
2 Corinthians

Lesson 5

“2 Corinthians 4”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

Chapter 4 begins rather emphatically with “therefore” (Διὰ τοῦτο), which points back to what Paul has just been stating about the glorious ministry of the Spirit. This phrasing indicates that Paul is ready to bring this portion of his letter to a close, but as he prepares to do this he returns once again to his issue of concern, which is his relationship with the Corinthian believers. In a frank, and forthright, manner he continues to reveal the reasoning and motivation for his ministry. He indicates his motivation for continuing despite the stormy and often dangerous people and circumstances he has faced in his ministry. This ministry is linked powerfully to the mercy of God, and is a ministry that is about glory and freedom even when great difficulties arise from within.¹ So often there is the false perception among people entering the church that now relationships, attitudes, and circumstances will all be perfect now. Paul and his companions understand that this is not the goal of this ministry and actually nothing could be further from that ideology. The life and ministry of Jesus surely proves that point. His life was filled with turmoil, conflict, misunderstandings, and ultimately this resulted in His death.

¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), pp. 79-80.

The reason that Paul and his companions do not lose heart is because of the mercy of God. This stands at the core of their motivation like a beacon bringing hope in the midst of the storms of life. Paul is trying to continually show his heart and his motivations for the ministry that he does. This will then stand in stark contrast to the motives that have perhaps been attributed to him by those that stand in opposition to him. If we can ascribe bad motives to a person then even if they are doing a good thing it somehow seems tainted what they are doing and makes it lessor in the eyes of people. Paul wants to leave no room for this type of thing to happen with his touching all the issues that either had been, or could be used to deprecate him and his ministry before God and before those to whom he ministered.

In verse 2, Paul then moves onto indicate that he and his companions have renounced all those things that might be considered to be shameful. He thus closes the moral failure loophole that perhaps could have been used against his ministry. "All societies have systems of prestige, and in all cultures we find notions of shame. But whereas in many Western societies these terms do not figure prominently in defining basic cultural values,

they do, by contrast, play a predominant role in Mediterranean societies, both past and present.”² Paul understands this, and lives within the context of this world, whereas in our world today it almost seems that the more shameful something should be, the more people are cajoled, prodded, and often ridiculed into accepting that which has traditionally been seen as shameful and even reprehensible by the norms of most civilized societies. Paul, who lives within this honor/shame culture proclaims his renunciation of these shameful things that would normally be hidden.

In addition, he and his companions refuse to practice craftiness, or distortion (**πανουργία μηδὲ δολοῦντες**) of the word of God. Instead they openly proclaim the truth and they even submit themselves to be judged by the conscience of everyone else. They do this expecting those doing the judging to recognize that ultimately it is God that they will have to answer to if they do not judge conscientiously. Paul is not just talking about ethics as if in some way he is trying to reduce the ministry of the Gospel to some kind of “moral ideal.” For Paul the Gospel Message is very

² Halvor Moxnes, “Honor and Shame,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23:4 (1993), pp.167-176.

much about far more than morality. It is about salvation,³ but here, he wants to insure that his audience understands that he is indeed a credible, truthful, moral, witness who can be trusted to deliver to the Corinthians the one true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul at verse 3, would seem to concede that some did not comprehend the Gospel message that he preached. Those, he says, are the ones who are perishing. Their blindness is not accidental, (verse 4) but is the result of “the god (ὁ θεός) of this world (age αἰῶνος)” ...who “has blinded the minds of unbelievers.” The reference here is to Satan. In Jewish doctrine there were two ages and Satan controls this one as the result of God’s formal decree allowing this to happen. Paul appears to follow this doctrine here. For Paul, this malevolent power is perceived as blinding human minds to prevent the light of the Gospel message from penetrating their minds. Those who are blinded are described using the term “unbelievers” (ἀπίστων). This is normally a term used for those who are perceived as being outside the church, but here it likely is intended to include those inside the church who are in truth false brothers. They are here seen here as

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 91-92.

doing the work of Satan by undermining the work of Paul and his companions.⁴

These minions of Satan blind people in order that they will not be able to see the light of the Gospel. If they do see that light they would come to comprehend that Jesus is the very “image” (εἰκὼν) of God. The propaganda of the great Roman Empire was that the gods had chosen the Romans to bring all the people of the earth together and that the gods had favored the Roman Emperor and made him lord of all the earth. In contrast to this message, the Christian proclamation was that the One True God, the Creator God, had made Jesus Christ Lord. Christians were his slaves (verse 5), they owed their allegiance to him and to him alone, and they formed an alternate community living under His rule. So here Paul circles back to what he has said previously in 2:14 regarding God’s captive and the aroma of Christ through whom the knowledge of God was spread to every corner of the earth.⁵

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 40 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), pp. 78-79.

⁵ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 83.

Paul makes it clear that they are not proclaiming themselves, they are in fact “slaves” (δούλους) for the sake of Jesus. As they move into verse 6, Paul gives all credit for this great light of knowledge that has shone in their hearts belongs to God. He has allowed this knowledge to come to them in the “face of Christ.” Therefore the source of their message is God Himself. This is a bold and powerful claim that is intended to silence the adversaries of Paul’s ministry. There is a powerful contrast here between the message bearers who are slaves and the source of the message which is from God Himself.

Beginning at 4:7, Paul will focus, for a while, on this contrast between the grandeur and power of this message that has been entrusted to him and his companions and the frailty, and inadequacy of the messengers. He will also expound more on the hardships that he and his companions have endured as the result of this great message. This message is, as it were, a treasure that

is stored in jars of mere earth (clay).⁶ This contrast of the tremendous power of this message and the plain ordinary vessels bearing it is additional evidence that this message belongs to God. This is powerful imagery that challenges the mind and fires the imagination in a way that can truly touch the soul. A jar of clay is easily broken, fragile, and disposable. Paul will spend the next few verses trying to answer the question of “how” does this fragile container hold something of such power and glory?⁷

At verse 8, Paul will begin outlining the afflictions that he and his companions have faced describing the trouble that they face, troubles coming from every side. They are “crushed” and “perplexed,” but in all of this they are still “not driven to despair.”

At verse 9, the catalog of issues continues talking about the “persecution” they have faced, but all the while clearly understanding that they are not “forsaken.” This is more than a

⁶ Biblical interpreters have always loved Paul’s image of the clay jar that isn’t broken by hardships. Here are comments by early writers and preachers:

Abrosiaster. The reference to earthen vessels is an allusion to the weakness of human nature, which can do nothing unless empowered by God. (*Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*)

Chrysostom. Paul used the term *earthen* in allusion to the frailty of our mortal nature and to declare the weakness of our flesh. For it is no better than earthenware, which is soon damaged and destroyed by death, disease and even variations of temperature. The power of God is most conspicuous when it performs mighty works by using vile and lowly things. (*Hom. 1 Cor.*)

Theodoret of Cyr. If none of these things ever happened [i.e., the things on the hardship list], the greatness of God’s power would never be revealed. (*Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*). From Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 88. cf. These quotes may be found in ACCS NT 7 (ed. Gerald Bray; Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999) 231–32.

⁷ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 88.

motto this is a reality. The word (ἐγκαταλείπω) that is used here is a word indicating a powerful and important concept. Paul and his companions are not alone in their ministry. There is no feeling of despair that comes from that sense of being all alone. Though they are in every way crushed, afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down they are not left behind.

In all of this suffering that they endure they carry around in their very bodies (Verse 10) “the death of Jesus.” This occurs so that the contrasting element of “the life of Jesus” may be made visible. Paul wants his audience to understand that the union that existed between him and Christ was something of a specific nature. It is a kind of ontological oneness. In this union he acknowledges that there is evil in the world. Unlike the way Rome brought peace, through conquest, taxation, patronage, impoverishment of the masses, and extremely violent responses when its sovereignty was challenged: The kingdom of God is different. Paul understood that he shared in the life of Jesus Christ, but not for himself alone, he shared in that life for the benefit of others. In all of this, the suffering of Paul is a sharing in

the suffering of Christ and rather than being a shameful thing it is a glorious accolade to verify the truth of Paul's ministry.⁸


Verse 11 reveals much about Paul's understanding of the mission that he is a part of and that this is the calling of all who would follow Christ. As Christians we are called to be part of God's transformative work. That transformative work has already begun with the incarnation, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ. Even in the weakness of mortal flesh the power of God is being displayed and used to carry out God's will. His will is for the world and all that is in it to fulfill his plan. That plan for human beings was for them to be God's image bearers (Genesis 1:26-27). The image of God has only ever been fully and perfectly displayed by Jesus Christ.⁹ Our call, as image bearers of God, is to replicate the image shown to us by Jesus Christ in our own lives. Jesus lived the intent of God. He fulfilled it displaying to us the nature and heart of God in His life, His death, and the resurrection is verification of this fulfillment.

⁸ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 89-90.

⁹ John 14:6-7 - **6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."** NRSV.

In verse 11 then, Paul reorients the discussion to convey to his audience the reality of their life and ministry. The dying of Paul and his companions recreates the image of Christ to display to the world the transformative methodology of God. He does not display his power as the Roman Empire does, or as Satan does. He changes hearts and minds to align them with the heart and mind of God in ways that take far more actual power than killing, torturing, and compelling obedience through force. The changes God initiates are deeper, more permanent, and truly more transformative than those of Rome and Satan. Their peace is a lie. What may seem counterintuitive to the Corinthians is the way God chooses to work. What the world sees as weakness and even as losing is in reality just the opposite. In the life, death, burial, and resurrection is displayed the great power of God. This same cycle is to be repeated in the life of the those that follow Christ.

Verse 12, the death that is at work in Paul and his companions is actually bringing life to those who are hearing and believing in the Gospel. This life is not the temporary fleeting life that can be taken by Rome, it is real, permanent, eternal life that is the gift of God to those who seek his face and His will over the lie



of Satan. Satan would love for us to believe that this life is all we get and we had better make it good because this is all there is. This is a lie and this lie compels human beings to forsake their role as image bearers of God. This then is sin that leads to death as we fail to fulfill the destiny for which we were created. We become image bearers of Satan rather than image bearers of God. The call of the Gospel message is to restore the narrative of God as our path, our guide, and our destiny.

Therefore, Paul, preaching in a city shaped by Roman imperial presence and decree, where wealth, power, and triumph were proclaimed as evidence of the favor of the gods, offers a radically different criterion for judging “success.” In particular, Paul calls upon his audience to view the world through a different lens. He challenges them to see the world through the lens of Christ’s death and resurrection rather than through the false lens of Roman imperial power. We need to understand that Paul is not here glorifying suffering just for the sake of suffering. He is calling upon the Corinthians to recognize that the suffering of Paul and his companions is suffering for Christ as they are about their

transformative ministry on His behalf.¹⁰ This is not something that they sought out in some way. This is suffering that comes about as a result of the world's, and Satan's resistance to the power of God working through them as jars of clay.

Verse 16 begins by repeating that he and his companions therefore do not lose heart. In this, Paul is signaling that he drawing his current thought to a conclusion.¹¹ Again, he challenges his audience to see what they see as they look at the world through the lens of Christ rather than through the lens of the world. Even though on the outside it appears that they are “wasting away,” their “inner nature is being renewed day by day.” The outward appearances are deceptive, they are the falsehood, while the reality is very different. The eyes should be fixed on this perception advocated by Paul and his companions, rather than that which is false. The Gospel message is counter to the message of Rome and of Satan.

Verse 17, lets us know that the renewal of which Paul writes is so significant that by comparison to the great weight of the glory of that which they are being prepared for it is insignificant.

¹⁰ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 91.

¹¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 92.

His focus is not upon his and his companions suffering, but upon the impact those sufferings are producing. There is no proportionality here as the sufferings are less than minor by comparison with the great weight of the glory that is being produced by God. This should be clearly taken into consideration remembering the context where we have a man that was once beaten down so much that he despaired of living (1:8). They were not minor afflictions that Paul bore, but their weight is minor in comparison to the overwhelming weight of the eternal.¹² At verse 18 Paul clearly portrays the need for this new type of vision that allows people to see the reality of eternity by contrast to the worldly.

He makes it clear that the eyes do not allow us to see this. What we actually see, and perceive to be real, is in reality temporary, or transient (**πρόσκαιρα**). The things that cannot be seen are in reality those things which are eternal, according to Paul. This is a hard concept for all people to grasp, but particularly for a people that is so sensually oriented as we are today. What we can see, feel, taste, and touch is what we focus on

¹² Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp 93-94.

and this has become the lens through which we see the world.


Perhaps it has always been this way with the world, but our scientific mindset gives even more impetus to this tendency. Paul wants his audience to begin this transformation of their vision to this new vision that allows us to see the reality of God, to see that which is eternal.

In seeing with the eyes that Paul calls his audience to see he seeks to ground them into the eternal kingdom of God and to rescue them from the temporary kingdom of this world. Paul seeks to reorient his audience to view the world with the eyes of God rather than through the eyes that falsely lead us to value things that are transient and temporary over that which is eternal and of God.

Synopsis

As chapter 4 begins Paul starts to wrap up the points he has previously made regarding the glorious ministry of the Spirit. His focus starts out here focusing on the mercy of God. This is the key to their strength and perseverance in the ministry. He also wants to reiterate the integrity of their ministry by stating their renunciation of shameful things and the practice of cunning in their presentation. There is the admission that not everyone comprehends the message of the Gospel they proclaim. For them Satan has blinded their minds in order to keep them from understanding that Christ is the image of God. Paul want his audience to know that he and his companions are their slaves for the sake of Jesus. They serve them. In this section, Paul begins to outline more fully his alternate view of reality that differs markedly from the one that they perceive with their own senses.

Paul and his companions are clay jars, fragile and easily broken, but their message fortifies them in a way that is miraculous. The message makes them indestructible like their master Jesus Christ who took the most powerful weapon of the Roman empire, death, and He overcame by rising from the dead.



They carry the death of Jesus in their own bodies so that life, true life, might work in those to whom they proclaim the Gospel.

Everything that Paul and his companions do, and suffer, is for the sake of the Corinthians and those to whom they minister.

They do not lose heart for this momentary, temporary, affliction is nothing by comparison to the weight of the eternal glory that the Gospel reveals to them and through them. This is the alternate reality that Paul and his companions boldly proclaim. This contrast between what can be seen and what is invisible challenges his audience to shift their perceptions of reality. With this shift will come the realization of the nature and power of the Gospel. They are called to fulfill their destiny of true image bearers of God.

Questions

1. How would you define mercy?
2. What is an instance where it was difficult for you not to lose heart? What kept you from actually losing heart?
3. What are some shameful things that people today hide? Why?
4. How would you define truth? Why?
5. What is the Gospel?
6. Why do you think Paul speaks in terms of “the god of this world” rather than spelling out his name?
7. Have you known people who had a mind blinded to something? What?
8. What is the “image of God?”
9. Why do you think Paul describes himself and his companions as slaves?
10. Whose slaves are Paul and his companions?
11. Why do you think Paul describes himself and his companions as “earthen jars?”
12. What does it mean to carry the death of Jesus?

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13. What is life; how would you define it?
 14. What do you think it means that God raised Christ from the dead?
 15. How would you describe eternity? How much does it weigh?
 16. What are some things that exist that you cannot see? How do you know they exist?
 17. What is more important, what you can see, or what you cannot see? Why?
 18. What do you think Paul means by writing, “What cannot be seen is eternal?”