



The Round Church at  
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2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Discouragement was clearly on Paul's mind as he wrote 2 Corinthians 4: *<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.* And he is still on the same theme in verse 16: *<sup>16</sup>Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* So let's consider that first:

**1. Do not lose heart**

The New Testament writers were aware that Christians are tempted to lose heart in speaking about Jesus Christ. 2,000 years down the line it is still the same.

In the 1960s there was a bit of graffiti on a University wall, which read, "God is not dead. He is alive and well. But now working somewhere else in the Universe on a less ambitious project!" We have all felt like that at times. If God is a reality and if the gospel is true, then why is it so hard to believe? Why is the Christian life such a struggle? Why is evangelism so often apparently unsuccessful? The Bible would not have us shut our eyes to those facts. But nevertheless, Paul wrote that he did not lose heart: *<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.* Paul did not look at the results of his ministry for encouragement. He looked at the source of his ministry: *<sup>1</sup>through God's mercy we have this ministry.*

God's mercy is a voracious mercy. It is not satisfied with just saving us. It must also use us. As God's mercy makes us Christian, it also commissions us for Christian service. Paul does not just have his own apostolic role in view. The 'we' of verse 1 is the same as the 'us' in verse 6.

This is true of all Christians. The gospel broke into our lives and saved us. We can take no credit for that. Nor can we take any responsibility for the fact that it will go on breaking into other people's lives and saving them, until the end of this age. That is why Paul did not lose heart. He had no sense of responsibility for, or ownership of, the gospel. The success of Christianity did not depend on him. Karl Barth wrote of the gospel, 'I am glad that I did not invent it and hence is not my responsibility to defend it. My only task and privilege is to tell you that God said so, and says so, until this day' (Deliverance to the Captives).

*<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>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.* If you and I are obsessed with the results of our gospel ministry, we will either grow discouraged or we will resort to human methods that jeopardise the integrity of the gospel. We must look up to see what God thinks of our work, before we look around to see how successful it is being with men and women.

Do you remember that exam question set to police cadets, which went like this? "You are on patrol when you notice a great commotion. As you investigate, you find a house ablaze, with a terrified family trapped inside. Thick black smoke is billowing across the road, and it causes a passing car to swerve to avoid a collision. Unfortunately, in veering off the road, it rolls down a bank and ends up in a fast flowing river. There is total confusion and a traffic pile-up ensues. From another crashed car emerges the most wanted

criminal in the region who races off down the road. What would you do in this situation?" The police cadets scratched their heads as they attempted to answer this challenging case-study. However the shortest answer just said: "Remove my uniform, and mingle unobtrusively with the crowd".

As Christians, you and I will be tempted again and again to remove our uniforms and mingle unobtrusively with the crowd, unless we believe that our Christianity is centred on something God has done for us, and not on something we must do for him. We have a commission from above to fulfil: faithfulness to that is more significant than success down below. As humanity did not invent the gospel, so humanity's response to the gospel does not authenticate it, nor does it jeopardise it. Because in the matter of telling other people about Jesus, we are out of our depth from the word go. We are not in the driving seat.

See how Paul goes on: <sup>3</sup>*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.* <sup>4</sup>*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* <sup>5</sup>*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* <sup>6</sup>*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness, "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.* Let's call this:

## 2. Supernatural recognition

Because the gospel is all about identification—identifying Jesus as who He really is. It is about being able to see something clearly.

I heard of an elderly couple who woke up one morning and the wife got out of bed and looked in the mirror and said, "I look dreadful—just look at my wrinkles, my teeth, my hair, my figure—I can't see any part of me that doesn't look awful". And then she turned to her husband who was still lying in bed, and said crossly, "Well, say something encouraging!" To which her husband replied, "At least there is nothing wrong with your eyesight!" But there is something wrong with humanity's spiritual eyesight. <sup>3</sup>*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.* <sup>4</sup>*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of*

*the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

It is an issue of identification. <sup>5</sup>*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* <sup>6</sup>*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness, "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.* Conversion is recognition. To be converted is to recognise Jesus Christ as Lord, to identify Him for the first time. Just what happened to Paul himself when that blinding light shone on him on the Damascus road, and he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" And "I am Jesus" came the reply. But there are spiritual forces working to prevent us from making that recognition: <sup>3</sup>*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.* <sup>4</sup>*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

The god of this age (or world) is, of course, a contradiction in terms. Deity / divinity is all about not being confined to this world or this age. But there is a spirit abroad in this age whom many serve as though he were indeed God. And if we make the idols of this world and this age our God, we blind ourselves to any other world or any other age. You see the inter-play in these verses between human will and the role of the devil. Those who won't believe 'the unbelievers' (in verse 4) are blinded by the god of this age, and they are the ones who are perishing (verse 3).

Notice it is their minds that he blinds in verse 4, not their emotions or their hearts or their wills—the mind which we so pride ourselves on as being our most sophisticated faculty for discerning truth. But the devil knows that it is actually our Achilles heel, because of our capacity for intellectual arrogance and self-deception: what a warning to our over-educated age! And the devil does it to keep us from seeing <sup>4</sup>*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*—to stop us from recognising Jesus.

Now please notice what Paul is, and is not, saying about himself in verse 5: <sup>5</sup>*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* Paul is not here talking about his own track record as an evangelist. He is not saying, "This is how to be a good

evangelist”. He is talking about the nature of the gospel. It is because the gospel is as it is (a matter of God’s grace from beginning to end) that the only role open to us is that of a slave—a slave bearing a message about the true identity of Jesus. Paul is not advocating some sort of meritorious self-humiliation, nor is he saying that he was a better person than some of his rival preachers in Corinth. If other teachers acted differently in Corinth, it was not because they were worse people than Paul; it was because to some degree they had a different gospel. Paul’s gospel (and I trust ours) is that Jesus is Lord. Jesus is absolutely supreme. If we say anything about ourselves, we will only get in the way of that.

So Paul goes on to explain how God’s power does work through us: <sup>7</sup>*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* <sup>8</sup>*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* <sup>9</sup>*persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* <sup>10</sup>*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* <sup>11</sup>*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.* <sup>12</sup>*So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.*

### 3. God’s power in our weakness

Remember, this chapter is not primarily about Paul’s own ministry—about how wonderful he is to go on persevering in the face of so much difficulty and opposition. It is about the nature of God’s power in the gospel, and how different that is from human power. God is not just saying in the Bible (over and over again), “You are weak but I am strong”. He is also saying, “The whole categories in which you conceive of strength and weakness need to be adjusted.” Look at verse 10a: <sup>10</sup>*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.* Paul is not there referring to the cross or the stigmata. He is referring to the whole way God works in saving humanity. It is that emptying of himself, that laying aside everything . . . remember Philippians 2:6-8: <sup>6</sup>*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,* <sup>7</sup>*but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* <sup>8</sup>*And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and*

*became obedient to death—even death on a cross!* You see the death of Jesus was not just the moment of crucifixion: it began when He left heaven and accepted mortality on our behalf.

Remember He did not even take in powerful or attractive humanity—*He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.* (Isaiah 53:2). And what Paul means when he writes, ‘*always carrying in the body the death of Jesus*’ is that we commit ourselves to the same way of working that God uses.

God laid aside everything that human beings consider powerful, in order to do the most powerful thing that has ever been done on this planet: the reconciliation of God and His rebellious creatures. So we too turn our backs on human power, and our faces to the cross, knowing that is how God works—in human weakness, in human despair, in the things the world despises, through the people the world ignores, in the experiences people dread and shun. The power and the glory of God breakthrough in moments of affliction, perplexity, persecution and depression. <sup>8</sup>*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* <sup>9</sup>*persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* Is your Christianity to some extent a perplexed Christianity? If not, it is not a biblical one. This extraordinary transcendent power of God means that you and I will be perplexed and thwarted in our lives. We will at times be brought to the edge of despair.

Some of us who are old enough may remember the glorious moment at primary school on a hot summer afternoon in the middle of a dull Maths lesson when an ant appeared on our desk (this illustration only holds for those of us who remember the days before modern insecticides made such an event extremely unlikely). I wonder if you can ever remember it happening? It was a golden opportunity for a quiet five-minute distraction, which the teacher would never notice. So you quickly put your Maths textbook along one side of the desk to stop the ant going off that way and your exercise book across the top and your pencil case on the other side, and then you used your ruler to work the ant across the desk top into a blob of ink and then over the sums you were meant to be working at. So you could use that excuse,

“I’m sorry my sums are such a mess, Miss; an ant walked over them”. I am sorry if you don’t have such a memory from your school days.

But God in all His wisdom and love and mercy hedges you and me around with the frustrating circumstances of our lives, in order that His power may be made manifest in us, to get us where He can use us. Left to ourselves, we are like that ant: we would be off the edge of the desk in a moment. But God’s love hedges us in with difficulty and frustration, so that His power may be seen in our lives. That is how He works: <sup>7</sup>*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* <sup>8</sup>*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* <sup>9</sup>*persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* <sup>10</sup>*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* <sup>11</sup>*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.* We are adopting God’s way of working, says Paul. It is painful. It is humbling. It is frustrating . . . and it is more powerful than anything known to humanity.

In my days at theological college many, many years ago, I once heard the Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbandt, speaking in one of the Cambridge college chapels. It was in the bad old days of the Iron Curtain and communist suppression of Christianity. Richard Wurmbandt had spent more than 14 years in solitary confinement, and for some of that time he had been tortured. I remember he had to lean on the pulpit as he spoke because his feet could no longer take his weight for extended periods, because the communist prison guards had beaten the soles of his feet with rubber truncheons. He told us a story then that I have never forgotten, and that I often come back to when thinking about power in weakness.

It was a story about a communist prison camp, where one day a small boy with a bunch of flowers in his hand asked if he could see the commandant. When he was shown into the commandant’s office he said, “today is Mother’s Day, and every year on Mothers’ Day I go to the market and buy a bunch of flowers for my mother. But last year my mother was imprisoned in your camp because she was a Christian, and she died here. This year I have no

one to give my flowers to on Mothers’ Day, so I have brought them here for you to give to your wife”. There is a power in the Christian gospel greater than the most powerful atheistic regime on earth. God has so ordained things.

#### **4. For the benefit of others**

<sup>12</sup>*So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.* <sup>13</sup>*It is written: “I believed; therefore I have spoken.” With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,* <sup>14</sup>*because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.* <sup>15</sup>*All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.* We have a resurrection faith: we believe God raised Jesus and that he will raise us. <sup>14</sup>*because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.* We know that by faith. Faith allows us to look past the appearance of things (the weak and frustrating nature of our lives . . . what Paul is calling *the death / the dying* here) to something beyond: the resurrection. You can only get to resurrection via death. You cannot be raised from the dead without first dying. And the dying is visible, but the resurrection is not yet visible. So we speak, against the background of this visible dying / death, about what we believe is to come—a raising from death, resurrection. Evangelism (telling other people about Jesus) is an exercise of faith not sight. It is about keeping our eyes on God and telling people what cannot be seen.

What Paul is saying all through this passage can be simply illustrated: if you think of our lives with a vertical axis to God and a horizontal axis to other people, Paul is saying that evangelism is actually all about the vertical axis. We do not concentrate on the effectiveness of the communication, the method. We concentrate on the faithfulness of the message. And it is for the sake of others that we do that. It is for their sakes, that we don’t concentrate on them but on God. Because it is God who must shine in their hearts *to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ* (v6), Who Alone can raise them with Jesus from the dead and give them life.

God’s power is altogether different from how we think. If we get obsessed with the success of

evangelism (how are people responding to me?), we are very likely to get in the way of God's resurrection power working. We are to get them face-to-face with Jesus, and that means keeping my own face to Jesus, and myself out of the way. So it is a matter of focus, of where we turn our eyes, and that is Paul's last point in this chapter. Mission must always be about the Gospel because the gospel does not just provide the content of mission (the message of God's mercy); it also dictates the method of mission (a humanly feeble proclamation of Jesus).

So, A final comment on these last three verses: <sup>16</sup>*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* <sup>17</sup>*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* <sup>18</sup>*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.*

### 5. A matter of focus

We look beyond what is seen at the moment to what is not yet seen. Paul is not just making a point about transience here. It is an interesting thought, that if we reassembled as a group ten years from now, many of us might well look much the same to one another. But apparently actually virtually every cell in our bodies would have been replaced in that time. We might look much the same, but we would not actually be the same. It would only be our teeth and our spectacles which would actually be meeting again. But what Paul is talking about in verse 16: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day* is a process of spiritual renewal. It was what he was referring to in chapter 3 verse 18: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* It is the work of God's spirit within us as Christians to make us, little by little, more like Jesus. *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* (3:18) *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* (4:16). And it happens through affliction and suffering. <sup>17</sup>*For our light and*

*momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* God's power is like that: it looks like weakness, frustration and difficulty from this side—like dying—but that is the route to resurrection. And it is a matter of where we look and what we see. <sup>18</sup>*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.*

In the Greek myth, the face of Medusa, the gorgon, was so hideous, it turned all those who looked at it to stone. The face of Jesus Christ is so wonderful that all whom God's Spirit allows to look fully into it are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another. This is the beatific vision that transforms human life. The apostle John wrote, *'It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is'* (1 John 3:2). It is all a matter of focus, where we turn our eyes and what we see; and the Lord Who is the Spirit will do His hidden work <sup>16</sup>*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* <sup>17</sup>*For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* <sup>18</sup>*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.* We need to fix our eyes on these great unshakeable truths of the Christian faith. We do not realise what power and glory there is in it, because we do not ponder the great gospel truths enough. We so easily forget what treasure we have in these jars of clay. I don't know if you remember the story of Thelma Howard?

Thelma Howard died in 1981. For 20 years of her life she had been the maid for a couple called Walt and Lillian. And every Christmas Walt used to call Thelma into his office to give her a Christmas present. No doubt she hoped for a tip of \$100 or so, or maybe even just for a box of chocolates or a bottle of wine. But instead, Walt gave her, year by year, some stock in the family company. In both a psychological and a financial sense, Thelma never 'realised' what Walt had given her. She died in poverty. But when her meagre possessions were being sorted after her death they found, discarded in a drawer, company stock worth over £6 million (and that was back in 1981). Thelma Howard was a millionairess and she never knew it. For those 20 years she had been the maid of Walt Disney.

Well, Christian after Christian wanders through life like that poor woman. Perhaps she looked with some bewilderment at the long words on those share certificates—'capital' 'registrar' 'annual general meeting' 'voting by proxy', 'redemption of stock' (or whatever were the American equivalents of those expressions)—and then she stuffed them back in that bottom drawer.

Well, we Christians do the same when we let the great truths of the gospel pass over us and fail to grasp the glory and the power that are ours in what God has done for us. ***7But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.***

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*