

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 300

Treasure in Earthen Vessels

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 13th June, 2010**

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).*

We are not left in any doubt what "this treasure" is. We are clearly told: "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." It is a beautiful expression. "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face" – the Person – "of Jesus Christ." "This treasure." And Paul says, "We have it." He is, in the immediate context, thinking of himself as a gospel preacher and the other apostles as gospel preachers, and he says, "We have this treasure." He valued it. He knew how precious it was. He called it the glorious gospel of the grace of God. He felt what an honour it was that he was called to preach it. He gloried in it. "We have this treasure." But he says, "in earthen vessels." That is, if the gospel is wonderful and precious, *we* are not, the preachers of the gospel are not – poor, empty, earthen vessels. Their only honour is that they are able to carry and bring forth this glorious gospel, and Paul says, it must ever be so, and there is a reason for it: "That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us."

And so this is a chapter in which Paul tells us of his weaknesses and his infirmities and his troubles and his persecutions and the times he is cast down. And he says there is a reason for it: that we might know we are not angels, we are still men, and not just men, but sinful men. We are nothing but weak, worthless, empty, earthen vessels and we have to be brought to know this and feel it "that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." That is what Elihu meant in that glorious gospel chapter, Job 33. He said, "I am according to thy wish in God's stead: I also am formed out of the clay." The two sides: a representative of the most high God, this honour, this glorious gospel: "I am according to thy wish in God's stead." But I must never forget this, and you must never forget it: "I also am formed out of the clay."

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." In all the Lord's dealings it must ever be, "That no flesh should glory in His presence."

“None shall glory in His sight
Of their labours e’er so bright;
All who are taught by grace shall know,
Living faith from God must flow.”

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” So it is in the whole work of redemption, the whole work of Jesus, bringing in that righteousness, laying down His life in death, shedding His precious blood. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” “Not of works, lest any man should boast.” And so it is with the work of grace in a sinner’s heart. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Now that will mark your religion whether it is real. You will not glory in self. You will not be left to boast in self, to be satisfied with self.

“Herein let self be all abased,
And sovereign love alone confessed.”

So there is a principle here. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Paul here is speaking of the glorious gospel of the grace of God, but every point of the gospel exalts the Saviour and humbles the sinner. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us,” and so it was with him personally.

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” Well, so much then concerning this as it belonged to Paul himself personally and to the apostles, and in measure to preachers of the gospel, because in its fullest sense it belongs to every sinner saved by grace, every saved sinner in this chapel. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

So, “this treasure,” and essentially this treasure is Christ, Christ Himself. It speaks of His value. It speaks of His preciousness. “This treasure.” And so you can think of this treasure in every part of the work of our Lord Jesus. His wonderful love with which He has loved His people from everlasting: “Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end.” “This treasure.” His mercy to poor, unworthy sinners in bearing with them, in forgiving their sins, in preparing them for heaven. “I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.” “This treasure.” That

wonderful righteousness that He brought in by His perfect, holy, spotless life which He reckons to the account of His people who have no righteousness of their own, so they stand complete in it. “This treasure.” O the preciousness of Christ’s righteousness! That sin-atonement blood that was shed on the cross, that made the atonement for sin, that opened the fountain where the vilest sinner may wash and be clean. “This treasure.”

So really we can go through the whole of the work of Christ, and then we can think of the various offices and relationships He sustains: the heavenly Bridegroom of His beloved people. “This treasure.” Christ as the Shepherd of His people. “This treasure.” And as Prophet, Priest and King, and the precious foundation on which the church is built. It is everything concerning our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is “this treasure.” “Unto you therefore which believe He is precious.”

But perhaps Paul is taking it just one step further, nearer, closer. It is not just the Lord Jesus and it is not just the Lord Jesus in all He has done, in all His relationships. It is *the knowledge of Christ*. He says, “The light of the *knowledge* of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” O that is it! “That I may know Him.” Paul gives us his own gracious experience in Philippians chapter 3, how the things he once counted treasure he had to reject as worthless dross, and the things he once despised he found to be real and lasting treasure. Paul could have sung that hymn:

“Fading is the worldling’s treasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting pleasure,
None but Zion’s pilgrims know!”

He says, “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.” I am not just quoting scripture after scripture this evening. A few of you here this evening have been taught by the Spirit of God to pray the prayer: “That I may be found in Him,” and then to pray the prayer: “That I may know Him.”

“To know my Jesus crucified,
By far excels all things beside.”

“This treasure.” The knowledge of Christ, whom to know is eternal life.

“But we have *this treasure* in earthen vessels.” Now these things are not a treasure to everybody, and by nature they were not a treasure to you and me. By nature the things we really wanted, the things we really sought after, the things that really concerned us, they were not the things of God in Christ; they were worldly things. We sought our treasure there. And the world ever seeks its treasure here below in earthly things. The world does not know that Christ and Him crucified is a treasure. The world does not know the knowledge of Christ is a treasure. If you were to ask a hundred people to write down what real treasure is, I think most would think about money, silver, gold; perhaps some people would talk about the treasures of the East or things in ancient India, or things in the pyramids in Egypt. Some would think of it a bit more philosophically and think of treasures as perhaps their children, their grandchildren, their family. Some might think of various joys. Some might count their holiday their treasure. You think of these various ambitions. Some studious people, their books are their treasure. So we might go on. All of us by nature were seeking our treasure here below, or in simple language, the things we really valued are the things of time and sense, the things we could feel and the things we could see and the things we could hear.

“This treasure.” When the Lord begins to teach a sinner, that sinner will see where real treasure is to be found. It is not in gold and silver; it is not in any ambitions; it is not in honour; it is not in fame; it is not in possessions. It is in Christ, the Pearl of great Price. We read of a man seeking this treasure. Where was he seeking it? He was seeking goodly pearls. All of us by nature are seeking goodly pearls, whatever it is that you mean. Well, we are seeking after happiness, seeking after peace, seeking after contentment. So we might go on. He did not really find it, but when he found the one pearl of great price, he was willing to part with all these others and give all that he had that he might have this one pearl of great price. He was satisfied. He had everything there. Do you know what Toplady says?

“I’m rich to all the intents of bliss,
If Thou, O God, art mine.”

“This treasure.” O but the Holy Spirit will teach you where true riches are and where false riches are, and you will want to possess this treasure. You will want to possess the true riches. O you see that man who was pulling down his barns and building greater, and he said, “Soul ... take thine ease, eat, drink.” He was planning for the future. He was building greater barns. Now that was not his sin; there was nothing wrong with that. The point is, he was satisfied with it. The point is, that was where he was seeking his riches. The point is, he was not thinking about eternity. “Thou fool.” The world would count him wise. He said, “What shall I do?” That is the great question: “What shall I do to be saved?” But he put it like this: “What shall I do?” – he had not enough room in his barns. “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Let me ask you that simple question and may you be honest in answering it. Do you know where true riches lie? Do you know the difference between true riches and false riches? Can you be satisfied with all this world can give, the best, whether it is money or ambitions or honour or fame or pleasure, or whatever it is? Or have you been brought to this point:

“These” – all of them –
“These can never satisfy;
Give me Christ, or else I die”?

“This treasure.” There is so much in the Book of Proverbs concerning this. Let me just mention one. “Riches profit not in the day of wrath.” Well, they do not. You read in the paper, somebody has left millions behind. How much did he take with him? “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” Do you know what follows? “But” – a glorious *but* – “righteousness delivereth from death.” The righteousness of Christ. There are the true riches. “Righteousness delivereth from death,” from eternal death. That is what it means really. “A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.” Why? Because the little the righteous man hath will take him to heaven; the riches of many wicked will not. The riches that the righteous man hath, he will take to heaven with him; the riches of the wicked, he will have to leave behind when he goes.

“This treasure.” O who is the rich man? Where does real wealth lie? I think I have told you that story over the years. It is a story which used to appear in the old magazines like the *Cheering Words*, and the *Sower*, and the *Little Gleaner*, and the *Friendly Companion*. There was this exceedingly-wealthy man who lived in Germany, and he was riding out on horseback one day, full of pride, to survey all his land. As he rode, he thought, “As far as I can see, to the north, the east, the west, the south, everything belongs to me. There is nobody as rich as I am!” As he went along, he heard a sound of thanksgiving and he dismounted from his horse, and behind a hedge was a poor labourer on his estate, poor old Hans, and he had just got a piece of bread, and he was returning thanks and blessing God for all His mercies and telling the Lord what a favoured man he was. This rich man mocked and despised him. As the story goes on, that night the rich man had a very striking dream. It was a different dream from usual. He felt he heard a voice speaking to him. The voice was that the following day, the richest man in all the district would die. He woke up in a cold sweat. He thought, “It must be me. There isn’t anyone else.” A lot of details in the story of how he sent for a physician, kept looking at himself in the mirror, and how he kept taking various things yet still seemed to be alright. How relieved he was when he went to bed that night and his health seemed to be perfect! He could not understand it. When he woke up next morning, one of the servants came with a message: poor old Hans yesterday was found dead underneath the hedge. The richest man in all the district!

“This treasure.” It is a wonderful mercy if we know where true riches are to be found, real treasure is to be found. If you want a real example in this, you have it in Moses the man of God. I suppose in some ways he was one of the wealthiest men on earth as a prince at Pharaoh’s court, but he rejected it all to be found with the poor, despised people of God. And the inspired apostle writing in the New Testament tells us he “esteemed the reproach of Christ” – listen: “greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.” If you will, the very worst that Christ would give him, not just the blessings. “The reproach of Christ.” He “esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.” You know why. He saw it in the light of eternity. “He had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”

“This treasure.” I remember a godly old man down in Sussex telling me once, with tears running down his face, that he was left an

orphan, and there was a wealthy family wanted to adopt him, and the man who wanted to adopt him later was ennobled. I am not sure whether he was knighted or elevated to a peerage. There was a very poor, humble, godly couple who also wanted to adopt him. He was only a boy and he had to choose. This is what he said to me with tears running down his face: “By faith I chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt.”

“This treasure.” “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” And Paul says, “We have it,” and it is ten thousand mercies if concerning any gospel blessing you and I can say, “We have it”; if we can say, “We have it” of anything that God has given us; if we can say, “We have it” of anything we did not bring into this world, because we did not bring this treasure into the world with us. But, says Paul, “We have it.” “We have this treasure.” If we have it, we do not deserve it, and if we have it, it is because God has given it to us, freely, mercifully. It is a wonderful thing if we can say, “We have it.” In another place Paul says, “Which hope we *have* as an anchor of the soul.” If we can say, “We have this treasure,” if we can say, “We have this hope” – to have something that God has given us.

“But we *have* this treasure.” I think perhaps the first thing will be to realise under divine teaching we have not this treasure, and then to realise what this treasure is, its value, its preciousness; and then to seek after it; and then to realise if we have it, it must be a gift of grace – we do not deserve it – but not to be satisfied till we possess it. “The knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” But what a mercy if we have a little hope that we are enabled to lay hold upon it by faith and tremblingly to say, “We have it.”

“We have this treasure.” “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. *But* we have *this treasure* in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” – which if words mean anything at all means this: that if we possess this treasure, we shall be taught our utter, complete unworthiness, our utter and complete worthlessness, a poor, empty, earthen vessel. It is a very telling, very striking figure. It is not a beautiful china cup made of the finest porcelain. It is just made out of clay, made out of

the earth. In other words, it is not worth anything at all; it is worthless. And it is easily broken, and it seems as if it well might be cracked. That is you, that is me – poor, empty, worthless, earthen vessels. And if we possess this treasure, then God will be sure to teach us the opposite. Why? “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” William Gadsby says,

“Whate’er I need in Jesus dwells,
And there it dwells for me;
'Tis Christ my earthen vessel fills
With treasures rich and free.”

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” So if you will, the treasure is not something that grows on us, part of us. It is not something we have obtained, or worked for, or manufactured. Here we are, a poor, empty, earthen vessel. Something is deposited in us. It is an inward work. It is an inward work of the Spirit. It is an inward work, making Christ known as our hope, our salvation, where all our dependence is. But we have to learn: this treasure in Christ; earthen vessels ourselves. “That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” The apostle puts it in another place, “That in all things He might have the preeminence.” It is Christ everything; it is the sinner nothing.

“We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” And that is the reason for all these things that Paul had, this being troubled and distressed and perplexed and persecuted and cast down. Why? That he should not glory in himself, that he should not have any confidence in himself. What a catalogue of trouble! These are the verses that follow immediately: “Troubled ... perplexed ... persecuted ... cast down.” Realising our helplessness, realising our weakness, realising our sinfulness, realising,

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

“That no flesh should glory in His presence.”

“That the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.” But one old preacher put it very beautifully: an empty vessel has a capacity of being filled. I repeat that: an empty vessel has a capacity of being filled. So you see this poor, weak, earthen vessel, worthless, but if it is empty, well something can be put inside it. It can be filled. And that is exactly

what the Lord in love and mercy does for these poor, empty, earthen vessels. He fills them. What is it? With “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

And so part of divine teaching in greater or less measure is to empty you and to teach you your emptiness, that you might realise this wonderful fulness in Christ, and it *is* a fulness, a treasure rich and free. “The exceeding riches of His grace.” “The unsearchable riches of Christ.” How Paul delights in this image, this figure: “The exceeding riches of His grace”; “The unsearchable riches of Christ.” And that is what dwells in the believer’s heart by faith.

But then there is this emptying. “The Saviour empties whom He fills.” So you dear souls this evening who feel weak and helpless and sinful and empty and void of all that is good, O how welcome you are to Christ! You could not be more welcome. It is those who are empty who are welcome to receive from His fulness, “and grace for grace,” to receive this treasure rich and free. It is this:

“Empty and bare, I come to Thee
For righteousness divine;
O may Thy matchless merits be,
By imputation, mine.”

Now that is the emptying and that is the filling. “Sinners are freely welcome still to Christ, the sinner’s Friend,” in all their worthlessness and all their sinfulness and all their weakness and all their emptiness. The more you feel your emptiness, the more you feel you have nothing, the more welcome you are, that you might prove that it is all in Christ, and you might learn that scripture personally and experimentally: “Ye are complete in Him” – completely lost in self, completely unworthy in self, completely saved in Christ. “Saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation.”

Well, these are precious things. These are heavenly treasures. They are provided by the Saviour. They are the treasures that He has laid up for His people, that He brings them to feel their need, to know where true riches are found, to feel their emptiness, their lost condition, their unworthiness, and then to venture as sinners in all their emptiness with nothing.

“Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to Thy cross I cling.”

“These are the souls that Christ will bless,” to the honour and glory of His name and to their real, lasting, eternal good. Now what a mercy if any of us here through grace tonight can say, “But we have this treasure.”

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