

What an amazing list of contrasts is given by the apostle Paul when he writes his second letter to the Corinthians.

In chapter 4 at least fourteen contrasts can be found.

The most obvious are light >< darkness, and life >< death; but there is also the **“treasure”** kept in **“jars of clay”**!

The careful reader finds in this chapter a description of total war: light seeking to penetrate and dispel darkness; darkness seeking to put out the light - and the apostolic reporter himself is found to be fully caught up in the epic battle (see also: Ro. 13:12; 2 Co. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:10-18). The great evil genius, **“the god of this age”**, has blinded humanity. Consequently, humanity is under his control and it is perishing (Acts 26:18). Yet, in spite of all his might, intelligence and effort, the enemy has never succeeded in putting out the true light of the true God. It is shining as brightly as ever, and the God of Genesis 1, the Creator, the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, is still shining his light into darkened hearts – it is the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Unable to extinguish that light, the enemy’s greatest concern is to keep men from perceiving it in their hearts and minds - at all cost.

“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age”
(Eph. 6:12)

When Paul writes of the glorious light of the gospel, he calls it **“this treasure in earthen vessels”** – a remarkable contrast. In 1947 that very contrast was dramatically illustrated when the first lot of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls was discovered. The scrolls are easily classified as the most important archaeological find ever,



biblically speaking at least - a priceless treasure. How significant that they were all kept in clay jars, and that their discovery was the result, precisely, of the sound of a *breaking* jar. That happened when a Bedouin shepherd boy, wanting to retrieve a lost goat, tossed a stone into a cave high above him in the bleak Judean hills. The sound of breaking earthenware alerted him and the jars and their precious contents were found. They had been there, undisturbed, for well over 2000 years. Even when Paul wrote those remarkable words in 2 Corinthians 4, the scrolls might already have been centuries old.

But, although Paul ignored the fact of their existence, he knew about a far greater treasure. He knew that GOD had become man, and that this God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, with all his light and life, inexplicably dwelt in a “clay jar” of human flesh! He also knew full well that if that light and life had not been allowed to break forth, as they did at Calvary, God’s purposes would have come to nothing...

Paul certainly was “*not ignorant of Satan’s devices*” (2 Co. 2:11). He realized that Satan’s strategy had called for the categorical prevention of Christ’s crucifixion (e.g.: Mt. 4:5-8; 16:21-23)! And when, in spite of all his efforts, Christ *was* on the cross, a desperate Satan still used men’s taunts to try and get him to come down (Mt. 27:39-44). Nothing, however, could keep the perfect Son of Man back. His “earthen vessel” *must* be broken, the treasure of light and life released - redemption for those perishing under Satan’s reign of terror (Hb. 2:14-15). No wonder the apostle wrote: “***God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...***” (Gal. 6:14)!

When Paul wrote about “earthen vessels”, or “clay jars”, he must have looked back at what his Lord had accomplished. Then he looked at his own experience, as becomes abundantly clear in this chapter, but he also looked around at the need among his fellow Christians. What did he see? With his eye of faith he must have seen, not only his own generation, but also later generations of true Christians, right up to our day... What he saw - as we too must get to see and understand - was that Man is extremely reluctant to give up his entitlement to his “clay jar”. To Peter, confronting the Lord on the issue in Matthew 16, it was a “No, no!!” That is, a “**No-to-the-cross!**” attitude.

Both Peter and Paul had to be made willing by the Lord’s loving, molding hands for the opposite, for the “**Yes-to-the-cross!**” attitude. At every turn after that - as they continued to say “Yes!” - their Lord’s life and light would shine out from *their* lives through the cracks and chinks they were sustaining in battle. It is in that same sense that Paul wrote to his Roman friends:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service”
(Ro. 12:1).

Paul must have had playing on his mind the story of Gideon and his band (Judges 7). To all of the three hundred men, that Gideon was eventually left with, were given, in one hand, a piece of earthenware, i.e. a pitcher or jar, and a trumpet in the other. No other “arms” available, or needed, just that pitcher and the trumpet! But inside the trumpet a clarion call was waiting to be sounded, and inside the

pitcher, a torch was burning – ready to burst forth! The signal agreed among the men, as they carefully took up positions around the enemy camp in the dead of night, was the sounding of Gideon’s trumpet. Instantly, all of them were to sound *their* trumpets, *and* break the pitchers. And that’s the way it went - the sudden commotion, coming from all directions, trumpets sounding, pitchers breaking, light abruptly shining out, had the desired effect, and a great victory was won!

But *what* if the pitchers, or jars, had had a voice in the matter; what if they had been unwilling to be sacrificed right there and then? What if they had asked, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 9: “*Do we have no right to... remain intact?*”? And what if the men holding them had had to give in to the stubbornness of the pitchers? The trumpets might still have sounded, there might have been some confusion in the enemy camp, but the most likely outcome would have been the routing of Gideon and his men - defeat, not victory, would have been the result!

When the men set out, the “wholeness” of the pitchers was vital - the torches must be hidden. But then, inevitably, the strategy called for the pitchers to be broken... As the “wholeness” had been vital, so now the “brokenness” was absolutely vital. Everything depended on it. “Brokenness” brings light – light brings victory!

So what is it Paul is seeking to get across? He is saying that, just as in Gideon’s case, God’s strategy in the New Testament calls for “brokenness”. God’s clay jars are of incalculable importance in God’s strategy, but that importance is derived from their fragile and transitory nature. The supreme example is not Gideon, but the Son of God. When He came among us, He dwelt in fragile human “earthenware” - ready to be broken. It is still what God is after - with all of his children. Here’s the reason given by Paul: “*that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us*” (2 Co. 4:7). What the apostle relates further along, in chapter 12, is very revealing:

“He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It means that when one of God’s present “jars” insists on “wholeness”, rejecting or putting off “brokenness”, God’s purposes are thwarted. It may seem a strange paradox, but when a treasure-containing jar allows itself to be broken, at that moment it proves its worth and its usefulness. If, on the other hand, it insists on crack-resistant “wholeness”, its uselessness soon becomes painfully evident... - simply because the treasure of light, hidden inside and waiting to shine out, is condemned to remain shut up! And who is behind this?

We have already seen how Satan himself, the consummate strategist, is the one plotting against God’s purposes. As in the case of Christ himself, Satan wants nothing of the cross in the believer’s life, no “brokenness”, no “suffering” – because none of the light of the Risen Savior must get released and shine out through a broken jar.

Human beings are out to show off their strength, their independence, their self-sufficiency, their beauty, their prowess... Any cracks

occurring? Quick, get them papered over! It is this innate idea that our soul-and-body-jars are all-important – that is where our problem lies. Of course, when the real treasure is unknown, when the jar has always been empty, what else can be expected? Countless millions look for the strengthening of their ‘jar’ and its ‘fulfillment’, but not being acquainted with the Light of Life, that fulfillment remains an illusion. The truth of the matter is always the same, whether rich or poor, (happily) married or not, dumb or clever, *without Christ* nothing really makes sense. The jar deteriorates relentlessly and as to any fulfillment, none is found. There is no lasting joy!

If the living Christ is not there, our lives are not only brief, but empty as well - they miss God’s purpose altogether. It is true that nimble artists, in front of thousands of spellbound, cheering, adoring fans, are celebrating... And they are certainly raking in their millions of dollars. But what is it they celebrate? All they and their fans celebrate is *the body* – *its youth, its charm, its agility, its voice, its appearance, its sex-appeal*. The whole thing is a highly charged “happening”; it is electrifying, yet, when the dust settles..., there’s no more than an empty shell. Did anyone ever tell a Michael Jackson, or a Whitney Houston, or an Amy Winehouse of the priceless treasure that God had for them, ready to be entrusted to their “jars”? Did anyone ever sit down with them and love them with the love of Christ and point out that the jar which so fixated and obsessed them, was not meant to remain empty, but rather wonderfully filled with supernatural light and life? And that if remaining empty, there simply was no way it could ever be truly functional or valuable? That it was the Savior from heaven who himself wanted to dwell in them? Did *you* ever tell anyone...?

In this article we are mainly concerned with the *Christian*, the one who *has* been filled with great treasure. The “normal” Christian is fully conscious of the fact that his ‘jar’ is not empty anymore. He has come to know Christ, and he’s aware of the priceless treasure inside! On the other hand, the “typical” ‘Christian’ treasures the “jar” more than he treasures the “treasure”! He may pamper the jar, varnish it, fortify it, train it, educate it, take pride in it, idolize it..., and he’s hardly aware of a ‘treasure’ inside. Leave alone, the treasure getting a chance to shine out joyfully!

Now, when we speak of the “jar”, we speak of all of these things: the body with all of its members and senses, and the host of amazing systems and functions the Creator equipped it with. And, of course, there are the intellect, emotions, will-power, which open up incredible human potential...

Robert Laidlaw opens his famous booklet, “The Reason Why”, with the incident of the young man who sends his bride-to-be a precious diamond ring, contained in a fitting little case. How shocked he is, when she writes to thank him, not for the diamond ring, but for the little case, which intrigues and fascinates her... An unlikely story? Unlikely, indeed! And yet, it paints a very apt picture of those Christians, who may have Christ dwelling within, but their awareness and appreciation are not of HIM. They focus on temporary and outward things – *not* on the “treasure”! If there truly *is* spiritual treasure, it is relegated to the “department of religion”, good enough for Sunday. On week days, attention is required for the ‘f’ stuff: finance, food, family, fortune, fashion, frivolity, fun, feats of this, flurries of that. But a living Faith, an intimate Friendship with the Savior, a loving

Fervor to please and serve him, are not deemed of much practical use. If on Sundays the pastor has his say about Christ-the-Treasure, that will be fine, but on Mondays it is back to business...

The treasure of light that Paul draws our attention to, was not to be tucked away, or kept behind a door with 'Strictly Private' on it. On the very first page of the Bible God says: "Let there be light!" In John 8 and again in John 9, our Lord said: "***I am the light of the world***"; but He also said: "***You are the light of the world***" (Mt. 5). The light ***must*** shine out; it must not be hidden under a 'bushel'. How are those near and dear, and those further afield, ever going to discover the greatest treasure of all if those who have it, keep it hidden? God wants the freedom to *break out* of the jar. It is how the priceless Dead Sea scrolls were discovered – a jar got broken.

Paul knew from experience what it is to be broken, and he had learned not to draw back. Wasn't that also his greatest desire for the lives of his dear friends in all the congregations (Ro. 12:1)? When we let God have that freedom, then Gideon's story becomes *our* story, and the "enemy" is truly confounded – the Treasure's light is liberated, shining out through the holes and cracks in the jar which is not made of steel, rather of fragile ceramic.

Like it or not, you and I cannot be true followers of our Lord if we are not willing to give up the rights to our "precious" jar – if we hold back from a full surrender to him. If you truly "treasure" him, then you will truly trust him for all the way He wants to go with you. Why not, by his grace, start walking with him today and learn from him as you go? Then, when the moment comes, trust him still when your 'jar' sustains an ominous crack. Let him shine out with his glorious light!

***"If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself (his jar),
and take up his cross daily, and follow me.
For whoever desires to save his life (his jar) will lose it,
but whoever loses his life (his jar) for my sake will save it.
For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world (for his jar),
and is himself destroyed or lost?"***
(Lk. 9:23-25).

When God saw that thousands of people in Samaria, in the coastal cities, in Phoenicia, in Cyprus and in Syria (*including* a traveling diplomat from Africa) were desperate to see the light, He also saw that hundreds of disciples in Jerusalem were ready for action – they were *not* holding on frantically to their 'jars'. They had handed the reins of their lives to their Lord. Yes, He had the right to break their "**P-O-R**" jars - the jars of their **possessions**, **occupations** and **relations**. And so, as God allowed a terrible persecution to break on their heads; **they** allowed him to touch their 'jars', overturn them and break them. As refugees they fled for their lives, bereft of everything, but the effect was that the wondrous Gospel light, shining out through these broken jars, reached all those thousands that were waiting, right along the eastern Mediterranean coast, on to Cyprus, and up into the important city of Antioch. We have the story in Acts 8 and 11. It is the story of what from then on has been happening throughout history. Often on a scale incomparably bigger, like in China today and North Korea, Iran, Eritrea and other countries...

We just quoted Luke 9, and there, at the end of that chapter, we have the following intriguing conversations of the Lord with some of his would-be servants. Watch how He highlights the problem of the “crack-resistant **P-O-R** jars” that hinder the “breaking-out” and the “reaching-out” of the Gospel light of God’s kingdom.

POSSESSIONS - *Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to him, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go”. And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”.*

OCCUPATIONS - *Then He said to another, “Follow Me”. But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father”. Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God”.*

RELATIONS - *And another also said, “Lord, I will follow you, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house”. But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the [proclamation of the] kingdom of God”. (see also Dt. 20:5-7).*

Their particular and legitimate **p**ossessions, **o**ccupations and **r**elations were the worst threat to their usefulness as heralds of the kingdom. How clearly our Lord discerns that these human jars have a habit of prevailing over divine treasure! He shows us the way to be saved from ourselves; it is the “**daily**” way of the cross, mentioned in verses 23-25. Then, as a disciple is saved from **himself** and from the dominance of his “jar”, the great treasure of the Gospel of God’s grace and kingdom is exposed and begins to shine out.

The arch-enemy of that kingdom didn’t manage to prevent God’s Gospel light from shining **into** our hearts. He miserably failed to keep God from transforming us into his beacons of light. Now he is doing all in his power to prevent that light from shining **out**. He has very cleverly designed other ‘gospels’ – ‘red herrings’ if you like - that entice Christians away from the one Gospel and from the radical consequences of the cross of Christ in their lives. Even in his time, the apostle Paul found it necessary to put believers and congregations on alert regarding “**different**” gospels. To the Galatian Christians, who had embraced a do-it-yourself “gospel”, he wrote:

“There are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”
(Gal. 1)

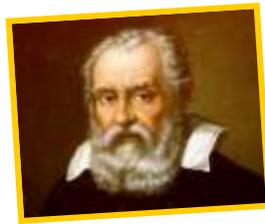
Modern ‘gospels’ proclaim good-news-for-jars: “There is no need for your ‘jar’ to crack and even less to break!” The “**health-and-wealth** gospel”, also called “prosperity gospel”, also called “word of faith”, is out campaigning all over the world, on TV screens and in mega-churches. What’s it all about? Very simply, it is all about the shoring up of your jar; sort of ‘steelifying’ it! The message is that on no account does God want your jar (your health and wealth) to suffer! Are you not doing very well physically, emotionally, financially? Are you depressed? Out of work? Need a bigger car? Got poor self-

esteem? Then there is good news for you. God wants you happy and healthy and prosperous... Just name it and claim it!

Still another gospel proclaims something similar – it is the “psycho-gospel”. Among the professional psycho-people (psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists and the like) there are true Christians who may genuinely seek to help others. They may quote Scripture and there may be valuable advice, but what basically, are they are trying to do? In your deep depression, in your loss of self-esteem, in your guilt complex, are you being led back to Christ – the “New Man”? Or is it a matter of restoring and bolstering that “old man” (Ro. 6:6) - giving him a good psycho-boost...?

Beware – “Other gospels” are called “accursed” by the apostle. Always remember there’s a mastermind behind them, someone that keeps telling you to stay away from the practical outworking of “the cross” in your life. Our Lord addressed him to his face; and so may you – in **his** name:

“Get behind me, Satan! You are an offense to me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men!”
(Mt. 16:21-23)



Galileo, the Italian astronomer, was out of sync with the prevailing system of thought, which had the earth as central to the solar system and the sun going around it. He caused a scandal and consternation, not least in the ‘church’, and got himself jailed for his ‘crime’. What he said, basically, was:
“The sun, *not* the earth...”

It aptly illustrates what Paul said in Galatians 2:20: “**Christ, not I...**” This truth, when discovered, is a message which is *not* accepted by the world, often not even by the ‘church’. Yes, leading a respectable “Christian” life is acceptable in this world, but only as long as that Christian is conformed to the world’s ways and is not giving signs of ‘fanaticism’. In other words, his life must be run the **egocentric** way!

What happens when a Christian stops running with the crowd; when, by the grace of God, he states unequivocally: “So far but no further! Henceforth for me to live is **Christ**”? This happens when ‘treasure-consciousness’ kicks in. It may bring suffering, but from now on there will be a light shining out, and it will illuminate others. With Christ now enthroned in his heart, this Christian has finally made his Galileo discovery: “**I am just a ‘satellite’; Christ is the ‘Sun of righteousness’! And He is at the center of my ‘solar system’**”.

In Revelation 2:4-5 we discover the shocking possibility of Christians and whole congregations “leaving their first love”, not treasuring their **treasure** anymore. Their ‘first love’, now redirected, gets all enthused about secondary matters, like the **P-O-R** fortunes. When the **treasure** doesn’t constitute a Christian’s “first love” anymore, “another gospel”, something like the “prosperity gospel”, will appeal to him; it promises guarantees, security, comfort, a jar of steel! So he goes in for the illusion, for the chimera. The promises sound so convincing and perfectly in line with his own greed and gullibility, and he takes the bait. God’s Word is laid aside and man’s reasonings and eloquence and chicanery are embraced.

No wonder James writes, “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world, makes himself an enemy of God”.

The inevitable effect? If you steelify the jar, you stultify the treasure...! If you go for material and temporary blessings, you forfeit the true, the spiritual, the eternal blessings! If you sidestep the cost of following the Lord Jesus now, you will find to your cost later that all your self-serving efforts are reduced to ashes...!

“If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Co. 3).

The *Bible* Gospel, which is unique, always shifts the attention (back) to the treasure - to Jesus Christ! John the Baptist, in his time, understood what it was all about. He said: ***“He must increase, I must decrease!”*** (Jn. 3:30). Paul, to his straying Galatian friends, summed it all up in these famous words:

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”

(Gal. 2:20).

You **cannot** follow Christ *and* the god-of-this-world. You **cannot** be his disciple *and* ignore the condition he puts down, which is “to deny yourself”, “take up your cross daily” and “follow HIM”.

“We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed, always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body!”

2 Corinthians 4:8-9