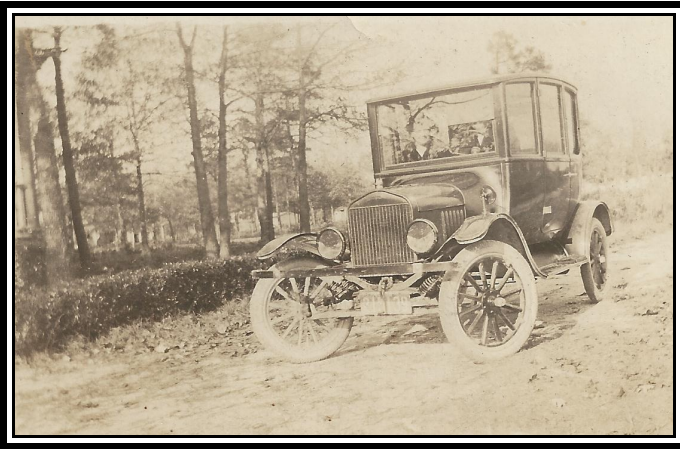




Author's Great Grandpa, Rev. Rowland Williams, carrying the Gospel in Northfield, NJ with his Model T Ford Car.

Carrying the Gospel

~ 2 Corinthians 4:3-18

"For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The Hymn writer writes, "Looking in the face of Jesus, O what words I hear him say, happy place so dear, so precious, may it find me there each

day." The glory of God is most clearly seen as we look into the face of Jesus. We do say a great deal with our faces. We show joy in our faces, we show anxiety in our faces, we show grief in our faces, we show anger in our faces, we show emptiness in our faces, we show delight in our faces, we show love in our faces, we show understanding in our faces. I have discovered more from the human face than from any other earthly source of discovery.

We actually connect with one another more by our faces than by any other manner. It has often been said that the most difficult counseling client is the one who looks down; yet, perhaps the most difficult counseling client is the one who looks away. While the one is discouraged, the other is likely resistant and even hostile. So, they look away.

We have a God who by Jesus Christ will look us in the face; we have come close to the Gospel when we can look him in the face. When we do, the very glow of understanding and the softness of caring seen upon that face will shine as a light within our own hearts and we will return the look. Jesus is the face of God. The glory of God is seen by looking in the face of Jesus.

It is in the face of Jesus that we see the heart of God. "There is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the *man* Jesus Christ." "No man has seen God at any time," but when God wanted to send us good news, he did so with a human face. God first sent the gospel in the human body of Christ, so that later, it could be carried by our human bodies.

This gospel comes in a very ordinary container. The gospel is a precious treasure. Peter reminded us that, "We are not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, but by the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." Though this gospel is a treasure beyond price, God has seen fit to make you and me containers for it. "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). We often complain about the container. The container gets blood clots, and arthritis, and cancer, and heart disease; it breaks, it suffers, it wears out. Why couldn't God have made a better container?

It is because God wants us to look beyond the container to see something of himself. He wants us to see a greater power. When I pray for people in the hospital, I never fail to pray for the caregivers, because I believe they do God's good work regardless of the outcome. Their caring is the greater work. It will be there long after there is no fix to the clay vessel. That is the real wonder of modern hospitals --they are full of people who care. The power of God is seen in their caring --the healing is only temporary; but it is the power of God that drives ordinary human beings to want to relieve suffering in others --that is a tremendous power. Paul said, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God." The power of God was seen in the "healing words of Jesus."

Marie Winters was in the Arnot Ogdon Hospital; she wasn't going to live much longer. From the window of her 3rd story room I looked down on the street below to see the snow falling fast and furious in the glow of the street lights. Marie said, "Go home, Ken. Get out of here before you can't." At that moment, nurse, Bobbie Jo Taylor popped in the door and said, "She's right Ken --go home, I'll be here all night." Marie died by morning --but, the words of a young nurse, became the words of God to live on forever, "I'll be here all night."

All of us are made out of a hunk of dirt. We are all earthen vessels. The gospel does not come in a Rolls Royce. Because of this, we need to make allowances for one another. While we're not Rolls Royces, what we are is quite wonderful. God put his hands to a shovel of dirt and he came up with the most wonderful thing in the world. "From dust thou are, to dust thou shalt return." Just a shovel of dirt and God makes a woman, a man, a girl, a boy.

The container for the gospel is just an earthen vessel, subject to breakage, wear and tear, of little value by itself, and sometimes not that good to look at. But, look what happens when God puts his hand upon it. You can get a Mother Teresa.

These vessels are engaged in a conflict as they carry the gospel. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8,9). It has never been easy to carry the gospel. It has never been easy to do God's good work in the world. Often times it's like being a pony express rider, trying to carry a message to humankind down a bandit ridden trail. "It's not an easy road we're traveling to heaven; many are the thorns on the way." Ephesians 6, among other places, cautions us that there is a conflict. The Christian life is described there as a battle. Paul encouraged young Timothy to be a "good soldier" of Jesus Christ. The last words of the Apostle Paul were "I have fought a good fight." These are all words of conflict. To make it more difficult for us, it is a conflict, in which, we are forbidden to be contentious. We are to fight the battle with love and kindness.

Now, in this conflict we are "troubled on every side." These Greek words portray a situation in which there seems to be *no way out* --things look very bad --even impossible. It has to do with an army totally hemmed in, and there is no way out. "We are hemmed in on every side, yet not distressed." That is exactly what the beginning of the pandemic looked like to me. Then, Gabrielle said, "Let's live stream, Grappa " (Let's use the invisible). And we started to move again with our "junkie" 1 megabyte-per-second up-load speed.

So, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a route of escape does appear.

The gospel contained in these earthen vessels is always accomplishing the impossible. So, we are "troubled, but not distressed;" "perplexed, but not in despair;" "persecuted, but not forsaken;" "we are cast down, but not destroyed." Yet, we are often troubled, perplexed, persecuted, and cast down. In life, we move from one impossible situation to another.

There is the conflict of life itself. Just trying to live, trying to survive, to feed our families and keep a roof over our heads --one that does not leak! Just trying to fill in all the forms, keep up on all the fees, taxes, insurance, tariffs and tolls can be a complex thing. However, beyond that, for the Christian, there is the additional struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of God. Paul knew it, Christ knew it, and every Christian since knows it. There is the conflict, which I think for the Christian, is more internal than external. There is the conflict; in the words of Christ, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." There is the conflict, but there is also the consolation.

There is the container for the gospel, there is the conflict of the gospel, and finally there is the conclusion --the successful conclusion of the gospel. The conflict will take its toll on the old earthen vessel. However much you try, you cannot escape the conflict if you are a Christian. It must, then, follow that it will wear you down; it will cost you. "Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:10,11). True concern causes true anxiety; true anxiety always comes with a physical as well as an emotional price-tag.

But, look how this works, 2 Corinthians 4:12, "So death is at work in us, but life in you." We are to be spent in order to bring life to others. That is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his brother." This is a principle against which we all rebel. The conflict has a cost; it takes a toll. Yet, by it we help others on their way to Christ.

I think, down deep, we would all like to get along with everyone else in the world. I think we would all like to have no enemies; that certainly would be my own preference. Yet, sooner or later, we all discover that some people just will not like us. Not that we blame them, but none of us like death working in us. On the other hand, I always go back to the fact that Gloria likes me --well, to be truthful, sometimes she doesn't even like me.

None of us like death working in us; however, Jesus said, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and *die*, it abides alone: but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit" (John 12:24). Now then, it doesn't really die, it only dies to itself. The corn seed falls into the ground; it is split open by the water and the abrasive action of the elements upon it; it grows, then, into a new stalk of corn. It dies to what it was and gives life to another. Through that process comes new kernels --many more new kernels. Life is multiplied, life is enriched as it is given for Christ. Jesus said, "Whoever will save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the gospel will save it."

Part of bringing others to Christ is to be willing to die to self and selfishness; it is a willingness to be that kernel. In any conflict there are things to be lost. This is what Jesus did. Jesus gave up His life in order to “take it up” again.

It was Amy Johnson Flint, stricken with arthritis who wrote, "He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater --He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again." I didn't know Amy Johnson Flint, but I have known Joe Winters, and Dottie Kuyper, and Tom Hart. I have seen the power of God as it drives bodies stricken with arthritic pain. None of them turned into bitter people; Why? "When the woes of life o'er take me, hopes deceive and fears annoy, never shall the cross forsake me: Lo! it glows with peace and joy." "When the sun of bliss is beaming light and love upon my way, from the cross the radiance streaming adds more luster to the day." "Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified; Peace is there that knows no measure, Joys that thru all time abide."

For everyone of us who has received new life in Christ, there is someone else who did a lot of dying that we might live. It takes more than a dynamic evangelist. For me, it took my mother, it took a Mr. Sanders, it took an aunt Ruth, it took an Orey and Martha Crippen, it took a Glen and Florence Dewey. It took a Gloria --the most incredible person I have every know. And I could go on.

They were all hunks of dirt, who wanted to carry a treasure, and they carried it to me. So, the story ends at verse 16 "So we do not lose heart. Even though the outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). We see the treasure, not the clay vessel. Want to see beyond this pandemic? Then, "Look into the face of Jesus." There is life on the other side of every cross.

The only part that dies is the outer, temporary, material part. Do not miss the wonder of Christ behind it all. After all, that is the point, "so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:11). Look for the gospel within these **clay vessels**. So that in our weakness, people may see His strength. Don't you see? People are doing kind things to help others get through things. People do sacrifice to keep other people safe. It may be that the most Christian phrase to come out of our recent pandemic will be, "Not given' up Mom for money." Something I heard a daughter say about her Mom, to someone who wanted her to "take a short-cut" through the pandemic. Once you get that --everything else will fall in place. You can make everything else work --but, make it work around the phrase "Not given up Mom for money." --Or, "I'll be here all night."

When you look at each other, look for the gospel; and ignore the rest.