

Staying Encouraged in Ministry Struggles

2 Corinthians 4:1-18⁴

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Paul opens this chapter with these words, "Therefore, since we have this ministry..." What ministry is he referring to? It is the glorious ministry of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6). What kind of ministry have we received?

- It is a ministry of the Spirit (3:8)
- It is a ministry of righteousness (3:9)
- It is a ministry of the eternal and the permanent (3:10-11)

And therefore, it is a more glorious ministry (3:7-11).

Therefore, as a consequence of it being this kind of ministry:

- We do not veil that glory, but reveal it by a bold declaration (3:12) arising from a being transformed life (3:18).
- We do not lose heart (4:1,16) in the face of difficulty or decline.

Illustration: W. Churchill - "We will never, never quit."

The Standards for New Covenant Ministry

(4:1-6)

¹ 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.

New Covenant ministry exemplifies godliness in its exercise while expecting heart transformation. There will be no disconnect from the way the ministry works from what is expected of people in their Christian lives.

How we do ministry and the way we go about it are profoundly affected by the glory of the ministry of the New Covenant.

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The Conduct of our Ministry**(v.2)**

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.

That we have received this kind of ministry impacts the way we do the ministry we have received. It affects the conduct and the methods we employ. Paul's language is clear in what he rejects and what he embraces. This is so because it is precisely at these points that his opponents, the so-called "super-apostles" are corrupting the ministry of the Word.

There will be *no deception* in life and ministry. Paul has thoroughly rejected shamefully deceptive ways of ministering. This is the temptation of the evangelical. They resort to manipulation, propaganda and reliance on the methods of the world in serving Christ.

There will be *no distortion* of truth in ministry. Paul has determined not to conduct ministry in such a way that it mixes it with foreign elements. The allusion is to the practice of taking good wine and mixing it with water and selling it as the genuine, full article. This is the temptation to the liberal. They twist and distort the gospel or present a partial gospel. They mix the truth with foreign elements so you can have today the prosperity gospel, or the social gospel or the therapeutic gospel.

In contrast, there will be *a full and complete disclosure* of truth that commends itself to in others conscience and before the face of God. This must be the full commitment of each of you, not just the elders. Each of you must give your life and whatever ministry God gives you to a full disclosure of the truth of the Word of God. You must reject the world's methods and their deceptions. And you must reject the distortions and twisting of Scripture that keep us comfortable and accepted among our peers.

Why do these things become a temptation to us? Because of...

The Challenge in our Ministry**(v.3-4)**

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.

One of the great struggles in each sphere of the church's purpose is that people don't get it. In our exaltation, people can sing without heart and passion and engagement. In our edification, we can preach and teach and apply and people can be apathetic, disobedient and utterly self-serving. And in our evangelism, people don't respond to the great danger of God's wrath and judgment and to the great provision in the gospel. So, we become frustrated and discouraged and quickly turn to things that work.

Paul says that we must understand that the god of this world, Satan, is actively blinding unbelievers so that they cannot see the light. The fact of their blindness does not deny the presence or the power of the light. The sun does not go away because you cannot see. So, while Moses veiled himself so that Israel would not see the fading glory, Satan blinds the unbelieving today so that the ever-present and brightness of glory is veiled to them.

And what a gospel it is that we have to proclaim. It is "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (v.4b). The gospel involves the facts of the doing and dying of the Savior. It is about His resurrection and our salvation. The good news is ultimately about the glory of Christ. The facts of the gospel are to the glory of the gospel like the facts

of atomic fission and sun spots and gravity are to the brightness and power and the energy flowing from the sun.

So how do these truths affect Paul's understanding of ministry? It shapes...

The Concepts for our Ministry

(v.5-6)

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.

I see two powerfully important ideas that are central to not losing heart in the glorious ministry of the gospel to a blinded and dead world.

There is the centrality of *the supremacy of Christ* (v.5). The core sentence here is that "we preach Christ Jesus as Lord." That we do so means that the focus is not on us except as bond-servants. The glory of Christ in the gospel is His supremacy – that is, that He is Lord. Not that He is just Divine, but that He is sole and absolute Lord who is to be worshipped, loved, trusted and obeyed. So we constantly shine the light of our preaching on Christ and stand in the shadows as servants.

There is the centrality of *the sovereignty of God* (v.6). Now this is where we must tell the whole truth. And here it is. We do not lose heart in ministry because that people see the light of the knowledge the glory of God is utterly dependent upon a sovereign work of God. Now don't miss this. God sovereignly speaks and light is created to shine in the darkness, so God sovereignly shines in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. O how I love these verses. O, to gaze on the magnificent glory of the eternal God by looking on the countenance of Christ with God given faith now and someday with real, physical sight. But that we see is utterly of God.

So here it is. The glory is great. The blindness is perverse and pervasive. But Jesus is supreme and God is sovereign and the good news is glorious.

But here is the root of so much discouragement. "We have this glorious treasure of light and life in earthen vessels, in frail and failing jars of clay" (v.7). So, we must not lose heart...

The Suffering in a New Covenant Ministry

(v. 7-18)

This is Paul's message in this text, "We will not lose heart" (v.1,16). And he had plenty of opportunity to be discouraged even to the point of quitting. He had struggled mightily in doctrine and correction with this church. He had had to do so in the context of enormous personal suffering and sacrifice as well as the public, slanderous opposition by the legalists and the "super-apostles". In other words, he had found what most Christians find to be true: there is great glory and joy and peace that comes to us as Christians. There is also great heartache, difficulty, suffering and opposition that comes as well.

But he will not quit. And neither should we. Why?

Ring out from this chapter is an enormous emphasis on glory. It is all about the glory, that is, that God should look large and weighty in our lives to such a degree that it can be seen by others.

(3:8) – It is a *with more glory*.

(3:10) – It is a *surpassing glory*.

(3:18) – It is the *glory of the Lord* into which we are being transformed.

(4:4) – It is the *gospel (good news) of the glory of God.*

(4:5) – It is the *glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

(4:15) – It is *a thanksgiving that abounds to the glory of God.*

(4:17) – It is an *eternal weight of glory.*

Further, Paul's thinking is shaped by two important words: light and life. There is the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (v.4), the light that shone forth from God's creative hand (v.6) that illustrates the shining of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God (v.6). Then there is the life of Jesus in us (v.10) that is to be manifested (v.11) through us and works in others (v.12).

So, we do not lose heart because of the encouraging perspective of what is the light of glory in Jesus (v.1-6) becomes the life of Jesus in us (v.7-15).

So here it is. The glory is great. The blindness is perverse and pervasive. But Jesus is supreme and God is sovereign and the good news is glorious.

But here is the root of so much discouragement. "We have this glorious treasure of light and life in earthen vessels, in frail and failing jars of clay" (v.7). So, we must not lose heart...

The Problems Encountered

(v.7-15)

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Here is the surprise. The glory of the treasure entails the suffering of the vessel. If we are to have God's power released in ministry, we will have the frailty of the vessel exposed in suffering. My beloved, there is no other way.

The Purpose in God's Design

(v.7)

Now why is this so? We possess this treasure in frail vessels of earth to show that the transcending, surpassing power belongs to and comes from God and is from us. The earthiness of the vessel shows that the power is from God. And when there is no power, what is often then sought is an elegant and strong and beautiful vessel. This is not God's way. His way is to place the treasure in clay pots and then to proceed to break the pot! This is...

The Pain of our Experience

(v.8-9)

Here are the kind of things that are the shared painful experiences that Paul suffered and we are exposed to.

CIRCUMSTANCES & MOLDING - We are being pressed down and squeezed in - but we are not in a strait place.

FEAR & THE FUTURE - We cannot see the passage (road) ahead, but we are not in a dead end.

MISUNDERSTANDING & LONELINESS - We are pursued & hunted down - but we are not left without friends.

PREJUDICE & FAILURE - We are thrown down and removed from a position of trust & preeminence - but we are not utterly loosed from the assembly.

What has God brought into your life to break the earthen vessel?

The Principle for our Understanding

(v.10-12)

Here is *the reality* of what is actually going on in the trials (v.10). In these things we are always carrying about in us the dying of Jesus with the objective that Jesus' life might be shown in our body. Now here is the way I understand this. In order for the power of God to be shown in the vessel, the vessel must be being broken so that life can be poured out. So when we suffer, we are to understand [interpret] that suffering as *life-releasing*.

Further, *the reason* these circumstances come is that we are handed over to death so that Jesus' life may be revealed. What an unfathomable mystery this is. The outward difficulties and pressures on the vessel are essential to the release of the treasure: that is, to the **display of light** and the **giving of life**.

So *the result* is that we are sharing the fullest expression of body life. We are entrusted with death so that life may flow to others.

Here is the fundamental meaning of the cross for power in ministry. Just as Jesus' sacrifice brings life to the church, so our sacrifice brings life to others. This is not some mystical unreality, but is the painful, wearying, sacrificial toil and trouble of pouring out our lives for others. And so the simple question. Will you? We love the beautiful imagery of being treasure filled vessels; do we embrace the brutal reality of being broken for the sake of others?

The Persuasion by our Faith

(v.13-15)

Paul has same attitude of faith as the Psalmist in Psalm 116:10 when he connects the difficulties he is experiencing with the dynamic of being delivered by God. So his identifying the hardships of life in ministry is not the *absence* of faith, but an *attitude* of faith. We can speak of pouring out our lives for one another because we have confidence in the resurrection. If we are going to be raised to be presented together to Christ, then what does it matter if we are dying now?

The discouraging difficulties do not keep us from a grand expectation that the gospel will spread. Satan may blind unbelieving minds, but God is shining the light of the knowledge of the glory of Christ in people's lives in the widening reach and increasing effect of grace.

The ever-spreading *grace* brings forth the abounding *gratitude* that is *glorifying* to God.

The Perceptions Entailed

(v.16-18)

The way we behave is driven by what we believe. You will often hear it said, "It is all a matter of perspective." That is not what Paul is saying here. What he means here is more represented by our saying, "Keep it all in perspective."

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Inward, not outward

(v.16)

We are looking at what God is doing in us. The outer man is in decline. But God is at work to develop and renew and sustain the inner man. I will not lose heart in failing and increasing frailty of my physical body when I experience the constant inward renewal of my soul by God's marvelous work.

Future, not present

(v.17)

We are weighing it all in the light of glory. The incredible difficulties and pain expressed in verse 8 that is sacrificial, life out-pouring are momentary and light when we place them on the scale over against the massive weight of the solid and stupendous glory to come.

Eternal, not temporal

(v.18)

We are seeing the invisible, the eternal. So, with spiritual eyes trained by faith through the Word we focus, not on what is near and passing and temporal, but on what is high and eternal and lasting.

Now stop a moment and reread that sentence again. The momentary, light afflictions: (1) are *producing for us* an incomparable weight of glory (2) *while we are looking* at what is not seen. There are two conditions to our having that weight of glory: the experience of afflictions while gazing on the unseen.

So, we will not lose heart. The greatness of the treasure in the frailty of the vessel gives us the privilege of pouring out our lives for others because we are convinced there is a glory to come that will make it all worthwhile.

Reflect and Respond

🔨 Brokenness releasing light...

Gideon and jars of clay

🔨 Brokenness releasing fragrance...

Woman with jar of perfume

🔨 Brokenness bringing glory...

Us with inward treasure of the glory of Christ and the outward breaking of the jars of clay