This is a preaching draft.

Treasure in Jars of Clay | 2 Corinthians 4:7-12
The Rev. Dr. John Frederick | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | November 15, 2026

Introduction

Early in the Fall, every year, my Catholic high school hosted a massive pep rally for our football team. There was loud music, cheerleading routines, inspirational speeches, and even a prayer from our parish priest, petitioning the Lord Almighty to bless *our* team instead of the opposing team from another Catholic high school across town. I'm not sure how sport prayers are supposed to work, but I'm pretty sure they aren't meant to work like that.

We always left those rallies absolutely convinced that our team would win. And yet, when the evening came, we always ended up losing, and usually by a lot.

The rallies stirred up great excitement, but they rarely resulted in victory. When I look today's passage, I wonder, does it operate like that? Like a Christian form of the pre-game, pep rally? Is it just a way to psych ourselves up for the next big game, for the next spiritual battle?

No. Today, we'll find that the Bible offers something so much better than a momentary morale booster set in a Christian key. We'll discover instead that Christian hope does not die out when the human-driven hype wears off. Christian hope abides because it depends on God's power, not our own. Therefore, we can proclaim with a confidence:

We are

- afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
- perplexed but not driven to despair;
- persecuted but not forsaken;
- struck down but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8).

But how can this be? How are we justified in having such a confidence? How is it that every other highly inspirational motivating talk hypes us up, but eventually falls short of the demands of true hope? It gets us in the game but fails to deliver a victory?

To get at this, we'll ask two questions. Both questions have to do with the "treasure" mentioned in verse 7. First, we'll ask **what is this treasure**? And second, we'll ask, **who is this treasure for**?

I. What is this treasure? (2 Cor. 4:7-11)

DRAFT

This is a preaching draft.

Let's look at verse 7,

> "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

The word translated "jar" here also means "an instrument or vessel that performs a function."

- **Acts 9:15** But the Lord said to him, "[Paul] is **a chosen instrument** of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel
- **2 Tim. 2:21** Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be **a vessel for honorable use**, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

The description, "jars of clay," refers to our bodies as vulnerable, weak vessels that carry a powerful treasure. We can infer a few things from this description of the body.

- A jar of clay does not create itself; it requires a creator to even exist.
- Clay vessels were common, inexpensive, and everyone knew that they wouldn't last forever. The frequently broke, cracked, and shattered. But they were useful, and often sold as lamps in the ancient world.

The key here is that we are **not the treasure**; **we are the jars of clay** who ***carry*** the treasure.

If we look back to verses 1-6, we find that the treasure is not our own willpower, strengths, or skills; **the power is the presence of the crucified and risen Christ dwelling in us**. The treasure is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

But there is more to this. It's not just that we're a container, and Jesus is the treasure. The real miracle is that the treasure held in the clay jar eventually redeems the broken, shattered jars of our human mortal bodies.

DRAFT

You see, part of the treasure held within the weak vessel is **the good news of the resurrection of the body**. This is something we proclaim every week in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body."

- This what Paul means in verse 14 when he says, "he who raised the Lord Jesus **will raise us also** with Jesus and bring us with [us] into his presence."
    - The treasure is not that the body will be destroyed; but as Jesus says, even though the body will die, "I will raise it up on the last day."

The treasure is that through Jesus, even the weak, broken vessels will be made new, incorruptible, unbreakable, eternal. This is unfamiliar to the world, and sometimes even to Christians. We are more accustomed to hearing that *we* are the treasure, we are the *light*, *we* are the hope, *we* have the inherent power to overcome every obstacle. Our skills, our strength, our intellect, our courage, our resolve.

Illustration ["Hero"]

As I was ringing up my groceries over at Safeway a few days ago, that old Mariah Carey song "Hero" came on over the loudspeaker.

Now, the first thing I think of whenever I hear this song is my wife. She is not too keen on spiders in the house . . . which is going to be a problem in Australia for sure.

Whenever a spider appears, I hear a cry for help "John there's a spider, get it," I never say answer. I never offer a reassuring, "Be right there" or "on the way." I simply walk, into the room flexing my muscles, making a real entrance, singing this very song,

> "And then a hero comes along, with the strength to carry on, you can cast your fears aside, yes you know you will survive."

It's not often that there is such an easy entry point for to be considered a hero, so I take it whenever I can.

But this week when I heard the song playing, this passage in 2 Corinthians was fresh in mind, and the contrast was stunning. For Paul, the hero, the treasure that we carry in our mortal flash is Jesus Christ; but for Mariah Carey the hero inside is **ourselves**.

DRAFT

This is a preaching draft.

There's a hero

If you **look inside your heart**

You don't have to be afraid

Of what **<u>you</u>** are

There's an answer

If you reach into **your soul**

And the sorrow that you know

Will melt away

[Chorus]

And then a hero comes along

With **the strength to carry on**

And you cast your fears aside

And you know you can survive

So, when you feel like hope is gone

Look inside you and be strong

And you'll finally see the truth

That **a hero lies in <u>you</u>**

In other words, according to this song, when things go wrong or get difficult, 'just look inside of yourself.' You are actually a hero, it turns out. When you simply look inside your heart. When you just reach inside your soul. Suddenly, aha! You realize, 'I possess all the strength I need to make It through **all by myself.'** I need a hero; and wouldn't you know I myself am the hero I need.

But if you've lived through even one time of grief, pain, sickness, true affliction, it becomes obvious that those lyrics, while inspiring and masterfully sung, are the stuff of pep rally hype not soul-satisfying. No one lying in a hospital bed ever says, I find my strength in this cracking, fragile clay vessel. No one in the depths of despair looks inside and finds peace, they only find the deep roots of what seems like an endless darkness.

In fact, apart from the gospel, the sequence in 2 Corinthians would be:

DRAFT

- I am afflicted . . . and then I am eventually crushed
- I am perplexed . . . until I eventually despair of life itself
- I am persecuted . . . until I am ultimately forsaken
- I am struck down . . . and then I am eventually destroyed.

Pep rally over.

But as we are jars of clay, we can boldly proclaim a treasure that we carry inside,

- We are afflicted in every way but not crushed—because *Jesus* bore our afflictions and was crushed for our iniquities.
- We are persecuted but not forsaken—because *Jesus* was persecuted and forsaken so that we might be forgiven
- We are struck down but not destroyed—because *Jesus* was struck down and destroyed but then victoriously rose again, destroying death and winning for us everlasting resurrection life.

Illustration [William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer]

- William Tyndale was Protestant Reformer who translated the Bible into English
- This was unauthorized and illegal at the time, and Tyndale eventually languished in a prison before he was martyred.
- In his dungeon cell he asked for simple things as he awaited his death, he requested his Hebrew Bible and manuscripts, and an extra hat and stockings to keep himself warm.
- Tyndale was strangled to death and burnt at the stake in **October of 1536**.
- His life's work had been to translate the Bible into the English language so that it could be read by the people. Eventually, after his death, it is used to compile the King's Bible, which is so sad, given that his last words were, "Lord! Open the king of England's eyes."
- "The tide was to turn within less than three years, and the English Bible was at last in the hands of the English people." (Marcus Loane, Masters of the English Reformation, p. 100)
- Thomas Cranmer, the famous archbishop of Canterbury who compiled the Book of Common Prayer, and wrote many of its prayers, likewise was burnt at the stake for his Reformation views.

DRAFT

These men knew that attaching ultimate hope to their mortal bodies, to their fragile 'jars of clay' would not have resulted in victory. They are not remembered today as saints because they used 2 Corinthians as a pep rally.

In their moments of deepest terror, pain, forsakenness, and destruction, they did not point within and say, 'the hero inside is me.'

They knew that treasure within was Jesus, and that this treasure would redeem, resurrect, and reconstitute everything that their executioners tried to break and burn. And that brings us to our second point.

We've seen what the treasure is, but we must also ask, who is the treasure for? Is it for our own enjoyment alone, or does it exist for the benefit of others? Who is this treasure for?

II. Who is the treasure for? (2 Cor. 4:12, 14-15)

> [12] So death is at work in us, but life in you . . . [14] knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. [15] For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

In verse 15, "All things are on account of you" or "for your sake." Why?

- It tells us, "in order that **as grace extends to many**, thanksgiving might abound to God's glory."
- The bearing of the death and resurrection of Jesus extends life, hope and grace **beyond ourselves**.
- It brings the treasure of the gospel to others.

Illustrations:

DRAFT

- A dear congregant praying the Lord's Prayer with family as he passed into the arms of Jesus
- A man who received Last Rites and Communion, but could not speak, suddenly singing *The Solid Rock*. It is not because of the way they died, but the way the lived, even in the very moments of death.

In these moments, the miracle is not a clergy person doing their job by serving the person in need. The miracle is that the person in need does not even have the strength to rise from bed, or to keep their own body functioning, and yet in those moments they minister to the all-surpassing power of the *treasure* within, not the weakness of the "jar of clay."

Instead of pity, I feel awe, because instead of a sick, broken vessel, I see shining through the breaks and the cracks of common clay jars, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

If the treasure within is Jesus; its power outlasts every human pep talk, it out lasts every debilitating illness, it survives every persecution; it is struck down, but it is never destroyed. Even as it faces death, this light is not extinguished. It not only carries us through from glory to glory; as verse 15 says, "this grace extends **to more and more people** so that it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." The treasure is Christ, and the treasure exists to bring this light, this grace, this hope to the ends of the earth.

Conclusion

[Vamp on finding Psalm 116, which is cited in this verse by Paul, earmarked in the Bible at Synod. Then read Psalm 116]

Psa. 116:1 I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
2 Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
3 **The snares of death encompassed me**;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
4 **Then I called on the name of the LORD:**
"O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!"

DRAFT

This is a preaching draft.

Psa. 116:8 For you have delivered my soul from death,

my eyes from tears,

my feet from stumbling;

9 I will walk before the LORD

in the land of the living.

Paul does not says, 'Look, it's not so bad now that I have Jesus,' but rather 'it is so bad that if it were all on me, I would be crushed, I would be driven to despair, I would be struck down, I would be destroyed.

The antidote to human suffering is not the denial of suffering.

The antidote to affliction is not the ability to just power through it.

The antidote to death is not the power of positive of thinking.

The antidote to every affliction, every suffering—the antidote to death itself— is power of almighty God, who defeats death through sufferings of Christ and destroys death through the power of his resurrection. The shadow of death is overcome by the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

And in you, O fellow jars of clay, lies a great and powerful treasure. The power not of permanent earthly brokenness, the power of redemption, restoration, and eternal life through Jesus Christ.

DRAFT

This is a preaching draft.

Discussion Questions

1) In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, the apostle Paul writes, “Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” This is no doubt true, and yet, an overly simplistic understanding of this would paint too much in black and white. Non-Christians, from their perspective, have many forms of hope. They hope in many things, but what they lack is a confident assurance in an uncertain and imperfect world based on an unchangeable, eternal God. How is Christian hope more sure, certain and complete? And how can Christians acknowledge a reasonable and respectful understanding of non-Christian hopes, while offering a form of hope that is the same yesterday, today and forever in Christ?

2) The treasure of the light of the gospel is intended to go to all people, so that they might know a hope that lasts forever because it is empowered by the power of God, and not of human beings. How can the martyrdoms of William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer help us to see the saving power of our hope for ourselves and for others, even in the face of the most horrific circumstances of life?

3) What would a pep-rally Christian hope look like if it were using Christian language, but applying it to the common, worldly, Mariah Carey confidence rather than a Jesus Christ inspired confidence? In what ways might it look and sound Christian, but really just be a Christian version of the ‘power of positive thinking’?

4) We experience many micro-deaths before our eventual death, precursors that remind us of the changing, fleeting, unjust, and tragic nature of so much of human existence. The death of seasons, relationships, vocations, dreams etc. How can the treasure of the gospel not only minister to the final death of the body but also provide hope in the many micro-deaths that we experience where the “death in us” threatens to steal our joy and diminish our faith?

5) When Paul says, “death is at work in us, but life in you,” he speaks about the others-centered nature of the Christian life. In what ways can the Christian life of self-sacrificial service bring life to others, even while we experience loss? How can the upbuilding of others help us to recover from the many “deaths in us” (e.g., changes in season, loss of relationships, loss of jobs, loss of dreams and purpose) to find our healing not in trying to recover what we have lost, but in seeing others experience life? In other words, how does living for the sake of others, even when it costs us, actually provide the very means by which all brokenness, including our own, can be healed?

DRAFT