

John Wesley

SERMON 124

[text from the 1872 edition]

THE HEAVENLY TREASURE IN EARTHEN VESSELS

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels." 2 Cor. 4:7.

1. How long was man a mere riddle to himself! For how many ages were the wisest of men utterly unable to reveal the mystery, to reconcile the strange inconsistencies, in him, -- the wonderful mixture of good and evil, of greatness and littleness, of nobleness and baseness [barrenness]? The more deeply they considered these things the more they were entangled. The more pains they took, in order to clear up the subject, the more they were bewildered in vain, uncertain conjectures.

2. But what all the wisdom of man was unable to do, was in due time done by the wisdom of God. When it pleased God to give an account of the origin of things, and of man in particular, all the darkness vanished away, and the clear light shone. "God said, Let us make man in our own image." It was done. In the image of God man was made. Hence we are enabled to give a clear, satisfactory account of the greatness, the excellency, the dignity of man. But "man, being in honour" did not continue therein, but rebelled against his sovereign Lord. Hereby he totally lost, not only the favour, but likewise the image of God. And "in Adam all died." For fallen "Adam begat a son in his own likeness." And hence we are taught to give a clear, intelligible account of the littleness and baseness of man. He is sunk even below the beasts that perish. Human nature now is not only sensual but devilish. There is in every man born into the world, (what is not in any part of the brute creation; no beast is fallen so low,) a "carnal mind, which is enmity," direct enmity, "against God."

3. By considering, therefore, these things in one view, -- the creation and the fall of man, -- all the inconsistencies of his nature are easily and fully understood. The greatness and littleness, the dignity and baseness, the happiness and misery, of his present state, are no longer a mystery, but clear consequences of his original state and his rebellion against God. This is the key that opens the whole mystery, that removes all the difficulty, by showing what God made man at first, and what man has made himself. It is true, he may regain a considerable measure of "the image of God wherein he was created:" But still, whatever we regain, we shall "have this treasure in earthen vessels."

In order to have a clear conception of this, we may inquire, First, what is "the treasure" which we now have; and, in the Second place, consider how "we have this treasure in earthen vessels."

I. 1. And, First, let us inquire, What is this treasure which Christian believers have? I say, believers; for it is of these directly that the Apostle is here speaking. Part of this they have, in common with other men, in the remains of the image of God. May we not include herein, First, an immaterial principle, a spiritual nature, endued with understanding, and affections, and a degree of liberty; of a self-moving, yea, and self-governing power? (otherwise we were mere machines, stocks, and stones)? And, Secondly, all that is vulgarly called natural conscience; implying some discernment of the difference between moral good and evil, with an approbation of one, and disapprobation of the other, by an inward monitor excusing or accusing? Certainly, whether this is natural or superadded by the grace of God, it is found, at least in some small degree, in every child of man. Something of this is found in every human heart, passing sentence concerning good and evil, not only in all Christians, but in all Mahometans, all Pagans, yea, the vilest of savages.

2. May we not believe, that all Christians, though but nominally such, have sometimes at least, some desire to please God, as well as some light concerning what does really please him, and some convictions when they are sensible of displeasing him? Such treasure have all the children of men, more or less, even when they do not yet know God.

3. But it is not these of whom the Apostle is here speaking; neither is this the treasure which is the subject of his discourse. The persons concerning whom he is here speaking are those that are born of God; those that, "being justified by faith," have now redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins; those who enjoy that peace of God which passeth all understanding; whose soul doth magnify the Lord, and rejoice in him with joy unspeakable; and who feel the "love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto them." This, then, is the treasure which they have received; -- a faith of the operation of God; a peace which sets them above the fear of death, and enables them in everything to be

content; an hope full of immortality, whereby they already "taste of the powers of the world to come;" the love of God shed abroad in their hearts with love to every child of man, and a renewal in the whole image of God, in all righteousness and true holiness. This is properly and directly the treasure concerning which the Apostle is here speaking.

II. 1. But this, invaluable as it is, "we have in earthen vessels." The word is exquisitely proper, denoting both the brittleness of the vessels, and the meanness of the matter they are made of. It directly means, what we term earthenware; china, porcelain, and the like. How weak, how easily broken in pieces! Just such is the case with a holy Christian. We have the heavenly treasure in earthly, mortal, corruptible bodies. "Dust thou art," said the righteous Judge to his rebellious creature, till then incorruptible and immortal, "and to dust thou shalt return." How finely (but with what a mixture of light and darkness) does the heathen poet touch upon this change! *_Post ignem etherea domo subduxerat_*, -- "After man had stolen fire from heaven," (what an emblem of forbidden knowledge!) *_macies et ~nova februm_*, &c., -- that unknown army of consumptions, fevers, sickness, pain of every kind, fixed their camp upon earth, which till then they could no more have entered than they could scale heaven; and all tended to introduce and pave the way for the last enemy, death. From the moment that awful sentence was pronounced the body received the sentence of death in itself; if not from the moment our first parents completed their rebellion by eating of the forbidden fruit. May we not probably conjecture that there was some quality naturally in this, which sowed the seeds of death in the human body, till then incorruptible and immortal? Be this as it may, it is certain that, from this time, "the corruptible body has pressed down the soul." And no marvel, seeing the soul, during its vital union with the body, cannot exert any of its operations, any otherwise than in union with the body, with its bodily organs. But all of these are more debased and depraved by the fall of man, than we can possibly conceive; and the brain, on which the soul more directly depends, not less than the rest of the body. Consequently, if these instruments, by which the soul works, are disordered, the soul itself must be hindered in its operations. Let a musician be ever so skilful, he will make but poor music if his instrument be out of tune. From a disordered brain (such as is, more or less, that of every child of man) there will necessarily arise confusedness of apprehension, showing itself in a thousand instances; false judgment, the natural result thereof, and wrong inferences; and from these, innumerable mistakes will follow, in spite of all the caution we can use. But mistakes in the judgment will frequently give occasion to mistakes in practice; they will naturally cause our speaking wrong in some instances, and acting wrong in others; nay, they may occasion not only wrong words or actions, but wrong tempers also. If I judge a man to be better than he really is; in consequence I really love him more than he deserves. If I judge another to be worse than he really is; I shall, in consequence, love him less than he deserves. Now both these are wrong tempers. Yet possibly it may not be in my power to avoid either the one or the other.

2. Such are the unavoidable consequences of "having these treasures in earthen vessels." Not only death, and its forerunners, -- sickness, weakness, and pain, and a thousand infirmities, -- but likewise error, in ten thousand shapes, will be always ready to attack us. Such is the present condition of humanity! Such is the state of the wisest men! Lord, "what is man, that thou art still mindful of him; or the son of man, that thou regardest him?"

3. Something of this great truth, that the "corruptible body presses down the soul~," ~ -- is strongly expressed in those celebrated lines of the ancient poet. Speaking of the souls of men he says:

*Igneus est ollis vigor, et coelestis origo
Sem~nibus; quantum non noxia ~corpora tardant,
Terrenique ~hebetant artus, moribundaque membra.*

These seeds of heavenly fire,
With strength innate, would to their source aspire,
But that their earthly limbs obstruct their flight,
And check their soaring to the plains of light.

4. But suppose it pleased the all-wise Creator, for the sin of man, to suffer the souls of men in general to be weighed down in this miserable manner by their corruptible body; why does he permit the excellent treasure which he has entrusted to his own children, to be still lodged in these poor earthen vessels~?" Would not this question naturally occur to any reflecting mind~? Perhaps it would; and therefore the Apostle immediately furnishes us with a full answer: God has done this, that "the excellency of the power might be of God, and not of us;" that it might be undeniably plain to whom that excellent power belonged; that no flesh might glory in his sight; but that all who have received this treasure might continually cry, "Not unto us, but unto thee, O Lord, be the praise, for thy name and for thy truth's sake."

5. Undoubtedly this was the main design of God in this wonderful dispensation; to humble man, to make and keep him little and poor, and base, and vile, in his own eyes. And whatever we suffer hereby, we are well repaid, if it be a means of "hiding pride from man;" of laying us low in the dust, even then, when we are most in danger of being lifted up by the excellent gifts of God!

6. ~Nay, if we suffer hereby, from the mean habitation of the immortal spirit; if pain, sickness, and numberless other afflictions beside, to which we should not otherwise have been liable, assault us on every side, and at length bear us down into the dust of death; what are we losers by this? Losers! No, "In all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us." Come on then, disease, weakness, pain, -- afflictions, in the language of men. Shall we not be infinite gainers by them? Gainers for ever and ever! seeing "these light afflictions, which are but for a moment, work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!"

7. And are we not, by the consciousness of our present weakness, effectually taught wherein our strength lies? How loud does it proclaim, "Trust in the Lord Jehovah; for in him is everlasting strength!" Trust in Him who suffered a thousand times more than ever you can suffer! Hath he not all power in h~eaven and in earth? Then, what though

The heavenly treasure now we have
In a vile house of clay!
Yet He shall to the utmost save,
And keep it to that day.

Potto,~ June 17, 1790

[Edited by George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology of Northwest Nazarene College (Nampa, ID).]

