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**TREASURE IN
EARTHEN VESSELS**

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2 Corinthians iv.

“ Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not ; (2) but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully ; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. (3) But if our gospel be hid, it is

hid to them that are lost : (4) in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. (5) For we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord ; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (6) 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. (7) But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us."

Scripture speaks of man in his natural state in two ways : alive in sins, and dead in sins. The first we get in the Epistle to the Romans, and the second in the Epistle to the Ephesians. As to sins and sinful lusts, man is alive enough. He shows plenty of activity and energy for self-pleasing and for sin, but none for God. Every vanity, amusement, dress or what not is preferred to God. For sin, he is alive ; for God, he is dead. Whether alive in sins or dead in sins, it is the same condition but looked at in different ways ; and in order to be delivered from this condition two things are needed.

As dead in sins, a new creation is necessary : he must be quickened. As alive in sins, death must come in : he must die. There is no other remedy or way of deliverance before God than death. This side of the truth we get in Romans, where the death of Christ is presented as meeting our guilt, and death with Christ as the deliverance from our state.

It is evident that when a man is dead you cannot say he has evil lusts and passions or a will of his own. So we read in Romans vi. 11 : “ *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ*

our Lord.” There is no remedy for being alive in sins but death.

The Epistle to the Ephesians gives us the other side of the truth : there we are seen as “*dead in trespasses and sins,*” and God quickens us and raises us up together with Christ. It is an entirely new creation. The Epistle to the Colossians gives both aspects. “*And ye are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power : in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body [of the sins] of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ : buried with Him in*

baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."

This tells us that as alive in sins we have died with Christ and are buried with Him, as taught in Romans, thus getting clear of the state we were in, for we have died out of it and are brought into a new place in righteousness by virtue of Christ's resurrection. Moreover, as dead in sins we are

quicken together with Him, which is also taught in Ephesians. Thus the Epistle to the Colossians goes, as it were, ~~between the other two~~. We are taken further than in Romans; because in Colossians we are spoken of as being raised with Him, which Romans does not teach as a fact, but as a hope: “*For if we have been planted together in the likeness of His death, we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection.*” Colossians does not present us as seated in heavenly places in Christ as Ephesians does, but it directs us to Christ who is there, and tells us to seek those things which are

above, “*where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.*”

Now all this and more was revealed to the Apostle Paul and declared by him in the gospel which he preached. And here in this fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians ~~he tells us by the~~ Holy Spirit that there is now no veil on the glory of God. If the glory is hid, it is hid from the minds of unbelievers, through ~~the effort~~ and work of Satan, whose object is to blind men's minds to it. Thus we read in verse 4 of our chapter, “*in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not.*” This is the action of Satan, “*the god of this*

world,” and he does it by means of men’s evil lusts and worldly desires.

The gospel is the gospel of the glory of Christ (not simply the glorious gospel of Christ, but the revelation of His glory); the glory of Him who was once on the cross bearing sins, but is now glorified at God’s right hand. The glory of God shines in His face and there is no veil on this. All about God has come out; He no longer hides Himself as He did formerly, dwelling in “*the thick darkness*.” So that if God is not now seen and known, the veil is on man’s heart. The blinding by Satan is not

exactly because men have rejected the gospel, but rather his leading them to reject it. The point is, that there is no veil now except on the human heart, and it is in contrast with Moses who, as we read in Exodus xxxiv. 33, put a veil over his face when he came out to the people from the presence of God, because they could not bear the "*glory of his countenance*," not even that reflection of the glory of God which shone in his face. Man "*came short of the glory of God*," and when its mere reflection was brought before him, he could not endure it, connected as it was with the law, or God's

claim on him. But now the glory shines “*in the face of Jesus Christ,*” and there is no veil upon that. Moreover, there is not, nor do we need, a veil upon our face but are like Moses in Exodus xxxiv. 34, who had no veil on when he went in before the Lord. He turned to the Lord and took the veil away. In a coming day Israel’s heart shall turn to the Lord, and then, as we learn from 2 Corinthians iii. 16, the veil shall be taken away from them. We do not wait for that day, but even now “*with open [or unveiled] face*” behold the glory of the Lord. And not only are we free to

do this; we delight to do it, for it shines in the face of Him who died for us and put away all our sins. Every ray of that glory tells how completely the work was done, for though He was once on the cross, bearing "*our sins in His own body on the tree,*" He is now in the glory and has certainly not got our sins there. In the case of Moses the glory connected itself with the law which required obedience from man. Therefore they could not bear it, but in the gospel it shines in the face of Him who died for us. Our sins were laid on Him and He was made sin for us. He is now in the

glory; and we, beholding with affection and intelligence the glory in Him, and taking delight in it, are "*changed into the same image from glory to glory.*" We see this in Stephen when he was being stoned. He "*looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.*" Christ filled his vision and this made him like his Lord. He does not think of the stones but calmly asks the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit and prays for his murderers, as the Lord did.

Israel "*could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is*

abolished” (2 Cor. iii. 13). The people could not understand that the ordinances were intended as a figure of that which was better and permanent. The whole system ordained through the hand of Moses was veiled to their eyes, and they fell under the letter that killeth. Occupied with “*the letter*” of the covenant, they did not see that all the ordinances were types and shadows pointing to One yet to come. “*The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.*” “*Now the Lord is that spirit*” (spirit with a small “s,” not a capital); and this ~~they did not apprehend~~. The institutions under

the law looked on to Christ, but in the tabernacle and afterwards in the temple there was the veil; a standing witness that God had not revealed *Himself* and that there was no way for man to approach His immediate presence. Under the law God did not come out and man could not go in. The law came out and the prophets came out, but God Himself was hidden behind the veil. In Christ, of course, God did come out, as He says in John xii. 46, "*I am come a light into the world,*" but man could not yet go in. Faith could say, "*We beheld His glory,*" but redemption

must be accomplished in order that man might be able to go in before God. This having now been done, we see a *Man* in the glory, "*crowned with glory*," and we see God's glory in His face. Now all is out; God is fully revealed and man enters the glory. The veil is rent "*from the top to the bottom*"; God has come out and man can go in.

From verse 2 of our chapter we learn that the Apostle gave out the things of the gospel as pure as he received them. He did not corrupt the doctrine, but manifested it in all the purity and brightness in which he had received it. Not only

was the glory of God fully revealed with open face in Christ, but it was also manifested without a veil in the pure preaching of the Apostle. This ministry, which was the power of the Spirit of God acting in the chosen instrument, made man responsible for submission to this glorious Christ; and when Christ was thus proclaimed, there was either submission of heart or the blinding of Satan. It is the same now, because man is lost, and if he does not receive the gospel he remains lost.

In 1 Corinthians ii. the Apostle writes thus : “ *Now we have received, not the spirit of the*

world, but the spirit which is of God ; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth ; comparing spiritual things with spiritual [or rather, communicating spiritual things by spiritual means]. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him ; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

From this we see that the Apostle received the things by the Spirit and that he told them out by the Spirit, so that we

get them as pure as he received them, both being by the Spirit. And further, it is also by means of the Spirit that the things are received by those to whom they are addressed.

God has shined into our hearts in order that the knowledge of His glory may shine out. This is the meaning of "*give the light*" in verse 6 of the chapter before us. It is something like lighting a candle in a lantern, that the light of it may shine out through the glass; and what the Apostle Paul could say was that the light shone out as clear and pure as God had caused it to shine in. The treasure was in an

earthen vessel, and the only way for the light of the lamp to be seen was by the pitcher being broken. Paul did not mind the vessel being knocked about and hardly pressed, so that the light shone out all the more. In 2 Corinthians i. 8 we read that he had been “*pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life*”; but what of that? He had the sentence of death already in himself; it was realised already in his mind, and its coming outwardly upon him only made him more conscious of it. He could fully say, as in this chapter, “*Death worketh*

in us." Hence Paul as a mere man had ceased to exist. He was a vessel. For the Corinthians it was the power of life in Christ which worked in him. Their gain was in all his trouble, as he says, "*but life in you.*"

In verse 10 of this chapter he says, "*Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus.*" This is practically and continually reckoning myself dead in order that the body may be simply a vessel through which the life of Jesus manifests itself. If the body is anything but a vessel, it is sin. When I walk as one dead with Christ, the flesh is not allowed

a place. A person may even cultivate the flesh, making provision for it (which in Romans xiii. 14 we are warned not to do), but that is bad indeed. He is a bad gardener that cultivates weeds.

In verse 11 he says, “*always delivered unto death.*” Here the circumstances in which Paul was helped him the more completely to realise himself as dead with Christ. God made him realise these things by the very circumstances through which he had to pass, in order that the life of Jesus might be manifested in his mortal body. Thus death wrought in the Apostle; what was merely of

man and natural life disappeared in order that life in Christ, developing itself in him by the power of God, should work in the Corinthians by his means. The flesh must be kept down and not allowed to move or act, and when one is in earnest the Lord passes him through circumstances which help him in it. Paul learnt in an honourable way, for if the circumstances were trying, they came upon him for Christ's sake. With us the Lord has often to send discipline because we have been allowing the flesh.

In verse 15 Paul says : “ *All things are for your sakes.* ” What

a wonderful thing for him to tell them ! How much like his Master here, as also in 2 Timothy ii. 10, when he says : *“ Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.”*

Christ in glory is my righteousness ; Paul had no better, and no one had any other ; and it is Him I am following after, to be with Him and like Him. My life ought to be like a man in a long passage going towards a bright lamp at the other end of it. I do not get the lamp till the end but I have the light of it all the way,

and the nearer I get to it, the more brightly it shines upon me. In that sense I get more of the lamp every step I take. The nearer I get in my spirit to the “*far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*” spoken of in verse 17 of our chapter, the more I can afford to regard the trouble on every side as “*light affliction*” and “*but for a moment.*” All present things become less to me, the more really I am looking at eternal things. Positive persecution I find less hard to bear when it actually comes than it seems when looking forward to it. When it is before me, I look at it with fear and trembling

perhaps, but when I am in it, I look out of it at Christ and find relief in God. And thus we do not faint.