

## **I am only a jar of clay** **2 Corinthians 4:5–12 and Psalm 137:1-4**

Babylon makes us think of a place without hope, a place of exile, oppression, fear, hopelessness, financial depravation, and spiritual despair. How can we be able to sing the song of the Lord in such a place? How can we celebrate the might of God in a place which makes us feel helpless and victims?

Psalm 137: 1 – 4 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.  
<sup>2</sup>There on the poplars we hung our harps, <sup>3</sup>for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
<sup>4</sup>How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

Text: 2 Cor 4: 7 – 9: But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

### **I. Jars of Clay**

In our text for Paul can call himself a "jar of clay." The image that is presented is one of weakness and insignificance. The jar of clay the Apostle has in mind is the most modest of vessels. We are not to think of a highly glazed, colorful piece of pottery. Rather, we are to think of an ordinary lump of clay fashioned into an ordinary pot and hardened in a fire, that so easily cracks and breaks.

Why does the apostle call himself a "jar of clay?" What does he have in mind here? The apostle is thinking of his many imperfections here. He first has in mind his weakness and helplessness in the presence of sin and temptation. He is so aware of his continued sin that he can call himself "the worst of sinners" (1 Tim 1:16). Countless Christians have identified with his description of the believer's struggle in Romans 7: *(Rom 7:15,19) I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing.*

That's not all that Paul has in mind when he calls himself a "jar of clay." He also looks to the weakness of his appearance. He admits he is timid when face to face, but bold when away (2 Cor 10:1). He admits some say about him, *(2 Cor 10:10) His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.*

Also in mind would be the slow decay/death of his body. His outward nature was slowly wasting away (2 Cor 4:16). But then, consider all the things he put his body through hard work, prison, beatings, shipwreck, stress, hunger, thirst, cold, heat, exposure ... (cf 2 Cor 12:23-29).

Paul, as he himself admits, is an earthen vessel, a jar of clay. The image he means to present of himself is one of weakness and even insignificance.

Consider also, for a moment, the sins you commit: Like the Apostle Paul, all of us – must confess our helplessness and weakness in the presence of sin, evil, and temptation. We too are sinners. We too try to do good but end up doing evil. We are but jars of clay.

Or consider our imperfections as a congregation. Can we say we have done our very best in reaching out to the lost? As a congregation, have we always built each other up and prayed for each other and encouraged each other or have we also torn each other down? As a church, have we loved each other as much as we love ourselves? Honest answers to these questions reveal that we are but a jar of clay.

I know only too well that in my role as pastor I too am but a jar of clay. Not all sermons hit the mark; sometimes words of comfort are inadequate; sometimes the message of grace does not come through clearly enough. You and I and Paul are but jars of clay.

## **II The Gospel Treasure**

In the Spirit inspired apostle speaks not only of jars of clay but also of "treasure."

What is this treasure?

The treasure that Paul mentions, then, is the wondrous Gospel story about Jesus:  
That He was conceived by the Spirit and born of the virgin;  
That He suffered under Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;  
That He rose from the dead;  
That He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God;  
That He shall someday come back to judge the living and the dead.

The wondrous Gospel story – that is the treasure Paul is speaking of. Don't forget what Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21). A man's heart worships what is his treasure. If your treasure, what you value most, is the things of this earth, your heart worships those things. But if your treasure is the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, then your heart will worship the Lord.

## **III The Gospel Treasure in Jars of Clay**

Think about this for a moment: the most precious treasure on earth is within sinful, mortal, frail human creatures. The most valuable treasure ever is within earthen vessels.

In today's world we lock valuables in bank vaults or safety deposit boxes. But the treasure of the Gospel is put in jars of clay!

*Jesus put his treasure in jars of clay that the whole world can benefit!*

*"But what if Peter denied him again? What if they all run away again in the face of opposition? What if the apostles became tired and despondent because they too lived in a strange land?"*

*Did Jesus have a back up plan to share the treasure and ignite hope in the world?*

*No. Jesus counted on the jars of clay to sing the song of the Lord in a strange land.*

*Twenty centuries later, God still has no other plan. He is counting on jars of clay like you and me to spread the glorious treasure of the Gospel.*

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay." **Do you realize what this means about individual believers?** What is most important is not our appearance as Christians, nor our persuasiveness in defending the true faith, nor even our knowledge and insight into Scripture.

**What is most important is whether all the glitter belongs to the treasure** and not to the packaging. What is most important is whether the glory goes to God!

We need to make a difference in this strange land!

We need to bring hope and love and peace to the hearts of people.

It does not depend on the packaging whether we are able to do this or not!

It depends on the treasure! It depends on Jesus! It depends on the power that is from God!

Let's not lose sight of that!

Let's focus on what God can do and we will once again sing the song of the Lord in this strange and frightening land!

**But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.**

The Rev Andries Combrink

Minister

[andries@pastoral.co.za](mailto:andries@pastoral.co.za)

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Lynnwood, Pretoria. [www.trinity.org.za](http://www.trinity.org.za)

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