

2 Cor. 4:1-6 “The Light of the Glorious Gospel”

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Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. – 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, ESV

Introduction: What causes you to lose heart? [Why Martin Luther lost heart and how he regained it.]

Have you ever lost heart? Of course you have! Almost everyone alive in the world has lost heart at one time or another. Maybe you came to a place where you just weren't sure that what you were doing was making any difference in the world or maybe weren't sure that you really mattered to anyone. Maybe you reached a point in a job where you thought coming to work was just a waste of your time and of your employer's money. Or maybe you had such an intense fight with your spouse that you weren't sure whether the wounds you had inflicted with your words could ever be healed.

504 years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther had, in many ways, lost heart. His devotion to the Catholic Church and the lifestyle of the monastery had been whole-hearted, unreserved, and unrelenting for years. As Luther would later famously reflect, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.”

Yet as the years of his monkery progressed, he had become deeply frustrated with himself and deeply disillusioned with the church he had served so faithfully. He was daily plagued by the pestilence of his own sin, which he could not seem to overcome. He had taken a pilgrimage to Rome in 1510 and had been shocked to see the deep

immorality and blasphemous irreverence in the heart of the church. Then, in 1517, the last straw: A peddler, a travelling salesman, a con artist named Johann Tetzel had come to the region of German close to where Luther ministered selling indulgences. Indulgences were a way to get yourself or your loved ones out of the torments of purgatory sooner. They were not exactly “for sale” – or shouldn’t have been – but a nice donation to the church for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome certainly would go a long way toward getting you a better indulgence. Tetzel took the indulgences business to new heights – or depths, depending on how you look at it – even coining commercial jungles – “Every time a coin in the coffer clings, another soul from purgatory springs.”

This disgusted Luther and brought him to the end of himself, and he responded by calling for a debate on the sale of indulgences, writing 95 Theses Statements that challenged the practice of the church. On October 31, 1517, the Eve of All Saints’ Day (All Hallow’s Eve), he nailed these statements for debate to the castle church door in his town of Wittenberg, Germany, which was like posting a notice on a public bulletin board.

Thesis #32 shows how much Luther had lost heart in the practices of the church: “Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgence letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers.” And yet, having lost heart in the practices of the church, Luther had not lost heart in the Lord and in His mercies. Statements 36 and 37 show this:

36. Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters.

37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.

Six months later, in April of 1518, Martin Luther got his desired opportunity for a more public hearing of his concerns in Heidelberg, Germany. He declared: “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.” And “The law says, “do this”, and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this,” and everything is already done.” He then concluded, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.”

Much like Martin Luther, the Apostle Paul had come to the place of losing heart earlier in his life, although he was brought there by the Lord in a much more dramatic fashion. Saul of Tarsus, as he was known then, was an energetic and committed young Pharisee who, in his zeal for God's law and honor, was determined to stamp out rising group of heretics known as "the people of the Way," who worshipped Jesus of Nazareth and proclaimed He was the risen Messiah, the Son of God. He rode from Jerusalem to Damascus to stamp out these rebellious followers of this false Messiah.

In a moment, as a light shone from heaven that was brighter than the Noonday Sun, Saul was knocked off his horse and his whole life came crashing down, as the glorious risen Lord Jesus said, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" As Saul of Tarsus lost heart because everything he had been pursuing in his life was shown to be an empty lie, the life of the Apostle Paul began, and he would never need to lose heart, because he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had been given a ministry by the mercies of God, who spared him from judgment, though he was a violent persecutor of the Lord Jesus Christ, and put him to service in the cause of Gospel instead.

I. The Ministry We Have by the Mercy of God, v. I

So, what is the ministry Paul had been given by the mercy of God? It was the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the full revelation of the glory of God in human form, as we will see later. It was the ministry of being an ambassador of Christ, as Paul will describe in more detail in chapter 5. Paul was taken from persecuting the followers of Jesus to being privileged to represent and proclaim Jesus Christ to the world.

Because this ministry was given to Paul by God, because it did not come from him and was not about him, he did not lose heart no matter how much he was called to suffer or be rejected or despised and rejected by the sophisticated men of the world. He did not lose heart because God had mercy on him, and if God had mercy on him, what did he care what mere men said about him or did to him? He did not lose heart because the One he was called to proclaim as a herald and represent as an ambassador had already won full victory over the devil's temptations, the sins of all of God's people, and the power of death itself. So what if some people thought he wasn't very sophisticated or impressive or as gifted as the so-called super-apostles.

Paul never forgot what he deserved, and he never forgot what he had been given instead, and that caused him to not lose heart.

We each live with two sizable gaps: a gap between what we desire and are tempted to think we're somehow entitled to and the reality of what we actually have and then the gap between what we really deserve from God and what we have been given instead. The first is an entirely imaginary gap that exists entirely in our egotistical imagination, where we ask things like "Why can't I have?" and "Why shouldn't I have?" and "How come some people seem to have?" and "Why should he have that and not me?" It's full of coveting and idolatry and self-exalting entitlement, and it will always lead us to be disheartened. The second gap – between what we actually deserve and what God has given us instead – is real and far bigger than we understand. We deserve eternal condemnation but God has given us eternal life instead, and because we really don't understand eternal, we don't understand the size of this chasm and what it cost Christ to bridge it for us, so that we get what deserves because He took what we deserve on the cross.

Keep your eyes focused on how much more mercy you have received from God than you deserve and how much it cost Christ to give that mercy to you, and you will not lose heart. Have confidence in His calling and His grace, and you will not lose heart.

2. **The Underhanded Ways We Reject, v. 2**

Having confidence that true Gospel ministry is given by the mercy of God also leads us to reject underhanded, deceitful ways of doing ministry:

But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. – v. 2

Sadly, the history of Christianity and the present state of the church around the world is littered with countless stories of "disgraceful, underhanded ways" of doing so-called Christian ministry. When I was last in Uganda in 2019, we had a Muslim van driver who took us from Entebbe to Reaching Africa's Unreached in Moyo – two full days of driving there and back. We got to know Abdul as he remained with us for the ten days of training we did. He told me that he didn't understand why all of the biggest churches in Kampala, the large capital city where he lived, were so corrupt

and worldly. He said that their message was “Come and get your miracle!” not “Come and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins.”

In Paul’s day, so-called Super Apostles commanded large honorariums for their impressive rhetorical skills. In Luther’s day, Tetzl and others sold forgiveness like a commodity and hundreds of years earlier, the Pope had promised a plenary indulgence – an instant ticket to heaven – for anyone willing to go on Crusade to kill Muslims and retrieve the Holy Land for the Christian Empire. You can turn on the television and see Benny Hinn slaying people in the Spirit, knocking them over with his jacket in stage so-called healings. Why do people do these things? Simply put, it’s because they are not faithfully carrying out the ministry God gives by His mercy and are instead trying to build a name for themselves or large and impressive church buildings for themselves or an ever-expanding empire or business for themselves and their families.

Paul says of himself and his faithful ministry companions, “*We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*” He says it should be obvious to everyone that faithful Gospel ministers are not engaging in cunning – that is, craftiness or subtlety. He says faithful Gospel ministers will not tamper with God’s Word but will openly and plainly state the truth from the Word of God, in a way that should be evidently marked by integrity to everyone who observes and evaluates.

Transparency. Clarity. “*Open statement of the truth.*” The Gospel is not some hidden secret that requires the right set of magic decoder rings to unlock. The church is not a secret society or a mystic order like the Masons or the Scientologists. What we believe should be openly and plainly stated, and what is taught and proclaimed should be evidently plain from the text of Scripture and the plain facts of history.

The Bible is the most widely translated, most printed, sold, distributed, and readily available book in the world, and in the history of the world, and second place isn’t even close. The most translated books in the history of literature are *The Little Prince* and *Pinocchio*, and they’ve been translated into about 300 different languages. The best-selling book in the history of literature is *Don Quixote* – yes, *Don Quixote* – which has sold about 500 million copies. But the Bible has been translated into over 3,000 different languages and over 5 billion copies of the Bible have been printed and

distributed – meaning that in both translation and printing, the Bible has 10 TIMES the distribution of the second-place books.

God is not interested in hiding the truth of the Gospel or the truths of His word, and faithful ministers should endeavor to make the meaning of the Bible plain and clear and should seek to make the Gospel plain and openly known.

3. **The Veiling of the Gospel, vv. 3-4**

So, if the Bible is so widely available and has been printed and distributed all over the world, and if the Bible is the most read, most studied, most taught, most commented on book in the world, then why is the Gospel still veiled to so many people? Why do so many people really still have no idea what Christians actually believe and why we believe it?

So many people think Christianity is all about going to church and trying to be a good person, or they think it's about trying to advance some political agenda or some social policies. Many, many people think Christians believe they are better than everyone else, that they alone have moral superiority. So, why?

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

“The god of this world” is Satan. He was given limited dominion over this world way back in the Garden of Eden when Adam obeyed him instead of God. Adam put himself under Satan's rule, and he dragged all humanity into the fallen condition of being slaves to sin and children of the devil ever since.

One Man – and only One Man – came into this world and faced down the devil and beat him soundly. He never yielded to Satan's temptations. He was the perfect and sinless image of God – all that Adam was supposed to be and more. He alone overcame the devil by the power of the Holy Spirit in perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father. He then went to the cross to pay the penalty for all of our sin, to loose us from the bondage to sin and Satan we are in by nature, and He rose again from the dead on the Third Day, defeating death, overthrowing the grave, and bringing life and immortality to light in His glorious resurrection.

Satan was defeated by Jesus on the cross and in His resurrection. Jesus fulfilled every promise of God and disarmed the devil.

In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul writes:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (ESV)

So now, for Satan, the One person he wants to keep people from seeing clearly is Jesus. Sometimes he does that by infiltrating the church and getting so-called Christians to practice all sorts of deceitful, underhanded, selfish cunning – because it throws up a big wall of self-righteous religiosity or self-exalting empire-building in the name of Jesus and that keeps people from seeing the true Jesus, the Jesus who is Mighty to Save, the Jesus who has overcome the devil.

He can also use any other religion or philosophy. He doesn't really care what you believe or what you try as a life strategy as long as he keeps you from seeing Jesus by faith. Jesus is the only one he fears because Jesus is the only One who has defeated him. And so he blinds *“the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”*

Even if you are a Christian, Satan is trying to do the same thing in your life. He will distract you with anything – even good Christian things – as long as they keep you from seeking and hiding yourself in Jesus. On your own, he knows he can deceive you and frustrate you. If you're hiding in Jesus by faith, he knows he is up against a force too powerful for him.

4. **What We Proclaim, v. 5**

And so Paul says, *“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.”* Paul knows that if he were to proclaim himself, he would be playing into Satan's hand. Paul is not anyone's Lord and Savior. Paul has not defeated the god of this world. Paul has not brought life and immortality to light through the power of His indestructible life. No, Paul must proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and not himself.

Every true Gospel minister makes much of Jesus and little of themselves. Paul says he and his ministry companions are mere slaves of those whom God has called them to serve with the Gospel. The ESV translates this “servants,” but the word is “slaves.” The Gospel minister proclaims Christ and serves people as their slave for Jesus’ sake. Now, just because Paul is the Corinthians’ slave doesn’t mean they are his masters. No, the Lord Jesus is his Master, and the Lord Jesus has given Paul his ministry by the mercy of God, and the ministry Christ has given Paul includes serving the Corinthians and the other churches Paul was called to serve. He was to pour out his life in service to the churches, but not to let them master him. He proclaimed one Lord, his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

5. **The Power That Makes All the Difference, v. 6**

So, as Paul served and proclaimed the Lord Jesus Christ and not himself, what power could he trust to be able to change and unveil people’s hearts and bring them to see and to love the Lord Jesus? Well, certainly not his own power but only the power of God.

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

Paul knows what saved him, and it wasn’t the powerful preaching of Peter or the wonderfully faithful testimony of Stephen the first martyr, whom Paul heard in Acts 7 and still helped the Sanhedrin stone him to death. The only thing that saved Paul was God’s light shining from heaven. Now, Paul had a very real encounter with a very real and supernatural light on the Road to Damascus, but he knows very well that the same power of God that saved him is the only power that can save anyone.

In the beginning, when the world was formless and void and darkness was over the face of the deep, God spoke, “Let there be light” and light shattered the darkness instantly. Paul knows that the same God who spoke those words can speak His eternal word, the Lord Jesus Christ, to shine into our hearts.

Only God can give us what we need to be saved – “*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*” That is, we need to know in our hearts that Jesus Christ is the Glory of God made man. His face shines with a glory that is eternal and unfading, something Moses never had, because He is the incarnation of the glory of God. And we need to know Him to be saved. To know Him is to have

eternal life, and not to know Him is to be left in eternal condemnation. So, do you know Him? If you're not sure, ask the Lord to shine the light of the knowledge of the glory of Gd in the face of Jesus Christ into your heart and life. Pray to Him. Call to Him. Ask Him to save you, to show you Jesus by eyes of faith that only He can give! When Martin Luther saw that light in the Word of God, it changed him forever, and God, through him, changed the world forever.

So, do you know Him?