A TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Key Verse: 4:7

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

Thank God for the truly glorious ministry of the new covenant. Because of the veil covering the minds and hearts people cannot see the glory of the new covenant, that is the glory of Jesus. But when the veil is taken away in Christ Jesus, they can see the glory of the Lord Jesus and put their faith in him. We should always humble ourselves before God’s word so that the veil may not cover our hearts at any time. It is so that we all may live in his freedom and reflect the Lord’s glory, being transformed in his likeness with ever-increasing glory. May we keep this blessing and hope in our hearts and freely serve the ministry of the new covenant, the gospel, and the Spirit. In today’s passage, chapter 4, we can think of the light of the gospel, the treasure in jars of clay and the importance of preaching and speaking out of faith in Christ Jesus, experiencing the death and life of Jesus with the true unseen and eternal hope.

**First, the light of the gospel (1-6).** Verse 1 says, “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” It is God’s mercy to have the ministry of the new covenant. Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:13-14, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” And the description “we do not lose heart/faint/give up” shows many difficulties in serving the ministry. Paul had said in 2 Corinthians 1:8, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life.”

Subsequently Paul says in verse 2, “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.” Paul had written at the end of chapter 2, “Unlike so many, we do not peddle word of God for profit.” We should always watch out for the peddling for profit, deception, and distortion of the word of God in our time. Verse 2 continues, “On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” The gospel preacher should present the word of God clearly, correctly handing the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), and appeal to the conscience of the listeners. This is the most genuine encountering between the two parties.

Then in verse 3 Paul says, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.” Here “veiled” means “concealed”, while the word “veil” put over the face of Moses has the meaning of covering. Even though a preacher sets forth the truth of God’s word plainly appealing to the conscience, not all accept the word. The spiritual results do not rest with the preacher but God, although the preacher’s role so critical. There are those who are perishing and to them the truth of God’s word is concealed. So do not lose heart according to the result.

Consequently, Paul says in verse 4, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Now here Paul says of the god of this age. In 2 Corinthians 3:16 Paul had said, “Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.” But the god of this age blinds the minds of the unbelievers not to turn to the Lord, not to see the light of the gospel. The god of this age turns people’s attention not to Christ Jesus but to something else, the glory of people or the glory of the world, the devil’s temptation, religious good cause, human beauty, or wisdom and philosophy of this world, etc. Under the influence of the god of this age people exchange the glory of the immortal God for the glory of mortal human beings and worthless images. They change the truth of God for a life (Ro 1:23, 25).

Paul said in verse 4, “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” The gospel, the new covenant, is light that displays the glory of Christ revealing who Jesus is. He is God’s Son whom God sent into this world for the salvation of mankind. He is God Incarnate. John 1:18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Hebrews 1:3 says, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” According to John 1:3-4, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” And Jesus said in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” The world is full of darkness, but Jesus gives this wonderful promise. Even one words Jesus can shine in a dark heart. Particularly, Jesus’ death and resurrection is the light that overcomes all the power of darkness.

In this world, a fierce spiritual battle is going on between two forces, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. In Acts 26:17, Paul testifies to what the Lord Jesus spoke to him before King Agrippa, “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.” Paul also said in Colossians 1:12-13, “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” When people’s eyes are opened to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, they are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

Before meeting Christ, I thought my life was a curse and I imagined the worst situations such failing in exams and marriage and tragic events happening in my family. So I was fatalistic about my life. But when I received one word of God, Genesis 12:2, “I will bless you…you will be blessing,” I realized that life is not a curse but a blessing in Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again from the dead. I was moved from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of life, and God has led me thus far in this kingdom of his Son Jesus Christ. Then how can we keep ourselves in the kingdom of light? A Psalmist said in Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my paths.” We need the word of God as a light at each path of life. John 11:40, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” has been a light for my path, especially for the last one and half years.

Then Paul says in verse 5, “For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” When human ideas or certain teachings are preached, the devil is not bothered, having no need of making any effort to blind the minds of the unbelievers, who have already been under his dominion. However, when Jesus Christ is preached, the devil is greatly agitated and makes every effort to keep his prey. Paul had clearly said in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, “Jews demands miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Despite the opposition and hatred to Christ, Paul preached Jesus Christ as his servant and a servant of his people for the salvation of their souls.

Subsequently Paul says in verse 6, “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” This is a new creation work. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone; the new has come!” Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works…”

Here Paul says, “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The gospel is the revelation of who God is and who we are in light of him. God revealed himself partly through the glory of God reflected on the face of Moses, but he revealed himself fully, through the glory of God in the face of Christ. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” Jesus is the final and full revelation of God. As we thought earlier, Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being. Indeed, knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent is eternal life (Jn 17:3). To see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ or the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, people’s minds and hearts are to be enlightened. So, Paul prayed in Ephesians 1:17, 18, “God…may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation…” and “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened…” This enlightenment is not by human knowledge but by the Spirit.

**Second, the treasure in jars of clay (7-18).** Verse 7 says, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” What is this treasure? In the context it is the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ or the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ, or more concisely Christ, Paul preached. We can say that the core of the new covenant is Christ Jesus, as he said at the Last Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Lk 22:20). The expression, “this treasure in jars of clay,” shows the invaluableness of Jesus and our valuelessness. There seem to be two kinds of Christians, those who know the value and preciousness of Christ they believe and those who have no perception and thought of this value. To the one what they believe is just a kind of religion with no living fellowship with Christ and their Christian life becomes like a meaningless routine and it becomes a burden to them; to the other what they believe is alive and the most precious in the world with top priority.

The Scripture describes this value in various ways. Jesus said once in Matthew 13:44-45, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine peals. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” We can certainly say that the key of the kingdom of heaven is Christ Jesus, and life is an investment to earn the most profit. Paul said in Philippians 3:7-8, “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” Gaining Christ is losing everything and at the same time it is gaining everything including eternal life and the kingdom of God.

And those who keep Christ Jesus as treasure in their hearts also know the preciousness of God’s words and treasure them up and ponder them in their hearts as written in Luke 2:19, “Mary treasured up all these things (what the shepherds said to her, the message of an angel concerning the baby Jesus just born) and pondered them in her heart.” A Psalmist confessed, “Blessed is the man…his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). Psalm 19:10 says, “They (the words of God) are more precious than gold, than much gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.” And Paul said to Timothy his spiritual son in 2 Timothy 3:15-17, “how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Again, “this treasure in jars of clay.” A jar of clay or pot is cheap, common, breakable, valueless and ugly. That is what human beings are before God, made of the dust of the ground. Those who do not recognize this become easily proud in doing the work of God, and become useless. However, jars of clay become precise and useful as they contain the treasure and offer themselves to God. God can use them at each time as he wants to fulfill his purpose and in that the lives of jars of clay become very meaningful and wonderful. Paul says continually in verse 7, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” How precious and great jars of clay are as they show the all-surpassing power of God as they share the treasure in them, shining the light of the gospel of Christ!

Paul says in verse 8, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Hard pressed on every side/afflicted, perplexed/be at a loss, persecuted/hunted down, and struck down/thrown down with force, what a life! Yet, not crushed, not despairing, not abandoned/forsaken, and not destroyed. It is because of the treasure Christ Jesus in them and all-surpassing power from God.

Certainly, if Paul had not preached Christ, he would have not suffered in that way. Especially when he preached Christ crucified, he offended sinful human beings. Paul said in Galatians 5:11, “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.” Paul also wrote in Galatians 6:12-13, “Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.”

Then Paul says in verses 10 and 11, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 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.” We learn a simple yet profound truth, no death, no resurrection; no cross, no crown; no pain, no gain. Paul said of the resurrection principle in 1 Corinthians 15:36, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” He also said in 15:31, “I die every day.” Jesus said in John 12:24, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it does, it produces many seeds.” Here in saying this Jesus is referring it to his own life that denying himself and obeying the will of God he chose to die on the cross to produce many lives.

Often, S. Ian leads us to sing the song, “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back; the cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back, no turning back.” The story behind this song was that a Christian, the first convert in his village in India was killed by the chief in the village after losing his two children and then his wife by arrow-shooting, when he did not renounce in public his faith in Christ Jesus to the end. After that the chief was conscience-stricken being amazed by the man’s true faith in Jesus Christ. He was converted and the whole village was evangelized. It was possible because of the treasure in his jar of clay and the jar of clay was broken gloriously.

Consequently, Paul says in verse 13, “So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” What a confession as a shepherd!

**Third, believe and speak (13-18).** Paul says in verse 13, “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak.” This is a quotation from Psalm 116:10. In that Psalm the Psalmist was in great suffering and agony of life, but the LORD saved him. He confessed, “I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD; ‘O LORD, save me!’ The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.” He continued, “for you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.” And then he said, “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With faith he could not but testify the living and gracious God. There seem to be many who believe but do not speak. Some claim that our life is important and it speaks for them. That’s true. Jesus also said, “You are the light of the world…let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). Yet it does not exclude speaking the word of truth. After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:15-16). Paul also said in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word.” Paul said in Romans 10:14, “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” And then he said, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” The gospel is given through words, and the words of the gospel must be spoken out of faith, which goes together with one’s life. It is as we studied in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, “because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” When words are spoken, the Holy Spirit can work.

Paul says here, “With the same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 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.” It shows that speaking and preaching the gospel in this hostile world needs resurrection faith. And then he says in verse 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.” What a wonderful result! What a grace! What a glory to God!

Then Paul shares his hope, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 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.”

We thank God for the treasure in jars of clay. May we truly keep the treasure in our hearts at any cost and offer our jars of clay to God for preaching Christ and speaking the words of the gospel to share the treasure, shining the light of the gospel.