



PART 2

PAUL IN CORINTH: LEADERSHIP UNDER FIRE

Chapter Eight

A LEADER MADE OF CLAY

It was, quite frankly, a matter of constant amazement to Paul himself that he was ever called to leadership to begin with. He told Timothy,

1 Timothy 1:12-13 (NASB)

¹²“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service,

¹³even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief.”

If the truth were told, he had to agree with his accusers’ claims. In effect, he acknowledged that they were exactly right on this count. Everything they said about his human weaknesses was true. He wasn’t attractive. He wasn’t anything special.

But after all, he reminded the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 4:5 (NASB)

⁵“For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.”

In other words, it wasn’t about *Paul* in the first place. He was only a bondservant and a messenger whose role was to proclaim the grandeur, the majesty, and the wonder of the new covenant message—“the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (v. 6).

2 Corinthians 4:6 (NASB)

⁶“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.**”

Paul freely admitted that in his case, the message was packaged in a humble, frail, imperfect, common container. Remember the imagery he employed in **2 Corinthians 2**. He was a censer—



a vessel to hold the gospel incense. He was merely an instrument through which God “diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place” (2:14).

2 Corinthians 2:14 (NASB)

¹⁴“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.”

And what a humble vessel he was! Not a fancy, engraved censer made of precious metals and inlaid with fine jewels, but an average, everyday clay pot.

That is precisely what he said in **4:7**: “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” An earthenware jar. A terra-cotta container.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NASB)

⁷“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”

The imagery is drawn from a familiar Old Testament passage in Jeremiah 18, where God is portrayed as a sovereign Potter, making and remaking His creatures into vessels fit for whatever use He chooses. Jeremiah wrote:

Jeremiah 18:3-6 (NASB)

³“Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something on the wheel.

⁴But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me saying,

⁶“Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter *does*?” declares the LORD. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.”

Paul borrowed the same familiar imagery in **Romans 9:21 NASB**: “Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” The clay represents fallen humanity—base, dirty, messy, and without any inherent virtue or excellence of its own. As the divine Potter, God sovereignly molds different vessels “from the same lump” for whatever use He sees fit. Their usefulness is derived from the work of the Potter, certainly not owing to any quality in the clay.

Even the finished clay pots have no virtue or power of their own. They are simply instruments in the Potter’s hands, fashioned by Him according to His own good pleasure. Isaiah wrote,

Isaiah 45:9 (NASB)

⁹“Woe to *the one* who quarrels with his Maker— An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’ Or the thing you are making *say*, ‘He has no hands’?”



So Paul didn't deny his status as a lowly jar of clay; he admitted it. That was no reason to reject him, though. In fact, his lowly estate as a clay vessel was one of the credentials of his apostleship. Thus he once again turned the tables on his accusers.

All leaders are at best clay pots. Some may be better-looking pots than others. But no true leader can boast of having attained his position merely because of superior talents, physical attributes, communication skills, or whatever. If God did not use homely, ordinary clay pots, there wouldn't be any spiritual leaders at all, because there aren't any people who aren't beset with blemishes and human weaknesses.

The greatest of all leaders in Scripture were fundamentally flawed. Abraham gave in to his fears and shamefully lied ([Genesis 12:13](#); [Genesis 20:2](#)).

[Genesis 12:13 \(NASB\)](#)

¹³“Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.”

[Genesis 20:2 \(NASB\)](#)

²“Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.”

Moses freely acknowledged that he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue” ([Exodus 4:10](#)).

[Exodus 4:10 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁰“Then Moses said to the LORD, “Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

He also had repeated problems with a fiery temper ([Exodus 2:11–12](#); [Numbers 20:11–12](#)).

[Exodus 2:11-12 \(NASB\)](#)

¹¹“Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren.

¹²So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one *around*, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

[Numbers 20:11-12 \(NASB\)](#)

¹¹“Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

¹²But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

David committed adultery and murder ([2 Samuel 11](#)).

Elijah succumbed to fear and depression ([1 Kings 19:3–10](#)).

[1 Kings 19:3-10 \(NASB\)](#)

³“And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.



⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers."

⁵ He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat."

⁶ Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake *baked on* hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again.

⁷ The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you."

⁸ So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

⁹ Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD *came* to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

¹⁰ He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

Isaiah confessed that he had a dirty mouth ([Isaiah 6:5](#)).

[Isaiah 6:5 \(NASB\)](#)

⁵ "Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

Jonah tried to flee his prophetic commission because he hated the people to whom God called him to minister ([Jonah 4:1-3](#)).

[Jonah 4:1-3 \(NASB\)](#)

¹ "But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

² He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."

³ "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."