

# CARRYING THE LIGHT OF TRUTH TO DARKENED MINDS

*SERIES: DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY*

by Ron Ritchie

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Whenever I hear or think about the city of Waco, Texas, my heart is filled with the warm and wonderful memories of my days at Baylor University. There in the midst of my spiritual darkness the Lord surrounded me with a group of genuine Christian students who really understood and lived out the spiritual calling of our Lord Jesus Christ: "You are the light of the world." It was in Waco that the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ began to break through to my unbelieving mind (the light of Christ finally came into my heart in Jerusalem some two years later). However, for most of the world, Waco, Texas is now a symbol of a distorted religious darkness. The town has become the home of hundreds of reporters, writers, movie directors, cult researchers, religious students, and tourists who are trying to figure out how a self-appointed evil messiah, deceitfully using the word of God and rock music, was able to have such control over so many men, women, and children. They will try to understand how he justified his sexual immorality, fortress mentality, and enough firepower to hold off a small army all these weeks---all in the name of Jesus.

The events in Waco, Texas are a daily reminder that we still live in a fallen world in which we find ourselves surrounded by men, women, and children who live in deep spiritual darkness and experience daily stress, perplexity, fear, and anger; resulting in a lifestyle of frustrated hopelessness. The apostle Paul faced much the same human condition when he wrote his thankful letter to the spiritual community in the wicked city of Corinth, Greece in 56 AD. In 2 Corinthians 4:1-12 we will discover that Paul continues to encourage his spiritual children out of his own personal experiences to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus regardless of the false teachers, the spiritual darkness, and the trying daily circumstances. He had come to the spiritual realization that God was able to use each and every one of their "clay pots" to bring the light of truth to darkened minds. This can also be our spiritual reality in a post-Christian society because....

## **We are ministers of truth**

2 Corinthians 4:1-4

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Every Christian you have ever met---including yourself---was once living in great darkness with a heart filled with sin and hopelessness. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5; see also verses 1-3; 6-7). It is our new life in Christ Jesus that provides the power necessary to become ministers of the new covenant. The new covenant God offers is this: "I will be your God and you will become my people. I will then write my law on your hearts and give you the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit to keep my law, and then I will forgive and forget all your sins" (see Jeremiah 31:31f). As we draw on the power of Jesus to cope with reality, we are given this ministry of the Spirit, a ministry of righteousness and transparency. The result is that we don't lose heart; we don't get discouraged and allow circumstances to overwhelm us. Our hearts are full of thankfulness because we realize that behind time and space "...God...always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing...." (2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

Paul now explains to his spiritual children in Corinth two reasons why he and his disciples have not become discouraged in the midst of their ministry to the world and the Christian communities. First, he says, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception. Our lives and message have been an open book. We don't need gimmicks or tricks to preach the gospel." This was in direct contrast to the practices of the false teachers in Corinth, who were using cunning traps to get people's attention and loyalty as they mixed the teachings of law and grace. In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 and 13-15 Paul writes: "...I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully...For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds."

The second reason Paul did not become discouraged in his ministry is that he did not distort the word of God; he did not water it down or change it to fit certain needs, as the false teachers apparently were doing. They taught that salvation was earned by works (see Acts 15:1), that marriage between believers and unbelievers was permissible (see 2 Corinthians 6), and that sex outside of marriage was acceptable to God (see 1 Corinthians 6).

Gimmicks and tricks are also being used in our own day to get people's attention. For instance, a certain church that claims to be Christian ran an expensive advertisement in a national magazine giving their history, using the name of Jesus freely, and inviting all to join their church. They claimed the following: They have a low divorce rate; they don't drink, smoke, or use drugs; they are moral, upright, and clean-living; they love to sing, dance, and play games; they are good givers to worthy causes; they are high achievers in sports, politics and entertainment; they have low cancer and heart disease rates and they live longer; their membership has doubled in the last ten years; they are against drugs, homosexuality, abortion, and immorality; and finally, their goal is peace. Yet behind this slick advertisement lie several theological traps, two of the more serious being their refusal to recognize the deity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and their insistence that salvation is accomplished by works.

Paul, on the contrary, drew on the power of the Spirit to function as a minister of the new covenant in the following three ways. The first was "by the manifestation of truth," or setting forth the truth plainly. He told people what God had to say about reality without using any gimmicks, games, or tricks. Rather than tickling their ears he gave them the good news: "You are saved by the grace of God through your faith in Jesus."

The second way Paul says he functioned as a minister of the new covenant was by "commending ourselves to every man's conscience." Paul and his disciples taught and preached messages that made an appeal to the mind, not to the emotions, trusting God for the power to teach about Jesus, who said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

The third way Paul says he ministered was "in the sight of God." Once again, as in chapter 2 verse 17, Paul is referring to his awareness of the presence and power of God. The apostle's life, motives, and actions were transparent before the Lord. He sensed his daily accountability to God for his ministry. He and his disciples lived out the truth of God in the sight of God (and the Corinthians). And in the end they trusted God for the results of their teaching and preaching.

Now Paul turns to his ministry to the non-Christian community, which included the false teachers he had to contend with. First he tells his spiritual children the bad news: "...even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing...the god of this world [age] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Satan blinds the minds of the unbelieving so that they cannot see the reality that they are sinners and need a Savior whose name is Jesus. When they hear the gospel it sounds foolish to their minds. Their veils of pride and self-sufficiency keep them in a world of their own making in which they are led to believe they can handle all that life sends their way.

The way Paul and his disciples were able to prevail against the opposition of the false teachers was to be

ministers of the truth; that is, to teach and live out the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures. They had only one message:

### **We preach Christ Jesus as Lord**

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

This represents the good news for unbelievers! In spite of the resistance of the unbelievers, the veils they wore, and the work of Satan who sought to distort the person of Christ, Paul is saying he and his disciples continued to preach Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus is not merely a prophet, a teacher, and a moral man, but the resurrected Lord of lords and King of kings. And the good news is that Jesus can break through all opposition and penetrate any darkness. The God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness in Genesis 1 is the same one who has shone in our hearts, and so we are empowered to carry that light into our spiritually darkened world. There is hope for unbelievers. No matter how proud and stubborn they are, no matter how many masks they wear, the God who said, "Let there be light," can reach the heart of and give sight to any spiritually blind person when a servant of Jesus shares the gospel with them.

No one knew this truth better than Paul, who, some five years after he wrote this letter, would stand before the Jewish people as a prisoner of Rome on the steps of the temple and tell them of his spiritual conversion thirty years earlier: "...I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, and also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify...And it came about that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And I answered, 'Who art Thou, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.'" (Acts 22:4-8.) The light of Jesus Christ penetrated the deep darkness that Paul (then Saul) was living in and liberated him to become a minister of the new covenant. Later Paul would give that same testimony to King Agrippa and add that the Lord Jesus had told him that he was to be sent to the Jews and the Gentiles "...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18.)

The way Paul and his disciples were able to confront the false teachers and bring the light of truth to darkened minds was to teach and live out the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures. They had only one message: Jesus as Lord. And in addition Paul says...

### **We minister out of earthen vessels**

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you.

Paul begins with the word "but." What he is going to share next is in contrast to what he has just said about God who causes his light to shine in our hearts and the spiritual battle being fought over the hearts and minds of men. The good news is that God can break through the blindness of men and make his light shine in their hearts. Paul himself is "Exhibit A."

So what is Paul referring to when he speaks of having "this treasure?" He is referring directly back to "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (verse 6). The word of truth of the resurrected Jesus who lives in our hearts motivates us to preach the good news of John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him." The Lord Jesus and his word of grace are the treasure Paul is talking about.

Christians have this treasure, Paul says, "in earthen vessels," or jars of clay. We are not the treasure; rather, we are the containers that hold the treasure.

The Corinthians would understand what Paul meant here. In that culture they used clay jars of all shapes and sizes to hold milk, fruit, flour, oil, and so forth. Clay jars, they knew, were made to contain something. As a clay jar, man was designed to contain the living God, who would make man's life purposeful, useful, and fulfilling. Most people in the world, however, are going around empty and despairing.

The reason the treasure is contained in jars of clay is simple: to show that "...the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves." The power that caused light to shine out of darkness at creation is the same power that can break through hardened hearts and minds and make the enemies of our Lord into his servants. That presence and power are expressed in and through weak men and women, clay pots, by means of the Holy Spirit. This has been God's way of fulfilling his purposes down through the ages as he has demonstrated his plan of salvation in the world.

God used Abraham and Sarah when they were old and long past the age of child-bearing to begin the new nation he was forming. Hearing God's announcement that Sarah would have a son, "Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?' Then the LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, "Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.'" (Genesis 18:12-14.) Sarah, the aged clay jar, gave birth to Isaac the following year.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon as he was hiding in a winepress and said to him, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior...Go...and save Israel out of Midian's hand." "How?" asked Gideon, "I'm nobody." That was the answer God was looking for. He just wanted a clay jar. So he said to Gideon, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together." (Judges 6:12f.)

Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar through the power of God and gave thanks to God, saying, "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; for wisdom and power are His." (Daniel 2:20.)

All of these men and women were clay jars. In the midst of their circumstances God powerfully moved through them so that all could see him accomplishing his plan of redemption. In the words of Psalm 62:11:

"Once God has spoken;  
Twice I have heard this:  
That power belongs to God...."

Paul goes on to demonstrate the principle that all power belongs to God by using four illustrations from his own life that will also apply to us. Let's remember that all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, experience difficult circumstances. But the difference is seen in our response. As others see that our power to cope with difficulty is coming from God and not from us, they will also see God's plan of redemption at work in and through our lives.

First Paul says, "...we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed...." Paul's figure of being crushed is drawn from the Roman custom of using the great weight of marble slabs to literally pressure prisoners into talking by placing slabs one after another on their chests until finally they were crushed. Paul uses this figure to talk about the afflictions, pressures, and stressful circumstances he and his disciples faced both physically and emotionally, from outside and from within. For example, we have only to look at chapter 11 of this letter to see the troubles Paul experienced: "...three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the

deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles; dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness...I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food...Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches." The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian when facing trials is that for the Christian power is available from within to hold up under the pressure, and that power is Christ himself. If the Christian chooses to rely on Christ, he will not be crushed!

Secondly, the apostle says, "We are perplexed, but not despairing. We are at our wit's end, without emotional resources; we don't know what is going on or how to proceed." Perplexity is not sin. Paul and his brothers and sisters experienced that feeling many times--in Troas, Philippi, Athens, Corinth, and Roman prisons. One time, for example, the Galatians had received Paul "as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself" (Galatians 4:14) and received Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Then some false teachers came among them and they began to fall into legalism by placing themselves under the law of Moses again. Paul challenged them with the truth of the word of God, and they began to treat him as their enemy. Finally he had to say to them, "I am perplexed about you" (Galatians 4:20).

J.I. Packer in his book *Knowing God* says that these perplexities are designed...

...to overwhelm us with a sense of our own inadequacy, and to drive us to cling to Him more closely...God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities...to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defence, and a sure refuge and help for the weak, is that God spends so much of His time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find, or to follow, the right road...God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on Him. Therefore he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Himself, to 'wait on the Lord'.

That is why we do not despair; God is the one on whom we have set our hope.

Thirdly Paul says, "...[we are] persecuted, but not forsaken..." Paul and his companions faced persecution many times for their beliefs. In Acts 23:6 Paul, having been arrested for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in the temple area, stood before the high priest and the members of the Jewish Supreme court and said, "I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" And the Pharisees and Sadducees got into such a heated argument over Paul that the Roman commander was afraid he would be torn to pieces and forced him out of the hands of the Jews. "But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." (Acts 23:11.)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis for speaking out against Hitler's regime, wrote in his *Letters from Prison* :,

"I believe that God can and will bring good out of evil...For that purpose he needs men who make the best use of everything. I believe God will give us all the strength we need to resist in all times of distress, but he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone...."

Fourthly Paul says, "...[we are] struck down, but not destroyed..." Many times Paul suffered the trauma of being suddenly struck down--just as if he had a sudden and unexpected blow to the head. On Paul's first missionary journey he and Barnabas were preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Asian cities of Antioch and Iconium; then they moved on to Lystra. "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city." (Acts 14:19-20.)

All humanity is formed out of the dust. We are all jars of clay, and as such we face afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, and trauma physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When we become Christians we are not suddenly lifted above the normal (and abnormal) circumstances of life. We are the same jars of clay, only now we contain the treasure of the life and power of the resurrected Christ within us! Therefore we have strength to cope with all the realities that God brings into our lives. If we choose to allow the Lord to live through us, we are no longer crushed, despairing, abandoned, or destroyed. Instead we are now able to see how God uses all these circumstances to his honor and glory, to bring us to spiritual reliance on him and into spiritual maturity.

Paul shares with the Corinthians the spiritual reality that God is at work in and through our "clay pots" to call out of every nation a people for himself. He shows us two ways this is happening. First he says, "...[we are] always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." When Jesus the perfect Lamb of God died on the cross, all the sins of humanity were placed upon him: all the pride, self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-assertiveness of man. He then physically died; that is, his flesh died. Now, according to Romans 6, all who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior are spiritually identified with his death. The old nature, though still able to influence us, no longer has any power over us. We are no longer slaves to our flesh. We have the power to choose to die to the "lust of the flesh" (the lust for power), the "lust of the eyes" (the lust for possession), and the "boastful pride of life" (the lust for position) (see 1 John 2:16). We are new creatures in Christ: "You are not your own...you have been bought with a price." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20.) So as servants of Christ we can choose to take up our cross daily and choose to die to our "rights" and to our feelings. As servants of the new covenant and as jars of clay we are to choose to allow the life of Jesus to be seen in our words and our actions, regardless of the outward circumstances, and the result will be life out of death. People will see that we have bodies of clay just like they do, but something about us is different. We may look like we did before we became Christians, but when people have been with us they will say, "I think I've been with Jesus."

"For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." Paul now moves from the Christian's choosing to walk in the Spirit as opposed to the flesh in order that Christ's life be seen in him, to his realization at times that his life is being used by God without his consent. This is the second way God is calling out a people for himself through our clay pots. Notice the word "constantly." This is a pattern for life. This was clearly seen in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 where Paul was placed by God in a deadly situation in order that he would learn to no longer trust in himself but in God who raises the dead.

"So death works in us, but life in you." Because of the willingness of Paul and his disciples to die to the cry of the flesh and minister by the power of the Spirit in Corinth, many in that wicked and spiritually blind city came to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

To quote J.I. Packer again in *Knowing God* :

"Through tribulations of pain and loss for Jesus' sake we enter into a thousand little deaths day by day, and through the ministry of the Spirit we rise out of those little deaths into constantly recurring experiences of our risen life with Christ."

Jesus Christ is alive and wants to extend mercy to everyone who is willing to place their faith in him as Lord and Savior. Once we become children of God our hearts are filled with encouragement as we move out into a spiritually darkened world, empowered by God as ministers of the new covenant with the light of the gospel that can penetrate spiritually darkened minds. God did enlighten Paul's mind, your mind, and mine, so we have great hope that he can bring the light of truth about Jesus into the minds of all those around us among our families, friends, and neighbors. God has placed his treasure, Jesus and his word, into our clay pots; and as our Lord he may place us into all kinds of stressful, confusing, hurtful, and traumatic circumstances so that the unbelieving world will see that the power to not be crushed, fall into despair, feel forsaken, or be destroyed comes from God and not from ourselves. But it is in all these trying circumstances that death is at work in us so that eternal life can be at work in the spiritually blind all around us.

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Ron Ritchie  
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