

Earthen Vessels

Opening Hymn: #229—O! To Be Nothing

2 Cor. 4:7 We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

The Bible is filled with symbolism. What is said is not necessarily what is meant. If we want to understand what it teaches, we must study it. This text is a good example.

Earthen vessels are today called stoneware or pottery. Moist clay is formed into a vessel on a potter's wheel. After the clay is baked at high temperatures, a vessel becomes useful. Each one is unique. Scraps of broken, earthen vessels help archaeologists date the time ancient cities were inhabited.

In Old Testament times people put things of importance in earthen vessels. Jeremiah was told to put his deed of purchase for a field in an earthen vessel to protect it. (Jer. 32:14) Treasures like the dead sea scrolls were placed in earthen vessels and remained protected for 2,000 years. But in this text Paul is not saying he and the Corinthians were protecting a literal treasure in literal vessels. What is he saying? First the word "vessel":

Acts 9:15 The Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen **vessel** unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

The Lord speaks to Ananias in a vision and he's talking about Paul. He calls him a "vessel." So a "vessel" in scripture means a human being. And it is an apt symbol because life itself is fragile, easily broken, just like a stone pot. The word "vessel" carries with it the idea of someone the Master can use in his service. That's the thought of words in our opening hymn: "A broken and emptied **vessel**, for the Master's use made meet."

What about the word "treasure"? There can be different ideas about that.

1) Paul was referring to the holy spirit God has given us:

Matthew 25:4 But the wise took **oil** in their **vessels** with their lamps.

In this parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the key difference between the two groups is the presence or absence of oil in the vessels. Oil is a symbol of the holy spirit; the wise virgins were filled with the spirit, the foolish virgins were not.

2) Paul was talking about being ministers of the new covenant (see 3:6). He says that although the ministry of Moses was glorious, the ministry we have is more glorious. Note the preceding verses:

2 Cor. 4:1 Seeing we have this ministry . . . [vs. 5] We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord.

3) Paul was referring to the truth as a treasure the Lord has given to us:

2 Cor. 4:2 [we do not handle] the word of God deceitfully.

4) Paul was referring to the “new creature.” This new mind now lives within an earthly body until it receives a spiritual body at death. Here’s a verse from the next chapter:

2 Cor. 5:17 Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Bro. Russell most frequently said the treasure was the new creature, although in the fifth volume he said the treasure was the holy spirit (*E245*). It doesn't really matter because that's not the important point. Whatever it is, it is contained in fragile, common people who come from the dust of the earth. You may think you know what "treasure" has been entrusted to you. Do you really think consider it to be a treasure? If you do, you will endure all kinds of trials to keep it safe. Notice the next few verses:

2 Cor. 4:8–10 We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.

Some might think it is not logical for God to use poor, unwise people for anything. But those are just the ones God has always used for His work “that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us” (end vs. 7). Consider the “great apostle Paul.” Great? Not to everyone. Later in this letter he quotes what some of his Corinthian critics say about him:

2 Cor. 10:10 (Living Bible) “Don’t bother about his letters,” some say. “He sounds big, but it’s all noise. When he gets here you will see that there is nothing great about him, and you have never heard a worse preacher!”

Not one person here is impressive by the world’s standards. That’s as it should be. God has always used flawed earthen vessels to represent Him and to deliver His message. Adam Clarke (vol. 6, p. 330) recounts an interesting story:

“The daughter of the emperor addressed Rabbi Joshua: O! how great is thy skill in the law, and yet how deformed thou art! what a great deal of wisdom is laid up in a sordid vessel! The rabbi answered, Tell me, I pray thee, of what are those vessels in which you keep your wines? She answered, They are *earthen vessels*. He replied, How is it, seeing ye are rich, that ye do not lay up your wine in *silver vessels*, for the common people lay up their wine in earthen vessels? She returned to her father and persuaded him to have all the wine put into silver vessels. Then the wine turned acid. When the emperor heard it, he inquired of his daughter who it was that had given her that advice. She told him it was Rabbi Joshua. The rabbi was called and told the whole story. He added this sentence: The wisdom and study of the law cannot dwell in a comely man. The emperor objected: There **are** comely persons who have made great progress in the study of the law. The rabbi answered, Had they not been so comely, they would have made even greater progress; for a man who is comely has not an humble mind, and therefore soon forgets the whole law.”

A Jar of Oil

Zechariah said we should not despise the day of small things. (Zech. 4:10) We could profitably explore a number of “small things” in the eyes of the world that accomplished great things in the right hands. One small stone from the brook was all it took to kill Goliath. A small jar of oil is the basis of a wonderful story in 2 Kings 4:

2 Kings 4:1-7 (RSV) Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” And Elisha said to her, . . . “What have you in the house?” And she said, . . . “[Nothing] except a jar of oil.” Then he said, “Go outside, borrow vessels of all your neighbors, empty vessels and not too few. Then go in, and shut the door upon yourself and your sons, and pour into all these vessels; when one is full, set it aside.” So she went from him and shut the door upon herself and her sons; and as she poured they brought the vessels to her. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” And he said to her, “There is not another.” Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.”

Matt. 9:29 According to your faith be it unto you.

This woman’s **faith** was on display. Think about her and her two children going house to house to borrow earthen vessels from her neighbors. “Why? What are you going to do with them?” Of course the neighbors knew about her troubles and that she possessed nothing. Her children were all that a creditor could take. But she must have had a marvelous character because although their vessels were valuable, her neighbors did loan their vessels to this woman and her two children. Talk about faith? Someone of less faith might have stopped with one vessel, or at most two. But little faith would mean little blessing.

There is more to this lesson. When you are in distress, when you expect the worst, what do you do? You go to the one who can do something about it, you approach the throne of grace. The woman did that; she sees Elisha as God’s representative. Then what do you do? Do you present God with the **solution** to your problem? That’s a big mistake.

“Selfish prayers are too expensive. Some have gained wealth and lost the truth and its service; some have gained health, only to find that with it they gained other trials no less severe: some have had their dear ones restored to them from the very jaws of death, only to wish afterward that God had not answered their prayers—or, more correctly, to wish that they had accepted the Lord’s wisdom and providences trustfully, contentedly, uncomplainingly.”—*Manna*, February 22

The woman came to Elisha only with the problem: “Help me. I don’t know what to do.” And the solution came from the one thing she did possess—a small pot of oil. Earthen vessels, one after the other, were filled to the brim with oil. You. Me. Every vessel. The Lord can fill us with his spirit if we come to him emptied of everything else. The filling has no limit. Every vessel can be filled:

“While there was a vessel to fill, there was oil sufficient; it only ceased to flow when there was no vessel to receive it. This is a good emblem of the grace of God. If we find in any place or at any time

that the oil ceases to flow, it is because there are no empty vessels there, no soul hungering and thirsting for righteousness.”—Adam Clarke

Four Kinds of Vessels [dishes]

The Greek word rendered “earthen” in 2 Cor. 4:7 is found in only one other place:

2 Tim. 2:20,21 (Goodspeed) In any large house there are not only gold and silver dishes, but also wooden and **earthen** ones, some for great occasions and some for ordinary use. So if a man will cleanse himself from these things [*from iniquitous things*—see vs. 19], he will be put to great uses, consecrated and used by the master of the house himself, ready for any good use.

The Greek word rendered “dishes” is the same as “vessels” in 2 Cor. 4:7. So these "dishes" are people divided into two categories: gold and silver, wood and earth. It shows the two phases of the kingdom—heavenly (great occasions) and earthly (ordinary use). If we are faithful to our covenant of sacrifice, we will be used to accomplish great things in God’s house. We will be of the gold [little flock] or silver [Great Company] class. But there is also a “wood” and an “earthen” class. This is the earthly phase. We suggest that the ancient worthies are shown in the wood and the world of mankind as earthen dishes.

This scripture says these vessels will be “ready for any good use.” This is important. We are to fit ourselves not for **honor**, but for **service**. We are to keep ourselves pure, sanctified, and cleansed from every iniquitous thing. Only then will we be ready for the Master’s service whatever He decides it should be.

Romans 9:20,21 (New English) Can the pot speak to the potter and say, “Why did you make me like this?” Surely the potter can do what he likes with the clay. Is he not free to make out of the same lump two vessels, one to be treasured, the other for common use?

Matt. 13:16,17 Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.

The attitude of our heart should be continual gratitude for the opening of our eyes and the unstopping of our ears so we can appreciate Him and His wonderful plan of salvation.

1 Thes. 4:4 Every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour.

We are earthen, cracked, common vessels. We don’t look like much. But let us live a sanctified life so that God, who reads our heart, will one day reward us openly. (Matt. 6:4,6,18)

Gideon

We know vessels can contain oil a symbol of the holy spirit. Although most unusual, there is one place in the Bible where they also contained light. It was when Gideon took a handful of men to fight the massed armies of 135,000 Midianites and Amalekites (Judges 6:33; 8:10). Gideon sent out a summons for

volunteers to fight. 32,000 showed up. But God told Gideon there were too many. If He gave them a victory, they would say their own strength did it. So those who really didn't want to fight were encouraged to leave. 22,000 did. Another test, and after it was over, Gideon was left with just 300. Let's read how this battle was fought:

Judges 7:16-23 (Good News) Gideon divided his 300 men into three groups and gave each man a trumpet and a jar [*an earthen vessel*] with a torch inside it. He told them, "When I get to the edge of the camp, watch me, and do what I do. When my group and I blow our trumpets, then you blow yours all around the camp and shout, For the Lord and for Gideon!" Gideon and his 100 men came to the edge of the camp a while before midnight, just after the guard had been changed. Then they blew the trumpets and broke the jars they were holding, and the other two groups did the same. They all held the torches in their left hands, the trumpets in their right, and shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" Every man stood in his place around the camp, and the whole enemy army ran away yelling. While Gideon's men were blowing their trumpets, the Lord made the enemy troops attack each other with their swords.

No human general would think 300 could prevail against so many. It is another "small thing" used by God to accomplish his good pleasure. Today a company of soldiers follows the sound of a bugle. Then it was a trumpet. When the enemy was awakened from sleep, they heard all these trumpets and saw the trumpeters because of the torches. Naturally they assumed each one was at the head of a separate company. There must be hundreds of separate companies of soldiers. They thought they were doomed. Panic set in and they killed each other in confusion.

Gideon and those associated with him needed faith. And he had faith. His name appears in Hebrews (11:32) as a hero of faith. It takes faith to think there is any value in a trumpet, an earthen vessel, and light.

2 Cor. 4:6 God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts.

We are God's army today. We are such a little company and the enemy is so vast. All we have are a trumpet, our earthen vessel, and light. When we shatter our earthen vessel—when we make ourselves nothing—the light shines forth. Trumpets are associated with messages in the scriptures. This teaches that the light of the gospel and its message do the work God wants accomplished.

Conclusion

God has given us treasure: 1) the holy spirit; 2) allowing us to become His ministers; 3) the truth; 4) made us new creatures. He has done this although He knows we are but fragile, common earthly vessels. "He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." (Psa. 103:14) It requires faith to believe God would do this, would use us in some way in the outworking of his plan. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Heb. 11:6) But **with** faith, anything is possible.

"Despise not the day of small things." This is not the day for big things. Those must wait until the next age. Now we are being prepared. If we are rightly exercised, we will be vessels of honor in God's great

house. So when we are in distress, let us go to the throne of grace with our problem, and leave it there. None of us are smart enough to come to the Lord with the solution to our problems.

Like the faithful soldiers who passed all the tests and fought at the side of their leader Gideon, let us break our earthen pitchers and let the light shine forth. The light and the message will scatter all the forces of darkness. Then the world of mankind will be at peace.

[closing poem if time permits]

Closing Hymn: #340—Onward Christian Soldiers

[First given in Los Angeles, April, 1996]

Gideon's Army in Antitype (*Poems of Dawn*, p. 127)

Arise! Then, O! Army of Gideon,
 Let him that is fearful return;
 Jehovah wants only the zealous,
 Whose hearts with the love of truth burn.

Ten thousand remain! Still too many;
 Once more He their loyalty proves,
 To see who most faithfully serves Him,
 To see who most fervently loves.

O! ye, who have sworn Him allegiance,
 Mark well! He is now testing you,
 With the water of truth He will prove you,
 To see who is loyal and true.

Look well to your drinking, then, brother,
 That you no impurities trace,
 Take your lamp, your pitcher, and trumpet,
 And stand every man in his place!

Your sword is the "Sword of the Spirit,"
 Your lamp is the light from His Word,
 Your pitcher, this poor earthen vessel,
 You break at the voice of your Lord.

Is your lamp burning bright in your pitcher?
 Doth your trumpet give forth "certain sound"?
 Soon the Sword of the Lord and of Gideon
 The enemy's host will confound.

For sure is the victory promised,
And great is the peace He awards—
Then, “stand” in your place, all ye faithful,
The battle’s not yours, but the Lord’s!