

CRACKED POTS, BUT A GLORIOUS TREASURE

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I want to do a little background to help us as we read the words of scripture in a moment, and take you through a little archeology for a moment. And some people love this, and they get all excited when we do this, and some people go, Oh, yeah, history. But I hope that this will really set up the message for you.

Let me show you a few pictures. This is a picture of a mound in North Syria, but you see these mounds all across the ancient Near East. You see them in Syria. You see them in Israel.

These mounds, they're like hills, but they're distinct from hills. When you look at one, you realize it's not part of the normal mountain ranges that you see in those areas. This mound or this hill looks a little bit different. Very often they're flat on the top, and they're just on the middle of a plain out in the middle of nowhere. It can be a flat plain there in Syria, and then all of a sudden there's this mound. And people used to ride past them on their horses and see these things and not really understand what they were.

There you can see one of these mounds set against the mountain range, and so you can see the difference between these and mountains. And so these were a bit of a mystery for a long time, and somewhere around about the 19th century, we really began to get an understanding of what they were, because some of the explorers went up and started to walk around on them and look at them. What they realized were every one of these mounds, and there are hundreds of them, they're old cities.

What would happen is people would find a place that was a good place to build a city, and they would put up the walls, and they would put up their houses and their special buildings. But cities didn't last too long in the ancient world. Maybe they'd be there for 100 years or so, and then there would be a war, and someone would come and burn the city down. Or there would be an earthquake, because there were a lot of earthquakes in the ancient Near East, and the city would be destroyed.

What would then happen is people would come back to the place years later because it was still a good place to build a city, and they would kind of just bulldoze everything down by hand, and then they would start taking some of the materials and bringing in new materials, and they would build the city again right on the old ruin. They would do this again and again and again.

So the city started out flat on the plain, but over thousands of years, what you had was city built on city built on city until you have these mounds, and the mounds were kind of valuable because the higher up you went, the more you could defend the city. So these cities became even stronger as they went through time, and that's what these mounds are.

They're called tells, and they're all over the ancient Near East. Well, one of the ways that you can get a clue that you're standing on old cities when you go to these places is that just walking along on the ground, you will see there are little shards of pottery. Here's a picture of some pottery taken from one of these tells.

There are millions of these things, old clay shards from broken pottery. Now, this is really, really important in archaeology because as you dig down through these tells, what do you find? You find that you're going back in time because at the top is the newest city, and right at the bottom is the oldest city, right? So you start off digging down, and you may dig through the Roman period, and then that's built upon a city was there in the Persian period, and then you dig down a little further, you get into the Iron Age. You dig down further, you get into the Bronze Age. You dig right down. You can get right back to just after the flood and things that were at the bottom of these cities.

And the way they date this strata that build up these tells, the way they tell when this city was or when these people lived, is very strange. You think, "Oh, they do it with radiocarbon dating, and they do it with this great technological means and that technological means," and we do have all that stuff now, so we do literally date it with those kind of scientific methods. But still the number one way that these strata are dated is by pottery.

They take these shards as they dig down, and they find the layers of pottery, and they can pull it out, wash it off, look at it, and identify. You see the patterns on there and the different shapes? They say, "Well, we know that they were using that kind of pottery in this region around this century." So they dig down, and they date the layers of the cities by pottery shards. I tell you all that to say this, the most universal object in the ancient world was the clay pot.

There were more clay pots than anything else. There were more clay pots than people. There were more clay pots than anything else that they used because every home had a store of clay pots. Every temple, every public building, they all had clay pots. They put water in them. They put oil in them. They put wine in them. They put grain in them. They put seeds in them. Anything you can imagine.

But this was a time when everything was held in clay pots. And they were quite fragile. And if you dropped one, it would probably break. And so they became brittle over time, and they had to be replaced often. The bottom line is this. Clay pots were the most common thing in the world, and they were the most temporary things. Here today, gone tomorrow. They very rarely lasted a generation.

They were generally broken. They were generally replaced in a lifetime. And so they changed over time. We have different designs and patterns over time. That's how we date all of history is through clay pots.

As we look at our passage this morning, we're starting at 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 7. And as we start the reading, Paul likens us to earthen vessels, clay pots. That's what he's talking about. He's talking about us as the most common things in the world at that time. It's an obvious analogy because our lives are quite fragile. And they are relatively short. And the older you get, the more you realize that we are here today and gone tomorrow.

And Paul uses this analogy about us. But Paul says that God has chosen to pour into us, into these clay pots, his treasure, his priceless riches. Now, in the ancient world, if you really wanted to preserve something, you probably didn't put it in an ordinary clay pot. They find things that are made out of brass, gold, silver and other things as the centuries went on.

And if you really wanted to preserve something for generations, you would put it in something other than a clay pot. But Paul uses this irony and he says, God has taken the greatest treasures in the universe and he's poured them into the humblest things. Into our lives, our temporary passing lives, his treasure, his priceless riches into clay pots.

What is Paul talking about? He's talking about the gospel. He's talking about the knowledge of God, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. He's talking about eternal life. All the treasures of God that

really last forever. He's poured them into our lives. That's an amazing thought, isn't it? This morning, we're going to call it **CRACKED POTS, BUT A GLORIOUS TREASURE**.

God takes the greatest things in all of eternity and in all the universe and pours them into us, a clay pot. So let's read it in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7 and down to verse 12.

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. [8] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; [10] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. [11] For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. [12] So death is at work in us, but life in you.” (2 Corinthians 4:7 – 12)

So there are several points to bring out of this passage today. And the first is what we've been talking about.

1) THE POWER GOD HAS PLACED INSIDE US

Look at verse seven, **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” (2 Corinthians 4:7)**

Notice Paul says “this treasure.” “We have this treasure.” What treasure is he talking about? Well, it's very clear what he's talking about. I mentioned it includes all those things like the gospel and eternal life and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It includes all those things, but it's simply stated in the previous verse. In verse six, it says **“the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”**

God has restored us into relationship with himself through his son, Jesus, and what Jesus has done for us. Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood so that we could be forgiven and cleansed and brought back into relationship with the God who we were cut off from. That is the greatest gift we could ever be given. That is the great treasure. And when we have this fellowship with God, when we have the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ, when we know God, we have all the blessings that come with him. All the blessings that come through relationship with God.

Now, as soon as you read that analogy, that God has poured all his great treasure into earthen vessels, into clay pots, us, it immediately raises a question. And the question is this, why? Why would God do this? Why would he choose to share all of this eternal stuff with his own creatures? We are finite beings. We are here today, gone tomorrow. Not only finite, but we are fallen. We are sinful. We have rebelled against God.

Why would God gift us all of this eternal treasure? Why? In the ancient world, you can imagine some very wealthy person. He has some very precious ointment. He's not putting it in the earthen vessel. He's going to find an ornate kind of brass little box and he's putting it in there. But here's God pouring the greatest stuff into clay jars. Why?

Have you ever thought this? Why didn't God just start again? Why not start again? Well, there's big mysteries here, but you know what? He knew it was going to happen. He knew from before eternity, from before the world ever began way back in eternity. He knew it all. So that's a kind of a dumb question itself. Why wouldn't he start again? He knew. But think about it. Why didn't God create greater beings? Why not create super angels or something and share it all with them?

So Paul instantly answers the question. He doesn't even start a new sentence in the same phrase that he says, God has poured this eternal treasure into clay pots, he anticipates the question and he tells us why God has done it. You know why? **“To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”** In other words, so that God will ultimately be the focus, not us. The treasure will be cherished as it should be and not the containers.

I always kind of chuckle when I hear an atheist speaking and they say, “Well, if God's real, then he should just perform this miracle. Show us he should do this miracle right now. And if he doesn't,” they wait a minute and nothing happens. They go, “See, God's not real.” Like God has to prove himself to you.

God doesn't spend the time selling himself with clever marketing. In fact, God does the exact opposite. He pours his treasure into the humblest of containers. Us, clay pots and his glory shines. People see our lives and how God changes us and how God uses us. And it's clear. God, only God could have done that in their lives. He shines, not the container, but the treasure shines. God is shown through us.

He's poured his eternal treasure into our lives. But Paul's not finished. Lest we should think then that this treasure in us means we should only live privileged lives, that if God really has poured this eternal stuff into us and he's made us his children, "Here we are. Wow, everybody better stand back. God's only got good things for us." Lest we should think that, Paul couples it with another truth.

2) THE PRESSURE THAT GOD ALLOWS UPON US

There is the power God has placed inside us, but then secondly, there is also the pressure God allows upon us.

Verses eight and nine. Paul goes from treasure poured into our lives to the next verse where he says, **"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."** (2 Corinthians 4:8 – 9)

What Paul is doing here in these two verses is he's describing his own experience. Since he's become a Christian and in particular, a Christian preacher, this is his experience. And it's the experience because he uses the word we, not me. He says we, it's the experience of his Christian brothers and sisters as they sought to live for Jesus in a very non-Christian world. As they sought to proclaim the gospel in those pagan cities of the first century, they faced intense opposition and persecution.

But Paul uses four couplets to describe their experience. Look at them there. He says afflicted in every way, some translations say hard pressed, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. See the four couplets there? Let's look at these couplets one at a time because they are so encouraging.

A) WE ARE HARD PRESSED BUT NOT CRUSHED

First of all, Paul says we are hard pressed, but not crushed. That word hard pressed, if you read the Greek word, it means to be caused distress because you are being hemmed in by enemies.

Imagine being chased into an alleyway by some people who want to mug you. There's a gang of people that want to mug you. And they put you into a corner and there's nowhere to go. And they're all around you and they're stepping towards you. That's the meaning of this word. To be caused distress by being hemmed in by enemies.

He says we are hard pressed. That's how we feel. There's enemies all around us as we preach the gospel of Jesus. And it feels at times like we are being pressed in so that they're going to overrun us. He says, but we are not crushed. We are not overrun. To be crushed means a hopeless situation with no way out. You cannot escape. He says that's never true of the believer.

When I read this, a little picture comes to my mind. It's a funny one. How many remember Star Wars, the original, not the sequels or the prequels? How many remember the trash compactor scene? Luke, Leia, Han Solo and Chewbacca are in there and the walls are coming in. And they know they're about to be completely destroyed by these walls. They're trying to press against the walls, but they have no hope. It's hydraulically pressing in on them. And then all of a sudden, something happened and the walls stopped pressing in, thanks to R2D2. And that's the image that comes to my mind.

We are hard pressed. The walls are closing in on us. And it feels like we are going to be popped like grapes right in the middle. And the enemy's coming against us on every side. He says, but we are never without a way of escape. Suddenly the ceiling opens up and the rope drops in and you're able to get out, right?

Remember the children of Israel at the Exodus pushed up against the Red Sea? It's a dead end. Pharaoh's coming down. There's no way to go. They're finished. They're done. Except for God. And all of a sudden, what seemed like an absolute wall behind them that they could not get through becomes a highway. Because God opens the Red Sea. Man could never do that. No one could ever even imagine that. But God did it.

Because there is always a way. When God is in our lives, there is always a way. And then Paul goes to the next little couplet and he says, we are hard-pressed yet not crushed. Secondly, we are perplexed but not driven to despair.

B) WE ARE PERPLEXED BUT NOT DRIVEN TO DESPAIR

To be perplexed here means to be at a loss filled with confusion because you don't understand. How many have ever been in a situation in your life, you got no answers? You're confused, why is this happening? How can we possibly find a way through this? We don't have any answers. Paul says, you know what? We are perplexed at times.

He was in situations not understanding what God was doing, not understanding why the circumstances were the way they were. He says, we're perplexed. He says, but never in despair. In despair there means to fall apart. You don't have all the answers so you feel there isn't an answer and so you surrender and give up.

Like the nihilists in philosophy who have concluded that life is futile, that there are no answers. So what did they do? They just say, give up. Life is hopeless. So you're like Ernest Hemingway. Once he'd had enough joy in his life, he said he done enough things he wanted to do, he took a shotgun and ended his life because he was a nihilist. He thought there's no point to life and so he came to a place of utter despair despite all of his money and everything else that he had.

But as Christians, we have a completely different perspective. We know that I may not understand, but God does understand. I may not have an answer, but there is an answer. God has all the answers. He has the ultimate solutions. So there is always hope. With God, there is always a way and there is always hope.

He's greater than every situation. Then the third little couplet, Paul says we are persecuted, but not forsaken.

C) WE ARE PERSECUTED BUT NOT FORSAKEN

We are persecuted, but not forsaken. When does persecution happen? Persecution happens when you're in the minority. No group of people who were in the majority were ever persecuted in the history of the world. It's always the minority. It's always when you're on your own. And one of the great fears of persecution is that we are all alone. In fact, if you go to our brothers and sisters who are being persecuted in various parts of the world today, North Korea and

other places, what is one of the ways they torture them? Putting them in absolute isolation so they feel all alone day after day, month after month.

That is persecution, to feel like you're all alone, outnumbered, to be intimidated and to be bullied. And Paul says, we've been there, persecuted all alone. He says, but we are not forsaken. The word means never abandoned. We are never deserted. Sometimes you wonder where God is, but I promise you, He's there. His presence never fails in our lives. He's always with us.

And the story that comes to my mind is from the book of Daniel. When you remember those three Hebrew lads, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and they were persecuted because they were outnumbered. They were three young men in a whole kingdom of people who were walking another way and bowing down to foreign gods. And the king said, if you don't bow down to the image you are going to be thrown into the fiery furnace.

It's interesting. You know what the fiery furnace probably was? A kiln for making clay pots. Interesting little tie in there, isn't it? That they had these furnaces used for firing clay pots and they could get intensely hot, thousands of degrees. And they were going to throw these three guys in there and the guys wouldn't yield. So it happened. They took the three men and they threw them in there.

But as soon as they got in there, you remember what happened? They looked in, the king looked in and he says, hang on, how many did we throw in there? Three guys, right? How come there's now a fourth person in there and he looks like a son of the gods? Who was in there? Jesus was in there with them. He's the fourth man in the fire.

And it doesn't matter what fire you face in life, you might feel abandoned. You might feel all alone. You're not abandoned. Paul says we never are. We are always with the fourth man. He's always with us.

Remember Noah? Noah, it says he was a preacher of righteousness. He spoke to his generation and warned them about the wrath that was coming, the judgment that was coming and nobody believed him. You talk about a minority, the whole world laughed at Noah. Everybody he knew laughed at him and wouldn't listen to him. He stepped into that ark as the

ultimate minority. When he stepped off the ark, he was the majority. There was no one left. He was never abandoned by God. We are never alone.

One Christian with God is always in the majority. We have all the backing of heaven. We have all the legions of God's angels. We are never alone. God is with us.

D) WE ARE STRUCK DOWN BUT NOT DESTROYED

And then finally, the fourth thing Paul says is we are struck down but not destroyed. Because you know what? There's no guarantee in the gospel that God's only going to allow this persecution so far and he will stop it every time, you're never going to come to physical harm. That's just not true.

Many Christians have paid the price with their lives for their faith. And Paul said, "You know what? I've been struck down many times." He had been beaten with rods. He'd been beaten with a whip. He had been stoned. He says, we are struck down. He experienced physical persecution. And eventually, Paul was beheaded in Rome. His life was taken from him.

He was executed for preaching Christianity. But Paul says, we are struck down but never destroyed. Even if it gets to that place where his lifeless body is laying on a cell while the Roman guards laugh, he says, we are never destroyed. Why? Because Jesus said, whoever loses their life for my sake, shall find it. We have an eternal life. We are never ended.

The word here for destroyed, we are not destroyed, the word is Apollyon in Greek, Apollyon. If you read Pilgrim's Progress, you remember one of the great enemies in Pilgrim's Progress was Apollyon, the destroyer. And it's one of the names of Satan. Jesus said in John 10 verse 10, he says, **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and (Apollyon) destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."** (John 10:10)

Satan cannot destroy the Christian, not ever. Even if we should give our lives for the sake of the gospel, you've got to know that that is not the end. It is never the end. It's never the end in a temporal sense or in an eternal sense. When you're in that circumstance and you feel like it's over, it's never over if God is involved.

God can turn around any situation. And then if the ultimate should happen and we should lose our lives, it is still not the end. We go into his presence, which Paul says is far better.

So there is always a way. There is always hope. We are never alone. It is never the end, which brings us to the third and the final point. The power God has placed inside us, the pressure God allows upon us, but thirdly, even if we should experience hardships or death for the Lord, there is the purpose that God accomplishes through us.

3) THE PURPOSE THAT GOD ACCOMPLISHES THROUGH US

God has reasons for everything he allows. The purpose God accomplishes through us, verses 10 and 11.

“We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. [11] For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (2 Corinthians 4:10 – 11)

Jesus lived 33 years upon this life, not for one moment of that time, no matter how much opposition he faced, no matter how much persecution he faced, did he ever lose presence of the Father with him. He always walked in the presence of the Father until those final moments.

God was always with him. We live that life. Jesus has raised us up to be joint heirs with himself. And just as he died but rose again, we also shall rise again and ascend with him. God's purpose in all things is to manifest Jesus to this world, to show and declare his son in our living.

That's why our testimony is so important, to show the love of Jesus, what he's done for us, to show it out to others. In our preaching, it's important that we tell people who made the difference in our life. We're not lucky. We are blessed by the hand of God. We are graced by every provision he has made. We are raised because he has raised us.

In our living, in our preaching, in our hardships, and even in our deaths. John Wesley wrote in his journal one day, having conducted a number of funerals, he wrote these words. He said, “Our people died well.” He meant people of faith, go and face that moment with the strength that no one else has.

And even in their death, they show the glory of God, the peace of God, the help of God, the strength of God.

To reach the unreached or even to reach your neighbour across the fence will require that something in us dies. Pride, fear, that must be put to death with Jesus so that we bring him the glory that he deserves. Be encouraged that God is at work.

God is going to change you. God is going to build you up. God is going to work it all out for his good and for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.

What that means is you can cry, you can scream, you can shout, but I promise that God has got you. It's hard, but he's got you. It's painful, but he's got you. He's working, but he's got you. It's falling apart, but he's got you. And because of what Christ has done for us, there is a limitation on what this world can place on us.

We are squeezed, but not squashed. Bewildered, but not befuddled. Pursued, but not abandoned. Knocked down, but never knocked out. And all the while, God is showing his treasure, his great glory to the world through us cracked pots. And God is using us every single day.