

So we're in a series this month of September in the letter of 2 Corinthians. I think Australians say 2 Corinthians, don't they? Americans say 2 Corinthians, but we say 2 Corinthians, or you say whatever you want.

I say 2 Corinthians. Our subtitle for this series is Everlasting Glory. Do you remember the question last week?

Have you seen his glory? Have you seen his glory? 2 Corinthians is our book.

Speaking of glory, I think 2 Corinthians is an absolute gold stash of glorious verses. Here are some of my favourites. Chapter 1 verse 20, For no matter how many promises God has made, they are yes in Christ.

3 verse 18, And we all who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory.

4 verse 16, Therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Chapter 5 verse 17, Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old is gone, the new is here.

Chapter 10 verse 5, We take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ. Chapter 12 verse 9, But Christ said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. What an epic book.

How about this verse, 2 Corinthians 4 verse 6-7. For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. In my opinion, that is one of the most glorious passages in 2 Corinthians, and that's the passage that we're going to jump into today.

As I was reading this passage this week, I began thinking about clay and glory. Clay and glory and the relationship between these two things.

When Paul talks about jars of clay filled with the glory of God, those two things, clay and glory, I think, are rich biblical themes that we could trace through the story of the whole Bible.

And when Paul mentions them, he's kind of drawing on some of that background. And the letter of 2 Corinthians or 2 Corinthians, I think more than any other letter in the New Testament, holds together these two themes of clay and glory.

And that is coming directly out of Paul's circumstance, the life that he was living when he wrote the letter of 2 Corinthians. I read a commentary this week about 2 Corinthians that was saying, in Galatians, Paul is angry, right?

You know he's angry in Galatians. In Philippians, he's joyful. In 2 Corinthians, he's broken.

When you read the letter of 2 Corinthians, he is in a place of hurt and woundedness and desperation for God. That's the letter of 2 Corinthians.

And in the letter of 2 Corinthians, in the midst of Paul's brokenness, we have the word glory appear more than any other time in all of Paul's letters. 2 Corinthians is a letter of clay and glory.

In fact, the story of humanity is a story of clay and glory. And that's the title of our message this morning, A Story of Clay and Glory. The story of humanity is a story of clay and glory, and it begins in Act 1, Creation.

Our story, meaning humanity's story, begins on the first page of the Bible. Genesis 1, verse 3, God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

So Paul picks up on this in verse 6 of chapter 4, the God who said, Let light shine into darkness, has made his light shine in our hearts. Genesis 1, the beginning of the Bible, portrays our God as the Creator God who speaks things into existence.

He said, let there be light, let there be a vault, let the water be gathered, let there be light in the sky, let the water team, let the land produce life. Then God said, let us make humankind in our image.

Verse 27, God created mankind in his image, in the image of God, he created them male and female, he created them. That's where our story begins. The story of humanity begins with creation in the image of God.

Now, what does that mean? In the image of God.

That's such a massive loaded term that in four and a half thousand years of biblical history since Genesis was written, or however long it's been, lots of people have had different ideas of what the image of God means.

So there's a whole camp of people who think the image of God refers to some kind of attribute that humans have, maybe the capacity for relationship, or maybe the fact that we have a soul, maybe the fact that we can reason.

Interestingly, the type of attribute that people think that the image of God refers to, changes from age to age.

So the Enlightenment, a couple of hundred years ago, when the West was overtaken with this idea that we could think our way into a better world, in that time period, they thought the image of God meant the capacity for reason.

So this idea of what the image of God keeps changing based on what each culture values.

But when we go back to the ancient Near East, to the original context that Genesis was written in, we learned that the phrase image of God referred to one type of person, and that was the king.

The king was the image of God or the gods, meaning the one who reflects the reign of the gods on earth among humanity.

So Genesis 1 opens with the astonishing claim that not just the king is the image of God, every human being, male and female, and that is astonishing in its culture, every human being is the image of God.

It's not something they have, not the capacity for reason. They are the image of God. We are the image of God, the representatives of God's rule on earth.

And so there's a number of scholars who would prefer to translate image of God as a verb, not a noun. So it's not that we are the image of God, but that we image God. We reflect God in the world.

And so Paul picks up this idea in chapter 3, verse 18, when he says that humanity with unveiled face contemplate the Lord's glory. This word contemplate in the Greek means to reflect as a mirror does.

He's picking up on this idea of the image of God, that humankind were made to reflect the glory of God like a mirror and shine that into the world.

Our story of clay and glory begins in Genesis 1 with the image of God being made to reflect God's glory. And then you have the second story of creation, Genesis 2.

It's not a sequel, it's not like part 2, it's kind of like the same creation story but told from a different perspective. I heard someone, a filmmaker, describe the difference between Genesis 1 and 2 like this.

Genesis 1 is like a wide shot of nothing, just blackness. A wide shot and then this booming voice says, let there be light.

And then you cut to Genesis 2 and it's like a macro shot of mud and this hand reaches down into the mud and begins to form humanity. This is Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

In Genesis 2, we read in verse 7 that Yahweh God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.

So Genesis 1 emphasizes that we are spoken into existence to reflect the glory of God. And Genesis 2 emphasizes that we are dust made from the mud of the earth. We could say the clay, formed from clay.

The story of humanity is, from the beginning, a story of clay and glory made in the image of God with glory, but made from the clay of the earth. And Psalm 8 is the Psalm of David, and he celebrates this union of the clay and glory.

He says, Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. You have set your glory in the heavens through the praise of children and infants. You have established a stronghold against your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them? Human beings that you care for them. We're made of dust, of clay, of the stuff of the earth.

You have made them a little lower than the angels, yet crowned them with glory and honor. You made the rulers over the works of your hands.

You put everything under their feet, all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea, all that swims the paths of the sea. Yahweh our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

David is celebrating the glory of God in the heavens and the humans. The glory of God, that the moon and stars, by the way, can you guys over here, can you see the moon or has it moved? It's moved.

As I was walking to church this morning, there's this beautiful moon and the sun was rising here, the moon was here and I had Psalm 8 in my head, that the heavens, what does he say? Yahweh our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

The moon and stars proclaim the glory of God and human beings proclaim the glory of God. We are clay and glory united together. That's where the story begins.

So St. Irenaeus, who was the Bishop of Smyrna in Turkey in the second century said this in Latin, Gloria de vivens homo, which means the glory of God is a human fully alive. The story of humanity is from the beginning, a story of clay and glory.

I was thinking about this idea a few months ago when we were in, my wife and I, in Florence, in Italy, and we got to see the David, as in this guy. Sorry, that will land there, the one before. This guy from our sermon series, Kings and Characters.

And honestly, if you've got to see the David, one of the most incredible pieces of art that human beings have ever made, certainly in our seven weeks across Europe, just incredible. Next slide.

Had this profound experience of standing in Florence in the museum, and there's like 300 people in this gallery, and we're just marvelling at the David. It's just like incredible. The glory of humanity.

And then someone steps on your toe, and then someone barges you, and then someone's swearing at their kids over here, and then someone kind of smells a little bit over there.

There's 300 people marvelling at the glory of humanity, lifting our eyes, and then we look around us, and we think, oh, are we really that glorious? This contrast was so clear. You know why the statue of David is so glorious?

It's 17 foot tall and made of marble. Most of, every one of the human beings in this room is, on average, less than 6 feet tall and made of clay. The story of the Bible is, from the beginning, a story of clay and glory.

But you and I know that those two things are not the world that we live in now. After Genesis 1 and 2 comes what? Genesis 3, which brings us to Act 2 of the story.

Separation. The big heading on Genesis 3 in your Bible is probably the fall or the fall of man.

You know the story, if you're familiar with the book of Genesis, Adam and Eve made in the image of God to reflect God's glory, to image God, there they are in the Garden of Eden when this unexplained serpent appears in the Garden and says, did God

really say you can't eat the fruit? And they say, well, it looks pretty pleasing to the eye, desirable for gaining wisdom, so they eat it. And then their eyes are opened, the fall of man. Genesis chapter 3.

Now, this language of the fall is, I think, really helpful when you consider the glory of humanity, that we were made to reflect the glory of the God who made all the heavens.

And now, when you see the story of Genesis 3 play out, there is no glory in Adam and Eve hiding naked in the bushes pointing fingers at each other. The story very quickly moves into a very not glorious place.

When you go to Genesis 4, you see the story of a jealous man murdering his own brother because God looked on his offering with more favour than his own. Humanity were created to reflect the glory of God, but we have fallen from that glory.

This language of the fall is helpful, I think, but when it comes to the sense in which we are made of clay, fall is confusing language because when you read Genesis 1 and 2, we were never infinite. We were never totally independent.

We had to eat food. Remember, we looked at that a few weeks ago. We were vulnerable and finite creatures by creation, and so we have not fallen from a state of independent perfection to dependence.

We were always clay. The difference is now we have been separated from God. The theologian and philosopher Peter Vann in Wagen argues that this language of maybe rupture is better language than fall.

We could say separation, because in sin we have fallen from glory, but in another way we have been separated from the life of God, from each other and from the world.

And so when you go Genesis 3, 4, 5, 6, up to Genesis 11, you see the story of violence and greed and wickedness and abuse and jealousy expanding and expanding and expanding. This is the story of clay and glory.

Human beings have fallen from glory, and now they are like, Paul would say, jars of clay, broken and dropped and shattered. Are we describing a garden 4,000 years ago or the daily news cycle in 2025?

This week, a political assassination in America, a crisis of disinformation, an epidemic of loneliness, brokenness in this world.

We were created as clay and glory, but now glory is the furthest thing from the truth about human beings, which brings us to act three of the story of clay and glory, restoration.

How is God going to restore what is broken in the world, to reconcile what has been separated, to redeem what is lost? John's Gospel opens with this kind of mirror reflection on Genesis 1.

John 1 verse 1, John says, in the beginning, we just hear Genesis, in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him, all things were made.

Without him, nothing was made that has been made. Now, at this point in John's Gospel, he's not really saying anything that we didn't already know. We know that God created everything with a word.

We know that all that has been made was made by God. But then you come to verse 14, and this is truly something new. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth. This is new. This is truly unique in the history of the world, that the word that created the cosmos takes on flesh.

The Creator is cast in clay. The Son of God is born to us under the Son. And John says we have seen his glory.

We have seen the glory of God displayed in the face of Christ.

Now, when you read the Gospels, especially the first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, I think one of the great moments that Jesus' glory is most visible is the story they call the Transfiguration.

So, Jesus invites Peter, James and John to go up a mountain. And while he's on the top of the mountain, Jesus is transfigured before them. His clothes become white and his face is shining.

It's an image of glory. And John, who wrote the Gospel of John, was one of the three people who was there on the mountain. We have seen his glory.

John says, the glory of the son. But you know, every time the Transfiguration is mentioned in the first three Gospels, do you know what story comes immediately before it?

This one, in Mark 8, verse 31, Jesus then began to teach the disciples, the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.

This contrast between glory on the mountain and Jesus' suffering and death is so clear in the Gospels.

When Jesus says the son of man must suffer many things, he's kind of quoting in shorthand what is fleshed out in the prophets, especially Isaiah chapter 53 and 52. God says through the prophet, see my servant will act wisely.

He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted, glorified, that's Jesus, glorified. Just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain, like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering and yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him

and by his wounds we are healed. John says we have seen his glory and that is the glory. Have you seen his glory? That glory.

The glory of God displayed in the face of Christ is most clearly seen, most magnified when Jesus was hanging on the cross being crucified for the sin of the world.

And so the Gospels hold this insane tension that the glory of God is most visible in the suffering and weakness and death of Jesus. That it was on the cross that the Son of Man was glorified.

So Jesus says in John 12, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. And we think transfiguration, ascension, like heaven opening in the angels, the choir of angels singing like at Jesus' birth. No, not quite.

Very truly, I tell you, Jesus says, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. That was Jesus himself that he was talking about.

That as his life was broken and died on the cross, glory came out. Life came out. Jesus in his life was clay and glory, brought back together again.

But on the cross, if Jesus is a gyre of clay, the cross was the shattering of the clay all over the ground. And as the seed of Jesus' life was sown, it brought resurrection to all the people of God. In Jesus' suffering, we see most clearly his glory.

A story of clay and glory culminates in the cross as Jesus died. The glory of God is displayed in the face of Christ. And that light, the light of God's glory, that is the one that shines on our face and brings us to life.

And so Paul says in verse 7, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Just like Jesus, who died in brokenness, glory came out, that light shines in our hearts, the glory of God contained in a jar of clay.

Paul goes on to say, we are hard pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned, struck down but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. So, do you feel hard pressed? Do you feel crushed?

Do you feel in despair? Do you feel persecuted? Do you carry death in your body?

Paul says the glory of God is held in that place. God puts his glory in jars of clay that in our brokenness, God's glory shines through. In our place of weakness, his power is most evident.

Have you heard of Kintsugi? Kintsugi, I don't know how to pronounce. The Japanese art form that looks like this.

This ancient Japanese art form where they would take broken pottery, worthless, it's shattered, good for nothing, can't hold anything. And these master crafts people would repair the pottery again.

But rather than trying to pretend that it was never broken, trying to mask over the cracks, they would fill the cracks with gold lacquer in order to create something more beautiful than before, stronger than before.

And so this image of brokenness being made new again and filled with glory, that's what God does to us.

That when we are broken, separated from Him, feeling weakness like a shattered jar of clay on the ground, God in His mercy brings us together again. But He doesn't cover over our scars as though they never happened.

He pours His glory in the cracks of our heart and life to shine through us to the world. He makes something more beautiful out of us in our weakness and brokenness. And so, this next image, this series of 2 Corinthians, this has been our image.

Strictly speaking, that's not Kintsugi, but it's inspired by this image of the jar of clay shattered by sin and separation from God, but in the mercy of God, brought together again and mended to hold the glory of God.

Every one of us in this room that has faith in Christ, that's us, a jar of clay that contains the glory of God. This treasure God holds in jars of clay in order that we would never think that we are so great, that we're such a great jar.

It's the glory inside the jar that God is so pleased and so gracious to shine through our brokenness.

And so Paul says, Therefore, in other words, in view of everything that he's just said, we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. And so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

And so we look forward to Act 4 of the story of Clay & Glory, glorification. Don't worry, we're not talking about this point. This is the end of the message.

We live in that time period between Act 3 and Act 4. We live post-restoration. We live post the death of Jesus and his resurrection, the mending of our broken jar of clay to hold the glory of God, but we await the future glorification.

We know how the story ends, don't we? We've read the last page of the Bible. We know Christ comes back.

We know that he will wipe every tear from our eyes. We know that he will make all things new, and what is broken will be fully restored to hold his glory. But in the meantime, we live between Act 3 and Act 4.

We live holding this treasure of the glory of God in jars of clay and looking forward to the glorification of all things that will come at the end of the age when Christ returns. And so Paul says, let me read it one more time as we finish.

Therefore, we don't lose heart. Even though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we're being renewed day by day.

Because these light and momentary troubles that we go through, they are achieving in us and for us a glory that is eternal, that far outweighs the trouble.

And so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, not on what is around us, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal. The story of humanity is a story of clay and glory.

In the beginning, perfectly integrated, but in the fall, in the separation of sin, clay and glory are the furthest thing from each other. But in Christ, His mercy restores us again and He pours His glory in us. His power is made perfect through us.

So do you feel crushed? Do you feel in despair? Do you feel persecuted?

Do you feel battered down by the brokenness of this world? I promise you, you are a jar that contains the glory of God and His power is made perfect in your weakness. So let's pray and then worship our gracious God.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the Word made flesh, that you left your home in heaven to become one of us. We thank you that while you were sinlessly perfect, you were also a man of sorrows and acquainted with our grief.

We thank you that you suffered many things and you died in our place. You died for our sins and rose again, Lord, and you showed us your glory revealed in the face of Christ crucified.

We thank you now that because our sin has been separated from us as far as the east is from the west, we can be reconciled back to you, Father. We thank you for your grace that you mend us broken jars of clay.

You put us back together, Lord, you make us whole again and you choose to store your glory in us. So I pray for all of us, for my brothers and sisters who are feeling crushed and worn down and broken.

Lord, would your power be perfected in our weakness? Would you pour your glory in us? Help us not to lose heart, but to trust you.

Let me finish by reading this blessing from Numbers, chapter 6. Yahweh bless you and keep you. Yahweh make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.

Yahweh turn His face towards you and give you peace