

2 Corinthians 4

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[0:00] How's it going?

Good? Good? So, you probably have that conversation 10 times a day, right? Maybe 15. How's it going? Oh, good, good. How about you? Good, good. Doing well. Yeah, thanks.

And, you know, I don't know about you, but when I have that conversation, at least some of the time, I'm not really telling the truth.

But, you know, I think it's what people expect to hear. I think that there's an expectation that when someone says, hey, how's it going? They hope and pray that things are under control, that things are going all right.

And so I have a tendency that even when they're not going okay, I'll put on a face. Someone says, hey, how's it going?

[1:01] Good. Good. How about you? Just change the subject, keep moving. You didn't really want to know, did you? And the things that we hide, they might be as trivial as something like our latest performance review at work being slightly disappointing, or a bad grade on a test or a paper we just got back.

But, you know, it might be something far deeper and far more significant. We're not okay. We're grieving the loss of someone we love, a parent, a friend.

We might be dealing with hidden scars from our past that are haunting us. We might be dealing with ongoing depression and wonder, how are we ever going to feel normal again?

Whatever it is, trivial or not, we have a tendency to hide those things, don't we? We have a tendency to put up a mask and say, I'm okay.

How about you? I think I'm going to make it through this message tonight, but I just want you to know it comes from my own heart and my own life in a way that's pretty profound.

[2:21] I'd like you to know as a pastor that I'm okay. I'm doing great. Things are okay. I have it all together.

But you know what? It's not really true. I didn't expect this. Sorry. I wake up each day pretty exhausted, tired, helpless.

My spiritual life is pretty up and down. My spiritual disciplines are pretty much in disarray. Sometimes I sit down and read the Bible and I can't because all I can think about is my wife.

She has cancer. And this sermon isn't about me, so we're not going to keep going like this. But I need to be honest with you as we're talking tonight.

Even with that, I cling to a desire for things to be going okay. I want you to feel confident that I have it together. I think we all have that desire.

[3:37] We cling for it. We want it to be all right. We want it to be somehow under control. I want to look at a passage tonight that has shaped my thoughts.

It has sustained my heart. And it's given me hope. Hope for me in my life. Hope for you, I hope, in your life. And also it's shaped for me a vision of what I hope that this church will be like.

So if you have a Bible, turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. It's on page 18 in your Bible. As you're looking there, let me give you a little context.

The Apostle Paul is writing to a church that he founded. You can look at the story in Acts 18. And since he left there, some teachers had come in behind him that had a slightly different message than the gospel he had preached.

They are proud, exalting of spiritual gifts. Their emphasis on living a, quote-unquote, victorious life in Christ, in fact, ended up undermining the gospel.

[4:48] By denying suffering and by denying weakness and denying the brokenness that comes in following Christ. And in light of this victorious living in this new gospel, Paul's life and Paul's ministry and Paul's gospel were being disparaged as less spiritual, less supernatural.

And Paul writes this letter in particular, 2 Corinthians, to try to explain, this is my life, this is my ministry, this is my gospel.

And he wants them to see how foreign this, quote-unquote, victorious, I have it all together, there are no problems, kind of Christianity is to the gospel.

How foreign it is to the very core of what we believe about Jesus. Let's read, we're going to read all of chapter 4 to give you the context.

And we're going to focus our thoughts tonight on 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7. So read with me. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

[6:01] Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways. We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The God of this age has blinded the minds of believers. So that they cannot see the light of the gospel, of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ is Lord. And ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who said, let light shine out of darkness, has made his light shine in our hearts.

To give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay.

To show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not in despair.

[7:10] Persecuted, but not abandoned. Struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. So that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

It is written, Outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

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

For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for your word. Speak to us tonight, we pray through it.

[8 : 42] Lord, prepare our hearts now by your spirit that we would understand what you have to say to us tonight. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. As I said, we're going to focus on verse 7 tonight.

And the first thing that I want you to see, the first 7 is a very simple verse. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

It's not a lot of things that we're going to have to unpack in terms of what those words mean. But I do want to give you a little bit of a framework to think about it. I think that what we see in the first part is that there is a gospel incongruence that is striking and that turns our understanding of what it means to be a Christian upside down.

What do I mean by gospel incongruence? Look at the first part of it again. We have this treasure, this incredibly valuable thing in a jar of clay. Well, what is the treasure he's talking about?

Well, the treasure he's talking about, you can look back in your Bibles, verse 4 and verse 6. He says it twice. This is what he, the words he's using to say, this is the treasure in us.

[9 : 55] In verse 4, it says that it is the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. And then further down in verse 6, he says it is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

And you almost get the sense that Paul is stumbling over himself trying to put enough qualifiers together to say, it is unbelievably incredible.

It is wonderfully awesome. It is, there are not enough words to say how precious, how valuable, how wonderful it is that in Jesus Christ we can know God.

And that God has let us see who he is in Jesus Christ. Not only has he revealed himself in content, but he has opened our eyes so that we might not only understand, but believe and cherish this vision.

And this is the treasure that Paul is talking about. And he says this treasure of inestimable, of surpassing value, it is in a jar of clay.

[11 : 09] Now, we don't have jars of clay in our culture today. If it were 30 years ago, I might be able to say a glass peanut butter jar. Because I think it is pretty close.

But most of you all don't even use glass peanut butter jars, right? They are all plastic. I was thinking this is sort of close, right? This plastic cup. Except this is not frail.

It is not breakable. And it will not decay. It will just fill our garbage dumps for the rest of our lives. And that's not what an earthen vessel is.

Not a jar of clay. A jar of clay was a simple, common container. You wouldn't notice it if you walked by it on a street. You would put anything in it.

And if it broke, you wouldn't think twice. You'd just go replace it. It is ordinary. It is common. And one of the things that I think he wants to emphasize when he talks about a jar of clay is that a jar of clay is subject to the realities and the hardships of living in a fallen world.

[12 : 14] A jar of clay is not special. It is not indestructible. Think about what the Corinthian teachers were trying to say. In Christ, you can become something supernatural where there is no suffering and there is no brokenness and there is no weakness.

And Paul is saying, no. No, that is not true. We are not like that. Not in this age. In the age to come, maybe, but not in this age.

In this age, we are jars of clay. And he goes on, if you look with me in verse 8, to describe what does it look like for Paul to be a jar of clay.

Look with me in verse 8. We are hard-pressed on every side. We are perplexed. We are persecuted.

We are struck down. We are experiencing the hardship of living in a fallen world. We are experiencing the frailty and the limitations of our humanness.

[13:17] We are experiencing the weakness and brokenness of being human. To sum it up, Paul is saying the human condition that we all feel and struggle with, it is real.

And it is in this context, a jar of clay, that God puts this incredible treasure.

This incongruence is a gospel paradigm in the scriptures. You can see it. Paul says, I am suffering all of these things, but the treasure in me is sustaining me so that I am hard-pressed, but not crushed, perplexed, but not despairing, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.

And then he goes on and he says, in fact, I am carrying around death every day. I experience the fallen world every day. I carry around death so that the life of Christ may be manifested in me.

And further on, he talks about in verse 16, he says, though our outer nature is wasting away. Many of you are pretty young.

[14:39] You haven't started to feel that wasting away. I'm 42. I've turned that corner. I heard that when you turn 40, your muscle mass begins to disintegrate at 5% a year.

It's kind of depressing. But my body is wasting away. Paul says, I am wasting away, and yet inwardly I am being renewed day by day.

So this is the gospel incongruence that Paul is presenting to us as a picture of what does it mean? To be a real Christian. And one of the things that I want you to see is that for Paul, he flips what we hide and what we proclaim on its head.

Because what we talked about at the beginning, what I tend to do is I want to hide my struggles. I want to hide that I'm not okay. I want to hide my weaknesses and my failures.

And what I want to present to you is a mask of, hey, I'm doing okay. And what does Paul say? I want to tell you, I am all these things. I am a jar of clay.

[15:46] I suffer. I am persecuted. My ordinariness is the thing that is on most display, because it's in that then that you see how wonderful this treasure that God has put in me is.

So that's the first part. But we have this treasure in jars of clay.

And there's still more. So that's the gospel incongruity. And the second part is that there is a gospel power that lives and inhabits that gospel incongruity. And that gospel power has a very particular purpose.

There's a strong so that in the middle of this verse. God has done this. He's put this treasure in a jar of clay purposefully. He has not redeemed us from being a jar of clay yet.

He has done it so that, look in verse 7 with me, so that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

[17:01] It may be shown, it may be seen that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. And the first thing I want to ask about this is power for what?

What is this all-surpassing power? And if we look at the context, if you went back and looked at verse 1 or you could look ahead at verse 16, you will see that this whole passage is framed by Paul saying, we do not lose heart.

And he's talking about his ministry, but I think it's appropriate to extend our application to a desire to live a life with God. And he says, we don't, we have the power to not lose heart.

God has designed it this way because he knows how easily we want to make our faith and our persevering about us. How do we not lose heart?

How do we give up? Well, I know that for me, I want to do it. Which is a phrase I hear a lot in my house right now. I have a three-year-old and a one-year-old.

[18:15] My one-year-old Katrina isn't quite verbal yet, but she's pretty good at squawking her intent in this direction. My three-year-old is extremely verbal and will say, no, Eli, do it.

No, Eli, do it. Daddy, I want to do it. Daddy, let me do it. I want to do it myself. And I think that that's true for so much of us in so many areas of our lives.

We want to do it on our own. And we might express this in the simplicity of a three-year-old. We might express it in brazen, bold self-confidence, but it also might be seen in a shy, retiring self-dependence that never asks for help, never depends on anyone else.

Or this desire to do it ourselves might show itself not by our confidence, but by our despair and our hopelessness. Because if I'm committed to doing it myself and I reach those times when I can't, I have no other recourse but to despair and to give up.

In all these, we want to be God. We want to be our own provider. We want to be our own savior. We want to be the master to decide what we do and how we do it because we want it to be about us.

[19:48] And God is committed to it being about him. He created a world as an expression of his love and he created it dependently so that our creation that he loves would respond to his loving care, provision, and lordship with worship.

That all of creation would say, what a great God has made us. And in our salvation, he has worked it out in such a way that when someone is saved by Christ, we would not be focused on what a great Christian he is.

But we would say, what a great savior who saved someone like me, someone like you. And when a believer perseveres in faith, God's intention is that we would live it out in such a way that it wouldn't say, what a great Christian.

He is so committed. It's amazing how dedicated he is. But to say, what a great God who has preserved him through it all.

Do you see how this is a contrast to what the teachers in Corinth were saying that day? And they were saying, hey, there's a Christian out there that you're going to sail through.

[21:11] Once you have Christ, no more suffering, no more hardship, no more trial. How easy it was for that to become boasting and arrogance and self-promotion.

how easy it was for those who struggled or felt their weakness to feel excluded, alien to the community and to the gospel.

And I do have to say, maybe in your hearts, like in my heart, there's still a desire to cling to the hope that it might be about us. I could tell my story my personal story about when there was a time shortly after college when I was a fairly new believer and I was pretty sure that God was pretty lucky to have me on his side.

I was sensing his call into full-time ministry and I had a great amount of devotion, energy for ministry, conviction about his scriptures and a passion to see lives changed by God.

But deep inside, I kind of wanted people to see me and say, what a great servant Matt is. I even, this is embarrassing to say, but I even harbored this little, because I read all these great missionary biographies and I harbored this little hope that maybe my life would be worth writing a biography about one day.

[22:39] And I'm sure I'm the only one in the room who's ever thought that, but that's how it manifested itself in my life. And God, in his mercy, brought me through some personal seasons of spiritual dryness and failure.

He allowed me to see ministry failure and the shattering of expectations and hopes. He allowed me to see my inability and my weakness.

And he helped me to see that being a part of God's work in this world, be a part of God's church is not about how much we do for him, but what an incredible privilege it is that he invites us to be a part of what he is doing.

What he is doing here in New Haven, what he is doing here in this world at this time, for such a time as this, God has called us.

And what an incredible privilege that is. It's not because we were wise or because we were rich or because we were smart that God called us. God calls us so that people will look and say, what a great Savior.

[24:06] What a great God. That the power in us would be seen to be from God and not from us.

And again, you see this playing itself out throughout the rest of the passage. All of those hardships, all of those jar of clay characteristics, but not struck down, destroyed, despairing, even given over to death, but the life of Christ is manifest in us.

He says, in fact, we live with the hope that even if we die that we will be raised with Jesus Christ again. And not only with us but with you, with the people that God is, Paul says, with the people that I'm ministering to, you Corinthians, we together will be raised by Christ.

Christ. This is the power of God at work in us, the power that he showed when he raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

And God designed it this way. God designed this power to be at work in us as jars of clay because, you know what, we can't live on two different power sources at the same time.

[25:26] We can't depend on two different things. We can't depend on ourselves and God. God says, it's either you or it's me. And God designed us to embrace our brokenness, embrace our suffering, embrace our weakness, embrace our humanity so that God's power may be seen in us.

As Paul says later, so that God's power may be made perfect, that is, reach the purpose for which it was given, not in my strength, not in my overcomingness, not in my gifting, not in my natural ability or my stature, but in my weakness.

That God's power is made perfect in our weakness. So what about us, Trinity Baptist Church? Are we going to be the fellowship of the have it all together?

Are we going to be the fellowship of the broken and redeemed? It's remarkable when you look at the ministry of Jesus, the people he attracted over and over and over again were the people who knew that they didn't have it all together.

They were the outcasts of society, the marginalized, the desperately needy. And the strongest rebuke that Jesus had for anyone was for the self-righteous, the self-dependent, the I can do it myself.

[27:11] And my fear is that we get this backwards in our church, that we think or that we communicate that church is a place for people who have it all together, or at least that it looks like it.

And I don't know, I struggle with this. You walk in those doors and you think, you look around and you think, eh, they all seem like pretty happy people. They seem to be doing all right. They must have it all together. So I'm afraid.

I don't want to be the first one to say, yeah, I don't. I'm here tonight because I'm desperately broken and needy because my weakness is almost overwhelming but for the grace of God in the gospel.

Friends, what I want you to see tonight is that no matter how hard the things that you are maybe hiding right now may be, no matter how hard the suffering is, no matter how great the weakness you feel, we can embrace these things as a part of God's plan in this life to draw us closer to him, to embrace the fellowship of suffering with Jesus, to know that he has walked a road harder than we ever will and we would ever have to.

Friends, we can stop pretending that life is supposed to be better than it is. We can see God's grace in the hard things.

[28:50] We can cry out to God in our pain. We can weep with one another over the hard things. We can thank him for his faithfulness in the middle of suffering and trial and we can hold out to one another the hope that we share that Jesus has achieved for us something in eternity that can give us power to endure anything.

Look with me again at verses 16 through 18 of this chapter. Paul says, therefore, we do not lose heart though outwardly we are wasting away yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day for our light and momentary troubles that probably don't feel light and momentary right now.

Certainly, they weren't for Paul. These light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all so we fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen for what is seen is temporary but on what is unseen is eternal.

If we are overwhelmed when we begin to be honest about how hard life is if we think our circumstances begin to be unbearable because they are the only things we can see Paul says, lift your eyes lift your eyes to Christ Christ who loved us by taking the road of suffering and weakness and brokenness for us as he came to bear the judgment of God for our sin at the cross he bore the physical pain of flogging the beating by the soldiers the long march carrying his cross beam up to the place of his execution the nails driven through his hands and feet Christ endured the emotional pain and suffering of the betrayal of his friends the abandonment by those who had pledged to stay loyal to him to the end the mocking of those who had yet only a week ago praised him and worshipped him the rejection of those that he came to save and as serious and severe as those physical and emotional sufferings were they pale in comparison to the judgment of God falling upon him for sin all of God's hatred for all that is evil and wrong in this world all of God's righteous striking down of a sinner all of the withdrawal of God's grace in our lives so that there is no love and there is no hope and there is no peace

God's withdrawal of his very fellowship and presence this was the greatest suffering that Jesus bore for us and yes it was even more striking because he was undeserving of it all because he had no sin so he died for us and this is God's love for us that he would walk a path of suffering for us and yet the great news is that he did not just walk this path of suffering did he but that by rising from the dead we have hope because in his resurrection he showed that death had no more hold over him that the power of sin had been defeated that all who joined with him by trusting faith in him can live with hope that no matter how hard life

[32:47] God Jesus understands no matter how bad the suffering feels he knows worse no matter how confusing perplexing it was he suffered when he was innocent Jesus endured all of this for us and he conquered over sin and over death so that as we have fellowship with him in our suffering we may also have fellowship with him in hope that one day the suffering will end one day the hard things will end one day God will make it all right and one day we will be with Jesus in eternity friends this is why I hope that this church will be a fellowship of the broken and redeemed if we want to be the fellowship of the

I have it all together we can do that but we will never see the glory of the gospel we will never see the power of God work in us but if we lay that down by God's grace oh God may it be so make this church a place where the treasure of the gospel is on display in us jars of clay so that people might look at this church and think what a great God what a great savior let's pray Lord you know our hearts you know each one in this room tonight and the things that no one else knows about their lives Lord we thank you that you are the

God of all comfort who comforts us in our afflictions and all of our afflictions Lord we pray tonight that the comfort of the gospel might be real for us Lord not only individually but Lord as a body that we might know what it means to speak to one another the hope of the gospel in the midst of our hard things oh God do this we pray for your glory in Jesus name amen