

Intro: Seven weeks ago, you possibly celebrated our country's declaration of independence by observing or even setting off fireworks. How many people here watched a fireworks display that weekend?

Most fireworks operate on the same principle – a certain amount of explosive wrapped in and confined by a container made usually of cardboard. This is true of fireworks you can buy at the fireworks stand or the fireworks you see displayed at community events or on television. (And I know this is true of the larger version because, when the breeze blew just the right way, the remnants of those containers would land in our backyard at our home in northwest Indiana after a July 4th fireworks display that originated less than 100 yards from our back fence.)

But I'm quite sure that most of you didn't watch or buy the fireworks to look at the container – even though admittedly, the outer covers of the ones they sell at the corner firework stand are colorful and brilliant. No, ultimately we enjoy fireworks because of the contents in the container – the spectacular display of color, sound, shape, and explosive power.

Creators and designers of fireworks have one simple purpose in mind for the container: provide a suitable place to contain the power and glory of the display until the appropriate time.

And I would suggest to you this morning, God has created you and me for just such a purpose as well.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:6-7 (NKJV) / Pray

I'm lifting these two verses from their context this morning so we can focus on one truth the Apostle Paul was communicating to the Corinthian believers. In verse 6 he is finishing one thought and in verse 7 he begins another thought. So these verses act as transitional hinges as Paul vindicates his ministry to the believers in this church. There were some in that church who questioned Paul's motivation while others questioned his credentials.

And in this part of the apostle's response, we learn something about God's purpose for His children – those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life. It was God's purpose for believers in the first century of Christianity and it is true for believers in the 21st century.

Put simply – one purpose of God for you, as His redeemed child, is for you to be a container in which resides the glorious gospel! Now this is true whether you realize it or not. It is not optional. Just as Jesus told his followers they were salt and light, so Paul is telling believers they are earthen vessels in which resides this precious, priceless treasure.

So one question for me when I read something like this is: How can I, how do I, best fulfill this purpose of God for me?

Now it is true, according to Scripture, that there are a number of purposes¹ for which God has created you; but the one we're focusing on this morning is being an earthen vessel.

So let's think about earthen vessels for a moment. The Greek word translated "vessel" is one of those words that depends on the context for you to know what is most likely meant by the writer. It was a generic term describing a utensil used to serve. It would be like us using the term "kitchenware." It could be a jar, a dish, a soup ladle or serving fork. Since Paul refers to this kind of vessel as something you would use to hold something else, most commentators understand this vessel to be a jar or pot.

But the underlying purpose of this pot was to be used for service. Remember that!

The vessel to which Paul likens believers is not described as polished metal or shiny crystal. It is described as "earthen" –

¹ Romans 8:28; 2 Timothy 1:9; 3:10 along with statements similar to 2 Corinthians 4:7 and the Jesus' words regarding his followers being "salt and light" (Matthew 5:13-14); Ephesians 2:10

made of clay. A certain kind of dirt mixed with just the right amount of water and dried by either the sun or an oven. And if you wanted it to not be porous you could add a glaze.

But no matter how pretty or plain the vessel and no matter how useful, all clay pots – earthen vessels – had one shared characteristic – they were, and are, easily broken. But that was okay because clay pots were pretty common.

The earthenware vessels of which Paul spoke were ordinary, everyday household items in Corinth. Such a vessel might come in different sizes and shapes. Some probably were even painted or glazed while others may have had elaborate designs etched on them. But all were made of clay. All could break.

The real value of these jars of clay had more to do with what they contained and how that content could be effectively served to others by that vessel.

Up to this point in his letter to the Corinthians and what he will say afterwards, Paul is giving testimony to what it has meant for him to depend on God and God's Word. By depending on God and His Word, Paul has been fulfilling God's purpose for him as a redeemed earthen vessel.

Dependence is an important theme here. Dependence on God and His Word – the Scriptures – is essential. Paul encourages his readers that this is the only way to have an eternal impact on our temporal world in a way that honors God and blesses you.

Dependence on God and His Word means deepening your relationship to the Lord through prayer, the study and application of God's Word, and fellowship with other believers.

You put a smile on God's face as He delights in bringing honor and glory to Himself as you express your dependence, allowing Him to use your "earthen vessel" to serve up His glorious treasure to the world in which you live. He is simply thrilled! You are His vessel through which He is honored!

But how does this work – this being an earthen vessel serving others this treasure that is in me? I don't know if that question is on your mind or not.

- Perhaps you're asking yourself, "Am I a glazed pot or not?"
- Maybe you're smirking inside, "Yeah, I know some crack-pots. That's for sure!"
- Or the first time I said the word "glazed" you began thinking Krispy Kreme™! (Wrong kind of glaze.)
- And perhaps you already have a handle on this earthen vessel stuff. That's terrific.

To be honest, this message is NOT the message I thought I was going to preach this morning. Something very different had been percolating in my head. But as I studied this passage again, the Holy Spirit, began to impress on me some fresh insights.

So let me encourage you, even if you do have a handle on this, hang in there. For some, this may be the first time you've heard this expression about the Christian life. If you're curious and wondering about it, hopefully what I will say will be helpful. Let's see if we might all stretch our faith and better understand God's grace and glory in our lives.

Who is an earthen vessel?

Let's start by clarifying, just who it is Paul is calling an "earthen vessel"? The verse says, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." So who is the "we" in this verse.

The "we" refers to believers – those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life – to have a relationship with God that otherwise they could not have.

What leads me to that conclusion is that Paul has just described those who do not believe in verses 3 & 4. And in verse 6, he describes a believer's experience in coming to faith in Jesus.

Here's my paraphrase of verse 6:

"The God Who commanded the light to shine out of the darkness when He created the world that same God has shone in our hearts through the person of Jesus Christ the light of the knowledge of His glory."

There are those who would say that if there is a God, He is most likely impersonal and really doesn't care about His creation. But if I understand this verse correctly, then that is not true. For the same God that created the world also cares about you and me.

Implicit in this verse is that we need whatever this "light" is and that somehow this "light" is related to God's glory, knowing about it and what it means. Of course, Paul speaks to this in other letters he has written. Like, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

When God created the world, He capped it off with His creation of man. God declared it "very good." The first man, Adam, said, "Oh yeah, I can improve on that." Temptation to be like god led Adam to disobedience – sin – incurring the penalty of which God warned – death. Man now fell short of God's glory.

That tendency to sin was – and is – hereditary. So Paul's statement, "For all have sinned . . ." means, well, "all have sinned." No one is exempt. We all fall short of God's glory. And in falling short, we forfeit the kind of spiritual relationship with our Creator for which He created us. Left in that condition, we would spend an eternity separated from Him.

But God still cared about us. He revealed Himself – His glory – on a limited basis through His creation. Then through the prophets as they wrote and spoke His Word, God revealed His plan for redeeming & reconciling humanity to Himself. Finally, God revealed – not just His glory, not just a plan, He revealed Himself, through His Son, Jesus Christ – the King of Glory!

Listen to these excerpts from John's Gospel:

1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

8:12a Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world."

14:6 "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Jesus' death on the cross was for the penalty for our sins – that awful penalty that if paid by us would mean an eternity separated from God. But Jesus died in your place, in my place. He rose from the dead to demonstrate, among other things, that sin was indeed defeated. And He says, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life." (John 6:47)

Friends, believing in Jesus is when "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" shines through because Jesus IS the light – He IS the glory of God. And the only way any of us can know "the glory of God" of which Paul speaks in verse 6 of 2 Corinthians 4 is by faith alone in the person of Jesus Christ.

And this is just simply fascinating coming from the pen of Paul. Think with me for a moment back a few weeks ago as Pastor Dave took us through Acts 9 where the persecutor of the church, Saul was on his way to Damascus to find more of those Christ-followers so he could do away with all their nonsense.

Why if anyone knew God, knew about God's glory, it was Saul. After all, he was an educated. He was religious. He was zealous and sincere. But he was about to be educated all over again because you can't really know the glory of God apart from Jesus Christ.

So when that light from Heaven shone on Saul, I'm wondering, with his own self-confident view of God's glory wrapped up tightly in his rabbinic scrolls, did Saul maybe think that God was putting a spot-light on him so everyone else could see just how happy God was with Saul?

We read, "he fell to the ground" in Acts 9 :4 as if the light had knocked him to the ground. But what if his falling to the ground was simply an act of worship? Saul knew how to recognize something divine. He read about such things in the Torah. So, yes, perhaps this was holy ground, just like Moses had experienced. "Oh yes, God is going to bless me for doing this thing," he might have thought.

So when he hears what he hears as the voice of the light speaks, Saul trembles and is astonished. Make no mistake about it. Saul got it! The light - the LIGHT - was Jesus. To truly know God's glory meant listening to and believing in Jesus.²

The uniqueness of Christianity is this: faith alone in Christ alone is the only way to have an eternal relationship with the God Who created you. Only through Jesus and faith alone in Him, can God shine in your heart to give you the light of the knowledge of His glory.

Do you have your own idea of what the glory of God is? Paul is here to tell you – I'm here to tell you — every believer is here to

² This is conjecture since we do not know for sure – one way or the other – what transpired other than what was recorded. To be honest, it is not the way I've understood the text before but in thinking through the context and comparing other Scripture, it is plausible.

tell you – that what you know apart from Jesus Christ is deficient. It doesn't measure up. Only through Christ can you really know God. Only through Christ can you have God's glory restored to you!

Why the image of "earthen vessel"?

What God has done for us through Christ is referred to as "treasure" in verse 7. And God takes this treasure and places it in, not Fort Knox, not the Federal Reserve, not a Swiss bank account, not angels, not cherubim or seraphim. He places it in every believer and refers to them as "earthen vessels".

Don't you just want to ask God, "Why would you take something so precious, so priceless, and put it in something so ordinary?"

Did you notice that Paul makes that point, too. He does it by starting off that verse with the word, "But . . ." He points out the obvious contrast to further communicate the intentionality of what God is doing.

So we ask again, "but why?" Well, the answer, of course, is in the verse – So that when the treasure is served to others, the excellence of that treasure is what will be amazing to them rather than the container it is in! I will come back to this in a moment.

However, I'd like to suggest at least three other reasons based on the overall context of Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

The first of these three other reasons is that by using an earthen vessel as a symbol for believers, it "levels the playing field." What do I mean by that? In the Corinthian church – and in most churches – there are some believers with massive egos while at the opposite end of the spectrum are those with microscopic egos. Then, of course, there's the rest of us who have perfectly balanced egos, thank you very much! Right!

The massive-ego types are those who just know God will use them because, well, how could He not? They are in the "Why not me?" crowd.

Then those with microscopic-egos believe that they're just not worthy and that God could never use them. These are the folks in the "Who, me?" crowd.

But guess what? We're all earthen vessels! All made of clay; none are made of polished brass or crystal glass.

In his first letter to these believers, Paul used a different analogy to communicate the point. He used the body. In 1 Corinthians 12 he recognizes that there is diversity in the body: hands, feet, eyes, ears, comely parts, uncomely parts, BUT all the parts are important and vital members of the one body.

So here, by comparing believers to earthen vessels, Paul is saying that although there may be diversity, all believers share the same privilege of being containers of the priceless treasure of God's glory. And all believers have opportunity to serve the world in which they live, serving up the treasure within them.

That leads to the second of the three additional reasons that Paul uses an earthen vessel as a symbol for believers. Earthen vessels were used as utensils of service. Their primary use was to convey liquids usually like water from the well to the home, wine from the winepress to the storeroom, and so on.

Today when we think of "earthen vessels" or clay pots, what comes to my mind perhaps pots for planting flowers or other plants. But that is not what Paul has in mind here. These vessels contained life-giving and refreshing nourishment for drinking and cooking as well as for cleaning. The pots convey the liquid – they serve to get what is inside to where it can best be used.

This is the picture of life as a believer – serving up the life-giving treasure of God's glory through Jesus Christ. And that is best accomplished by faithfully living for the Lord.

Faithfulness – that is what God is most interested in from your life. How faithful are you in serving others using the gifts, abilities and resources with which you have been blessed? Now that

service will vary, yet the key element is that there is always an opportunity to serve. At home, school, work, your neighborhood, your church – lots of places.

For most here today, your biggest dilemma is deciding on which opportunity to pursue. You could do any one of ten or more things but it's tough to choose. Don't let the multitude of opportunities paralyze you and keep you from choosing at least one and doing it faithfully as to the Lord.

What you do should be something that best fits your gifts and desires. Now that may be within the organized activities of the church. But it could also be some form of involvement at work or in your community or with other ministries like Youth for Christ. For some, for now – it will be at home.

The issue of being faithful in your service to the Lord has more to do with you being where God wants you to be, doing what God wants you to be doing – submitting to His Word. With that kind of sensitivity to God and His Word, you will develop a servant's heart, from which the treasure of God's glory in you will be ministered to others.

The third reason I think Paul used earthen vessels to represent believers is to remind us of the temporal nature of life. Now while this may be a "no-duh" point to make, it still should be made.

In our culture, it is sometimes difficult to wrap our head around the reality that life is temporal. That reluctance to deal with reality is captured in the baby boomer's motto, "60 is the new 40," a motto spurred on by the desire to not only stop the aging process but reverse it! Add to that the mindset that what we have here & now seems pretty nice compared to whatever it is that waits for us as believers in the "sweet bye and bye."

While living a healthy lifestyle is commendable – even biblical – the reality of our humanity is that we are on this earth for only a short time when compared to the eternity that awaits us after we die or the Lord returns. And when you get to Heaven, well, from

the little we are told in Scripture, it will make the best of “here & now” seem like the local landfill. C’mon folks, God uses gold instead of asphalt for paving the streets in Heaven!

Earthen vessels, regardless of how pretty they are, are fragile things. Drop it and it breaks. And like earthen vessels, we have only so much time in which we can be used of God to serve His treasure within us to the world in which we live.

The image of an earthen vessel reminds us that all believers share the same privilege of being containers of the priceless treasure of God’s glory, having the opportunity to serve the world in which we live, serving up the treasure within us, for as long as we live in this world.

What is the purpose? (Conclusion)

So what is the purpose of all of this? That takes us back, as I promised, to verse 7 which makes the purpose clear . . . “that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”

One commentator writes:

God has done this so all may see that the transforming power of the gospel is supernatural and not just human.³

What is meant by this has to be understood within the context of the passage as Paul goes on to describe his own experience, where the fragility of his earthen vessel is pictured. (Read vs. 8-9)

Those whom you serve will be watching. They will see you deal with the temporal things of this life – the good and the bad. They will see how you handle those curve balls that come your way.

Dependence on God and His Word enables you to fulfill God’s purpose for you as an earthen vessel in such an extraordinary way that what will come out of those moments as you serve up the treasure – the treasure of the glory of God through Jesus

Christ – is that God is honored, God is glorified.

- We are earthen vessels who have received the glorious gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- We who are finite can be servers of the Infinite;
- We who are frail and breakable can present to others the One Who is omnipotent and eternal.
- We who appear as just ordinary (as earthen vessels) have within us the One Who is overwhelmingly awesome and glorious.

And it is the Lord of glory to whom we lift our praises, worship and adoration . . .

³ Constable, Thomas L. Notes on 2 Corinthians, 2010 Edition
(found at www.soniclight.com)