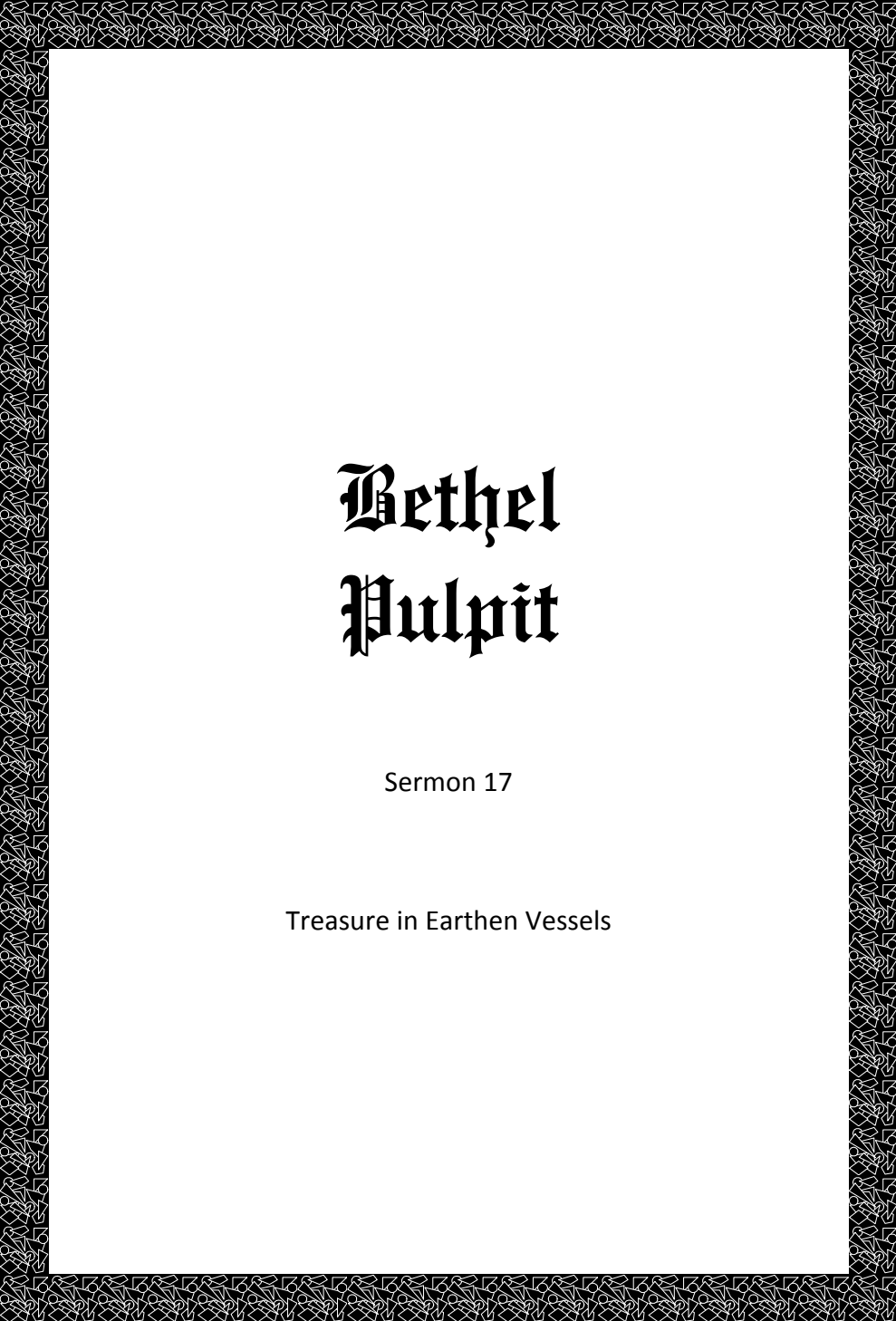




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 17

Treasure in Earthen Vessels

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 5th October, 1986**

Text: *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4. 7).*

What a wonderful mercy it is to have something that God has given us, something we did not bring into this world, but something we will certainly take out, something that this world can never give, something that we can never give ourselves! Now Paul says, "We have this treasure." It was something he had received from God. That was his privilege, and how highly he valued it! The vital point with you and me tonight, beloved friends, is this: have we anything that God has done for us, anything God has given us? Have we anything of which we can say, "This is mine"?

Of course, you find language like this in quite a few places in the Word of God. Let me just mention another instance. "Which hope we have." Here he says, "We have this treasure." There he speaks of possessing a hope – not a hope he had by nature, but a God-given hope, a Holy Ghost wrought hope in his heart. "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the Forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus."

"We have." You see, the whole spirit of the world today is a spirit of covetousness (isn't it?) to get something, to have something – pleasure, ambitions, riches, houses, possessions. Now the Lord kindly says, "Covet earnestly the best gifts" – not these earthly things, however right they are, that one day will have to be left behind, that may in their measure satisfy your body, but can never satisfy your soul. "Covet earnestly the best gifts." And do not be satisfied until you possess them. You know what the best gifts are, these blessings that only God Himself can give: the unspeakable gift, His own beloved Son, the Lord Jesus, and then all the blessings of the gospel treasured up in Him. Now covet those; do not be satisfied until you have them.

There is a remarkable word in that little-read book, the prophecy of Obadiah: "The house of Jacob shall possess their possessions." All God's people have possessions in Christ. All God's people have possessions in

Scripture, in the Word of God. But the point is to lay hold of them, to be led by the Holy Spirit to possess them, to have that sweet assurance that they are ours.

Well, there is a treasure in Christ. I believe almost everyone in this chapel tonight can sing that line, “In Him” – that is, Christ – “In Him there dwells a treasure all divine.” But may many of you before you go home tonight be able to sing the line that follows: “And matchless grace has made that treasure mine.”

“But we have this treasure.” If you enquire what Paul is speaking of, what he means by the treasure, then there is no uncertainty whatsoever concerning the answer. He has just mentioned it. “The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Now that is what he means by *this treasure*, a personal acquaintance with the Son of God, a personal knowledge of Him and the blessings that are in Him, and eternal life bound up with it all. You see, this great work of the preceding verse is God’s work alone. “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts.” There are two creations here, the original creation, when God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light; and then the new creation, that dawn of everlasting day in a sinner’s heart by the inshining of divine light by the Holy Ghost. And you can no more regenerate yourself than you could create the world. It is the same divine, almighty power.

“God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts.” That is, the place where the darkness is, the darkness of sin, the darkness of unbelief, the darkness of carnality. It is in our hearts, and when the new birth takes place, God shines in our hearts and then we see things we never saw before, we never saw by nature – our unworthiness, our sin, our guilt, the vanity of the world, the solemnity of the judgment day and eternity, heaven or hell before us. We see these things. In His light we see light. And it is because “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts.” There may be some dark old cottage with the shutters up and the light has not shone inside that cottage for years. Then someone comes and breaks down those shutters and the light of the sun shines in, and there you see all the filth and the cobwebs and the spiders. They were there before, but now you see them. And all these evils are in our hearts by nature, but when God shines

in, what are these things that you see? You say, “Can ever God dwell here?”

“God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts.” Now the Lord never performs that miracle of love and mercy to leave it there, just to show you dismal things. Where He begins His work He carries it on and completes it, and if the Lord has shone in your heart to show you your need, your vileness, then He will never leave His work unfinished until also He has given you the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Now that is what some of you want (isn’t it?) to have that glimpse by faith of the glory of God as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ, the glory of His love and His mercy, His tender compassion, His great salvation. But it is the knowledge of it. You see, this is the treasure, when those beams of grace and glory shine in a sinner’s heart, when there is some knowledge, however small, of His great love, of His mercy, His forgiveness, when you know something of His precious, sin-atonement blood, His righteousness, His intercession, but especially the Lord Jesus Himself, “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory,” Christ dwelling in your heart by faith – and so He will where there is that aching void that nothing here can ever satisfy but Christ.

“Which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” O, you say, that tries me, Christ dwelling in my heart – “Unworthy dwelling, glorious Guest.” Well, is Christ in your prayers that spring from your heart? Is Christ in your desires? Is Christ in your affections? “Which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

So in a word, this treasure is Christ Himself, the knowledge of Him, all the blessings that He bestows, all ending in eternal life. “This treasure.” But you see, the point is this: Do you and I count this to be a treasure? If you went out in the streets tonight and asked people what they meant by treasure, you would get all kinds of answers. Perhaps some would think of “treasure island” and treasure hidden there years ago. Perhaps some would think of treasure on these ancient ships which have sunk at sea. And other people might point you to the crown jewels or something like that. Other people might be more practical and speak of money in the bank, or a good harvest gathered in, and some people think of the treasures of the sea, when the fishermen have a good harvest.

“This treasure.” If you and I are enlightened by the Spirit of God, if God does shine into our hearts, then we will see things as they really are, the vanity of the best of earthly things, the best of earthly riches, and the value of the things of God. The wise man says, “Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death.” “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” If a man possesses all the treasures of the east, and if his soul is eternally lost? Someone put that question when a man had died: “Do you know how much he left?” And the answer was, “Everything.” You and I will leave everything behind. “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither.”

“This treasure.” The Lord Jesus said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth,” whether that treasure is money or ambition or pleasure or a comfortable home or a name among men, or whatever it is. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.” I take it the point there is this, that whatever treasures we have, sooner or later we shall lose them. It may be suddenly. That is the thief breaking through and stealing, in a moment they are gone. Or it may be a very slow work all through a lifetime, the moth eating it away, the rust corroding it. “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Now what do you count to be treasure? To possess Christ in your heart, would you count this to be treasure? We read of that man seeking goodly pearls, but when he found the pearl of great price, he was ready to part with all to possess it. I suppose we are seeking goodly pearls, things like happiness and peace and contentment – goodly pearls. But O, if we find the Pearl of great price, the Lord Jesus, there is everything in Him. It will make us willing to part with everything else that we might possess Him. How many of you can honestly say,

“Compared with Christ, in all beside
No comeliness I see”?

“This treasure.” O has the Lord taught you what true riches are, where real treasure is to be found, something you can never lose, something that will take you to heaven and you will take to heaven with you? “This treasure.” Now beloved friends, never be satisfied until you possess this treasure. The man who has it is rich indeed. The man who lacks it, whatever else he has, is poor.

So all God’s people will be made possessors of this treasure, this vital, personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus. But you see, here is the word of warning. The apostle puts one of his *buts* in. “*But* we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” I suppose in present-day language we would say a clay jar or a pot mug. Earthen vessels. This is a description of God’s people. What a contrast there is here! This jar made of clay, there is nothing attractive about it, but in it is deposited this precious treasure. Now that is just what it is in salvation. You and I are these poor earthen vessels, but if God shines in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, then we possess a heavenly treasure in poor, earthen vessels.

But we have continually to be reminded of it, that the treasure is not in us. The treasure is not in the earthen vessel. The treasure is in Christ, “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” If there were a priceless gem on display and it was displayed in a casket of pure gold, people would not know whether they were supposed to admire the casket or the gem that was in it. Now here there is an opposite, a contrast. In a word, in its pure, gospel simplicity it is this: everything in Christ, nothing in the sinner. We need wisdom, natural wisdom, heavenly wisdom. It is all in Christ. Our treasure is in Christ. We need grace. It does not spring from our barren hearts. It does not come from nature’s barren ground. It is all in Christ. That is where the treasure is, all the grace. We need daily strength. It is in Christ. In other words,

“Whate’er I need in Jesus dwells,
And there it dwells for me.”

But it will ever be “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us,” not that the vessel may be admired or valued, but the treasure in it.

Of course, in the first instance Paul is speaking of his own ministry. He had a wonderful gospel to proclaim, the gospel of Christ and Him crucified. But he did not count himself to be anything. He realised that it was a treasure, but he had that treasure in a poor, earthen vessel. And this word is true of every God-sent, gospel minister, a poor earthen vessel, yet bearing the wonderful treasures of Christ and the riches of His grace. And it is true of every saved sinner without exception.

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” In the following verse, he works it out. “We are troubled on every side.” That is the earthen vessel; that is the weakness. “Yet not distressed” – not crushed. That is the treasure. “We are perplexed.” Again the earthen vessel, the frailty. “But not in despair.” There is the treasure. “Persecuted.” That is the earthen vessel. “But not forsaken.” There is the treasure. “Cast down.” The earthen vessel. “But not destroyed.” The precious treasure. And the wonderful thing is that this treasure can never be lost. We think of that beautiful word,

“Then let the wildest storms arise;
Let tempests mingle earth and skies;
No fatal shipwreck shall I fear,
But all my treasures with me bear.”

Do you believe that when you die you will not suffer any fatal shipwreck, that the last great storm can never destroy this treasure, that you will take this treasure to heaven with you?

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Now if you possess it, it will always be this, “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” That means that you will be humbled and Christ will be exalted. It will mean that He will have all the glory in your salvation, and the Lord will teach you this lesson. What a good commentary it was that we sang just now:

“Self-renouncing, grace admiring,
Made unto salvation wise.”

And the other verse:

“Stripped of all their fancied meetness
To approach the dread I AM,

They are led to see all fitness
Centring in the worthy Lamb.”

Now that is it, “that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Grace will always work like that. Divine teaching will always work like that. It will humble you, and put the crown on the Redeemer’s head. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” There is an excellency in the things of God. Grace will bring you to “approve things that are excellent,” but you will not find any excellence in your own sinful heart. You will find all that excellence in Christ. “This treasure.”

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Let us take a look more closely at this striking figure the Lord uses of a poor, earthen vessel. Now first of all, it is not of any value at all. Really, it is a valueless thing. It is just made out of rough clay, and there is no value in it – an earthen vessel. Now tell me, are you made willing to be an earthen vessel, if only you might be filled with this treasure? That is, you painfully realise your own complete worthlessness, your unworthiness. It is, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”

“They are led to see all fitness
Centring in the worthy Lamb.”

But you are brought to this, that there is no worthiness in you. O to be brought to own and feel our complete worthlessness as sinners in the sight of a holy, heart-searching God! If divine light shines out of darkness into your heart, you will know and feel that. You will know what a poor, earthen vessel you are, so worthless and so weak. It is not like some wonderful tankard of the best metal. It is so fragile, so easily broken, so easily crushed. Let it fall, and it is in pieces. Divine teaching, as divine light shines into your heart, will bring you to acknowledge and feel not only your complete worthlessness, but also your complete weakness. O how weak and frail we are, no power, no ability to obey God’s holy law, to save ourselves, to merit heaven, to prepare ourselves, to do anything good! Now tell me, is grace making you willing to come in here? You are willing to be a poor, earthen vessel – not just to say it, but to feel it – if only you might say, “We have this treasure.” You are worthless and weak and far from perfect, this earthen vessel, cheap and with no perfection. You realise the only perfection is in Christ – perfect through His

comeliness. “I have seen an end of all perfection: but Thy commandment is exceeding broad.” Weighed in the balances of God’s sanctuary, you realise how imperfect you are, a poor, earthen vessel.

“My best is stained and dyed with sin,
My all is nothing worth.”

And then there is no particular beauty, no real attraction, an ugly thing, not the best porcelain, not the finest china, just a poor, earthen vessel. “When Thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, Thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth.” I suppose by nature we have a certain beauty in our hearts, as we think, in our religious devotion and so on. Has your beauty been consumed away, and you see that in the eye of God, that all-seeing eye, you are defiled and deformed through and through?

So it is not a very pleasing picture, it is not a very attractive picture. It is a picture of every sinner saved by grace. It is what all of them are brought to feel and willingly acknowledge, willing to take their place at the feet of Jesus and to confess that they are nothing, that they can do nothing, that they are just poor, earthen vessels, so unworthy, so worthless, so weak, so sinful, so imperfect, so ugly, lacking all beauty – an earthen vessel.

But you see, and it is a wonderful *but*, it is a glorious *but*, this poor, earthen vessel is filled with the most priceless treasure there ever was and there ever will be. Now what a contrast, the earthen vessel – you and me – and the priceless treasure – Christ! There is just one thing that this earthen vessel has, only one thing, and that is a capacity to be filled. But before it can have that capacity to be filled, it must be completely empty. You see, it is a poor, earthen vessel, but it has been completely emptied. It is not half stuffed with rubbish, and the priceless treasure mixed with the rubbish. It is completely emptied – that is the one qualification – and then it is filled with the treasure.

I say this with much love and affection. Perhaps the reason why so many of you do not really possess this priceless treasure in your hearts is that you have never been completely emptied. It is painful work to be emptied, to be emptied of all your supposed goodness, to be emptied of all your creature righteousness, to be emptied of all your false hope, every

vain confidence, to be emptied of every sandy foundation, to be emptied of everything which will never take you to heaven, to be emptied of everything short of a saving knowledge of Christ. Now this emptying is painful work. In that long chapter, Jeremiah 48, the Lord deals with the Moabites, a very solemn picture of those who are not the people of God. The Moabites were somewhat akin to Israel and they spoke a similar language, but they were not Israelites. In the eleventh verse, God gives their character. They are settled on their lees; they have never been emptied from vessel to vessel. Now beloved friends, there is a fulness in Christ, a sufficiency of love and mercy and grace in Christ. But you and I have got to be completely emptied that we might receive this fulness. Now tell me, are you willing to be emptied?

“Emptied of earth I fain would be,
The world, myself, and all but Thee;
Only reserved for Christ that died,
Surrendered to the Crucified.”

A poor, earthen vessel, weak and worthless and imperfect and ugly to look at. O but the one thing that really matters is this being emptied. Now if the Lord has emptied you, if you can go in all your emptiness to a full Christ, then come and welcome. These are the souls the Lord will bless. These are the ones that He delights to fill. These are the ones who will possess this precious treasure. It is come and welcome, these who have been emptied of everything in self.

“Though void of all that’s good,
And very, very poor,
Through Christ I hope to be renewed,
And live for evermore.”

Now that is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven.

I remember in my early days of preaching going to Liverpool and there was an aged woman with a most expressive face, and now and again she would smile, and now and again she would nod her head. Of course, she has been dead now for many, many years. I made a few enquiries about her. They said she was one of the old members, a very godly woman. When she came before the church, she told them she had not

much to say, no good in herself apart from Christ, but that was a summary of her religion:

“Though void of all that’s good,
And very, very poor,
Through Christ I hope to be renewed,
And live for evermore.”

Now that is the religion that takes a sinner to heaven. O to possess it! An empty vessel, filled with this treasure. And the treasure is there because God Himself has put it there, God Himself has put it in your heart, and He has put it there for ever. The poor, empty, earthen vessel and the treasure are there bound together. You see, the day will come when the believer’s body will be laid in the grave, but it will rise again a triumphant body, a glorious body, like unto His glorious body. But whilst here on earth, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

Let our last thoughts this evening be of the treasure, Christ Himself in His glorious Person and finished work. “Unto you therefore which believe He is precious.” And then, you see, we read of the unsearchable riches of Christ. This is what we are commanded to preach. “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Now this is the treasure. O what riches there are in His everlasting love, that love that took Him to Gethsemane and Calvary! “Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” And what riches there are in His glorious righteousness which completely covers His people, their everlasting wedding garment. O the value of it! Money cannot buy it. It is freely given. And what riches in His precious, precious blood, that blood which makes a way to heaven, that atones for sin, that washes it away, that satisfies divine justice, that softens the heart, that brings forgiveness! O what heavenly wonders dwell in the blood of Christ, and what riches in His all-prevailing intercession in heaven, as there He presents the merits of His death, and ever lives to intercede. What of the glorious offices He sustains, those relationships that He bears? What riches in all the doctrines of the gospel! O but especially what riches made known in those bitter sufferings on the cross when He bore that awful load of His people’s sins and for ever bore it away!

Above all, there are the riches of Christ Himself, the riches of His glorious Person. You see, it is the rich and poor met together, a poor sinner and a rich Christ. It is nothing in the sinner. It is everything in the Saviour – a poor, empty earthen vessel filled with treasure rich and free. And do you know what the venture of faith is as you come in all your emptiness to this full Christ in all His riches? Do you know what it is? It is this, and this is the religion that will take you to heaven. This is what faith is:

“Lo! glad I come; and Thou, blest Lamb,
O take me to Thee as I am;
Nothing but sin I Thee can give;
Nothing but love may I receive.”

Just as a poor, empty, earthen vessel:

“Nothing but sin I Thee can give;
Nothing but love may I receive.”

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”