks. Of the 42 buildings on Campus, 19 sustained major damage; only one building was untouched by the storm. University President Dockery has estimated the damage at \$40 million.

As I watched I heard the President say, nearly 1200 students were on campus that evening and almost 80 percent of the student dormitories were destroyed. Immediately I began to think of the students, and then I realized that I knew one of them, and many of you probably do too, Joanna Vaughn. Joanna is the daughter of Debbie and Andy Vaughn. Debbie attends our morning Women's Bible Study. This is Debbie's best guess of approximately Joanna's room. It is hard to tell, because several of the buildings that were in front of it were destroyed. Joanna sought cover in a bathroom with other students.

Review

The things that seem permanent, unshakable, and built to last forever, can topple in an instant and ironically the things unseen to the world are those that last forever. Our study today/tonight is in 2 Corinthians, we are continuing in Chapter 4. Last week Gretchen focused on God's glory. She talked about the glory that lasts and the new covenant that shines even brighter than the old covenant. She reminded us of God's glory that transforms, overcomes, is permanent, is truth, points to Christ, and reveals God. We will pick up our study in Verse 7.

Scripture Passage: 2 Corinthians Chapter 4, verses 7-18.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For 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. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. ¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. ¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Now, let's look again at verse 7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

I want you to really let those words soak in. If you have something to write with I want you to take 45 seconds to write this verse in the space provided on your outline. Go ahead and do that now. You know Deuteronomy 17:18 tells us that the Kings of Israel and Judah when they came to power were to write for themselves a copy of the law in a book from which they could read and learn all the days of their lives. There is great value in writing down scripture.

This morning/evening the focus of our study will be verse 7. We will touch on the other verses and their meaning and application; but this will be our focus, the lens through which we examine this passage. In this verse we are presented with an incredible contrast, a mental picture that illustrates deep spiritual realities.

The Treasure

Let's begin with the treasure; but we have this treasure . . . The treasure of course is the gospel. The treasure is the ministry to which Paul refers in the opening verse of Chapter 4, "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart". That ministry is the spreading of the gospel.

God had been slowly revealing this treasure, this gem beyond compare, to man since the very beginning, even as early as the Garden of Eden. He began with brief phrases and simple pictures like: the Exodus, the Law, the Sacrifices, the Tabernacle, the Priests, the Temple until finally the time was finally ripe. The time when God himself would lay aside his glory and take on the form of a man. Jesus Christ would come as a baby, grow, and live among men. He permitted himself to be executed on a Roman Cross to pay the penalty for the sins each of us committed so that we could be forgiven by God and restored to a personal relationship with him.

We have this treasure . . . it is priceless. There is no monetary value to be placed on a relationship with God himself. No price that could be assigned to being called a friend of God. There is not an acceptable exchange we could offer to live forever in the very

presence of God, in his heaven, where there is no death, no sin, and no sorrow. We have this treasure.

What do we do with treasure? Usually we protect it. We store it away. We find a safe hiding place; perhaps a safe deposit box in a bank vault, or a locked place in our home. In the case of national treasures, like the Crown Jewels or the original copy of the Declaration of Independence we place them in locked glass cases to be admired; but also surrounded by security guards, cameras, alarm systems so that the treasures do not leave their safe place.

The Container

Jars of Clay

God; however, has placed his most valuable treasure, in jars of clay or as the King James Version words it, earthen vessels. I admired these jars several weeks ago. You may have seen them during Pastor Steer's sermon on Jesus turning the water into wine. I happened to be reading scripture that morning for the service, so I literally had a front row seat. I stared at them the entire time. I don't know that I had ever really seen jars of clay, that large and that close up. I have pondered them for weeks. April Rowe, one of our worship team leaders, graciously arranged to have them here for our study so that you too can have the opportunity to ponder their meaning.

Characteristics

Plentiful, Common, Functional, and Fragile

In Paul's day, jars of clay were plentiful. The New Life Application Bible Commentary says "They could be seen just about everywhere- in window openings, near cooking fires, and in marketplaces". They came in many shapes and sizes. They had many different uses: held food, fuel, water for washing, garbage, and even human waste. They were not particularly beautiful or lovely. They cracked, they leaked, and when they broke, which they did easily and often they were discarded and replaced with another earthen vessel fitted for the needed function.

Strength

Sometimes they were used to hold valuables, like silver and gold and on occasion displayed a rare quality of strength that seemed inexplicable. In 1947 a shepherd looking for a stray goat in a cave near Qumran, which is on the northwestern shores of the Dead Sea in Israel stumbled upon some clay jars containing ancient scrolls. These are what we know as the Dead Sea Scrolls and were from the 1st Century A.D.; Paul's day. They contained a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah as well as numerous other portions of biblical text. In this case jars of clay had preserved ancient scrolls for 2,000 years.¹

¹ Nelson Study Bible. Page 1125

Examples of Jars of Clay

The jars of clay to which Paul is referring are our earthly bodies. This is the same thought as he expresses in **1 Corinthians 6:19** Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Our bodies are the dwelling place of God on this earth. We are the containers for his treasure.

We are like those physical jars of clay. We are fragile. Commentator John Stott worded it well when he said we are, subject to decay, vulnerable to disease, and to injury.² We are plentiful and common. There are many of us walking around. We are in homes, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, at the gym, at the park, on the soccer field. We come in all shapes and sizes. We are ordinary.

God had been using jars of clay, fragile and flawed, to hold his treasure for centuries before Paul ever put forth this metaphor. Consider Abraham who lied twice and said his wife was his sister and found himself being called to account by pagan kings. There was Moses who by his own admission was inarticulate, and who more than once lost his temper with serious consequences. There was David, Israel's greatest king who committed murder and adultery; but there was one example of a flawed man that Paul knew better than anyone else; himself. Paul had been a persecutor of Christians and an accomplice to Stephen's stoning. Paul understood the analogy of a clay jar; I don't think he ever quite got over the fact that God had called him of all people to be an apostle.

Remember a few weeks ago Michelle back in Chapter 2 mentioned an issue with the Corinthian Church regarding letters of recommendation. It seemed those in the church were requesting proper credentials from Paul and he told them his letter of recommendation was them, since he himself founded the church there.

Paul still seems to be addressing this issue. It is a difficult one. On the one hand if he defends himself and provides credentials he seems arrogant, on the other hand if he doesn't provide the recommendations he appears unqualified. Paul handles this in a very unique and mature way. He agrees with them that he is unequal to the task. He admits his difficulties and his weaknesses. He says,

⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Notice the contrasts in this sentence. He says, "We are hard pressed." The pressure is very great on Paul and it comes from all sides. He has difficulties with the Jews, with the Gentiles, and with this local church. In 2 Corinthians 10:10 we read this charge by his critics, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." No wonder he felt hard pressed.

² Stott, John. *The Message of 2 Corinthians*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1988. page 87.

We are perplexed, meaning confused or discouraged. He is struggling. He is suffering from persecution; the word used here means to track down a prey³. Finally, he says we are struck down; perhaps he is referring to the stoning he suffering in Lystra where the people left him for dead. Or perhaps he had in mind a wrestling metaphor; which is what the word often refers to where a wrestler was struck down when he was thrown to the floor. This of course is a setback; but it is not the same as being defeated.⁴ Even in all these difficult situations that Paul and his colleagues faced, God had sustained them. He had prevented them from being crushed, in despair, abandoned, or destroyed.

¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For 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. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. ¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,

Note again the contrasts. Here it is the contrast between death and life. In this passage when he refers to carrying around in his body the death of Christ he is speaking of the cost of being a disciple of Christ. Paul had suffered many things in his obedience to the ministry to which Christ had assigned him. It is revealing to recall Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus recorded in the 9th Chapter of the Book of Acts. Jesus is speaking to Ananias and sending him to minister to Paul who has been struck blind. Jesus says, verse 15, "Go! This man (meaning Paul) is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Paul knew great suffering as a follower of Christ. In verse 13, this phrase, "I believed; therefore I have spoken" don't seem to add a great deal to our understanding until we look at Psalm 116 from which Paul is quoting.

¹ I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. ² Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. ³ The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!" ⁵ The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. ⁶ The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me. ⁷ Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you. ⁸ For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, ⁹ that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁰ I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted." ¹¹ And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars." ¹² How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me? ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. ¹⁴ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. ¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints. ¹⁶ O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains. ¹⁷ I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD. ¹⁸ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.

³ Galvin, James C and Beers, Ronald A. , Contributing Editors, Life Application Bible Commentary, The Livingstone Corporation, 1999 page 332.

⁴ Anders, Max, General Editor, Holman New Testament Commentary, 2000; Broadman & Holman Publishers. Nashville, TN page 339.

Paul knew great suffering; but he knew that that suffering had a purpose it was bringing life to the people of his day. He was bringing them God's very treasure: the gift of salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus. Paul understood very well the metaphor that he was using; he knew what it was like to feel fragile. Sometimes I think we are under the impression that because we have the account of a person's life in the Bible that somehow the exercise of their faith was easier for them than it is for us. In this letter; however, we get to see the intimate thoughts and struggles of Paul and realize it wasn't easy for him. It is not easy for us. We too are jars of clay.

Lessons For Us

So what can we learn from this passage about the treasure in jars of clay that will help us to function as Christians on a daily basis? **First, we learn two realities about our lives.** When I first read some of the commentators' descriptions of jars of clay; frankly I found them a little offensive. I was o.k. with being labeled as fragile and weak so that others could see the all surpassing power of God; but I was a little annoyed with the characterization that the jars could be tossed out, replaced when broken beyond repair.

The First Reality is that We Will Die. It is painful reality; but a useful exercise to realize that we will not be on this earth in these bodies forever. No matter what our roles in ministry, in community, or even in family; we have a temporary assignment. When sin entered into the world, death was the result. We are susceptible to disease, to injury, to aging and to death. We will die. It is a reality. It is the truth. Gretchen, will further expound on this reality when she teaches from Chapter 5 next week, where our bodies are compared to a tent.

The Second Reality is the Resurrection. We can allow ourselves to be discouraged and to lose heart if we focus exclusively on death, and the temporary nature of life. When we do that we risk losing heart; we are encouraged twice just in this 4th chapter not to lose heart.

With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. The resurrection is coming. We can count on it. We know that God who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead is also going to raise us from the dead. That is a fact. That is reality. That is the truth. 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 says, For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. This reality balances and outweighs the reality of death. For now we have future and a hope. Now we have a purpose and a plan.

¹⁵All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. ¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Again we see contrasts, here the contrast between outwardly wasting away and inwardly being renewed. We can take heart because even though our bodies may be outwardly wasting away through either disease or aging; inwardly we are being renewed in spirit day by day. We can take heart because even though our troubles on this earth make us feel hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down; when we view them from the perspective of eternity even we will agree that they were momentary and light. The process of being refined by them will achieve for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

To keep from losing heart, we must fix our eyes not on the things we can see like brick buildings, or money, or wealth, or power; but we must fix eyes on what is unseen. Hebrews 12:2-3 says, Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

The third lesson we learn, from this passage is that the placement of the treasure into jars of clay is not accidental; but intentional and purposeful.

God specifically directed that his treasure would be housed in human beings frail and flawed as they are because in this way it is clear that the all-surpassing power that others see is from God and not from us.

Others can see the power of God present in us in our weakest moments. These verses remind me of specific people, some of their names are written in the margins of my Bible by these verses and others are written so indelibly on my heart that I don't need to write their names in the margin. One of those examples, is my father. My father was diagnosed with lung cancer that had spread to his liver in August of 2002; five months later he died. He attended church often in those intervening months. In December that year for Christmas our whole family accompanied him to church. In the last month of his life, as he was literally wasting away from his cancer, on more than one occasion the men of the church had to carry him to the car because he was too weak to walk.

One of the young ladies of the church in her 20's, healthy, single, working, confessed to a family member that she often slept in on Sunday mornings and was either late to church or never made it at all. But one morning she saw my father, come into the church, worship, and then be carried out at the end of the service. She said, she determined on that day, that if my father placed that high of a value on the worship of God; she would stop squandering her opportunity to worship Him. Even in our very weakest moments the power of God radiates in supernatural ways.

I think of Luanna Lechliter, a beloved member of our church, and faithful leader in women's ministries, and in women's bible study. Luanna has now moved to Nebraska to be near her children. ALS has taken a huge, almost indescribable toll on her physical body beginning with loss of the use of an arm and progressing to most every other part

of her body, and most notably her ability to speak and to eat. Yet, Luanna's e-mails convey a spiritual power that can only be described as the all-surpassing power of God displayed in one of his fragile and beloved servants.

Consider our opening example, the damage and devastation of Union University. That situation has revealed the incredible treasure that was held in clay pots. I almost cried when I had heard the President of the University responding to a reporter's questions. The reporter asked, So where are all of the students? I mean where can you possibly put 1200 students?

The President responded, by saying, that by meticulous procedures they had accounted for every student and they were all safe. He continued, "What can only be explained as a miracle of divine intervention, no lives were lost". Can you imagine the opportunity for a witness like that on national television? Finally, in response to the location and care of the students, he said, that as soon as the storm passed, the Faculty and Staff of the University began pulling up to the campus and loading as many students as they could take in whatever vehicle they had: cars, vans, the back of pick up trucks and took many of the students into their own homes and located temporary housing for the others. This is an incredible testimony to the precious treasure, the Glory and Majesty of God, working through his servants, mere clay pots in their most fragile and broken moments.

Those scenes speak volumes. I read one of the blog posts on the university's website just days into the disaster that said something like this, "I don't even go to church; but I am so impressed by how all of the students and faculty are handling this I have sent a check." This unbeliever did not know how to name what they saw; but we do, it was the all-surpassing power of God.

The final lesson, I think we can learn from this passage is that God places his treasure in clay jars because He wants it accessible and shared. My daughter, Ashley has developed an interesting new hobby, collecting old books. She is 14 years old and loves history and literature. I jokingly told her literature teacher a few weeks ago that if he didn't stop feeding her enthusiasm for books that we would need a conference to determine spending limits for the number of books she is purchasing for "school projects". He laughed and reminded me that there are far worse things that high school students can do besides collect old books.

The other night she woke me from a dead sleep at 10:30 p.m., on her knees beside my bed, begging, she said, "Mom, I just found on-line a 200 year old copy of the Book of Common Prayer with the Psalms included. Mom, it's the same kind that George Washington used. Can I please order it? I will use my allowance".

Notice the intersection of both the love of literature and the love of history, with a component of spiritual development accompanied by financial responsibility. How could I say no? She received the airmail package from the United Kingdom a few weeks later. The very next day as we were loading the car for school she emerged gingerly carrying a small box along with her backpack and lunch. What is in the box? I asked, although I was pretty confident that I already knew the contents. "It's my new book", she said, "I know is a bit of a risk to take it to school; but I just have to show it to my history teacher and my literature teacher". She continued, "I have already decided that if something happens to it, it will not be the end of the world, although I will be disappointed".

You see that treasure was valuable to Ashley, very valuable; but the real thrill of it was being able to share it with someone else. It is the same with our treasure. We can keep it hidden away just for us; admire its beauty, and put it back away in a nice safe place; but the real thrill is to be able to share it with others. God has housed his most priceless treasure in jars of clay, in you and me, so "Be very careful, then, how you live—not being unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil. (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Intensive Study Questions for Shared Grace

1. Read 2 Corinthians Chapter 4. List some qualities of an Earthen Vessel/Jar of Clay. If you have a chance, do a little background reading to find out how these were used in Paul's day.
2. What is Paul using this metaphor of an Earthen Vessel/Jar of Clay to describe? What is his point in doing this?
3. Name some Old Testament Characters that illustrate this concept of being an Earthen Vessel/Jar of Clay.

O.T. Character	Weakness	

4. Complete the table given what you know about the life of Paul. (Skim portions of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians for ideas).

Paul	Weakness	

5. Now make a table for Yourself

Me	Weakness	

6. Take a look at your tables above and in the third column fill in how you think that weakness might have resulted in showing that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.
7. What is the treasure that we have? What makes it so valuable?
8. Why do you think God chose to place that treasure in an earthen vessel.

Discussion Questions for Shared Grace

1. In this passage Paul refers to us as Earthen Vessels/Jars of Clay. What is your reaction to that characterization? Does it offend you, provoke a neutral reaction, confusion, wonder, rest?
2. What is it about us that makes us Earthen Vessels/Jars of Clay? Why do you think God chooses to use that kind of container?
3. What makes you specifically identify with the Earthen Vessel/Jars of Clay metaphor? What are your weaknesses, your limitations? Would you consider sharing with your group members how that quality has been used by God?
4. Our Earthen Vessel is the container that holds the most priceless treasure in the universe. Suppose you have only 60 seconds to explain it to a friend, what is that priceless treasure?
5. When have you had to confront the reality that Paul describes in this passage that: what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal? How did that make a difference in your life and in your ministry to those around you?