

THE FORTUNE OF THE FRAIL

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." II Corinthians 4:7.

When wealth is found in unlikely places or genius appears in shabby circumstances, you have the making of a good news story. Such a case was related in the Reader's Digest some months ago. John Gunther was the reporter. Albert Schweitzer was the one reported on, and he is one of the world's best known missionary doctors. What gave the story its dramatic power and appeal was the fact that Gunther found Schweitzer, a man renowned in philosophy, medicine, theology and music, living in the heart of Africa under a Christian compulsion of service, toiling for savages in an oppressively tropical land.

In his simple quarters Schweitzer often, late at night, sits down at an old, over-sized piano that was once given him by the Paris Bach Society. It is lined with zinc to protect it against dampness and the ravaging termites. On and on Schweitzer plays for the sheer joy of the music. Gunther concluded his article with these words: "It was a fascinating privilege to hear him play, and it is this picture of him, sitting at that battered old wreck of a piano in the middle of the silent, creeping jungle, that I shall remember best."

There you have it--a brilliant jewel in a pewter setting, grandeur blazing out amid the gloom, a diamond found in a dustpan.

Now this is essentially the idea that fills and fascinates Paul's mind as he writes our text. He thinks of the Christ Who, by the Holy Spirit, lives in his heart and of the good news of Christ that he has the privilege of spreading wherever he goes. Then he thinks of himself, of the uncomplimentary things that he knows about himself and the unflattering things that others have said about him. He isn't handsome. He isn't eloquent. Sometimes his persecutors beat him up and leave him an ugly-looking mess. His health is not robust and often he aches with weariness. At best he tastes the limitations of an imperfect mind and a mortal body.

So from Paul's heart there comes this testimony, which is both an humble confession and a thrilling exclamation: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." II Corinthians 4:7.

I. The Description.

Let us observe closely how this treasure is described. The whole jewel is laid open before us in the preceding verse. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." II Corinthians 4:6. Note the description of the amazing fortune that is ours as children of God and Christian witnesses.

Call it "light," says Paul. Doesn't that make it interesting? When God viewed the earth in the beginning, He saw a world of chaos. "The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). Then suddenly the voice of God said, "Let there be light: and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The state of the earth before God kindled the lights of the firmament is analogous to the state of the human soul before God speaks spiritual light into it.

Call it the "light of knowledge." Doesn't that make it alluring? Knowledge is precious. Never has a generation sought knowledge with keener zest than does our own. Scientists are busy night and day exploring the universe. The telescope sweeps the starry heavens. The microscope brings to light the wonders of the infinitesimally small. Every year new marvels are announced, the bounds of knowledge are enlarged and science gains new laurels.

And yet sharp limits are set to all the knowledge science can give us. When physical research has done its all, the greatest thing remains undone. The human heart cries out for God, and finds no rest in any created thing. The flowers in their beauty and the stars in their glory cannot solace a wounded soul. When temptation beats as a storm on the soul, when the heart is sad, when some deep grave yawns before us and eternity draws near, we want one who can help us. Is there such a one? Yes! With the accent of a grand certainty Paul declares that God is, that God knows and that God cares.

Call it "the light of the knowledge of glory." Doesn't that make it fascinating?

Call it "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God." Doesn't that make it thrilling?

Call it, finally, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Doesn't that make it utterly desirable?

God has revealed Himself through creation, nature, His inspired Word, His preincarnation appearances and the face of Jesus Christ. Through the face of Christ is the highest, the last and the final revelation of that glory. To realize how much a face can say, one only needs to observe the face of a little child, beaming with innocent trust, or the face of a thinker, with its air of meditation and insight, or the face of a saint, aglow with holy ardor and faith, or the face of one's own mother, tender with love and bedewed with tears of devotion. The face of Christ is a complete exhibition of God's glory.

The glory of God is revealed in the face of Christ, not merely that we may see it, but that we may be transformed by it. This transformation comes through beholding.

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."

His glory and grace are revealed and manifested to us in order that we may reflect them for the illumination of others.

What Paul is saying in verse seven is this: the fortune of the Christian is his possession of Christ and, through Him, the knowledge of God in His saving grace and holy glory.

1. Christ is the focused glory of God.

The Psalmist said, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." Psalm 19:1. There you have the creative glory of God spread abroad or diffused through the vast ingenuities and wonders represented by the sun, moon and stars.

Turn then and look at Jesus Christ our Lord. Here you see the glory of God revealed in a face. Here it is God's glory become personal--not diffused but focused. There are two ways to look at beauty: discuss it as an idea, an abstraction, or see it in a rose, or a sunset, or a pair of lovely eyes. There are two ways to approach the glory of God: impersonally in nature or personally in Jesus Christ. It is the Christ way for me, says Paul.

2. Christ is the full glory of God.

According to the scriptures, the glory of God is revealed to men historically in stages, and the revelation moves on to a purposed climax. The first stage of the revelation is to be seen in nature, in the heavens above and the world around. But there is another stage. "But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?" II Corinthians 3:7-8. That is to say, the law, while it reflected the majesty and holiness of God, and while it served to make men aware of their sinfulness and to restrain them from unbridled evil, could not change their hearts or forgive their sins. Nevertheless, the moral glory of God shone in that law.

But history moves on. It moves on because God moves in and through it. And finally we come to Christ. "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Galatians 4:4-5.

Men once looked at the stars and said God is powerful--that is His glory. Men later looked at Sinai and said, God is holy--that is His glory. But at long last they looked at His Son and said, God is love--and that is His glory. The full fact is, as we see it in Christ, that God, Who is powerful enough to create us and holy enough to judge us, is loving enough to save us.

3. Christ is the fadeless glory of God.

"And not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished." II Corinthians 3:13.

Some have drawn the hasty conclusion that Moses, returning from his lonely vigils with God on Mount Sinai, put a veil over his face because the brightness would be too great for the men of Israel to endure. Not at all, says Paul. The glory on Moses' face, splendid as it was, would fade away; and, in these circumstances, it was best for the fact of its fading to be hidden from the people.

In contrast with the passing glory of Moses' experience is the permanent revelation we have in Christ. "The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" is more and more reflected in the faces of those who possess Christ as their treasure.

II. The Depositary.

Let us observe where this treasure is deposited. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us." II Corinthians 4:7.

Paul was not blind to his physical weaknesses. His critics did not hesitate to point them out, and there was cruelty as well as contempt in the way they did it. His enemies ridiculed his "bodily presence" as "weak" and his "speech" as "contemptible." "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." II Corinthians 10:10.

In chapter eleven, in a passage that moves one to the depths, Paul frankly acknowledges how fragile is the body that houses his unbreakable soul as he goes about proclaiming Christ. Five times he had been given a lashing of thirty-nine stripes. Three times he was beaten with rods. Three times he was shipwrecked. He had known exhaustion, pain, long vigils, hunger and thirst, doing without meals, cold and lack of clothing.

It was in and through a beaten, battered body like that that the presence and glory of Jesus Christ expressed itself. That is the fortune of the frail. It was a cast of the treasure of God's glory in Christ being deposited "in a frail vessel of earth."

III. The Design.

Having considered the description and the depository of this treasure, we shall note what is designed by this arrangement of a fortune so rich in a receptacle so frail. The reason for it, says Paul, is "that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us."

The ability to break is the power man exercises. It is the power he covets. Sometimes it is breaking a record. Sometimes it is breaking a competitor. Sometimes it is breaking an enemy. That is man's power. He glories in it.

But the ability to be broken--how different that is! It requires nothing less than the power of God.

The one makes for pride; the other for humility. The one gives us a swelled head; the other a bowed heart.

See what power this is that God designs for us. It is such that when we are broken by God, we are unbreakable by anything outside of Him. That is what Paul means when he says in substance, "We are handicapped on all sides, but never frustrated." There are no dead-end streets for those who trust God. Delays? Yes, just as with Israel at the Red Sea. But no defeats--God makes a way through.

Paul says, "We are puzzled, but never in despair." Here is power that holds us hopefully steady when God doesn't give all the answers to all our questions. We believe there are answers and He has them in His keeping. We trust Him utterly.

"We are persecuted, but we never have to stand it alone." In the loneliness of his persecution, Paul felt a higher Presence still. He told Timothy that when he was on trial, "The Lord stood by me." II Timothy 4:17.

"We may be knocked down, but we are never knocked out." We have the power to bounce back, regardless of the blows that hit us.

Well, there is God's design, cried Paul, in giving us this treasure of Christ in earthen vessels. It is His purpose that through our very weakness His power may be released.

When we are hemmed in by circumstances, we shall receive power to get through. When we are frazzled out with perplexities, we shall receive power to hope on. When we are held up to scorn, we shall receive power to take it. When we are beaten down by the devastating blow, we shall receive power to rise again.

Such is the fortune of the frail, the matchless treasure of God's glory that we have in the face of Jesus Christ.