



## #4 Breakable, but Bearing Treasure

### *2 Corinthians 4:7-18 (NRSV)*

<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you.

<sup>13</sup>But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—"I believed, and so I spoke"—we also believe, and so we speak, <sup>14</sup>because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. <sup>15</sup>Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

When an item of crockery in your kitchen falls and breaks, what's your first thought?

- Dispose of the broken item?
- Or, do you think to yourself, "I'll attempt to repair it?"



2 Corinthians 4:7 employs the image of disposable items from 1<sup>st</sup> Century kitchens.



The Apostle Paul writes: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 *Corinthians* 4:7)

When I visited Northern Pakistan some years ago, I had the privilege of visiting a 1<sup>st</sup> Century archaeological site, not far from Kashmir, at Taxila. It’s a place where the disciple named Thomas was said to have travelled to spread the Gospel.

Being so far from a city, I could simply stroll among the digs and troughs where treasures had once been uncovered and shipped off to the British Museum.



To my amazement, the soil in the sides of the hills and dug-outs was littered liberally with little triangles and squares of every-day broken clay pots and jars from kitchens and shops down the ages. Once broken, they had been simply tossed away back into the earth.

Earthenware vessels like this were common in every home in the ancient world. They were not very durable (compared to metal), and they were useless if broken. No-one attempted to repair such a vessel if cracked for “They were... cheap and of little intrinsic value.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2 *Corinthians* Paul is defending the legitimacy of his ministry as an apostle of Christ. There are doubters; there are accusers in the new church that Paul founded at Corinth<sup>2</sup>, a significant city in Europe.

- “He’s unimpressive in public”, some said of Paul.
- “He seems easily defeated, and easily diverted from his own plans,” his accusers might have said of him.

<sup>1</sup> 2 *Corinthians* (Tyndale), by Colin Kruse

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 18:1-18

- “He’s too flawed, dull and ordinary to be a true apostle of Christ,” seems to have been one of the objections generated by some infiltrating “leaders” in the congregation in Paul’s absence (see *2 Corinthians* 11).

Yet, Paul was happy to wear this caricature of a “cracked pot”. It perfectly illustrated his view of **how God works in and through him**.

**Leonard Cohen** once sang: “There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.”<sup>3</sup>

The light Paul has in mind in *2 Corinthians* is mentioned in chapter 4, verse 6. Paul understood, that he was the bearer of God’s **perfect and divine light**<sup>4</sup> - the Good News of Jesus. As an apostle, he believed God’s light **shined through** his human frailty.

Just after the second world war, the British Ambassador to the US devised an ingenious plan for sending top secret messages to and from England. Phone



calls were easily tapped. Locked bags on planes attracted too much attention. But Sir Oliver Franks found that messages of the highest classification were never discovered if sent in an ordinary envelope by regular mail.

**No-one thought to look there!**<sup>5</sup>

In the ancient world, some people used to hide their precious items in jars of clay, because no thief would think to look there.

**How interesting that God’s precious Gospel message and grace is delivered in an everyday mug, not in fine china in Paul’s estimation!**



Paul presents a paradox in Christianity that he explained back in *1 Corinthians*, chapter 1...

“...but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For

<sup>3</sup> "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen

<sup>4</sup> *2 Corinthians* 4:6

<sup>5</sup> Illustration found in *Paul for Everyone*, by NT Wright

**God's foolishness** is wiser than human wisdom, and **God's weakness** is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:23-25)<sup>6</sup>

God chose Paul, and his self-confessed flawed co-workers, to be messengers and leaders in His church in way that Paul thought **consistent with the pattern of Jesus**. God's power, as Paul writes later, is **made perfect in human weakness** (2 Cor. 12:9).

2 Corinthians 4:8-10, gives specific examples of Paul's recent experiences of God's presence and power during persecution, difficulty and weakness. Notice in the graphic here that Paul is applying his theological reflection about the death and the resurrection of Jesus at work in him to his experiences of hardship while on mission.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10	
<i>The dying of Jesus</i>	<i>The life of Jesus</i>
Hard pressed...	but not crushed
Perplexed...	but not in despair
Persecuted...	but not abandoned
Struck down...	but not destroyed

Some of the Corinthian Christians, it seems, preferred proof of God in a leader **without fault and without failures**. Paul's boast is not that he never has trouble, nor that he is always in good health, nor that he always wins now that he knows Christ. He's not a leader who **never got knocked down**. Paul was one who consistently **got back up again** thanks to the strength and faith God worked in him.

Evidence of the power of God, for Paul, comes in the form of **faith that endures hardship**.

It's at this point that many sermons and commentaries **jump to a conclusion** that you too – the reader - have the light of the Gospel within you, and it will shine through if only you will willingly suffer for Christ.

But notice that's not what Paul goes on to say directly!

In fact, I think the first reflection we should have is, "What if I'm like those Corinthian Christians who were his doubters and accusers? What if I too **look for God in the wrong places?**"

<sup>6</sup> "Jews" is a term in many English translations of the New Testament referring to those who identified themselves with Jewish religious practices of the day. "Gentiles" refers to non-Jews of all other nations of that time. "Greeks", is a reference like "Gentiles", but often specifies those who were steeped in Hellenistic culture.

You see, nothing in Paul seemed attractive or positive to his opponents. His afflictions, frailty and ordinariness rendered him **foolish in their eyes**. **Some couldn't "see" God in the testimony of Paul's endurance, or his comfort, or his deliverance** amidst trials. They were looking for God in other places.



I visited the site of ancient Corinth, and as seen in this photograph. Do you see the spectre of Acro-Corinth looming large behind the city? Upon its summit, in Paul's day, one could see white marble temples glistening in the sun. Corinthians would regularly ascend the hill to take part in religious rituals for the

pursuit of health, wealth, sex, and status. What mattered in Corinth were **prosperity, pleasure and power**.

No wonder some of these new Christians at Corinth were **looking in the wrong places for the signs of God's presence, guidance and power**. They had eyes well-trained to look for shiny objects, elaborate packaging, and hoped for power and status from their every-day pursuits. Perhaps these strong traits held sway over the new-found Christians beliefs in this early example of a European Christian community.

### What's our response?

I think our best response to this passage in *2 Corinthians 4* is to **reflect honestly** to see if we too are prone to **look for God in the wrong places**.



This is often the problem of the reader today. Western commercial culture has trained many eyes to be drawn to the **shiniest objects with the best packaging**. We are encouraged by market forces to **adore perfection** and **despise hardship and brokenness**. Like the Corinthians who doubted Paul, we could be in danger of **being blinded** to where Paul considered God to be most obviously present and active – in his suffering.



Paul regularly reflected upon the Scriptures. They helped him to **know where to look for God**. Having found his former way of life to be bankrupt with regard being right with God<sup>7</sup>, Paul set trained his mind and his eyes through study of Scripture to learn a different way – a pattern he found true in Jesus...

- In vs. 13 he quotes Psalm 116 – “I believed, and so I spoke”. Paul’s own study of Scripture leads him to say, “I realize that I stand in a long line of **God’s servants who faced trials** and yet were strengthened.”
- In vs. 14 Paul shows us where his **grounds for faith** in the face of trials lies. He says, “we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence.”

So, I think the passage begs us to **ask ourselves**: Are we like the Corinthians who looked for God in the wrong places? Or, like Paul, can we learn to recognise God as present and powerful in amidst trials, even amidst brokenness.

### Learning from Japanese Art

At the outset of this article I asked whether you are the sort of person who disposes of broken crockery, or whether your first thought is to repair.

There is a Japanese art for repairing broken pottery today called ( kin-tsU-kU-roi). It means: **golden repair**.

It is a process in which lacquer resin is dusted or mixed with powdered gold and used to, for lack of a better word, glue the piece back together.



The artists believe that **breakage and repair are part of the history of an object**, so rather than something to hide or disguise, **they illuminate it**. There’s an affinity with the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi* that embraces the flawed and imperfect.

By highlighting the cracks and repairs, the service an object gives is marked and honoured as important in any damage or breakage. The works are often so beautiful that some have been known to deliberately break an object so that the object has the enhanced beauty of the golden repair.

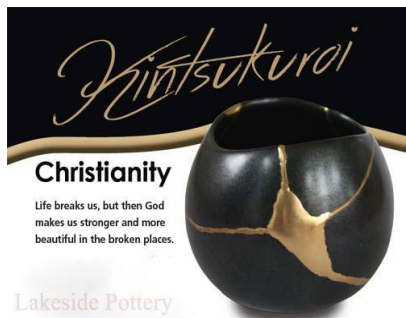
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<sup>7</sup> (see *Philippians* 3:4-11)

Our landfills are **so** cluttered with broken and discarded things, it's hard to imagine us ever thinking about life with God with this Japanese mindset.

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Cor. 4:7)

It's tempting to look at this text and think Paul sees himself as a disposable utility. But in reality, it was Paul's **life story** that gave opportunity for God to make the Gospel shine to the world through his testimony. **God doesn't throw away what is broken, God resurrects it.**



It's not a huge leap to go from the brokenness of a piece of pottery to the matter of human brokenness... life batters, chips away and breaks us in a variety of ways.

Yet, we Christians can know that it's often in the difficulties of life that, like Paul, **we learn that God present to comfort, to strengthen us, to build faith in us**, and to work in us a longing for the life to come. This is especially true when we step out in faith to serve and face some sort of trial and difficulty because of it. No-one sets out to be broken and God does not delight in our pain. However, it's in such golden chips and breaks that the Good News of Jesus often becomes **treasure hidden in an ordinary, ever-day jar of clay**, as Paul once described himself.

Our frailty, troubles, and even our brokenness could become a beautiful testimony to the glory of God in Jesus Christ.