

VI. Jars of Clay

November 18/19/20, 2014

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Aim: To accept that our weakness is the means by which God works to further His gospel; and that our struggles are preparing us for God's incomparable glory.

A. The Gospel Paul Expounds (2 Corinthians 4:1-6)

The bitter conflict in Corinth between Paul and his opponents now comes into clearer focus. Now we discover the nature of the criticisms they have made against him. In his defense, Paul claims to have executed his ministry with utmost care. He has in no way altered the Christian message (to make it say what he wants it to say) or manipulated his hearers (to make them do what he wants them to do). He, the faithful messenger of God, has accurately passed on the word of God while respecting the integrity of the hearers.

1. Paul's Ministry (4:1-4)

a) *The Truth Is Uplifting (4:1)*

¹Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

'Therefore' points back to Paul's discussion of the new covenant in 3:6-18. Strength to endure trials comes from the unveiled look into the face of Christ made possible under the new covenant. That look was also the source of strength for Paul's new covenant ministry. The apostle used the plural 'we' as a humbler way of referring to himself. By so doing, he softened the personal nature of his defense of himself and his ministry.

What Paul has from God, he pointedly tells the Corinthians, is 'this ministry.' His newly arrived critics, by implication have 'that' ministry – a continuation of the ministry of Moses which issues in condemnation and death (3:7, 9), a covenant which is now 'de-glorified' by the infinitely greater glory of the new covenant which has overtaken it (3:9-11). The ministry he and his companions have is in fact a product of the mercy of God. This shows that Paul regarded preaching the gospel as a great privilege conferred on him by God.

Against the charge of being demoralized and having given up, the apostle writes as 'having' (present tense) 'this ministry' as indicative of his ongoing commitment. The unscheduled visit to Corinth, followed by one letter, then another, with a further visit pending, are all clear evidence that Paul has by no means given up either the ministry or the Corinthians. The truth that held him steady no matter what the opposition or difficulties was that he and his colleagues had received this ministry 'by the mercy of God.'

Paul's call to the ministry was based solely on God's 'mercy.' God's mercy is His withholding of the judgment that sinners deserve, temporarily in the case of the unsaved to give opportunity for repentance and faith, and permanently in the case of the redeemed.

What Paul writes is a reply to as many as five accusations which his opponents in Corinth have leveled against him. His 'we do not lose heart' suggests that his opponents had accused him of having become demoralized and apathetic in the ministry. Had he not quit Corinth then Ephesus? Was there not talk of his depressed state of mind?

Paul's critics imagined that the difficulties and reversals that dogged his ministry had disheartened him, as they would any man. But Paul was energized for ministry. Undoubtedly

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Paul has problems, but while God is changing the characters and conduct of men and women through his ministry, he will not lose heart.

Engkakeō ('lose heart') means to give in to fear, lose courage, or behave like a coward. Despite his sufferings and the savage attacks on him by the false apostles, Paul had not surrendered. His courage came from confident knowledge of the God of glory, whom he had perceived in the face of Jesus Christ.

b) *The Truth Is Uprightly Presented (4:2a)*

²*But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning...*

In verse 2, there are three related disclaimers. The fact that Paul uses the language of commendation again (cp. 3:1) shows that he is very much aware of facing criticism. In saying that he has 'renounced secret and shameful ways' and that he does not 'use deception,' Paul is probably referring to the accusations some were bringing against him at Corinth. He had said he would come to them, but he had not actually arrived. There were in fact very good reasons for this, as he indicates in 1:23-2:4. His non-arrival was however taken by some there as a symptom of his little concern for the truth. They obviously felt that he must have been pursuing some secret agenda all the time he was professing loving concern for them. It is a solemn fact that acceptance of the truthfulness of the gospel is often tied to the known integrity or otherwise of the messengers themselves. This puts a great responsibility on the shoulders of every preacher of the gospel, in fact every witness for Christ.

The claim to have 'renounced secret and shameful ways' likewise indicates that the newcomers were claiming that Paul was guilty of such things. In other words, they were saying that he was a dishonest and devious man. His reply, 'we do not use deception,' refers to their specific charge that he declined the Corinthians' financial support in order to have some subtle bargaining power over them (cp. 12:16).

From the moment he first saw the glory of Christ at his dramatic conversion, Paul certainly 'renounced' his former hidden life of shame. He despised his sin and cried out for deliverance from it (cp. Rom. 7:24). His Christian life was from the outset a life of purity, as he pursued holiness.

The adversative conjunction *alla* ('but') could be translated 'on the contrary,' or 'on the other hand.' It indicates a contrast between Paul and the false apostles at Corinth. The 'things hidden because of shame' could be the very things they were accusing him of. But in reality it was the false apostles, not Paul, who were guilty of them. It was they who had a secret life of shame and who brought a hidden agenda to Corinth.

Aischunē ('shame') describes disgraceful, dishonorable deeds that produce embarrassment and humiliation. Such a dark, hidden, hypocritical lifestyle had characterized Paul before his conversion. *Panourgia* ('craftiness') refers to trickery (Lk. 20:23) and deceit (11:3; Eph. 4:14). Someone who practices *panourgia* was unscrupulous, willing to do anything to achieve his goals. In a plain testimony to their own corruption, the false apostles had accused Paul of being (like they were secretly) a manipulator, of seeking money, power, and influence. None of that, however, was true. Paul was no deceiver; he had no hidden agenda. He was nothing more than what he appeared to be: a bold, fearless preacher of the new covenant gospel message.

Paul naturally embraced forthrightness as his method of ministry. This involved the rejection of all deceit—literally, 'the hidden things of shame,' the kinds of things people do but only under

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cover, and with shame if exposed. Specifically, Paul adds, ‘we refuse to practice cunning.’ This is Machiavellian cunning (cp. 11:3) in which ‘the end justifies the means’ regardless of the means employed.

It was in part because of his plain, clear approach to the ministry that the false teachers attacked Paul. They preferred a subtler, more veiled approach, one more appealing, palatable, and less offensive to unbelievers. Plain preachers like Paul are offensive because they preach the straightforward, unvarnished truth, whether or not it brings shame on them. The false apostles were, in effect, first-century marketing experts. They viewed the gospel as a product and themselves as salesmen. Part of selling the product (the gospel) was veiling its truth and sprucing it up by adding some mystery and magic. By tweaking the message, repackaging it to make it more popular and trendy, they hoped to better appeal to first-century consumers. They would then succeed in making converts (and money). Paul’s straightforward, powerful presentation of the pure unadulterated gospel (cp. Rom. 1:16) frustrated and threatened them. It also exposed their secret lives of shame. It is no wonder, then, that they bitterly opposed Paul.

Opponents of the gospel are often underhand in the way they go about things, deliberately manipulating people and acting shamefully. They may profess to obey God’s Word while at the same time distorting the Scriptures and practicing deception.

c) The Truth Is Openly Proclaimed (4:2b)

...or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Similarly, his ‘nor do we distort the word of God,’ implies an accusation of having added to or diluted the message about Christ. Paul made the counter-charge that they ‘peddled God’s word’ (2:17) and proclaimed another Jesus and a different gospel (11:14). Clearly, this was a battle over true doctrine.

‘Adulterating’ is from *doloō*, a word used in extrabiblical Greek to speak of corrupting gold or wine with inferior ingredients. Paul’s message was the plain, pure, unmixed truth of the gospel. The same could not be said, however, for the false apostles. They were busy adulterating the Word of God for their own purposes. They were con men, cheats, charlatans, and frauds, guilty of the same deception of which they falsely accused Paul. No doubt they accused him of tampering with the truth by not preaching the Mosaic Law. They probably also insisted that Paul’s simplistic message denied the hidden, secret things of God, that therefore he was guilty of failing to preach the whole counsel of God. Sadly, many today level the same charges at those who proclaim the sufficiency of Scripture. The idea that the Bible alone—apart from psychology, mysticism, or supposed supernatural experiences—contains everything needed to live a joyous, fulfilled, God-honoring life is derided as quaintly naive and overly simplistic.

If Judaizing influences were present at Corinth, Paul may also have been accused of distorting the word of God. This is because the Judaizers held that the Gentiles ought to be brought under the Law and receive circumcision as a sign of the covenant just like the Jews, and Paul was opposed to this, as Acts 15:1-2 and his Epistle to the Galatians show us very clearly. They probably accused him therefore of setting aside important requirements of the Old Testament, although of course Paul had good theological reasons for doing this (cp. Gal. 3-4).

The elements in Paul’s gospel which would have caused acute difficulties for Jews, including many Jewish Christians, were those which emphasized that the covenant of God with Israel was

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now fulfilled or ended (3:13; cp. Rom. 10:4). The focus of these assertions which so gravely affected Jews was, of course, Jesus Christ. Presumably the Christian Jews who opposed Paul would have concentrated on the human Jesus as a faithful member of the Jewish people and as one who taught and interpreted the law of Moses. It was not merely a case of one set of theological opinions in conflict with another – Paul’s against the Judaizers. Twenty years earlier Paul would have shared the presuppositions of those who now opposed him. It was the Damascus Road event, the circumstances of which are so strongly embedded in this passage, which radically altered Paul’s way of thinking about Jesus and therefore of Judaism.

Nor did Paul ‘tamper with God’s word.’ He did not falsify it or water it down. Such tampering invariably edit’s God’s Word and exalts the preacher. It is common for the evangelical preacher of today to edit God’s Word: 1) by removing the text from its context, and using it to say whatever the preacher likes; 2) by moralizing the text, so that it is reduced to an ethical maxim that fits any religion; 3) by using the text to promote hobbyhorses; and 4) by dogmatic insistence that the text says things it does not truly say. This homiletical hocus-pocus has subtle roots such as the desire to be clever and popular or synthetically relevant or intellectually respectable or to make the gospel more acceptable. But most often God’s Word gets watered down by the preacher’s laziness. He simply will not do the hard work to engage and preach a text in its context.

As to the generalized accusation of being secretive and devious, and more specifically, his crafty motives for declining their support (v. 2a), he declares that he is ‘setting forth the truth plainly.’ The words, literally, are ‘by the manifestation of the truth,’ the truth, that is, of ‘the word of God.’ He makes no claim to innate goodness or to personal adequacy. Despite his personal problems, which he does not hide, he is living sincerely as a Christian and commends himself as such to the consciences of others. Moreover, he does this in ‘the sight of God.’ Paul has the deep conviction that God witnesses all his motives and actions (1:23), and that everything he has done will be apparent on the day of judgment (5:10).

Giving out the gospel plainly and clearly in all its truth is not undertaken for personal ends, but rather for the glory of God in the salvation of men and women. It is evident, however, from what Paul says here, that he saw it can also be a testimony to the integrity of the person who communicates it. The preacher must be absolutely straight with his hearers. It is the plain truth he must tell. So behind what he is saying is the important principle that message and messenger are mutually vindicating.

When there is an open, clear manifestation of the truth of Scripture, no matter what public scorn it brings, there is the source for spiritual power and impact. But when preachers, ashamed of the gospel, proclaim human wisdom deceitfully in the name of divine truth, their work is impotent. Thus, the faithful preacher’s world is the realm of biblical truth. All people, even those who have not heard the gospel, have an innate (though limited) knowledge of God’s law. The preaching of the gospel activates the ‘conscience,’ which bears witness to the truth of the message even in those who reject it.

Although he says that this commendation is to the conscience, it is also in the sight of God, for Paul recognized that the final arbiter of truth could never be in the human heart but can only be God Himself, for ‘all truth is God’s truth.’

In stark contrast, Paul embrace openness and candor. The fact that he conducted his straight-on ministry ‘in the sight of God’ means that his ultimate concern in everything was God’s approval.

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God was his primary audience; thus Paul preached the undiluted Word of God with bold simplicity and clarity.

d) The Truth Is Often Hidden (4:3-4)

(1) Veiling the Gospel (4:3)

³*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.*

Finally, it appears that they accuse him of obscuring the gospel, doubtless from law-conscious Jews who could not make sense of Paul's Messiah-centered message which treated the Mosaic law as outmoded. In writing 'even if our gospel is veiled,' he is, to a degree, conceding their point against him. Paul knew from bitter experience how few Jews accepted his message. The veiled mind which hindered their apprehension of the glory to which the old covenant pointed (3:14-15; cp. 1:9) also prevented their receiving the apostle's proclamation of its fulfillment in the Son of God.

The truth is set forth plainly, and yet we have to reckon with the fact that it is not always understood. Why does Paul say 'And *even* if our gospel is veiled'? Because it might seem strange to the readers that, with the coming of the New Covenant, there should be any veiling. They might well have thought this to be a condition only of the Old covenant, and not of the New. Paul recognized that this was not so, but that in every age Satan is at work in seeking to blind people to God's truth.

While accepting that for many Jews in particular his gospel message 'is veiled,' Paul by no means agrees that this is due to a content which is defective or diluted. As Calvin put it, 'the blindness of unbelievers in no way detracts from the clearness of the gospel, for the sun is no less resplendent because the blind do not perceive it.'

One of the criticisms the false apostles leveled against Paul was that his evangelistic methodology was defective. His approach was simple and straightforward (cp. 1 Cor. 2:2). His preaching was a plain, bold, direct presentation of sin, repentance, and faith. Because of that, the false apostles accused him of being offensive and ineffective. He was alienating people (cp. 1 Cor. 1:23). He needed a better marketing plan to overcome consumer resistance. That kind of thinking is prevalent in today's church. Contemporary critics argue for a subtler and less offensive approach to presenting the gospel. Preaching sin, repentance, judgment, and hell is out; 'user-friendly' churches are in. Worship services give way to entertainment designed to make nonbelievers feel comfortable and not threatened. The thinking is that they will then be open to considering Christ.

Underlying much of modern evangelism is the heretical idea that anyone can and will respond to the gospel if it is presented in an ingenious enough way. The view sees unbelievers as consumers, for whom the gospel must be cleverly packaged in order to make the sale. For people who argue like this are assuming that Christian preaching is analogous to a marketing exercise. You have your product: the gospel. You have your consumers: the congregation. And the preacher is the salesman. It is his job to overcome consumer resistance and persuade people to buy. According to Paul, there is one very simply but overwhelming reason why that analogy is not a good one. The preacher does not overcome consumer resistance. He cannot. Consumer resistance is far too large for any preacher to overcome. All the preacher does, Paul says, is to expose that resistance in its formidable impenetrability. If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The preacher does not save anybody. He is an instrument whereby

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people who are being saved become aware of the fact. Thus, the issue is not the skill of the one proclaiming the message, the packaging of the message, or the technique used in proclaiming it. The issue is the condition of the hearer.

Paul indicates in Romans 1:21-22, 28 that through sin human thinking became futile, foolish hearts were darkened, and human minds depraved. This is tantamount to saying, as he does here, that there was a veil in operation. We need to remember this today. Not only should the Word be preached, but there needs to be prayer too, because constant and total dependence on God to reveal His truth and to open blinded eyes is quite indispensable.

(2) Blinding the Minds (4:4a)

⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers...

Paul knew firsthand what it was like to be blinded to the truth because he had been in the bonds of darkness before being dazzled by the glory of Christ on the Damascus road.

Behind all counterfeit teachings and ‘gospels’ is the activity of the enemy of souls, Satan. He tries to obscure the true message of the gospel, to place a ‘veil’ over the minds of men and women so that they cannot see or understand the good news.

The ‘unbelieving’ are the same ones described in verse 3 as those who are perishing; the two terms are synonyms. *Aiōn* (‘world’) is better translated ‘age.’ The ‘god of this world’ or age is Satan (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2; Tim. 2:26; 1 Jn. 5:19), who controls the ideologies, opinions, hopes, aims, goals, and viewpoints current in the world (cp. 10:3-5). He is behind the world’s systems of philosophy, psychology, education, sociology, ethics, and economics. But perhaps his greatest influence is in the realm of false religion. Satan, of course, is not a ‘god’ but a created being. He is called a god because his deluded followers serve him as if he were one. Satan is the archetype of all the false gods in all the false religions he has spawned.

‘The god of this age’ is a startling and unique expression, although it may remind us of Christ’s own description of Satan as ‘the prince of this world’ (Jn. 12:31). Why ‘god’? Probably not only because of the power he exercises, but also because worship is directed to him. You do not have to be a Satanist to worship the devil, but simply choose any false object of worship. It is important though that we should not misunderstand this language in such a way as to attribute absolute power, or even power equivalent to God’s power, to Satan. This concept is quite alien to the Bible (cp. Rom. 16:20).

Paul attributes the veiling to the ‘god of this age,’ Satan. The blindness of man to the word of God is due not to any human agency, but to the activity of Satan. The RSV translates ‘world,’ not ‘age,’ suggesting the idea of place, as if the devil were god over the planet earth or the universe. But the original word *aiōn*, (English ‘eon’) really means an era of time, an epoch. The NIV translation ‘age’ has much to be said for it. From the biblical perspective it is the ‘age’ commenced by Adam’s rebellion, not the created world, which is evil. The creation is merely the stage on which the tragedy of man’s sin is enacted.

‘Minds’ translates *noēma*, which refers to the ability to reason or think. Unregenerate people cannot think properly about spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:14) because they have a ‘depraved mind’ (Rom. 1:28; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:8).

Here Paul writes about a blindness of the mind just as in 3:14 he says, ‘their minds were made dull.’ It is much the same thought, for both expressions suggest a lack of response to stimulus,

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from the light or from the truth. It is all too evident that many who see the physical world and have a measure of understanding of it are quite blind to spiritual realities. It is this kind of blindness that Satan has so effectively secured, and the marks of it are to be seen everywhere in human society.

(3) Seeing the Light (4:4b)

...to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

It is specifically the glory of the Lord Jesus, the image of God, that Satan does not want people to understand. The evil one is not particularly concerned when we talk about religion, or even Christianity, but he is disturbed when we proclaim the Lord Jesus and His unique glory as ‘the image of God.’

Christ’s revelation of God is gospel, wonderfully good news, for it shows that God cares for His imperfect world, for men and women in whom His image is so sadly marred as to be at times almost unrecognizable. In this gospel God’s light is beamed out brightly. This is an objective fact which is true whether or not people can actually see it. In the realm of spiritual sight, faulty human reception is no denial of the reality of the divine light of Christ. The privilege of seeing God’s glory revealed in Christ is granted only to those to whom God in His mercy grants spiritual sight.

2. Paul’s Message (4:5-6)

a) *The Person (4:5)*

⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

How did Paul exercise ‘this ministry’? The ‘ministry’ is expressed by preaching. By what did Paul mean by ‘preach’? In his day the word we translate as ‘preach’ was not primarily a religious but a secular word. The verb *keryssein* comes from the noun *keryx*, meaning a ‘herald,’ a person who brought important announcements from a king or emperor to his people, scattered throughout his kingdom. An approximately modern equivalent to the ancient *keryx* is the radio or television news reader who announces the news to the listening world. Like the modern news broadcaster, the ancient ‘herald’ had to possess a good speaking voice and the self-discipline not to embellish or alter the message.

By declaring, ‘We do not preach ourselves,’ Paul distinguished himself from the false apostles, who did, in fact, preach themselves. Paul’s disclaimer was both a denial of the false apostles’ charge and an indictment of them. Instead of promoting his own agenda, Paul proclaimed ‘Christ Jesus as Lord.’ The heart of new covenant preaching is communicating the truth about Jesus Christ. True preaching about Christ includes the truth that He is both Savior and Lord. It’s goal is to get people to understand who Jesus is, why He came, and what He accomplished. God, in His sovereign grace, then uses that truth to bring salvation to the human heart.

What is the content of Paul’s preaching? It may be important that Paul first states that ‘we do not preach ourselves’ and concludes the sentence by saying ‘ourselves as your servants’ (literally, ‘slaves’). This is directed at the new ministers who claim to be superior to Paul (11:5) and whose ministry ‘enslaves’ the Corinthians (11:20). Their preaching, apparently, focused on themselves and had the effect of making the Corinthians serve them. By contrast, the apostle

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preaches ‘Jesus Christ as Lord.’ Paul’s language makes it clear to us that calling on Christ as Lord and confessing Him to be such are central to the gospel.

The antidote to the veil of blindness is lifting up Christ. The phrase ‘Jesus Christ as Lord’ is shorthand for the gospel. First, ‘Jesus’ (i.e., ‘the Lord saves’) the name given to the Son of God at His incarnation, signifies that the Lord’s salvation came when Jesus was born. Second, the title ‘Christ’ (i.e., ‘the Anointed,’ ‘the Messiah’) speaks of His being the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Third, ‘Lord’ declares the fact that the crucified Christ has been exalted by God through the resurrection to the position of lordship in Heaven and that He is the ruler of the world. Thus, when you confess that ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ (cp. Phil. 2:10-11), you at once confess His *incarnation* and his *Messiahship* and His *lordship*, sealed by His glorious resurrection as He now forever reigns.

To reckon himself a slave of Christ was part of Paul’s regular outlook, and in fact it was so integral to his self-image that he mentions it at the beginning of several letters (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). This was true also of other New Testament writers (James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1). It was however something else to confess himself a slave of others. The words, ‘for Christ’s sake,’ are therefore of crucial importance. A man may have a slave. Another man visits him and he wants to honor him and assist him. He therefore makes his slave available to him to care for his needs. This slave belongs to the first man, not the second, but he serves the first by serving the second. So it is with the Christian’s service of others. Those who love Christ and are devoted to serving Him will be self-effacing, not self-exalting. They will also humbly serve God’s people.

b) The Power (4:6)

‘For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Although he uses the first person plural in verse 6, there can be little doubt that he is thinking chiefly about his own conversion, although of course with a realization that God has done a similar work of grace in the hearts of all true believers in Christ. How could Paul explain to his readers what that experience was like? Undoubtedly it was an experience of light, for Christ appeared to him in glorious light and a flood of light shone on his path. But this light was not simply an external phenomenon. It entered into his very heart.

It was the ‘glory of God in the face of Christ’ which above all changed the direction of the life of Saul of Tarsus. Paul knew immediately it was God Himself who in His ‘glory’ had confronted him in the glorified Jesus. Hence, Jesus Christ whose ‘face’ (or ‘person’; Greek *prosōpon*) Paul saw is described as the ‘image’ of God (v. 4). The bright glory Paul saw with his eyes near Damascus is now also said to be internalized in the ‘hearts’ of all who hear and believe the preaching about the glorified Lord.

‘Face’ is a word that arrests the reader’s attention and it may well have two senses, both of them intended by Paul. He was the glory of God quite literally in the face of Christ, for he saw the glorified Christ with his actual physical eyes. ‘Face’ has also come to have a meaning which went beyond the physical countenance. It had come also to mean ‘person.’ The term ‘face’ is even used of God in the Old Testament, when God says that nobody can see his Face (Ex. 33:20). This is tantamount to saying that the revelation He gives of Himself is only partial. Paul saw the face of Christ, not only in a strictly limited physical sense, but also in the sense that he saw Him as a Person, and he saw God revealed in Him. So light came to him, not simply in the

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sense that it shone into his dark rebellious heart, but also that, when this happened, it gave him true knowledge of God, a knowledge which he was then to communicate to others in his preaching of the gospel. So, for him, everything started with that great encounter with Christ, everything went back to that encounter.

To what then could such an experience be compared? In an analogy that fairly takes our breath away, Paul compares it to the first day of creation, when God said, ‘Let there be light!’ What an incredible claim! But conversion really is that, for the new birth is at the same time a new creation. It is our introduction to a new world, a new heaven and earth that will be consummated at the climax of God’s program of redemptive action for this world of His (Rev. 21:1ff.). Paul takes up this new creation theme again later (5:16-18; cp. Gal. 6:15).

Paul was no armchair theorist writing theological abstractions. He knew what it was to be blind and then to see. And more, Paul knew that his experience on the Damascus road was a paradigm of what every believer has quietly experienced in Christ. All believers were blind before they saw. And here’s the driving point: it is nothing less than God’s creational power that does it! The God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ so that the darkness of the primeval world was banished by light, is the one who does it for us. Think of it. The God of creation, who first called light out of darkness, is the only one who has the power to overcome our blindness. And He does it with a word!

At the beginning of the creation, when all was darkness and chaos, ‘God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light’ (Gen. 1:1, 3). God now addresses His gospel word to sinful people whose lives are, metaphorically speaking, darkness and chaos. New birth—or regeneration—is as dramatic and powerful a work as creation itself. It requires as great a power to shine into people’s hearts to give spiritual understanding of Jesus’ identity and work as it did to command light to shine out of darkness at the time of the creation.

Redemption is as much a sovereign work of God as creation; in fact, Paul used the analogy of creation to describe salvation in 2 Corinthians 5:17. The same God who turned on the light physically turns on the light spiritually—and does both without using any evolutionary process. Spiritual darkness envelopes the unredeemed until God shines the light of the gospel in their hearts; He alone can dispel the darkness of sin and ignorance.

The ‘god of this age’ who ‘has blinded the minds of unbelievers’ (v. 4) is, therefore, limited in his power; he is not omnipotent. God has placed in the hands of His people the more powerful instrument of the gospel which can actually overcome this blindness and allow the light of God to break into human hearts. Satan, the petty tyrant, is capable only of removing sight; God actually restores sight, through the gospel, so that the spiritually blind can see.

B. The Weakness Paul Experiences (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

In what he now writes, Paul touches on some of the harsh realities of human existence – suffering and physical decay (4:7-18), death (5:1-9), and judgment (5:10-21). It is interesting to ask why Paul should have raised these matters immediately after the section in which he declared the old covenant to be outmoded, overtaken by the new. For all their words about power, the new ministers in Corinth have nothing to say about suffering, death, and judgment. Ultimately they are concerned with transient and superficial matters. But in the new covenant of righteousness and the Spirit, God meets humans in their suffering, death, and judgment – at their points of deepest need.

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As he penned this epistle, Paul was under furious attack in Corinth. False apostles had infiltrated the church there, assaulting Paul so as to create an environment for purveying legalistic heresy. To gain a hearing for their demonic lies, they first had to destroy Paul's apostolic and spiritual credibility in the eyes of the Corinthian church. To that end, they launched an all-out blitz on the apostle's character and ministry. Their attack was merciless, relentless, and petty. Those hurtful, hateful attacks, moving people's loyalty from divine truth to satanic lies, demanded a response from Paul. He was not interested in defending himself for his own sake but for the sake of the gospel. The false teachers' attacks on him put Paul between a rock and a hard place. If he defended himself against their slander, which he had to do to hold the church to the truth (written and incarnate), he risked looking proud. And, in truth, no one was more acutely aware of his shortcomings than Paul himself.

How then was Paul to extricate himself from this dilemma? How was he to defend himself and the gospel he preached without seeming proud? Rather than deny the false apostles' allegations that he was weak and imperfect, he embraced them. The apostle declared that the priceless truth of the gospel was held in a humble container. In fact, his weaknesses, far from being reasons to reject him, were among this most convincing apostolic credentials. To express this, he used the analogy of a precious treasure kept in a clay pot.

1. Power Through Weakness (4:7)

⁷*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

a) Priceless Treasure

'Bu' introduces a contrast with verse 6, which describes the immense and incalculable glory of the eternal God revealed in the incarnate Christ. The 'treasure' in view here is the same as the 'ministry' in 4:1. Both terms describe the glorious gospel message. The treasure is of incalculable worth (cp. Col. 2:3, 9). That priceless divine treasure is contained in a lowly human container—a humbling perspective every preacher and believer must have. Paul's humble view of himself was at the heart of what made him so usable.

Paul contrasts a priceless jewel with its receptacle, an everyday earthen jar. The jewel, or 'treasure,' is 'the knowledge ... of God in the face of Christ' which God has 'made ... shine in our hearts (v. 6). The earthen jar in which this treasure is contained, the human body, is subject to decay and vulnerable to disease and injury. It is, in ultimate terms, powerless.

The 'treasure' is the illuminating power (described in the preceding verse as 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ') that God provides with the full creation power with which He spoke things into existence. This 'treasure,' this creational, transforming gospel power, has been committed to insignificant, fragile flowers of Christ—men and women who, like Paul, are all clay pots.

b) Pots of Clay

The analogy of the divine Potter is one of the most ancient, for Genesis 2:7 speaks of the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground and the analogy is employed also in a number of other Old Testament passages. In some of these passages, it is the fact that clay vessels are so fragile that they can easily be broken that is in view (Ps. 2:9; Is. 30:14), at other times it is the sovereignty of God the Potter (Is. 64:8; 29:16; 45:9; Jer. 18:1-6), while in yet another it is the cheapness of the

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material (Lam. 4:2). Paul was to use the analogy again soon in writing to the church at Rome (Rom. 9:20-21).

Clay jars were the throwaway containers of the ancient world, so that their life spans were generally a few years at the most. They were used to store and transport water and olive oil and wine and grain and even family treasures. Earthenware jars were an anonymous part of everyday living as they were used for cooking and eating and drinking and storing leftovers. Every domestic archaeological excavation site contains their remains, called ‘ostraca,’ from the Greek word for pottery. No one took note of clay jars any more than we would of a fast-food container. They were simply there for convenience. It was no great tragedy when such vessels were broken. They were cheap and easy to replace. As such, jars of clay provided Paul with a penetrating metaphor for his and his followers’ humanity. As clay jars we are all frail, weak, transitory mortals.

Ostrakinos (‘earthen’) refers to baked clay. The vessels Paul describes here were just common pots: cheap, breakable, easily replaceable, and virtually valueless. Occasionally they were used to hide valuables, such as gold, silver, and jewelry. The pots containing such valuable items would often be buried in the ground. Clay pots were also used to store valuable documents; the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered stored in clay pots in a cave near Qumran. But ‘earthen vessels’ were most frequently used for ignoble, everyday purposes. In ancient times, human waste and garbage were stored and transported in clay pots. Such clay pots had no intrinsic value; their only worth came from the valuables they contained or the service they performed.

Far from disputing the false apostles’ disparaging assessment of him, Paul embraced it and turned it into an affirmation of his authenticity. But like a cheap, fragile, ordinary clay pot used to hide valuable treasure, Paul carried the priceless treasure of the glorious new covenant gospel. God delights in using humble, common people, those who are overlooked by society. He places in such clay pots the incalculable treasure of the gospel.

The theme of weakness runs through Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and is prominent here. It is important to see ourselves as ‘jars of clay’ and not to have exaggerated views of our strength. Even those Christians whom we most admire for their godliness and gifts are just as much jars of clay as we are.

c) Power of God

This is not accidental, but deliberate. The power to lift man out of his powerlessness in the face of suffering, decay, and death does not come from within himself; it comes only from God. By using frail, fallible people, God makes it clear that the power lies not in the human messenger but in the divine message. God’s power transcends the limitations of the clay pot. Earlier (1:8), he wrote of being ‘under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.’ Now, in exact answer, he writes of God’s power, which surpasses the weakness of the human body.

The reason for this is so there would be no mistake about where the power comes from. Christians are never powerful in themselves but are only vessels in which God’s power is exhibited. Our frailty and weakness provides the ground for God’s power (cp. 12:9). The breaking up of our clay vessels through the crushing circumstances of life allows ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (v. 6) to shine forth in full creational, gospel power. In all of this, then, Paul is graphically and categorically stating that our weakness is essential to and necessary for the display of His power.

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Had this priceless treasure been contained in a strong and permanent body, it would have proved a fatal combination for proud and sinful man. Like Adam, he would have reached for the heavens to be a spiritual superman, a ‘god,’ a reference perhaps to Paul’s opponents (cp. 12:6-7, 11). We come to appreciate how powerful God is only when we acknowledge the certainty of our own death. In fact, the opinion that the power of God impinges on man not in his supposed strength but in his real weakness is no passing sentiment, but is the theological insight, the chief theme, which binds together the whole letter and gives it its unity. It was stated near the beginning (1:8), is restated here, and will reappear near the end in the memorable words of Jesus to Paul: ‘My power is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9).

It is easy to misread what Paul says here so that we interpret it as the means of enhancing *our* power. The natural equation is: My weakness plus God’s power equals *my* power. But that is *not* what Paul is saying. Rather, he teaches that as we embrace our weakness, God fills us with His power so that His power is manifested through us. We do not become powerful. We remain weak. We do not grow in power. We grow in weakness. We go from weakness to weakness, which is to remain vessels of His power—ever weak and ever strong.

What does he intend by the analogy here? Divine sovereignty is certainly not absent from his mind, for he says there is a purpose in the fact that the treasure is in such jars of clay, and this is to demonstrate God’s all-surpassing power. The unimpressiveness and frailty of the messengers of the gospel are also very much in view. What are we? Simply common pots with priceless treasures in them! There is however another way of viewing Paul’s reference to jars of clay. It is possible, especially in view of the context, that he was thinking of the clay lamps that could be bought in any marketplace in the Mediterranean world (cp. Jn. 8:12). The disciple of Christ possesses no personal light; it is the indwelling Christ who makes us the light of the world, for the light we transmit is not our own but His. It may well be that Paul had both ideas in mind, and that the use of the word ‘treasure’ instead of ‘light’ may have been determined by a kind of creative ambiguity. We do have great treasure in our hearts, the treasure of the gospel, but this treasure is also light, which is to shine out through us. As treasure it is infinitely precious; as light it brings us revelation from God. Both facts are true. As Paul makes clear, we are not the originators of this treasure, this light, but simply its communicators.

2. Deliverance in Weakness (4:8-9)

⁸*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;*
⁹*persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;*

Paul’s humility and weakness did not cripple or destroy him but instead strengthened him. Paradoxically, he found encouragement in his frailty, because then the power of God flowed unhindered through him. Far from being a liability to his ministry, an honest assessment of his spiritual limitations was his greatest asset. By a series of four contrasts, the apostle demonstrated that his inabilities did not cripple his ability to minister.

Now in verses 8-9 the apostle gives four parallel paradoxes that all illustrate Paul’s experience of the clay pot axiom in his own life—namely, that weakness invites strength. The paradoxes are autobiographical of Paul’s constant experience. At the same time, they touch on the biography of the committed Christian disciple.

Ordinary people will be encouraged to know that their difficulties were also shared by the great apostle. Yet along with each of these problems mentioned in verses 8 and 9, he adds ‘but not.’

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If the fourfold difficulties show that he is a ‘jar of clay,’ the fourfold ‘but not’ is evidence that the ‘all-surpassing power is from God’ (v. 7).

The intruding ministers in Corinth apparently spoke of power and triumph in the Christian life. Paul, however, is emotionally honest. He does not cover up his difficulties, but, as one conscious of being a ‘jar of clay,’ reveals something of his sufferings and hardships. In speaking of being ‘hard pressed,’ he is referring to those ‘pressures’ which impinge on him because he is a Christian. Being ‘perplexed’ means a feeling of being ‘cornered.’ He says he is ‘persecuted’ or ‘hounded,’ doubtless on account of his ministry. Finally, he confesses to being ‘struck down,’ which probably means, in our language, ‘depressed.’

a) *Squeezed But Not Squashed (4:8a)*

First, ‘we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.’ ‘Afflicted’ is from the verb *thlibō* and refers to being under pressure. Paul was under constant physical and spiritual pressure (cp. 1:8-9). The earthen vessel of Paul’s life was ‘afflicted’ in the radical sense of pressured, which is best represented by the word *squeezed*. But his pressured weakness was ever met with God’s power, and he was ‘not crushed.’ ‘Crushed’ is from the verb *stenochōreō*, which refers to being confined to a narrow, tight place. The pressure he faced could not keep Paul’s ministry bottled up. A modern translation would be, ‘We are squeezed but not squashed.’

The jars are subject to pressure. Paul has already told the Corinthians about his recent experience of this (1:8). So he says now, although subject to pressure they are still intact, so that they can still contain the treasure, still transmit the light. There is a surprising element here, for it would take little force to destroy the earthen vessels used in the homes in this part of the world. Perhaps there is then just a hint here that the presence of the power within the vessel has a protective function as far as the vessel itself is concerned.

b) *Bewildered But Not Befuddled (4:8b)*

Second, he was ‘perplexed but not driven to despair.’ The Greek text contains a play on words; the participles translated ‘perplexed’ and ‘despairing’ are from the words *aporeō* and *exaporeō*, respectively. Paul was at a loss but not at a total loss. He was at his wit’s end, but there was still a way out; he was at the brink of defeat but not defeated.

In Greek, these words form a rhyming play (*aporoúmenoi... exaporoúmenoi*) as the second word intensifies the first. Again, a modern translation would be, ‘bewildered but not befuddled.’

c) *Hounded But Not Hunted Down (4:9a)*

Third, Paul was ‘persecuted, but not forsaken.’ ‘Persecuted’ is from *diōkō*, which means ‘to pursue’ or ‘to hunt.’ Paul’s many enemies stalked him day in and day out. But despite that, Paul was ‘not forsaken,’ deserted, or abandoned.

Paul knew what it was to be persecuted (literally, ‘pursued’ or ‘hunted down’), but he was never forsaken by God. We could translate this as, ‘pursued but not abandoned,’ or ‘hounded but not hunted down.’

d) *Knocked Down But Not Knocked Out (4:9b)*

Fourth, the intensity of the paradoxes peaks in the final expression, ‘struck down but not destroyed.’ ‘Struck down’ means struck down by a weapon—‘whacked’ as we might say. But Paul was not destroyed. Rather he was quickly back on his feet. The following rendering catches the idea: ‘knocked down, but not knocked out.’ The buffetings that Paul and his

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companions have endured in their gospel ministry have not made them give up but simply caused them to look for grace to persist.

‘Struck down’ is from *kataballō*, and means ‘to strike down’ as with a weapon, or ‘to thrown down,’ as in a wrestling match. ‘Destroyed’ is from *apollumi*, which could also be translated ‘ruined,’ ‘lost,’ or even ‘killed.’ In modern boxing terms, Paul may have been knocked down, but he was not knocked out. He triumphed not by escaping adversity but by successfully enduring it.

No one could withstand such an onslaught in his own strength and still maintain his joy and peace, let alone do the work of the ministry. The power of God made Paul fearless and formidable. Nothing his enemies could do would destroy him.

It wasn’t that Paul in each case reached down into his soul, sucked it up, and became *the man*. It was never *his* strength. It was God’s. Paul’s weakness was the occasion for God’s power. Paul remained an earthen pot, and a cracked pot at that, as his crumbling flesh allowed the power of God to shine so brightly.

3. Life from Weakness (4:10-12)

a) *The Practice (4:10-11)*

¹⁰*always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.* ¹¹*For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

Verses 10 and 11 express exactly the same thought in different words. Why? Perhaps Paul repeats his thought because the idea may have been new to the Corinthians. Not only so, but spiritually it is very challenging, so that it was important to emphasize it by repetition. A feature of these verses is the repeated word ‘always’ in verses 10 and 11. Paul’s Greek text uses two different words, but their meaning is identical, and he also uses the first of them in 2:14. This reiterated thought stresses for us that Paul has in view an abiding lifestyle for the Christian, not simply an attitude to be adopted on some particular occasion.

In verse 10 Paul summarizes and interprets the paradoxes in verses 8 and 9. Paul reiterated in verse 11 that he simultaneously experienced the dying and life of Jesus in his life and expanded it to include all believers.

b) *Death of Jesus (4:10a, 11a)*

The truth was a powerful rebuttal to the allegations of the false apostles. They argued that Paul suffered because God was chastening him for his secret life of sin. But in reality Paul suffered at the hands of evil men because of his identification with Jesus Christ. Therefore Paul’s trials, far from being a sign of God’s displeasure, were actually a badge of honor. ‘Dying’ does not translate *thanatos*, Paul’s usual word for death, but *nekrōsis*. *Thanatos* speaks of death as a fact or an event, while *nekrōsis* describes the process of dying. In verse 11, ‘delivered over’ is from *paradidōmi*, the same verb used to describe Jesus being delivered over for crucifixion (Mt. 17:22; 20:18-19; 26:22; 27:26; etc.).

Union with Christ has profound implications for the practical everyday life of believers, because it was with the Christ who died and rose again. Because of this union there is, in the inspired thought of Paul, a communication to the believer of these two experiences of Christ. The believer knows a ‘death’ as well as a ‘resurrection,’ for in willing submission to the death of his

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own plans he finds newness of life. It is interesting here that Paul does not actually say that we carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, but rather (for this is the literal meaning) the dying of Jesus.

As Paul deepens his point, he goes on to instruct the Corinthians that his experience of power through weakness was, in effect, like that of Jesus in His death (weakness) and His resurrection (power). The word rendered ‘death’ here refers to the *process of dying* rather than to the final state of death. Paul carried about in his body the dying of Jesus as he lived out his missionary calling.

The ‘death’ (better, ‘dying’) ‘of Jesus’ which Paul carries ‘around in his body’ refers back to the fourfold distress of verses 8-9 and anticipates the two longer lists of suffering in 6:3-10 and 11:23-29. Examination of the three passages reveals that the ‘death of Jesus’ in Paul’s ‘body’ is his way of speaking of the physical and emotional pain associated with his ministry of the new covenant. The cost of ministry, whatever it means in specific circumstances, is part of what Paul means by carrying ‘around in’ the ‘body the death of Jesus.’

c) Life of Jesus (4:10b, 11b)

The apostle’s courageous, faithful, patient enduring of suffering manifested the power of the living Christ in his life (cp. Gal. 2:20). ‘We who live’ denotes the redeemed, those in whom the life of Christ dwells. Believers’ suffering is a purposeful sacrifice that results in the power of God being unleashed in their lives.

By the ‘life of Jesus’ Paul means, first, the four ‘but nots’ of verses 8 and 9. That the Christian does not succumb to his problems and difficulties is evidence that ‘the life of Jesus’ is ‘revealed’ within him, through the transcendent, sovereign power of God. Paul, however, is also speaking of the future when God’s resurrection power will finally deliver us from death (cp. v. 14). Then, too, ‘the life of Jesus’ will be manifested within us, but permanently.

The ‘life of Jesus’ refers both to the here and now and to the life hereafter. The life of Jesus is manifested in the lives of those who truly follow Him. And ultimately these realities will be full-blown in our final deliverance from mortality in the great resurrection of the dead.

d) The Principle (4:12)

¹²*So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Paul concludes this astonishing paragraph with an unexpected twist because, by the way Paul has been structuring his thought, we would expect him to say something like, ‘So death is at work in us, but life is also at work in us.’ But surprisingly, he says, ‘So death is at work in us, but life in you.’ This is of course, the great principle of the cross. Christ died that we might live. The great exchange of the gospel is: Christ’s life for ours.

Without Paul’s ‘death’ there would be no ‘life’ for the Corinthians. This principle of life arising out of death or costly sacrifice originates with Jesus. Jesus’ death, literally speaking, is the ‘source’ of eternal life to humanity; the death of those who minister, metaphorically speaking, is the ‘means’ of life for mankind.

Paul literally looked death in the face regularly so he could bring the message of eternal life to the Corinthians; he was even willing to die physically so that they could live spiritually. Paul’s suffering was not for himself but for the building up of the church.

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The encouragement comes out clearly in verse 12. Paul is explaining to his readers what his dying, and the dying of his fellow-workers, means, not only for them, but also for the Corinthian believers they are serving with in the gospel. It is not just life for ourselves that we discover to be at work when we accept dying, but life for others. There can, in other words, be no fruitfulness in service for Christ until we are prepared to die.

It's humbling to take to heart the fact that we are clay pots, and as such we are fragile and transitory, vessels of weakness. But it is also so beautiful and liberating to know that God's power in our lives does not come from our pursuit of power.

C. The Hope Paul Expects (2 Corinthians 4:13-18)

1. Confidence in Resurrection (4:13-15)

a) Continuity of Faith (4:13)

¹³Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak,

Paul states that he has 'that same spirit of faith' as the write of Psalm 116 who thankfully testified to God's deliverance of him from death. So far from having lost heart (vv. 1, 16), as his critics claim, the recent experience of deliverance from death (cp. 1:8-10) has strengthened Paul's resurrection faith, and because of this he writes, 'we...speak' (the Greek implies 'continue to speak') the word of God. True belief impels strong, consistent, unwavering testimony to the truth. Those who genuinely believe the truth cannot help but speak that truth.

His quotation from Psalm 116:10 is most interesting and instructive. The psalm is a hymn of praise occasioned by the psalmist's deliverance from death. What is particularly interesting is the fact that his assertion of faith comes in a quite surprising context, for it is in a part of the psalm where he is describing his experience of distress and also his disillusionment with people. Here then faith was under real pressure from circumstances and yet was exercised in a most positive way. How appropriate then is its application to the circumstances of Paul's own life as described in verses 7 to 12! Here then Paul sense that he and David have spiritual kinship, and he recognizes that the same Holy Spirit of God is at work within people of the Old and of the New Covenants. It is interesting that Paul links faith and speech here, for he does this also in a deservedly famous passage in Romans 10:9-10. It is out of the fullness of the heart that the mouth speaks, and genuine faith should certainly find expression in our verbal witness.

Paul explains what sustained him to continue preaching—his faith in God. Paul does this by citing a brief line from Psalm 116:10, the heart of Psalm 116. For Paul, a brief reference like this served as a pointed to the full context of the Psalm upon which he based his statement of faith. Significantly, Psalm 116 describes a time when the write (King David) almost died (cp. vv. 3, 8, 15), but God delivered him from death (cp. vv. 8-10). David 'believed' that God had delivered him and therefore 'spoke' of it (v. 10). As this statement in verse 10 is the center and pivot of the Psalm, it places faith at its very heart. Thus, Paul's gospel ministry rested squarely on God's Word and his experience of God's deliverance from death, which was in grand continuity with the experience of the suffering righteous of the past.

While the foundation of Paul's faith was in the past, Paul now goes on to show that the focus of his faith was on the future. What heartened him for the battle and fortified him to preach Christ

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Jesus in every circumstance was his dynamic certainty and confidence about the future. It will become ever so clear in this passage that what Paul longed for and believed about the future had everything to do with how he lived in the present.

b) Certainty of Resurrection (4:14)

¹⁴*knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.*

The first reason Paul puts forth for his unflinching preaching amidst the squeezing and bewilderments and hounding and knockdowns of ministry is his utter confidence in future resurrection. The resurrection was, in fact, central to Paul's preaching of the gospel (cp. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). The abiding confidence is that he, along with all believers, is only a step behind the Lord. For Paul, this confident hope in the future resurrection was what gave him the strength to persevere.

Paul has already made reference to the spiritual resurrection of believers (vv. 10-11), but now he asserts his belief also in their bodily resurrection. In fact, the one is really an earnest, a pledge and foretaste, of the other. It is not surprising that he links the resurrection of Christ and that of believers so intimately here, for, the Corinthians would recall, he did exactly this in a major exposition of this theme in 1 Corinthians 15.

Because the gospel provides the most glorious and important reality, the hope of resurrection for all who believe, Paul was bold and fearless in preaching it. In doing so, the apostle willing put his life on the line. Death held no terror for him. Paul willingly risked his life not only because of his own hope in heaven but also for those who would hear and believe.

c) Crescendo of Praise (4:15)

¹⁵*For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

Another reason for his missionary zeal was his passion for the 'glory of God.' Paul longed that men and women who 'neither glorified (God) as God nor gave thanks to Him' (Rom. 1:21) would, in increasing number, be converted through the gospel an express thankfulness to God, and so glorify Him.

A complementary reason behind Paul's tenacity in ministry is the ultimate praise and glory of God. In the here and now, the more people who come to Christ, the more people there are to 'with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:6; cp. Rev. 7:9-10).

Clearly, Paul's goal was never his own comfort, reputation, or popularity. Nor was it ultimately the salvation of others. The final goal of Paul's selfless, sacrificial service was that more voices would be added to the hallelujah chorus of praise and worship to God. The Lord's servants bather their hearts and souls in the light of God's glory reflected in the face of Jesus Christ. They then selflessly reflect that majestic glory to others so that they can be saved and worship God (cp. Dan. 12:3). God's astounding plan is to use common clay pots to carry the priceless treasure of the glorious gospel to needy sinners. As they humbly, faithfully serve Him, His power flows through them to others. The final result is that more and more people will worship and glorify God.

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Paul's own words, 'with you' (v. 14), remind him that there is a purpose in his sufferings, a purpose for the Corinthians themselves. He is prepared to endure suffering for their sakes. He is being enabled in the context of suffering to reach more and more people with the message of God's grace in Christ. As a result of this there is a great overflow of praise from many hearts (cp. 1:11). There is nothing that so moves our hearts to praise God as the knowledge that He has saved us by his grace. The phrase, 'to the glory of God,' shows us that the ultimate motive of Paul's work was not found amongst human beings, not even in their salvation, profoundly important as that was, but in God Himself. He wanted to see God glorified. It is important for every servant of Christ to have this orientation.

Paul's 'futures'—the future resurrection and the future doxology—are what steadied and steeled him to keep the course. They are the reasons that he wasn't squashed or befuddled or abandoned or knocked out. Thus we see that our 'future' have everything to do with the way we live.

2. Confidence in Transformation (4:16-18)

In verses 16 to 18 Paul operates with two pairs of antitheses, the outward and the inward, the temporary and the eternal, and it is most instructive to see how he does this.

a) Inner Renewal (4:16)

¹⁶*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*

'So we do not lose heart,' is a reiteration of what he said at the beginning of the chapter in verse 1. And with this, the apostle now gives his reasoning for this conclusion—in a word, his hope in *transformation*, ultimate future transformation.

'We do not lose heart,' he declares, repeating the exclamation of verse 1. In the former reference it was the knowledge of what God was doing *through* him that kept Paul at his task, despite opposition and discouragement. Now, in verse 16, his perseverance as an apostle flows out of the understanding of what God is doing *in* him.

The phrase 'but though' ('though') could be translated 'even if,' 'even when,' or 'since.' It introduces a condition assumed to be true and establishes the first reason Paul endured suffering and did 'not lose heart.' He could endure anything in the physical realm because he was far more concerned about the spiritual realm.

(1) The Outer Man Is Physical [DSB Preferred]

'Outer man' is, like 'earthen vessels' (4:7), and 'mortal flesh' (4:11), a reference to the physical body, the perishable part of man. From birth to death that body is consistently decaying. But Paul's outer man was decaying not only because of the normal aging process, but also because of the abnormally arduous life he led. But in direct correlation to the dying of Paul's 'outer man' was the growth and maturing of his 'inner man.' The 'inner man' is the heart, the soul that lives forever.

The seemingly paradoxical truth is that when believers are physically weak and at the end of their own resources, they are in the place where they can be made spiritually strong. Life's trials, troubles, and difficulties serve only to build inner strength, because they drive believers to humbly, prayerfully, hopefully depend on God. The decaying outer man will perish, but all believers will one day receive a new imperishable body (5:1-5; Rom. 8:22-23; 1 Cor. 15:42-44,

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49). Recognizing that motivates believers to value the inner man over the outer man, and that produces spiritual endurance.

Paul's body may not look at the moment as if it has an eternal destiny. It is, he says, 'wasting away,' a phrase which was perhaps a summary of the thoughts he expressed in verses 7 to 10 (cp. 11:23-27). There is, however, an inward renewal and this is going on all the time. The body may move more slowly but there is a spiritual dynamic in the heart and this is constantly being renewed.

Why does Paul not 'lose heart'? It is because God will raise his body from the dead (v. 14). More, he knows that the progressive decay of himself outwardly is being accompanied by the proportional renewal of himself inwardly. He does not mean only that our inner lives are renewed day by day in the sense of being repaired or refreshed. It is more particularly that God is creating within our inner nature a new person out of the old, so that when it is finished it will be completely new. The renewal of which he speaks is not something we see, feel, or experience, it is apprehended by faith and hope. This truth is intensified by his shift from psychological imagery ('ourselves inwardly') to architectural imagery (building, house, dwelling) in the following verses. What these complex word-pictures appear to be saying is that God is preparing a permanent home for us after the dissolution of our present bodily frame.

(2) The Outer Man Is Spiritual

Paul isn't describing physical decay as such. 'Outer nature' (literally, 'outer man') does not refer to the body, and 'inner nature' (literally, 'inner man') does not refer to the soul. There is no body/soul dichotomy here. Both 'outer man' and 'inner man' refer to the *whole person*. 'Outer man' refers to our status in Adam as part of this present age; 'inner man' refers to our status in the last Adam, Christ. Therefore, Paul is saying that the old sinful man is 'wasting away' (being deconstructed!), while our new self in Christ is 'being renewed' (reconstructed!) 'day by day.' Thus, Paul was heartened because amidst the stresses and perplexities of apostolic ministry, the old nature was deconstructing, and he was being reconstructed in the image of Christ. No faint heart here! The transformation is far too glorious and encouraging to allow that.

The distinction between 'outwardly' and 'inwardly' must be carefully understood. Paul is not distinguishing, as the Greeks did, body from soul or body from mind. By 'outwardly' Paul means a person in 'his creaturely mortality,' as belonging to this age, which 'is passing away.' By 'inwardly' Paul means the person who belongs to the age to come, who already possess the Spirit of the new age.

b) Incomparable Glory (4:17)

¹⁷*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...*

What is 'glory'? Man cannot see God (Jn. 1:18); what God shows man and permits him to see is His 'glory' or 'brightness.' God displays His 'glory' for all to see in the sun by day and the moon and stars by night (Ps. 19:1). He revealed His glory to His servant Moses (Ex. 33:18-4:8) and in His Son's miracles (Jn. 2:11) and through His death (Jn. 12:23-24). Paul saw the glory of God in the face of Christ on the road approaching Damascus (Acts 9:3-5). Although 'glory' belongs to God alone, He imparts His glory to His people. Through the gospel God shines His light into the darkness of our hearts (4:6). Thereafter, the Spirit progressively intensifies the glory within each believer's life (3:18).

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Earlier, when Paul began this letter, he stated that the ‘affliction’ he had experienced in Asia had left him ‘weighed down beyond measure’ (literal Greek, 1:8). The weight of his affliction was real and, in fact, almost killed him. However, here in 4:17 Paul re-employs the same words ‘weight’ and ‘beyond measure,’ but in this context to minimize the deadly weight of affliction he had experienced in Asia. Instead of the weight of affliction, there is now the ‘weight of glory.’ And, whereas the Asian affliction had ‘weighed him down beyond all measure,’ the ‘weight of glory’ is doubly beyond measure (the phrase ‘beyond measure’ is repeated twice in the Greek for intensification), that is to say, ‘out of all proportion’—exponential glory! For Paul, ‘the affliction which once felt like a lethal weight around his neck now seems weightless in comparison to his eternal load of glory.’ When the apostle suffered affliction, he did not focus his thoughts on how heavy the affliction was, but on how heavy the glory would be because of the affliction. Our troubles work for our benefit as they prepare us for heaven. Sanctification is glory begun; and glory is sanctification completed.

Though Paul’s ‘affliction’ was constant and intense, he viewed it as ‘momentary’ and ‘light’ (easy to bear; insignificant) in view of eternity (cp. Rom. 8:17-18; 1 Pe. 1:3-5). Weighed in the balance with the suffering of this life, the ‘weight of glory’ tips the scales heavily in favor of eternal reward. There is a direct correlation between suffering in this life and glory (capacity to praise and glorify God) in the next.

Here Paul may be playing on the original meaning of the Hebrew *kabod*, which is rendered into Greek by *doxa* (glory). From the eternal perspective, glory is substantial and sufferings are lightweight. The same thought, differently expressed, also occurs in Romans 8:17-18. The expression ‘far outweighs’ is a very strong one in the Greek. It is almost as if Paul is saying that to compare the two is utterly ridiculous. What does Paul mean when he says that our sufferings achieve glory? Probably his thought is that the pattern of sufferings followed by glory, established by Christ Himself in His own life, is God’s own pattern for His people, and that we should not seek to escape from it but rather to accept it as God’s will for us.

Earlier Paul employed the Greek word *hyperbolē* to convey the extent of his problem: ‘we were under great pressure,’ the last word meaning ‘weighed down.’ Here Paul takes up the word ‘weight’ (*baros*) and also *hyperbolē*, which he uses twice for absolute emphasis, applying it not to suffering, but to glory (‘an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison’). Seen in true perspective, the ‘troubles’ of our outer nature are ‘light’ in weight and of ‘momentary’ duration, while the ‘glory’ of our inner nature is of heavy ‘weight’ and ‘eternal’ duration. ‘Troubles’ help us understand that there is no future for us here in this tawdry, fading existence. Therefore we focus, increasingly, on the unseen, resurrected, and glorified Christ (4:4-6, 14).

The Greek text literally reads *hyperbolē eis hyperbolē* (from which the English word ‘hyperbole’ derives), forming a double expression for strongest emphasis. The phrase means ‘out of all proportion.’ The ‘weight of glory’ awaiting believers exceeds all limits; it is beyond the possibility of overstatement or exaggeration. In Hebrew, the word ‘glory’ comes from the same root as a word meaning ‘heavy,’ perhaps influencing Paul’s choice of words here. It should be noted that the only suffering that produces the ‘eternal weight of glory’ is suffering for the sake of Christ, or that honors Him. Suffering the consequences of sin does not contribute to our heavenly blessing.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 6

c) *Invisible Eternity (4:18)*

¹⁸ ...as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In verse 18, Paul brings together both antitheses that we have noted into one verse, and in so doing he identifies the seen with the temporary and the unseen with the eternal. This is a truly Christian perspective, for many men and women act as though life in this world is going to go on indefinitely, even though in their heart of hearts they know death must bring it to a conclusion. The Christian however is given a godly realism about this.

Proskairos ('temporal') refers to things that are temporary, that do not last, that are destined to perish one day, that belong to time. In short, *proskairos* encompasses everything that is not eternal—all the material world's temporal ideas, values, standards, and achievements. The allurements of the passing world system were of no interest to Paul. He was not interested in amassing a fortune, having a palatial estate, or a prominent career. That attitude made him seem, by worldly standards, a colossal failure. When Paul called for believers to focus on things that are eternal, he had in mind the triune God and the souls of men.

The skill of the surgeons in transplanting organs gives hope of greater life-expectancy to many people. Nevertheless, the power of death within us is in the end irresistible. I have no power either within myself or outside by which my life can be renewed or extended in any ultimate sense. Because 'what is unseen is eternal,' it is more real than the things which are seen. Our future 'eternal' existence with God is a true existence; this one is only a shadow cast by the coming reality.

Everything we see with our eyes is temporary. There is nothing we can look at that is not transient, from the possessions we own to earth itself to the farthest star to the tiniest microbe. But the unseen is eternal—God Himself (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—the souls of our brothers and sisters in Christ—the promises of God yet to be fulfilled—Heaven itself.

The tragedy of our times is that men and women have lost their eyes for the unseen and believe and hope and work in the visible. But Paul focused on the unseen things to come. Paul's hope was set in the future resurrection. For him the grave was empty. The certitude of the resurrection was inevitable and compelling. It determined the way he lived. Because of it, he bore in his body the dying of Jesus and lived as a slave to others and willingly died daily. Paul could unwaveringly hear the far-off song of eternal doxology from every tongue and tribe. And the strains of future doxology kept him on course. His 'futures' shaped his life and destiny. Alongside Paul's hope in future *resurrection* was his hope in future *transformation*. He did not lose heart because his old sinful man was 'wasting away' in blessed deconstruction while his new self in Christ was 'being renewed day by day.' And he looked forward to his final transformation at Christ's appearing. He remained heartened because the weight of the afflictions of ministry were nothing compared to the weight of glory for which they were preparing him. And he endured because he looked past the transitory to the eternal.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.