

'We Have This Treasure in Earthen Vessels'

by A.W. Tozer

The Christian has a priceless treasure in earthen vessels, and God gives us a vessel that is a constant problem to us to keep us humble and to remind us of our dependence on Him.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:5

Topics: "Humility in Faith", "Divine Treasure"

Description

A.W. Tozer emphasizes the profound truth that Christians possess a priceless treasure within their earthen vessels, highlighting the contrast between the divine nature of God and the frailty of human existence. He explains that this treasure, which is the presence of God, serves to remind believers of their dependence on Him and the need for humility. Tozer discusses the paradox of having such a glorious gift contained in weak and imperfect vessels, suggesting that this design keeps Christians grounded and reliant on God's grace. He encourages believers to embrace their weaknesses as a means of experiencing God's strength and to recognize the importance of humility in their spiritual journey. Ultimately, Tozer calls for a deeper understanding and experience of the divine treasure within, urging Christians to live in a way that reflects their identity as vessels of God's glory.

Transcript

"We Have This Treasure in Earthen Vessels" - September 14, 1958

2 Corinthians 4:5-7

Beginning tonight at seven o'clock as has been intimated, I shall preach a series of sermons if I am able to stand up under it because I realized that this will be the most difficult series I ever preached. Not physically difficult, but a great fear is on you when you talk about God. If you don't talk about Him worthily, you had better not to mention His name. And I will begin tonight this series, "A Journey, an Excursion into God." The text for all the time will be, "with Christ in God, with Christ in God" from Colossians. [Complete ten-part sermon series starts next Sunday, February 28 on TozerTalks.com]

Tonight I want to talk a little about the unity of the Trinity and the fact that wherever Jesus is, the Trinity is there; God manifests Himself. We will come unto him. And I also want to talk about the enthusiasm of the Godhead. God's uncreated enthusiasm for His work, for all that He has made, all that He's doing, from creation to the consummation. So I'd like to have you come, we've announced it over the radio, and I think there will be good crowds. But we want you.

Now I want this morning, to follow last Sunday mornings text in Second Corinthians chapter four, and beginning with verse five, this. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has 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. That will be the text. We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us.

Now, the Holy Spirit refers here to what he calls, this treasure. And the preceding verses give us some hint, and the rest of Paul's writings, what that treasure is. The Christian, let's begin like this, that the Christian has within him a priceless deposit. He has received something which has made him, I wonder if I dare say, biologically different from all the rest of mankind. He is like other people, so much like other people, that if you see two men sitting on a bus side by side or riding in an airplane or sitting at a conference table in some business house, or working at the mill, you couldn't tell them apart. They are just men, just two men. But they are as much different as Heaven is different from Hell finally, because one of them is just man, born of the degenerate seed of Adam, living his self centered, decent, nice, life, but self-centered and godless. The other has within him a priceless deposit, a new, living organism directly from God; in a wondrous way, that philosophy, psychology, metaphysics, cannot possibly ever understand, to say nothing of explaining. He has become a partaker of the divine nature. And he is a shrine wherein dwells the ineffable Godhead.

Now I don't use words carelessly. If I'm sitting around a table eating with brother McAfee and Brother Moore, I might say some things that where I couldn't document, you know, just teasing along but, when I'm preaching the Word, I'm ready to back all that to say, with the exceptions and occasional lapsus linguae when I say Jacob and mean Abraham, and I couldn't force back a mistake. But I say that a Christian, a true Christian, a regenerate Christian. Now there are other kinds of Christians, you know. There are Christians in name only and those that are dead and think they are living and all sorts of so-called Christians, but I am talking about the real Christian, the only real kind of Christian there is. He's a shrine wherein dwells the ineffable Godhead.

And I mean by that, is that you cannot divide the substance of the Godhead. It was said way back in the beginning of the church that we dare not confound the persons, and we cannot divide the substance. The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are of equal substance, eternal and therefore, God cannot be partly present anywhere. And the Father cannot be where the Son is not nor the Son where the Spirit is not, nor the Father and the Spirit where the Son is not. While it was the Son who was incarnated and died on the tree and not the Father and not the Spirit. Yet also Jesus said while walking on Earth, the Son of Man which is in the bosom of the Father. He came and was incarnated, and yet never left the bosom of the Father. For the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are of one eternal, uncreated substance. Jesus said, that if we kept His commandments and followed Him and loved Him, "We will come and make our abode with him." Now this is the priceless treasure; and the commission and ability to make known to others this truth, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now that's point number one, that the Christian has a priceless treasure. He doesn't have any more if he is a millionaire Christian, and he doesn't have any less if he's in the old folks home, or in the poorhouse. He still has a treasure, so excellent, so infinitely excellent that language cannot possibly describe it. That it takes hymnody and imagination and faith and worship and years of experience, even to touch remotely on the borders of this vast glorious ocean of molten gold that lies in the heart of the Christian. Now that's one

thing.

Now the second thing is, we have this priceless treasure in earthen vessels. Would it not seem logical that anything so exquisitely lovely, should be contained in something as near like it as possible? Would it not seem that diamonds should be contained in caskets made of gold? But here we have this priceless treasure that angels desire to look into, contained in an earthen vessel.

Now, every Christian has felt the incongruity of this. You see, our trouble friends is that we're lazy. We're mentally lazy and we're spiritually lazy and we like to get everything settled and made up and fixed, nailed down and labeled and pigeonhole and have a rubber band around it so we know right where it is, and thus our Christianity becomes a conventional, neat little package. We never like to be suspended. We never like to have any incongruities, or any inconsistencies or paradoxes in our lives. But I submit that the Christian life is a life with the good many paradoxes in it, and a great many incongruities. So many, that they have been openly attacked by unbelievers as proof that Christianity is not real and not of God.

We know better than that and we know the reason for these incongruities, the apparently incongruities. But it's apparently incongruent that the excellency of this treasure, this treasure with all its excellence, should be committed to an inferior vessel, a base vessel made of clay. Paul even calls it this vile body, though that's not quite the right translation. This earthly, base, inferior thing, as much inferior to the content as a ten-cent store flower pot might be if you were to pour it full of molten gold. Now, this vessel is not only our bodies, but our total personalities; the flesh with all its weakness; the mind and its state of much imperfection; and the soul, as fragile as cobweb as we see it. And we've all felt this inconsistency in our reverence, maybe we have never said it.

You know, we Christians keep quiet about a lot of things. David did the same thing. David said, when I thought to utter this, why if I say this, it will be a hindrance, it will be a stumbling block to the children of thy people. So he kept it to himself in the 73rd Psalm. One of the paradoxes he faced, one of the difficulties of why good people often suffer and bad people always get fat and their eyes stand out and have everything. David said that bothered him a long time but he never peeked. He said, I kept that to myself because I didn't want to hinder God's children.

And so I imagine that there are some of these paradoxes that we Christians mull over in prayer and in meditation, but we don't mention because we're afraid of raising questions we can't answer. But the answer lies here my Brethren and Sisters. The answer lies here. It's a deep truth this answer is; why such an infinitely precious treasure should be contained in such a casual, ordinary vessel. It's the reason, the answer is here. I say the reason and the understanding of it is a profound philosophy.

Now, don't misunderstand and don't shy away from the word philosophy. Because I believe that all people are philosophers. I believe we all ought to be. For a philosophy of life is a viewpoint from which you can glass all the terrain and look out on all the neighborhood. And it is a high, vantage point from which you can orientate yourself and square away so your values get right, and your directions get right, and you hear your marching orders. You know what to do and confusion leaves you, and frustration goes, and your mind clears up, and you know who you are and why and whom you belong. That is spiritual philosophy.

Every Christian ought to be a philosopher. If he just depends on texts, pretty soon, somebody will come along with a barrage of text and upset him; Jehovah's Witness or somebody. But, if he dives deep and finds out what those texts mean and extract the deep spiritual meaning from them, and gets himself a philosophy of the spiritual life, then he will not be shaken. He can't shake him. No Jehovah's Witness with

these phonograph records, and his brass will ever be able to move him. Nobody will ever change him at all.

It's amazing how stupid God's people are. A preacher came to me in a Bible conference not too long ago. And he had a tract written by Jehovah's Witness against the Trinity and he was all wrought up and disturbed. He said, oh, we've got to do something. He was all worried. He said, the people are getting all worried about this, because this nasty little tract said that one plus one plus one equals three. And therefore we had three Gods a nasty little crack written in the spirit those men can write. And this man who was middle-aged was disturbed and he said his people were disturbed. Why should people who have had one year under a good pastor be disturbed about the Trinity? Why should we not make our churches into Bible schools and seminaries so that our people can go out instructed in the book?

Now I said I would give you the reason that God temporarily allows an infinitely priceless treasure to be contained in an ordinary earthen vessel. It's because of who God is and who we are. And it's because of what God is and what we are. You see, God is uncreated, and we are His created works. God is self-existent, and we exist from Him. God is the originating cause and we are but God's thoughts incarnated. God, the upholder and the Sustainer, and the Mover of all matter and time and space and law and motion and energy. God is the fountain of it all. God is the life of all that lives. God is the wisdom of all the wise. God is the Soul of all souls of all beings.

And so, the logic of God's claim to preeminence; we being simply satellites thrown from God so to speak, sparks struck from the holy anvil; we being made in His image, simply, we being created, there was a time when we were not. There never was a time when he was not, for He is eternal, and never had a beginning. You and I had a beginning. He thought us into being and spake us into existence. And when he did, we became creatures. And the difference between God and creatures is a gulf fixed so wide that it's wider than the Gulf that separated Dives and Lazarus, for it is the gulf between God and not God. It is the gulf between that which is created and that which is not created. It is the gulf between the creature and the Creator, an infinite Gulf separates that which is the uncreated Godhead from all His created beings even though they be archangels or seraphim by the throne.

So you see, there has to be a proper relationship held and established. You and I have to realize we come from God and go back to God. We're dependent upon God. We revolve around God as the satellite around its sun. As the planets around the sun in the heavens, that we depend upon God out of God and into God. And that because God is, we are and if God were not, we'd cease to be. All this, we've got to know. And we've got to have this relationship right. And as long as we hold a right relationship between us and God, everything is all right.

But as soon as we misinterpret our high honor; as soon as we begin to say, I am a Christian, I'm a brother to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, Heaven is my home, and I have been redeemed. I have all the righteousness of God in Christ. Soon as we get to talking like that. Pretty soon, Old Mother Nature rouses and shakes her head and whispers to us, you're somebody really. You weren't until you were converted, but you are now. You're somebody. You're a wonderful fellow. And we begin to misinterpret the high honor that God has bestowed upon us. And we begin to take the place of God Himself. And instead of realizing that we're dirt picked up by the sovereign choice of God and inhabited, we begin to think that we're superior. We look down on yellow people and black people and moderns and liberals and Mohammedans and atheists, and harlots and all the rest, forgetting that no Christian ever I ought to look down on anybody. No Christian ever ought to take any attitude, but that of complete humility. And along with

Wesley say when he saw the drunk there, but by the grace of God go I.

We all ought to know this, but you see, I can preach this to you, and you can write it down in a notebook and memorize it. And when it's all over, we still don't have it. We feel a natural, though depraved love of self. And that, of course, upsets all spiritual balance and destroys all the logic of our being, and brings a blight to our souls. So God won't rest until He dethrones us experientially.

Now, the fault I find, and I'm a member of Keswick Council, and McAfee sits in on it and Mr. Chase. But nevertheless, I say, and I've said it there at Moody Church, that my fault I find with it is, that it is too much in the head and not enough in experience. You can know the doctrine of the crucified life. You can be instructed and have even this philosophy that I've talked about, this viewpoint, realizing that God is above all, and you're beneath all and God is in heaven, you're on earth, that God is righteous, to you belongs confusion. You can know that and not experience it. And until you experience you don't really know it. For lots of people are in Hell that went to Keswick meetings and believed in the deeper life. Don't forget that.

John Bunyan and that great old masterpiece of his which I'm reading again for my own joy, old Calvinist that he was, he nevertheless took one of these, one of his characters Ignorance, I think, right up to the gate of Heaven. And he got the order, you go below and send him down to Hell. And then said the old allegory, he said this, "then I perceived there is a way to Hell from the gate of Heaven." That you can be religious all your life, and yet never have experienced it. Only have known it in your head. Only be orthodox.

So, it's the same with the deeper life, the crucified life. You can know all about it, and if everybody that can get up and spin off all about, not I but Christ, be honored, loved and exalted. If everybody that knows the doctrine, we're living it what a bunch of Christians we'd be. But we know it, but we don't experience it. So, the dear God wants to bring us to the experience of it. So He gives us a continual demonstration to keep us humble. Oh, you'd think that life would humble us, wouldn't you. You would think that a businessman who goes out and invests all his money in a deal and has it blow up in his face and has to start again as a machinist working for a dollar and a quarter an hour or whatever he gets. You'd think that would humble him but, no, no. You'd think the young woman who is in love with a young man and they're engaged and one day he sends her a note saying, I've changed my mind. I'm joining the Foreign Legion and jilts her. You'd think that would knock her pride. But no, it doesn't. She'll go right out and ball a while and go right back before her mirror and doll herself up and think she's as pretty as she was before.

You can't destroy pride from the outside. It takes a work of God within to do it. And so God does this, God gives us a vessel that is a constant problem to us. Our weak, frail bodies, our aging bodies, and our tired minds and our bad memories, and our forgetfulness, and our low IQ, and our poor, total self, he gives us that. He said, now that's what sin has done to you. That's why you're like that. But I put within you an eternally, precious treasure that's yours. And it's yours forever and ever and ever, while the ages roll. And so in order that you might remember who you are, and how low you are, and how worthless you are apart from My love, why I'm just going to let you carry this treasure around in the little old vessel to keep you humble.

You know, Francis of Assisi was a great soul. He wasn't over on our side quite, but he was a great soul. And he used to refer to his body as a donkey that he rode around in. He took good care of it. He said, take care of the body. It's the donkeys he called it Brother Ass. He said, this is the donkey that God gave me to ride around on. And that's all he ever called his body. It was just the transportation we say now. This

vessel, this precious treasure had to have transportation. And so that was the vessel. He saw that and God wants us to see it.

We must experience our undoneness not learned in seminary. But of course, you get the root of it, the idea of it in seminary or in Bible school or in your church, but you must experience it in your heart. My brother, It is one thing to know that your IQ is low. It's another thing to get up and make up bobble in society and be a red face for two weeks. There's a difference you see. It's one thing to know your memory is bad. It's quite another thing to forget a telephone number right when you're desperately in need of it.

So God just lets us be weak like this. Somebody says, why doesn't God make our bodies powerful and strong, worthy of the treasure it contains? Why doesn't he make our minds to be like the very mind of Christ, perfect and all? Well, if God did that, pretty soon he'd have another rebel on his hand. He'd have another Lucifer. You'd look yourself over and say, this is that great Babylon which I have built. And God would have to turn you out to eat grass until your feathers were grown. So the result is, God just lets you trot around in this poor old donkey of a vessel of yours. But don't forget, faith knows what you got. Faith knows that we have that infinitely, precious deposit. We are the dwelling place of the ineffable Godhead. Jesus Christ Himself lives in our hearts. The Holy Ghost inhabits our beings. And we're God's children. And our names are written in His hands and on His shoulders and in His heart. And we are as dear to Him as the apple of His eye, and ten million, ten million hells can't take us out in His hand. And yet, He's not going to let us in any wise do any strutting.

I heard again while I was in the East about the man who's so important he could strut sitting down. And you and I know that a fellow can be, . . . we're just naturally proud. And if we can't be proud of anything else, we'll be proud of the fact that we're humble. And so the Lord let you have this vessel of yours, this earthen vessel. That's where you get your humbling you see. If the Lord merely said to you, now son, you're pretty weak, and you'd better watch it. We'd say thank you Father, I'll try and we'd have nice testimony. But the Lord says it, then let you fall flat on your face. And you get up and say, O God, oh, what a fool I've made of myself. I don't know whether God replies to such talk or not, but if He does, He'd say something like this, "Well, if you had believed what I told you, you wouldn't have fallen, but I had to let you tumble in order that you'd believe it and experience it. You see, any doctrine that isn't experienced is very likely to be simply nominal and not real. You've got to experience it.

Now, so that treasure remains in earthen vessels that we may know our own weakness; that we may know our own ignorance; that we may have no confidence in the flesh ever; and that we may be all and in all. I mentioned this casually on the radio yesterday. Maybe most of you didn't hear it, so I'll tell you now. Last week I was in Buffalo at a conference. I didn't attend the yak-yak sessions. I attended evening sessions when they didn't do anything, but just hear the Word, that is, the preaching.

And while I was there, I think I never got such treatment. They rolled out the red rug. And the red carpet, I really walked around on the red carpet. And I went back to my hotel room about the third day or second maybe day and I said to myself, it looks as if my preaching was getting more effective than before. And it did look like it. And then the letter came in a batch of mail from the office in New York and I opened it up. Some of it was routine, but one was a letter from a missionary in Vietnam, a young fellow with a number of degrees. He said that the Alliance Witness was like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead. When it was good, it was very, very good. But when it was bad, it was horrible. And he called attention and he used those words and he call attention to a recent editorial. And he said, I am dismayed at such tabloid thinking. He said it's rah-rah thinking. It's oversimplification. Then he ended by saying, why don't you let

God judge the world? I was trying to be the judge of the world.

Well, that kind of hurt me coming from an Alliance missionary, but pretty soon, a sense of humor got a hold of me. And I said to myself, what's that you were saying to yourself here a couple hours ago that you think your preaching is getting more effective? I said to myself, isn't it maybe that God just knew that you needed this letter? So, I have that letter as a treasure. Because it helped me to remember that not everybody is on my side. And that I make a lot of mistakes too. And that I do oversimplify and that I got a lot of things wrong with me, but I'm not apologizing, I'm explaining. For I'm simply saying, I have this treasure in earthen vessel. And if you find the earthen vessels getting chipped and checked and cracked, and Brother, don't look at me, I know it. But I also know he can't take the treasure away. I also know that you can't rob me of that eternal deposit which I got when I believed in Jesus Christ's savingly and was made partaker of the divine nature. And every time I start to raise my head just a little bit, God let's somebody come along and slap me down. So I've got used to it. I thank Him. I thank Him.

Wouldn't it be terrible if the Lord would never let your enemies get to you and only have your friends. You know what happens to politicians when they never listen to anybody but their friends, they get defeated. Just let anybody go to Washington or Springfield, or wherever it is and listen to his friends. Next time he'll be defeated. Because his friends have all the good things to say. He'd better listen to his enemies, so he'll run scared. Then he might get elected.

So, in the kingdom of God, I have got so many friends. I got friends here in this church that are so dear to me, that they are dearer than the birth of blood and flesh. And they wouldn't say a thing against me if they knew I was wrong. My good board, those dear men, I know that they wouldn't say anything against me even if they knew I was dead wrong. But you know, that isn't good for a man. Too much of that will swell your head. So, the Lord let somebody come along with the other side. That's to show that you still are a man in the flesh and that you have an earthen vessel and that it's not a very good vessel.

Well, this kind of thing won't hurt the honest good man of God. Because he'll be glad to get rid of his self-confidence after all, for self-confidence is a hellish thing. And really self-confidence is a deceitful thing because nobody's really self-confident. Everybody has really got a deep, basic inferiority complex. But self-confidence is there nevertheless. But we're glad to be rid of it. Glad to be thrown out on God. We're glad to have infinite wealth in a poor, little ten-cent store vessel. We're glad that eternity dwells in the temple of time. We're glad that the High Godhead comes to the mortal man and lives there.

Well, he'll be glad to get rid of his ambition and his pride and what Simpson called the strength that harms. And he'll be glad to endure the discipline of the earthen vessel. Isn't that a good book title, "The Discipline of the Earthen Vessel?" Why doesn't somebody write a book on it? Dave Gillespie, I hereby appoint you herewith. I'll write the introduction, if you'll write the book, "The Discipline of the Earthen Vessel." You have got to have it. You've got to have it. You gotta have your lashings. God doesn't like to do it, but He's got to do it, to keep us low, so we can raise us high. And if we won't go down, He will slap us down. And He will let this earthen vessel slap us down.

Poor old Brother Hoffman, tired, old, weary body. And I see you in varying degrees of decrepitude. God bless you. And you look at me and smile and say, now look who's talking. I know, I know. It's the old earthen vessel, Brother and Sister. But it's the discipline, if you can learn the discipline the earthen vessel. If you can let your troubles be your school teacher. If you can go to college to your weakness, and sit and listen to the lecture delivered by your ignorance. And learn from your poor base vessel. That after all, all

that God has to do is withdraw His hand and you'd sink for a million eternities. But He holds you in His hand and says no man can pluck you out.

So, we'll enjoy more in that glorious day. Because we've had this little while of riding on an ox cart. God doesn't give you a Packard. He gives you an ox cart and bumps along and says here, bump along on the ox cart. I'm speaking spiritually now. If He gave you a jet plane, you'd blow up with pride, so He just keeps you bumping along or on your feet. And every once in a while you'll look up and say O God, I'm below and Thou art above. I'm little and Thou art great. I'm weak and Thou art mighty. I'm ignorant and Thou art omniscient. Your attitude is right then and your relationship to God is right. And you're off the throne and God's on the throne and the logic of your being is in balance. Everything is all right.

And if ever you change your mind about it, listen to your friends and believe all the cards they send you on your anniversary. When they tell you how you can sing or how you can preach or how they do love you. Just as soon as you do that the Lord will say, well, the poor boy has got to have another bump. So, He lets the old earthen vessel crack up a bit and you come crawling out wiping your eyes and saying, dear God, why didn't I know better. We don't. We don't Brother. We just never learn. We're going to one of these days when we know as we are known and we look on His face and His name is on our forehead. Then we'll thank Him for the discipline of the earthen vessel.

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