

Peeking in Clay Pots

Scripture: II Corinthians 4:6-7 “... but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us”

Background

Paul was responding to, not only situations that were happening in the Corinthian church, but with their attitudes about themselves, Paul, and what they thought was proper spirituality. For the Corinthian church, the projected image was all important. Paul has to deal repeatedly with the Corinthians with the following items:

Corinthian Focus	God's Focus	Reference
Worldly wisdom	Godly wisdom	I Corinthians 1:21-27; II Corinthians 1:12
Divisions through favoritism	Unity of the brethren	I Corinthians 1:10-12
Physical strength	Godly strength	I Corinthians 2:1-5
Physical appearance	Inner confidence	II Corinthians 1:9-10
Commending self	Right judgment	I Corinthians 6:1-6; 5:1-3

Culturally, Corinth thrived on wisdom, complex displays of strength and ability, and demonstrations of wealth

"non licet omnibus adire Corinthum" (Not everyone can go to Corinth – Horace)

These same attitudes filtered into the church and colored how the Corinthian church saw and accepted the activity of God. Paul's letters were written for the Corinthian church and for us as well, to see where the true power and wisdom of God rests, and how to live in that in the face of challenging circumstances

The God Proof

For the Corinthians, the proof of the gospel was found in the ability of those delivering it, as well as the testimony of others regarding them. In a sense, the Corinthian society had a system of certification for everything, including the gospel.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? – II Corinthians 3:1

Even though the Corinthian church had a very close and dependent relationship with Paul, because they were so focused on external presentation, they didn't consider what they had in Paul special. They lumped Paul in with the rest of those that would present the gospel, and place his word equal with

others, regardless of the relationship. Basically, if it presented well, it was accepted, and the better it presented, the more it was accepted.

Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus, I became your father through the gospel – I Corinthians 4:15

Note: the guardians were only useful for boys until they became men, then they were turned over to the father.

Paul urged them to not look externally for the proof of God's ability through Paul, but internally

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts – II Corinthians 3:2-3

Where was God when ____

When we look externally, sometimes it is hard to see God present in the circumstances or people around us. Other times we try to give justifications or our own defense to help us understand and accept what is going on. Rabbi Kushner wrote this response to the question of "where was God on 9/11?":

"... God was trying to discourage anyone from taking these flights. Those 4 flights together held over 1000 passengers, and there were only 266 on board. God was on 4 commercial airlines giving terrified passengers the ability to stay calm... God was busy trying to create obstacles for employees at the World Trade Center..." (you can view the rest of Rabbi Kushner's article here: <http://neilmammen.wordpress.com/2011/09/11/where-was-god-on-9-11/>)

Our response to such an article is acceptance, because we can now understand the scope of God at work. We can place God in specific places and activities that make sense to us. While this is a good explanation for the activity of God, it can be argued that

- 1) God was only there for those that escaped the disaster
- 2) God wasn't there for those who died
- 3) We can only see God in the delta between what happened and what could have happened.

Does an omnipotent, omnipresent God only present Himself in the delta? Does God need to be *proven* for Him to still be God? Do we worship God because we have an explanation of our surroundings, or is God's presence enough?

This is what the Lord says – Israel's king and Redeemer, The Lord of Heaven's Armies: I am the First and the Last; there is no other God. Who is like Me? Let him step forward and prove you his power. Let him do as I have done since ancient times when I established a people and explained its future – Isaiah 44:6-7

When we reduce God to our understanding of the circumstances, we reduce His power and ability to our own. How then can we expect God to work in our situations in ways greater than we can, or to

present a life that is abundant and full? For the Corinthians, God was as good as what *they saw*, but Paul was trying to show them that God, and what He has for us, is much more than our faculties can take in

However as it is written, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God – I Corinthians 2:9-10

Removing the Lid

Paul begins to have a detailed conversation about the difference between the old covenant and the new (which is interesting, because the Corinthians were Gentiles) and the glory that comes from each covenant.

For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison of the surpassing glory...Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away – II Corinthians 3:10,12-13

Paul shows the Corinthians that what he has (and what they have) is so much greater than anything that came before, and because of that, they have a right to be bold about what they have, and what they are. Yet the boldness is not in their own person or ability: what they have and who they are are all from God:

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves. But our competence comes from God – II Corinthians 3:4-5

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house – Matthew 5:14-15

Paul does not present the things that he has done for the Corinthian church as a proof that God is real, or as a proof of the presence or activity of God. His confidence was not because of anything he did, but because of who God made him, and even that was not based on the promise or potential for activity.

The activity does not determine the creation. Rather, the creation determines the activity.

Paul was not a minister because he was a great orator, was well versed in the scriptures, etc. Paul did the things he did because he was a minister

Paul let the reality of who God was and who he was in God, shine through all circumstances, and that reality was not influenced by the social acceptance of the circumstance or not.

The Beauty Within

Our alabaster box

In biblical times, alabaster containers were made to keep perfume. Often because of the beauty of the alabaster itself, it was fashioned into exquisite containers. The real value, though, was contained inside – expensive perfume.

The Corinthian church in many ways was like this, in their focus on the external and the presentable. We need to be careful that no matter how beautiful the container, it is only a container, and the real “value” is what is inside

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean – Matthew 23:27

Paul understood that the container was not the focus, and was free to not to have to be the focus of attention when it came to matters of God. Paul, then compared us to something less glamorous: clay pots

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us – II Corinthians 4:7

Identifying the Treasure

When Paul takes the focus off of the external, he shows exactly what is important, what God is doing in the lives of the believers:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness”, made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ – II Corinthians 4:6

Knowing What I Know

For Paul, it was about understanding the glory, or the manifest presence of God in Jesus. It was knowing that God was going to be God in all things, that Jesus would still be the risen Lord and his Savior, and that nothing was going to change that.

The God we have in salvation is the same God we have when nothing is going right. The God that blessed and healed us is the same God when the blessing and healing are delayed.

Why is this important? Because we have to be able to know that God is God, whether we can justify it in our circumstances. Similarly, we don't minister, witness, or testify about God only when things are going well. Even when things are dark and hard to understand, God continues to be God and His light shines in us

...Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before God, your words were heard, and I am come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty one days... - Daniel 10:12-13

It was easy, therefore for Paul to be confident, because he wasn't focusing on himself. Rather he was fixed on who God is. Paul did not use his own reputation or activity as proof of the gospel. Rather he allowed the *real reality* of Jesus to be proof enough. This was the treasure

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake – II Corinthians 4:5

What Paul took from Damascus

Paul's Experience	Paul's Testimony to Corinth
When I thought I knew God and was qualified to do work for His glory, and had letters of certification to do so, I saw a bright light, the glory of God, that brought me face to face, and to a new knowledge of who Jesus is	For God who said Let light shine out of darkness has made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ – II Corinthians 4:6

Paul walked away from Damascus with a deep understanding of who Jesus really was, not just a nice experience that he could exploit. This is why Paul was able to focus on the simple truth of the gospel

...we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God. On the contrary by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God – II Corinthians 4:2

Our first focus and effort is to allow God to give us that deep profound understanding, not just of the existence of Jesus, but of who Jesus really is, and let that be our confidence in all circumstances.

The best answer for "where is God when ____?" is "the same place He always has been – shining His light of the understanding of His glory in the face of Jesus. When the circumstances don't make sense