

The Light of the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn again to the chapter we read in 2 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians in chapter 4. I want us to look at, just by way of overview, the first 12 verses of this chapter. I'm going to read it all, but Paul says at the beginning, therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. And then he tells us in verse 5, for what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. And he says in verse 7, but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us, and so on.

Amen. The ministry is always tough, and there are many reasons for that. One of the main reasons, of course, is that there is an enemy that is at war against us all the time, an enemy we often forget about. But it's an enemy that if you are engaged in gospel work, you become increasingly aware of. Paul was increasingly aware of, and he so often mentions, he so often talks about the enmity that he faced in proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ. But while every ministry is tough, there are some ministries that are tougher than others, and there is no question whatever, but that the ministry that Paul was engaged in was as tough in many ways as they got. Paul experienced really everything in his ministry. However, difficult and all though it was for Paul, he tells us that we don't lose heart, even though he also highlights the fact that we're afflicted, that we're perplexed, and that we're persecuted. Paul says all these things, verse 8, we are afflicted in every way, we are perplexed, we are persecuted, we are struck down. But he tells us at the beginning, we do not lose heart. And it's very encouraging when you see Paul writing like this, because at a human level, it would be very easy to say, right, if I am day after day being persecuted, if I am being afflicted, if I'm being crushed, if I am being knocked down, day after day after day, there's going to come a point where I say, enough is enough. I can't do this anymore. And be very easy at a human level to say that. But Paul doesn't say that, because Paul says, even although it is tough, and he highlights that in these verses, he says, we do not lose heart. And the fact that he doesn't lose heart is because the ministry is not his own. It is a ministry, therefore having this ministry, he says, and how does he have it? By the mercy of God. One of the things that Paul revealed in was God's mercy. I know that every Christian is very aware of God's mercy, but some people are more aware of it than others. And Paul was one of those who couldn't but see God's mercy. God's mercy was at the very forefront of his thinking. Paul never forgot what he was. He tells us he had been a persecutor. He'd been a blasphemer. His hands were actually red with the blood of the Christians. He was the man who caused havoc among the early church. He hated the Christian with a passion. And he caused maximum distress and hurt and pain in the Christian church. Paul never forgot what he was. And he couldn't get over what he had become. And he knew that it was by and through the mercy of God, that he was what he was. And you know, it's the same for ourselves.

[4 : 3 9] You say to yourself, I was this. In fact, you say to yourself, I am this, but the mercy of God. And it's one of the great marvels in the Christian faith that God is so merciful to us. God's mercies are new every morning. It is because of his mercy that we are not consumed. That's what the Bible tells us. And it's one of the most wonderful things to focus upon the mercy of God. And a Christian who is reveling in the mercy of God is a Christian who will become humbler and humbler and humbler, which is the way God wants us to be. One of the greatest ways of losing our pride in ourselves and our own sufficiency of ourselves is to marvel and to revel in God's mercy towards us. And that was part of what was at the very heart of Paul's ministry. He couldn't get over God's mercy to him. And what God had made him in and through his mercy? So, Paul, you see, has been given this ministry. And what ministry is it?

Well, it is the ministry of Jesus Christ. That's what he tells us in verse 4, at the end of verse 4, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

A gospel that came from glory and a gospel that brings us to glory. It's all glory. It began in glory. And God, the God of glory, sent his Son from glory to bring us to glory. Isn't that an amazing thing? Today, if you're a believer, you're caught up in this amazing thing. I saw somebody on the television jump off a bridge on one side of a huge ravine. And I don't know where the rope was, but he went like a, just a pendulum. It was an amazing jump right down the one side and right up the other. This, it was just one of these incredible stunts. But you know, in a sense, it's almost like that, that here is a gospel coming from glory, sweeping down. And it's like we are at the bottom of this ravine and we're caught up in and brought on to glory. At the moment, we are still down at the bottom, but we are now beginning to move onwards and upwards. That's the way the believer goes, onwards and upwards. It's like you're moving all the time. But the amazing thing is that you, as you journey on, you feel you're going downwards, but you are actually going upwards, on to glory.

[7 : 46] And so Paul has always got this theme of glory. And Paul is so aware of this gospel that it's a gospel of power. Elsewhere, he tells us that it is a gospel of, this gospel is a power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. And Paul is aware that there is no greater message in the whole wide world to bring to people than the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because you know there is nothing in all the wide world that is made for your soul like the gospel.

There are other people today who would come to you and they could say to you, I will give you something great. There are people who could come to you today and say, I'll take you to America for a holiday. That would be wonderful. And there are many people in the world who could do many wonderful things. People of doctors could come and maybe be a little, just there's a host of things that come.

But let me tell you, there is nobody in the whole wide world that can deal with who you are in the very depth of your being with your soul and ultimately your body like our great God can. And he has done this in and through Jesus Christ. And let me tell you, you have a soul that needs being dealt with.

You are not just a body. We look after our bodies. We aren't just our mind where we dwell upon things where our minds are stretched and we read things and we glean things and we use our mind to think things through. We are also soul. And our soul is really at the very heart of all that we are. We need our souls to be sorted. And that's why Jesus came into the world. And that's why Paul was saying he gloried in this ministry because he knew that he was bringing to people the most important thing that could ever be brought to them. And that's a wonderful thing about the gospel. That's a wonderful thing about being a Christian because you are able to share with people and point people in the direction of the only one in the whole universe who has for your precious never dying soul.

[10 : 17] And so Paul is saying we glory in this ministry and we don't lose heart. Even although it's difficult. Even although we face so much opposition. And Paul highlights in the previous chapter and in this chapter a couple of the things that make it difficult for preaching the gospel. Or I should say difficult for results to come from the preaching of the gospel. You know, at one level you say to yourself, why is it that so many people who hear the gospel aren't saved? Well, Paul tells us in chapter 3 that for the Jew there is a veil over their eyes. In this chapter he tells us that the God of this world has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. That's what he says in verse 4. In that case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel. Isn't that amazing? So that today, if you're here without Jesus, you might not be aware of it, but Satan is keeping you from focusing upon the Lord.

He has an amazing power. He's called the God of this world. He doesn't have divine attributes. Satan doesn't have divine attributes. He's not omniscient. He's not omnipresent or any of these things. But he is still the God of this world in the sense that people follow him, people obey him, and even people worship him. He exercises an influence far greater than your own upon us. And often we don't realize it. And one of these influences is to close our mind to the gospel. And he whispers to our heart, you don't need this just now.

Or he'll deaden your heart so that these things aren't important. And you can hear them and readily dismiss them. These are things, yes, you can weigh them up and put them aside. He has this amazing way of deadening your heart. And our own, of course, we've got to remember our own heart naturally is dead.

So it's an incredibly difficult thing for a person to be saved. Because everything is stacked against believing. There is natural opposition within our heart to the things of God. Satan is at work in order

to keep our minds blinded to the things of God. And Paul knew that there is only one thing that can change that, and that's God's power. It's not the preacher. It's not the person who's bearing witness. It's not the person who's sharing the gospel. At that point, we and all of us are simply instruments in God's hand. God has chosen in an amazing way to have the gospel spread to people through us. But at the end of the day, the power belongs to God. It doesn't belong to human eloquence. It doesn't belong to great oratory. It doesn't belong to amazing arguments. Always, at the end of the day, it belongs to God's power. And God will give His glory to none other. And that is why very often when you will hear somebody give their testimony. As time goes on, they will see all the different influences that came to bear upon their heart and mind. Although the time of their conversion may have been just, they might be aware of this particular time or whatever that took place. There are so, when you look back, you see the influence of this person, and you become aware of the prayers of that person, and you become aware of particular sermons, and you become aware of particular things in Providence, and particular things you read. And all these things are worked by God coming together so that the glory goes to God alone. It doesn't go to people. And so, Paul is very aware of this.

[15:03] But Paul is also aware that there are also people who are criticizing his ministry, and people who are saying that Paul is out for himself in these things, and that Paul is using kind of a methodology that's underhand and deceptive. That's what he's about. There were Judaizers following Paul wherever he went, an awful thorn in his flesh. But Paul says in verse 2, we've renounced disgraceful underhand ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word.

But by the open statement of truth, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. That's how it has to be. There has to be an open transparency with God's Word.

And Paul is saying, we aren't using methodologies. We aren't using any kind of deceit. We're not trying to play on people's emotions. We're not trying to bribe people. We're not trying to force people into our corners and, well, batter the gospel into them. All we're doing is proclaiming the truth.

And you know, my friends, the truth speaks for itself. And when we, that's what the pulpit is for. We must never bring our own ideas or our own fancies or our own hobby horses or whatever it is that we have to proclaim. That's what, that's what Paul always did. He said elsewhere, writing to the Corinthians at another stage, I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I have one message, Paul said, and that is to proclaim Christ, nothing else. And my friends, that is what it is. And so Paul is renouncing all other things. And he's saying, the one thing we're doing is holding up Jesus Christ. So Paul is aware that this is urgent business and that he's facing all these oppositions with the God of this world, blinding the minds of the unbeliever.

And my friend, if you're here today without Jesus Christ, may I again say to you, you need Jesus to take the scales from off your eyes. Because Paul, when he goes on and he says, for we proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone into our hearts. You can see Paul, as he's talking there, he's going right back into Genesis 1. And he's saying, the God who at the very beginning said, let there be light. The God who brought light into being by his word.

[18:10] It's the same God who in a similar way, different, it's not into the darkness of what was, but into the darkness of our hearts. Hearts that are closed by Satan. Hearts that are closed by our own inbuilt rebellion. Hearts that can't see. God says, let there be light.

If you have never come to discover, if you've never seen Jesus in the gospel, ask today that that may happen. I remember before I became a Christian, one of the things that used to perplex me, particularly times when I wanted to be a Christian, I understood, or at least I thought I did, what the Bible was saying. And I believed it. But I couldn't get from where I was to there. There was something that just seemed so confusing and so difficult. I knew it said in the Bible, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. But I couldn't. But the problem was that I cannot do it myself. It's God who will shine that light into your heart. And you know, when that time came for me to come to a persuasion of my salvation, you know what I discovered? It all seemed so simple. And I was saying, how could I not? How come that I wasn't able to see it? It was because this was a point where God, as it were, opened my mind, my understanding to see. For the first time, I could really see Jesus as Savior. I understood. And if you today cannot see that, that's because there are scales over your eyes. I'm not saying that by way of criticism. It's what the

Bible tells us. What you need, and this is where our responsibility lies, is to ask God, Lord, save me. And He will do that by saying, let there be light in your heart. He will do so by the light of Jesus through the Spirit, opening your heart and mind to see and to understand and to believe. And it will all come together.

That's what, so our responsibility is to seek the Lord and say, Lord, come into my heart. And He will do that through the shining of His own light. You see, knowledge and understanding come with light. If you, as sometimes happens, you end up, you go to, you're away. Supposing you're going on holiday and you're going to a wee village and you arrive at night and it's dark. You really have no idea what the place is like. And when you get up in the morning, you look around, you say, whoa, this is beautiful. This is a beautiful place. I couldn't see this when I came at night. You can see all the veils and the valleys and the trees and the rivers and everything. You say, it's a beautiful place. But in the darkness, you couldn't see it. And it's the same with the gospel. You can, as I say, you can read the Bible, believe many of the things and believe all the Bible, but somehow still not able to see. Well, God can today help you to see where it will all begin to become clear. You go to Him and ask Him to do that. Time is moving. Just very briefly move on. And so, we find that Paul is telling us about the light that comes in the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But then he says, we have this treasure in jars of clay or jars of earth. This, of course, was a metaphor that was used in the early world for human weakness. So, what Paul is saying is this gospel is a treasure.

This gospel of Jesus Christ is a treasure. But where is a treasure? It's in jars of clay or earthen earthen vessels, earthen jars of earth. Now, the amazing and wonderful thing is that the treasure is not impaired. It is not spoilt by being put in a jar of clay or of being buried in an earthen pot.

[23 : 01] If you had a lump of gold and you put that lump of gold in a clay pot and you put it, buried it into the ground. And it was there for years and years and years and years and then it was taken up.

It might be covered with earth and water, but you'd clean it off and the gold would be still as precious and as valuable as it had ever been. It wouldn't lose its worth or its value. And even so, although the glory of Christ has come into our heart, His glory will never be tarnished or spoiled by the fact that it is in someone like us. And so, it's an amazing thing to think that the third person of the Godhead has come to live within us. But you know, at many levels when it says we have this treasure in jars of clay or jars of earth, it's very true. It is literally true because that's what we are, earth, clay.

We came from the dust. And it's one of the humbling things of life and death is to remember that it's to dust we'll return. It's not something we particularly want to dwell on, but it's a fact that it's to dust from dust you came and from dust you will return. But again, we're in earthen jars with regard to the way that probably others see us because as people look on the glory of the church, that's all they see, earthen jars. Because the church doesn't look very glorious, does it?

You look at a lot of the great things that happen in this world, and you look at these moments, you often see them in times, say, of opening like a World Cup or Olympic Games or the inauguration of an American president or all these times where there's celebration, the royal wedding. And there is such, I'm not criticizing this, but there is so much pomp and ceremony. And you stand back and you say, whoa, that is amazing. But then you look at the Christian church, and what is the Christian church?

It's made up of people, individuals, who are earthen jars, who are earthen clay, you and me. And so the church doesn't look that glorious. And yet, if we could see what we're going to become, because the king's daughter is all glorious within. And as God looks down upon his people today, they are beautiful. They are glorious, because he is beholding them through the glory of Christ.

[25 : 53] But one day we will shine with all the glory of our Savior. We will share in his mediatorial glory. And the glory that will be ours throughout an endless eternity will surpass all the glory that this world ever had this world ever had and put all together. That's a wonderful thing about it all.

But at the moment, we are here, as it were, in the earthen jars. But you know, one of the wonderful things is this, that the glory of anything, and you know, you see that in the Christian. And it's a wonderful thing when you see the Christian maturing. And you see the Christ-likeness beginning to come through more and more, where the believer is beginning to resemble Jesus more and more. There's a glory there. And even the world see it. Because as a Christian is ripening for glory, there's something beautiful about that person. It's like, you know, if you want to see, if you, if you want to

see something glorious, if supposing, often you will see it, if diamonds are, supposing a beautiful ring, it's usually put against or on, lying on a black cloth. You don't put a beautiful ring surrounded by jewels. If you want to focus upon the beautiful ring, you will put the background as black or something so that the ring will stand out. And in a sense, that's how it is for you and me.

Because we are the pots of earth. And God is seeking that his glory will be displayed through his people. We are that black background in order for the glory of Christ to be seen. It's a wonderful thing. You give a little child a present. There's no point in wrapping that present in the most spectacular, bright, sparkly wrapping paper. Because they'll be far more focused on the wrapping paper.

We've often seen that when the children were very, very small. That's what they would do. You would have the present. There's the wrapping paper. The beautiful wrapping paper was far better than the present. They'd be crunching it and looking at it and holding it up. You're saying, you're looking at the wrong thing. And that is why we are pots of clay, so that the glory will be seen. And then Paul highlights then, and he goes on, and just sum this up just in a moment, that we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed, but not destroyed, and so on. You know, this is one of the amazing things that goes on. The Christian is somebody who is battered and bruised, but never defeated. And what is God doing as he's doing this to us? He is, this is all part of the molding and the preparing for glory.

It is all part of the shaping. As one translation has it, we are knocked down, but not knocked out. And that's a great description. Because if a person is knocked down, but they're not knocked out, they'll get up again. If you're knocked out, you're lying flat out. So in a sense, that's how it is.

[29 : 28] We're knocked down, but we're not knocked out. And you know, when you think about it, every blow that the Lord allows down upon us, or his heavy hand comes, it's always given with a kiss.

And you know, as I said, we grow in him downwards. You know the old adage, the bigger they are, the harder. We used to say that when, remember in school, and sometimes you'd be away playing football, and the team seemed so much bigger than you. And people would say, ah, never mind, the bigger they are, the harder they fall. And there's an element of truth. If somebody is six foot six, they've got further to fall than if they're five foot six, and so on.

And you know, at a spiritual sense, that is true as well. Because the bigger we are in our own pride, the further we have to fall as God works and knocks on us. But as we grow down, and down, and down, then we have less distance to fall. And that's what God is about, taking us down, and down, and down.

It's not often comfort. Often it's very painful to the flesh. And there are times we're wearied with it. And we sometimes think, oh, Lord, I wish there was some other way. But my friend, if we could see the glory that awaits. At the end of the chapter, that's what it's saying. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. If you had a scale, add scales. And on the one side you put the suffering, the affliction, and all that, and it's tough at the moment. But put on the other side the glory that is beyond comparison. It wouldn't even, it doesn't even, the scales couldn't even register the difference. And that's what Paul is saying. My friends, we need the faith to learn to submit to the Lord and ask Him that His glory will be displayed through us.

[31 : 51] And may I say again, by way of appeal to anybody in here who does not know of this glory, the glory of God in Christ, in our own heart, the beauty of being in Jesus, ask the Lord today, Lord, shine into my heart. Let light shine. That's what he said, let light shine out of darkness.

May your light shine into my heart today. Let's pray. Amen. O Lord, our God, we pray to bless us and that the word that we've come under today might be richly blessed to us. May we know the saving power of God in our heart. May we know the light shining into our souls. All be with us, we pray, and do us good and cleanse us from our every sin.

And in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.