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Priceless Treasure in Clay Jars

4: 7-15

Priceless treasures in clay jars DIG: Why is the picture of a clay jar a fitting one for describing believers in relation to their Lord? What qualities should we have as clay jars for God's use? What is the treasure within the clay jar? What truths keep Paul going in spite of his hardships? Why does ADONAI call Paul to go through such hardships?

REFLECT: What does "death at work" and "life is in you" mean to you? Which is at work in your life? Why? How do these verses help you cope with your present difficulties and anxieties? How do these verses challenge the commonly held ideas of what makes a person a "success?" Is your jar broken? What price are you willing to suffer to follow the Messiah?

The ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing.

The gospel is **a treasure**. This **treasure** has been entrusted to us, men and women who are nothing more than **clay jars**. **God** did this on purpose because, given our human weaknesses, the impact of the Gospel is not evidence of human power, but of the power of **ADONAI**.¹¹²

When **Paul** wrote this letter, **he** was under furious attack in **Corinth**. **False apostles (to see link click [Aj](#) - The Problem of the False Apostles)** had infiltrated the church there, assaulting **Paul** so as to create an environment for spreading legalistic **false** doctrine. To gain a hearing for **their** demonic lies, **they** first had to destroy **Paul's** apostolic authority and spiritual credibility in the eyes of the **Corinthian** Church. To that end, they launched an all-out blitz on **the apostle's** character and ministry. Their attack was merciless, relentless, and petty. They even stooped so low as to criticize **Paul's** personal appearance (**10:10**). **The false apostles** claimed the reason so many had rejected **his** message was that **he** was an unimpressive, common man.

Those hurtful, hateful attacks, moving people's loyalty from divine truth to satanic lies, demanded a response from **Paul**. **He** was not necessarily interested in defending **himself**

for **his** own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel. **Paul** knew that if **the false apostles** could discredit **him**, **they** could replace **him** as **the apostles** with authority in **Corinth**. Then, **they** would be free to deceive **the Corinthians** with **their false** teaching.

The false apostles' attacks on **him** put **Paul** between a rock and a hard place. If **he** defended **himself** against **their** slander, which **he** had to do to hold the church to the truth (written and accurate), **he** risked looking proud. And, in truth, no one was more acutely aware of **his** shortcomings than **Paul himself**. In **his** first letter to **the Corinthians** **he** confessed: **For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (First Corinthians 15:9 NIV)**. To **Timothy** **he** wrote: **I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. 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 (First Timothy 1:12-13 NIV)**.



How could **Paul** remove **himself** from such a dilemma? How was **he** able to defend **himself** and the gospel **he** preached without seeming proud? Rather than deny **the false apostles'** accusations that **he** was weak and imperfect . . . **Paul** embraced them! **The apostle** declared the timeless truth of the gospel was held in a humble container. In fact, **his** weakness, far from being a reason to reject **him**, **he** used the analogy of a precious **treasure in a clay jar**. **But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it will be evident that such overwhelming power comes from God and not from us (4:7)**.

Clay jars were commonplace in virtually every home in the ancient Middle East. **They** were inexpensive and easily broken. Unlike metal jars (which could be repaired) or glass ones (which could be melted down and reused), once broken, **clay jars** had to be thrown away.¹¹³ Yet, rather than being housed in a gilded box, **God** entrusts **His treasure** to these fragile containers . . . ordinary and disposable. However, the very weakness of **the clay jars** focuses attention on **God's** extraordinary power. **The redeemed of Messiah** might not look

too outwardly impressive at times **(10:10)**, but inside we each contain **the light** and **treasure of God**.

The simile of **the clay jars** takes us back to the incident during the time of **Gideon**. In **Judges 7** we read that **Gideon** took only **three hundred men** with him to free **their land** of innumerable **Midianite** invaders. Each man had **a trumpet** and **a torch** and **an empty clay jar**. **They** carried **their torches** in **the clay jars** so that **the light** couldn't be seen from a distance. Then when **they** got among **the Midianites**, **they** broke **their clay jars**. It wasn't until **the clay jars** were broken that **the light** could shine out. That is the thing which we need today. We need our **jar** to be broken. **The apostle Paul** was a man who knew what it was to be broken for **Yeshua's** sake. With the "health-and-wealth" gospel that is so prevalent today, the trouble is that we don't have enough who are willing to do that.¹¹⁴

Expanding upon **his clay jar** theme, **Paul** wrote one of **his** most transparent statements. Although **Paul** was a fragile **clay pot** of inferior quality, **he** was not broken. To illustrate this, **he** rehearses a list of hardships that **he** had endured as **an apostle of Messiah**. **We have all kinds of troubles, but we are not crushed; we are perplexed, yet not in despair; persecuted, yet not abandoned; knocked down, yet not destroyed (4:8-9)**. On first reading, it may appear that the list presents **Paul** in stoic-like terms as someone who bravely endures **the sufferings** that **his** ministry brought. However, **his** statement: **so that it will be evident that such overwhelming power comes from God and not from us (4:7)**, clearly indicates that **his** purpose is to show that **his** hardships paradoxically display the power of **God**.¹¹⁵

Most people of average devotion would have been broken by such adversity. Yet devotion did not sustain **Paul**; it was the power of **God** at work within **Him**. The task demanded all **he** could give. And when **he** had given **his** all, and even that wasn't enough, **God's** power carried **him** through. This truth prevented **him** from thinking that he could do it all by **himself**. **He** knew that **God** was working even through **his** limitations and failures. As one controlled by the love of Messiah, he dared to reach beyond his limits because he trusted in **God's** power to redeem what **he** did. **Paul** had become **the suffering apostle of the suffering Messiah**.¹¹⁶

In contrast to **the false apostles** in **Corinth**, **Paul** could say that **he** may have been **knocked down**, so to speak, but **he** wasn't **knocked out**. **The false apostles** did not **suffer**. Instead of winning lost souls, **they** stole converts from **Paul's** churches. Instead of sacrificing for the people, **they** made the people sacrifice for **them (11:20)**. **The false apostles** did not have **treasure** to share. All **they** had were some museum pieces from the

TaNakh, faded antiques without the life-giving **Ruach Ha'Kosesh**.¹¹⁷

The suffering that **Paul** and **his companions** were experiencing was merely a continuation of **the suffering** endured by **Yeshua**. **We always carry in our bodies the dying of Yeshua, so that the life of Yeshua may be manifested in our bodies too (4:10)**. The word **dying** here does not translate *thanatos*, **Paul's** usual word for **death**, but *nekrosis*. *Thanatos* speaks of **death** as a fact or a one-time event, while *nekrosis* describes the process of **dying**. It was not a matter of **life** after **death** or even **life** through **death**, but of **death** in the midst of **life**. What had been done to **Messiah** – the false accusations, the beatings, the mockery, **His** murder – was exactly what was being done to **them**. In that context, **they** felt privileged to **suffer** on **their Lord's** behalf. As **Paul** wrote to the church in Colossae: **Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Messiah's afflictions, for the sake of His Body, which is the Church (Colossians 1:24)**. The ironic twist was this: **Paul's sufferings** and eventual martyrdom at the hands of the enemies of **Messiah** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ I - John the Baptist is Beheaded**) actually resulted in a great multitude (including the believers in **Corinth**) receiving eternal life.¹¹⁸

The next verse restates the basic assertions of the previous one: **For we who are alive are always being handed over to death for Yeshua's sake, so that Yeshua's life also might be manifested in our mortal flesh (4:11)**. **Handed over** is from the Greek word *paradidomi*, the same verb used to describe **Yeshua's** being **handed over** for crucifixion (**Matthew 17:22; Acts 3:13; Romans 4:25**). It's as if **Paul** was saying, "facing **death** is part of **life**." As **Paul** and **his** co-laborers proclaimed the Good News (in which **the death** of **Messiah** is primary), **they** suffer for it, sharing in **the sufferings** patterned after **their Lord**, as **their** story is patterned after **His**. Thus, on the one hand, **Paul** was daily subjected to **death**; but on the other hand, **he** was continually upheld, and made more than a conqueror by the experience of the risen **Yeshua** in **his mortal body (Romans 8:35-39; Second Corinthians 1:8-10 and 2:14)**.¹¹⁹

Thus, **death is at work in us but life in you**, in other words, "**We are dying, but you are living**" (4:12). The apostle pointed out that **his** ministry was the reason **the Corinthians** had experienced the Good News of **Yeshua Messiah**. **Paul's suffering** was not for **himself**, but for the building up of the Church. Like **his Master**, **he** came as a **servant (Mark 10:45)**. He reminded **the Philippians**, "**Indeed, even if my lifeblood is poured out as a drink offering over the sacrifice and service of your faith, I will still be glad and rejoice with you all (Philippians 2:17)**. To the **Colossians** he wrote: **I rejoice in my present sufferings on your behalf (Colossians 1:24a)**. And he wrote to **Timothy**,

“Why do I persevere through it all? For the sake of those who have been chosen, so that they too may obtain the deliverance that comes through Messiah Yeshua, with eternal glory (Second Timothy 2:10). It was Paul’s privilege to suffer in bringing the Gospel to others, who then became the fruit of his courageous endurance, an unbroken chain through the ages.

What enabled **Paul** to endure in the face of **his suffering**? **The TaNaKh** says: **I trusted, therefore, I spoke. Paul** identified with the righteous man who wrote **Psalm 116:10**. True witness for **ADONAI** is based on **faith/trust/belief** in **ADONAI**, and this comes from **the Word of God (Romans 10:17)**. **Paul** could **speak** of **his suffering** and **death** because **he** was confident that **YHVH** would deliver **him (1:9-10)**. This confidence was founded on the resurrection of **Messiah, the Firstfruit** of more to come for all those who place their **faith** for salvation in **Him**. **Since we have that same Spirit who enables us to trust (1 Cor 15:35-52; Rom 8:17b-28), we also trust and therefore speak (4:13)**. Those who genuinely believe the truth cannot help but **speak** of that truth.

After citing **Psalm 116:10**, a hymn of praise for **God’s** deliverance of **the psalmist’s** soul from **death**, **Paul** asserted **his** unshakable confidence that even if **they** killed **him**, **“Because we know that he who raised the Lord Yeshua will also raise us with Yeshua and bring us along with you into his presence” (4:14)**. **Paul** believed that with absolute confidence, **he** was able to **speak** on **Messiah’s** behalf with equal confidence. It’s as if he was saying to **the Corinthians**, “Hey, what’s the worst thing **they** can do to **me**? Kill **me**? Ha! Even if **they** do that, **ADONAI** will raise **me** from the dead and let **me** live with **Him** forever. So what have **I** got to lose?” **His** was truly an eternal perspective.¹²⁰

Clearly, **Paul’s** goal was never **his** own comfort, reputation, or popularity. **All this is for your sake, so that as grace flows out to more and more people** through the evangelistic efforts of both **himself**, as well as **the Corinthian** believers, **it may cause thanksgiving to overflow and bring glory to God (4:15)**. In the words of **Dani’el 12:3**, **“Those who can discern will shine like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever**. The astounding plan of **ADONAI** is to use common **clay pots** to carry **the priceless treasure** of the glorious gospel to needy sinners. As they humbly and faithfully serve **Him**, **His** power flows through them to others.¹²¹

Earlier **Paul** had said: **But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it will be evident that such overwhelming power comes from God and not from us (4:7)**. But how do we do that? How do we live that way? We have to practice the presence of **God** when life

hits us in the face. When the doctor across the table is talking about cancer and suddenly you realize she's talking about you. When the phone rings and the police tell you that it's your child . . . your spouse. When someone tells you they don't love you anymore. They don't want to live with you anymore. When the child that you've raised doesn't believe what you've taught them; they believe what the world says. What do you do when life hits you in the face?

When Jacob was fleeing from Esau **he reached a certain place he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which ADONAI spoke to him,** reassuring **him** that **He** would be with **him** and gave **Jacob** many wonderful promises. **When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it"** because life hit **me** in the face (**Genesis 28:16**). What do you do when life hits you in the face . . . you practice the presence of **God** in your life because **He** is still on the throne and **He** still loves you and cares for you?

*Dear Almighty Heavenly **Father**, Praise **Your** Almighty power and **Your** faithful love. They are such a comfort. Thank **You** for entrusting us with such a great **treasure** as your Good News. Even though we are merely **clay jars**, help us to rely on **Your Spirit** and not to back down to **the false apostles** of our day. Help us to care more about **Your Word** than we do about ourselves. Praise **You** that not only is **Your** power eternal, so also is **Your** faithful and enduring love. How marvelous that **nothing can separate us from Your love (Romans 8:38)**! What a great and double bonus to have, and to live for, an eternal home with Almighty **Father** who always loves me. That is worth suffering any criticism and shame for! Praise and love **You** always! In your holy **Son's** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*