

God doesn't want us to be strong - treasure in clay jars

In 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 Paul describes a principle which is found throughout the Bible - God puts his treasure in clay jars so that its brightness is more clearly seen!

Clay jars, these days, are often used because they are tasteful or decorative. In Paul's day they were just useful, mundane. God uses people who are ordinary, just like other folks, to achieve his purposes. In fact he seems to go out of his way to choose the most unlikely heroes! An octogenarian couple would not seem the obvious starting point for a family that would bless the whole earth, neither would a fanatical Jew who hated Christians be for us the obvious choice for the one to take the gospel to the Gentiles! God thinks differently from us.

Lets look at Gideon as a prime example of God's ideas on recruitment. We find him first in Judges 6 where we find him hiding from the oppressing Midianites. God's messenger tells him (v14) that he is being recruited to deliver Israel from these oppressors, to which Gideon answers that this cannot possibly be the case since "my clan is the weakest in Manasseh (only half a tribe!), and I am the least in my family"

The Lord answered, "Oh bother, I didn't know that! I've gone and chosen the least member of the weakest family of the least important tribe - Manasseh isn't even a whole tribe. What am I going to do? I guess I'll just have to make the most of a bad job". Do you think that's how it was?

God does not 'make the most of a bad job', 'make do'. He doesn't make mistakes or get taken by surprise. God knew that Gideon was the least member of the weakest family of the least important tribe (well, half a tribe). The question is, do you think that the fact that Gideon was the least member of the weakest family of the least important tribe (well, half a tribe) was **the reason** God chose him? That this was part of his unique qualification for the job God had for him?

Gideon had no family connections, no power, no riches, no great courage. He didn't even have much faith - all that stuff with the fleece was not because he trusted God but because he didn't! He wanted proof! But, he was God's choice. God was not making do. He was extremely ordinary but God had a plan for him.

Having chosen his man, God then set about making sure he had the right resources for the job. Gideon mustered his army, no doubt relieved when 32,000 turned up. God wanted to make sure Gideon had the right resources so he said any who were afraid of facing the largest army any of them had seen could go home - 22,000 obliged!

Gideon was probably glad that at least he still had 10,000 (although, whether this would be enough.....) God wanted to make sure Gideon had the right resources so he arranged this little test about how they drank water and the result was another 9,700 went home.

Gideon was probably less than overjoyed that he only had 300 men left. But Gideon with his army of 300 went off to fight the Midianites armed with 300 clay jars, torches and trumpets (part of the provisions for an army of 32,000) and a plan that God had come up with. They crept down and surrounded the Midianite camp in the middle of the night with the torches inside the jars. They broke the jars, blew trumpets and shouted 'for the Lord and for Gideon' The Midianites fled in panic and turned on each other - you can read the story in Judges 7.

They did have the right resources -'I will be with you' (Judges 6:16), 'The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon' (Judges 6:34). The right resources - God himself, his Spirit, his presence.

Why did God do all this? Wouldn't it just have been simpler to find a trained general and send him off to do the job? No, God does things his way for his reasons: read Judges 7:2ff. God was not going to allow

Gideon to boast, to take the glory. God shares his glory with no-one. He was making sure everyone knew it was an extraordinary God working in an ordinary man.

Again and again we see this pattern - God does great things by putting his presence, his Spirit in someone who is otherwise weak and insignificant (and knows it!). You also see the opposite -people who forgot that it was God's presence, God's Spirit that enabled them to do great things and when they forgot, when they started believing it had something to do with them everything went pear-shaped - Joshua, Gideon, Saul, David, Hezekiah...

Gideon and his little army empowered by God are a picture of 2 Cor 4:7 - treasure in jars of clay. Then, of course, there is a picture within the picture - the torches in the clay jars that Gideon and his army used. And when the jars were broken, the light was revealed.

2 Cor 4:7 says we have **this** treasure in jars of clay to show that **this** all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. What is **this** treasure? It is the light shining in our hearts, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ, and that leads to power. What is the **light in our hearts that is also God's power?** - it is God's presence, his Holy Spirit making Jesus real to us. Grace is God's **empowering** presence. This treasure is God's **grace - His presence, the Holy Spirit.**

If this treasure, this light is in a jar how can it be seen? Light shines out, the treasure is revealed when the jar is broken (cf Gideon) through the cracks.

2 Cor 4:8-10 describes Paul's brokenness but look at v11 - the clay jar being broken to reveal the treasure within - the life of Jesus. Paul talks more about this in 2 Cor 12:7-10. Here he gives his testimony of brokenness and weakness leading to strength. God's power, God's very presence being revealed **because** it is contained in something (or someone) weak.

What are the implications of this for us? I asked whether the fact that Gideon was the least member of the weakest family of the least important tribe (well, half a tribe) was **the reason** God chose him? Whether this was part of his unique qualification for the job God had for him? OR whether God made a mistake and ought to have chosen someone better.

Talking to people I see a problem in the church - we think too little of ourselves. By that I mean that we don't appreciate our position in Christ and think that God really is just making do when he says he wants to use us. (Of course there is also the opposite problem which comes from the same misunderstanding about how God uses weak people - when we are successful we think it has something to do with us, but I want to leave that on one side for now)

I think we see that God does put his treasure in jars of clay but do we think this is somehow second best, that he would prefer to put his Spirit in someone more worthy or less ordinary. I think we all know that we are jars of clay and know that God **can** use us. But do we wish we were something better? For him!? Don't we realise that he deliberately chooses jars of clay, ordinary people, because they show up the real value of the treasure - they make a better background against which the treasure can be displayed.

We see that he uses weak people but do we think that it is because the strong ones were all too busy? Or maybe he is just humouring us. We realise that God **can** use us, weak as we are, but do we regret our weakness and wish we were stronger. Do we think that God uses us **despite** our weakness?

This is all back to front. God doesn't want me to be stronger. He wants me to acknowledge my weakness so that he can fill me with **his** strength, with **his** power, with **his** Holy Spirit. His strength is made perfect in weakness. He uses me **because** I am weak not **despite my weakness**. He has seen my strength and power and wasn't impressed!

The implication of this is wonderful. God takes the ordinary and fills it with the extraordinary. This is his first choice not his second best. He puts his Spirit in ordinary people **because they are ordinary** not because there is no-one else. That is what the incarnation was all about (incidentally, look at Isaiah 53:2!) God takes the weak and fills it with strength. He puts his Spirit in weak people **because they are weak**. Why? To show that the splendour, the glory, the power is **his**.

We have a great privilege. God actually wants to use me, God actually wants to use you and not because no-one else is available. He does it so that his glory will be seen.

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