

**June 28, 2009 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 “Jars of Clay” by Richard Boatman**

<sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in **jars of clay** to show that this **all-surpassing power is from God** and not from us. <sup>8</sup>We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup>We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... <sup>14</sup>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...

Beloved, as believers we are possessors of an incredible treasure. That Holy Other who said, “Light Be” and light was is the same One who has spoken light into the darkness of our lives. (verse 6) We are indwelled by the divine. The Holy Spirit abides within. What treasure is ours; what splendor of God’s presence inundates us. And yet...and here Paul abruptly arrests our attention and grounds us in an essential reality... “But we have this treasure in jars of clay...”

In May of 2006 a Stradivarius called the *Hammer*—a violin produced during the “golden period” of the early 1700s—sold at a public sale for \$3,544,000. Can you imagine a Stradivarius being stored in a large shoebox? Or one of Antonio Stradivari’s original violins being carried around the house by a three year old? That is the drama of the great apostle’s declaration: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay...” We as containers are weak and vulnerable; our bodies and emotions and mental faculties are often suspect, prone to pride; we are frail and often foolish. We get irritated if we have to stand in line too long; we become angry when someone pulls in front of us or the referee makes a poor call; we lose our sanctification when the neighbors mow too early; a pimple on our nose can ruin the prom and we are easily embarrassed.

Michael and Rachel were recently driving to Des Moines. The gas light came on so they pulled into a station in Altoona. They soon discovered they had left check books and both their credit and debit cards at home. So here they sat. Rachel scrounged through her purse and found \$4 worth of dimes and nickels. Since it was a prepay station, one of them was going to have to go in and place all these coins on the counter and prepay \$4. They debated who this would be as neither of them wanted to do it because it was embarrassing. So, they worked it out in an adult manner: they played *rock, paper, scissors*. Michael lost.

All of us as “jars of clay” are so prone to pride and so frail and often foolish. So why does God entrust such treasure to be contained in such fragile containers? In

order “to show that this **all-surpassing power is from God** and not from us.”

In a word, “there is a God, and we’re not him.” At stake in the Garden of Eden was Lordship—who is God. The first couple chose themselves. And the idol of *self* has been the greatest competitor to the divine ever since. But in our Lord that old self, the Adamic nature has been “crucified with Christ.” Though this human vessel is weak, it has been chosen as a residence for God. It took centuries. God’s self-revelation began in a remedial way as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob slowly learned that God was not localized and only worshiped in a particular region at a certain tree or rock. Through Moses Israel was taught that God’s presence dwelled in the Ark of the Covenant but moved with them wherever they were directed. Israel with all its weakness was used as a carrier of God’s seed to usher in the Messiah. Now God was revealed in the unique person of Jesus Christ—the God-man. And for the last two thousand years we have lived a new reality—“Christ in us the hope of glory.” We have become the Most Holy Place of the Temple.

And so we are caught in a holy-tension between glory and weakness. <sup>8</sup>*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup>We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body...*

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul alludes to the depth of vision and revelation given him. He was “caught up into Paradise” (verse 4) and allowed to bask in the treasure of unfiltered glory. He heard “inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” But “because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! I pled with the Lord three times to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why...I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (verses 7-10).

Beloved of God, there is glory to be found in our weaknesses, for weakness is held in God’s hope. For as today’s passage says, <sup>14</sup>*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...*** We are not perfect, but we are being perfected; we are not fully sanctified, but we are being sanctified. At different speeds and paces and rhythms and ways, God’s life is reigning in us; the kingdom is coming in us;

heaven is manifesting on earth through those who are being “Jesusized.” We are gripped in that hope and encouragement of which Paul speaks:

*<sup>16</sup>Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* Randy Tjaden and his crew have been roofing the parsonage. Because of the steepness of the roof, they’ve erected scaffolding that allows them to work more efficiently and with greater safety. Inner renewal is like spiritual scaffolding as it frames up our inward lives giving us something stable to stand on. For those without this inner framework of spiritual growth, external changes become particularly difficult.

E. Stanley Jones was a great Methodist missionary to India. Though a magnificent speaker and writer, he gave great energy towards developing an inner life with much supportive “scaffolding.” When quite old he had a debilitating stroke that immobilized him and left him nearly speechless. But his inner man continued to be renewed! “I need no outer props to hold up my faith,” he wrote, “for my faith holds me.”

Sometime earlier Jones had visited with a retired bishop. The bishop was frustrated now that he was out of the limelight. Seeing something special in Jones, he inquired as to the secret of victorious living. E. Stanley Jones told him the secret “was in self-surrender. The difference was in giving up the innermost self to Jesus. The difference was in the texture of the things that held him. When the outer strands were broken by retirement, the inner strands were not enough to hold him. Apparently he had a case of ‘limelight-itis’ instead of a case of surrender to Jesus.”

*Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

Have you ever considered that your affliction or pain or distress is achieving something that produces substance, that actually helps shape your spiritual life? The shaping may come from resisting the affliction or from surrendering to a more noble path the affliction forces you to consider. Such was the case with Howard Rutledge, a United States Air Force pilot shot down over North Vietnam during that war. In his book *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, Rutledge reflects on inner resources that developed during his years as a P.O.W.:

*...it became so much easier to separate the important from the trivial, the worthwhile from the waste. For example, in the past, I usually worked or played*

*hard on Sundays and had no time for church. For years [my wife] had encouraged me to join the family at church...but I was too busy, too preoccupied to spend one or two short hours a week thinking about the really important things. Now the sights and sounds and smells of death were all around me. My hunger for spiritual food soon outdid my hunger for a steak. Now I wanted to know about the part of me that will never die. Now I wanted to talk about God and Christ and the church. But in...solitary confinement, there was no pastor, no Sunday-school teacher, no Bible, no hymnbook, no community of believers to guide and sustain me. I had completely neglected the spiritual dimension of my life. It took prison to show me how empty my life is without God.*

In great affliction, something of great value was achieved for Howard Rutledge. A spiritual “scaffolding” began forming in him. A beautiful inner sanctuary was built in the harsh environs of solitary confinement. The Psalmist reflected: “He who dwells in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I will trust’” (Psalm 91:1-2).

But let’s face it—not everyone comes through affliction being better than they were; some become bitter. And I think the reason we become better or bitter in large part depends on how we act out **verse 18**: *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.* Gordon MacDonald observes that we may be saved Christians but “can [still] exist in a state of such disorganization that almost no communion with God is possible. That usually leads to a general chaos in other parts of one’s private world.” By fixing his eyes on Jesus, Peter walked on water. When he turned to gaze upon the circumstances, he sank. By fixing their eyes on Jesus, Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight from a prison cell. Had they looked upon the circumstances, they could have been depressed. Our lives are defined by where we fix our eyes. Our attitudes are defined by what we look upon.

Today’s teaching really evokes two related questions: How is your inner scaffolding? Where are your eyes fixed? As your life changes, as challenges come, as aging sets in, when disappointments arise—How’s your inner scaffolding? What are you looking at, the eternal or the temporary? Let us join together in building our inner scaffolding and practice “fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2).