



2 Corinthians - Chapter Four

I. 2 Corinthians 1:1-7:16 - Paul's Defence of His Legitimacy as an Apostle (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

Paul once again makes it clear that his work is not about him for he is just a servant, a clay jar, and all the suffering and hardship he willingly endures is for the sole purpose of having Jesus revealed to the world. It is the message contained within the common jar that is of greatest importance.

The Gospel is not about a different god, someone other than the world's original creator, but about the same creator God bringing new life and light to his world, the world where death and darkness have made their home and usurped his role. Paul summarises God's command in Genesis 1, in order to say: what happened to me on the Damascus Road, what happened to you when you believed, and what happens whenever anyone turns to the Lord is a moment of new creation. The truth of the Gospel is simple and Paul does not need rhetoric or fancy speech to proclaim it.

Paul concludes the chapter by indicating that the ministers of the Gospel go through all these trials and hardships, yet they continue to speak out in order that others, like the Corinthians, can live in the hope the Gospel brings. That should result in thanksgiving by all.

I.e 2 Corinthians 4:1-6:13 - Paul's encouragement in his ministry

Paul explains why, despite his life of affliction as an apostle of Christ, he does not lose heart in his ministry (4:1, 4:16 and 5:6). He then goes on to define further (5:11-6:2), and support (6:3-13) the message and character of the new covenant ministry itself.

I.e.i 2 Corinthians 4:1-15 - Treasure in Clay Jars

Paul met with as much opposition to his teaching style as he did to his character as an apostle. However, Paul clearly states that he will not be discouraged by the criticism or change the message of the Gospel to suit his listeners. He makes it

clear that he will not be like those who like to skilfully manipulate an audience with their rhetoric and fine speech making. Paul's strength is in the message and he commends himself to every person's conscience. The conscience is where conviction takes hold that what one is hearing is the truth. The problem lies not in the message but with the ones who are unable to comprehend it.

Paul compares the Gospel minister to a piece of Palestinian pottery. The treasure he refers to is the glorious good news about Christ. The Gospel minister is a vessel made of common, run-of-the-mill clay, fragile and easily broken. And yet God has entrusted the treasure of the Gospel to such a vessel. God does this to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from the person that he has entrusted it to.

1.e.i.1 **2 Corinthians 4:1-6 - The new covenant dawning of the new creation**

In spite of those who reject his Gospel, Paul does not lose heart in his ministry because through it God is bringing about the beginning of the new creation amid this fallen world.

¹ Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

2 Corinthians 4:1

It is by God's mercy. Paul once again clearly states that it is not by his own power, credentials or authority that he undertakes the work of an apostle. It is purely down to God's grace that he can do what he does: **<<But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life>>** (1 Timothy 1:16).

Do not lose heart. Paul and people like him endure in the faith and trust they have placed in God through Jesus. Christians are called to persevere in times of trial and hardship. Paul is an excellent model of such a person. The OT indicates the difference between those who trust in God and those who do not: **<<Foreigners lost heart, and came trembling out of their strongholds>>** (Psalm 18:45), **<<but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint>>** (Isaiah 40:31).

² We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practise cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

2 Corinthians 4:2

Because Paul is not motivated in his ministry by money: **<<For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence>>** (2 Corinthians 2:17), and because he does not crave human approval: **<<Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people?**

If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ>> (Galatians 1:10), Paul refused to falsify or tamper with, a word also used of wine merchants diluting their wares, God's Word by watering it down or changing it to suit what people want to hear: <<*For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires*>> (2 Timothy 4:3).

Rather, Paul's open statement of the truth commends him to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God as judge: <<*So although I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, nor on account of the one who was wronged, but in order that your zeal for us might be made known to you before God*>> (2 Corinthians 7:12), and: <<*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up*>> (2 Corinthians 12:19), and shows that he does not proclaim a secret or hidden Gospel to only a select inner group. Three times in this letter Paul refuses to commend himself by external evidence (3:1, 5:12 and 10:18), while three times he does commend himself by pointing to his own conduct, although each time he attributes it to the mercy of God (v.2, 6:4 and 12:11).

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 we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

2 Corinthians 4:3-5

If our Gospel is veiled refers to the hardened heart that causes one to be separated from God's presence and makes it impossible to recognise Jesus as the Messiah: <<*Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds*>> (2 Corinthians 3:12-15). Those whose minds are veiled are the ones who are perishing, even though it may not appear that way to them in this age. This is all part of the deceit against those who do not know Jesus as their Lord.

The god of this world refers to Satan: <<*Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out*>> (John 12:31), and: <<*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient*>> (Ephesians 2:1-2), whose aim is to do all he can to prevent God's light from piercing the veil and penetrating into people's hearts, minds and souls.

The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. The Gospel illuminates how Christ's death on the Cross makes it possible for God's people to be in his presence, having been transformed by God's presence and not destroyed by it: *<<And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit>>* (2 Corinthians 3:18). This Gospel is both proclaimed and embodied by Paul: *<<When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God>>* (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Thus Paul preaches the crucified and risen Christ as Lord, i.e. the Gospel, and Paul himself lives out the Gospel in the service of his hearers; that is, as an embodiment of the Gospel in his own Christ-like slavery to the needs of his people. A further contrast between Paul's attitudes and actions and those of his opponents is revealed in: *<<For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough>>* (2 Corinthians 11:4).

⁶ For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who 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 4:6

The God is Paul's way of reminding them that there is only one creator and sustainer God, unlike the many and varied gods of the pagan worshippers who abounded in Corinth and elsewhere.

Let light shine out of darkness. Paul uses the provision of light in Genesis 1:3 to picture conversion as the dawning of the new creation amid this fallen world: *<<The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined>>* (Isaiah 9:2), *<<he says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth'>>* (Isaiah 49:6), and: *<<So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts>>* (2 Peter 1:19). This light can then be found within a believer's heart: *<<It is you who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness>>* (Psalm 18:28).

Paul literally saw the light when he encountered the Risen Lord on the Road to Damascus: *<<Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him>>* (Acts 9:3). John also wrote about this light: *<<What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of*

all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it>> (John 1:3b-5).

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. To know the glory of Christ (v.4) is to encounter the life-transforming glory of God.

1.e.i.2 2 Corinthians 4:7-15 - The new covenant power of the resurrection

In spite of his suffering as an apostle, Paul does not lose heart (v.16) because the same power that raised Jesus from the dead enables him to endure adversity (vv.7-12), and his resurrection reveals the power of God (v.7 and vv.11-12).

⁷ But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7

This treasure is a reference to <<*the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*>> (v.6) as the content of the Gospel (v.4).

Clay jars is a common metaphor in the ancient world for human weakness: <<*how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed like a moth*>> (Job 4:19), <<*I have passed out of mind like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel*>> (Psalm 31:12), <<*its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly that among its fragments not a sherd is found for taking fire from the hearth, or dipping water out of the cistern*>> (Isaiah 30:14), and: <<*Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand*>> (Isaiah 64:8). This verse thus restates the central thesis of 2 Corinthians as seen in 1:3-11 and 2:14-17: God triumphs amid human weakness, embodying the principle of Christ's crucifixion: <<*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong*>> (1 Corinthians 1:27), and: <<*If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness*>> (2 Corinthians 11:30).

The point that should not be missed here is that the content of the clay pot is of far greater value than the pot itself and no one should dismiss the message based on their assessment of the outer container, the person proclaiming the Gospel is just the servant; Christ is the message.

This extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. Power is the Greek word *dynamis* from which the English word dynamite is derived. The Gospel is not merely a message that confronts the mind but an explosive power that can turn a person's life upside down. Once again Paul makes it plain that it is God and not them who is the authority, so they cannot boast in their own strength: <<*The Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me"'*>> (Judges 7:2).

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 made visible in our bodies.

2 Corinthians 4:8-10

Afflicted, but not crushed. These verses show the paradox of living as a believer in the present evil age.

Perplexed, but not driven to despair shows that Paul did not always understand the trials and hardships he faced but that he was content to accept them. He was also perplexed about the behaviour of other believers: <<*I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you*>> (Galatians 4:20).

Persecuted, but not forsaken indicates that testing will come but that God will stand by his own people during such times: <<*Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also*>> (John 15:20), and: <<*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you'*>> (Hebrews 13:5).

Struck down, but not destroyed. The theme continues with the idea that, although they may have been knocked back, God has always been there to pick them up in order for them to continue their work: <<*though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand*>> (Psalm 37:24), <<*for though they fall seven times, they will rise again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity*>> (Proverbs 24:16), and: <<*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen*>> (2 Timothy 4:18).

The reader needs to be aware that Paul here is speaking after the event, for he had survived these and many other afflictions. However, at the time they are very real trials and he probably did feel crushed, forsaken and even destroyed as he wrote near the opening of the letter: <<*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead*>> (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

This passage is an enormous comfort to all those who are going through persecution, temptation, suffering, bereavement, tragedy and sorrow of every kind. This is what it can be like to live out the Gospel. This is what being a servant of Jesus Christ is often like for many people around the world.

By the death of Jesus Paul is thinking of the whole experience, that is, the hardships, troubles and frustration that Jesus faced during his three-year ministry: the loneliness, the disappointments with his disciples, the exhaustion, the constant harassment by opponents, the crowd's continuous demands, the incredulity of his family, the mocking and jeers of his foes, the flight of his friends, the hours on the Cross, the thirst and then the end.

The life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. Paul is acknowledging the wearing effect that the Gospel ministry had on Jesus mentally, emotionally and physically. Nor is this a unique experience. Jesus taught his followers that if anyone would come after him, they would suffer: <<**He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’**>> (Mark 8:34), and: <<**Then he said to them all, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’**>> (Luke 9:23). This is a clear statement of what might and often does lay in store for the Christian, as Paul makes very clear near the end of his own life: <<**Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted**>> (2 Timothy 3:12).

¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

2 Corinthians 4:11-12

Paul is always being given up by God to death for Jesus’ sake so that the power of the resurrection life of Jesus, experienced in Paul’s ability to endure adversity and in the powerful spread of the Gospel in spite of opposition, might be made known in the weakness of his mortal flesh (v.7).

Given up is the legal term used in the Gospels of Jesus being handed over to the authorities. If this is the sense here, then the Gospel ministry is being pictured as a ‘delivering up into death’s custody’. The Gospel ministers are expendable in this ministry and therefore Paul can liken them to clay pots. While the Corinthians might have looked on hardship and death as incompatible with a Spirit-directed ministry, it nevertheless produced a life that even now is at work, or better still, is energising them.

There is an important lesson here. The Corinthians, like many Christians today, believed that adversity was inconsistent with the Spirit-filled Christian life, let alone with the Gospel ministry. At issue is how God manifests his power. Paul’s opponents claimed that it is through the working of signs, wonders and miracles. Paul, on the other hand, maintained that God’s power is able to make itself known most effectively through ministerial hardship and distress. His second catalogue of ministerial troubles drives this point home even more forcefully: <<**We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything**>> (2 Corinthians 6:8b-10). It is the ‘yet’ side that attracts attention. How is it that Gospel ministers live on? Certainly not by their own strength, for theirs is a position of weakness. But it is in their very weakness that the eternal life of Jesus is revealed.

For Jesus’ sake excludes a reference to the aging process or to the normal trials of everyday life. Paul is thinking of the hardships and troubles that he experienced as a result of carrying out his ministry. He catalogues them at some length in Chapter 11.

Paul's suffering and endurance are intended to bring about this same resurrection life among the Corinthians as they too learn to trust God amid adversity: <<*If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation*>> (2 Corinthians 1:6-7).

¹³ But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – 'I believed, and so I spoke' – we also believe, and so we speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

2 Corinthians 4:13-15

We have. These words signal that Paul is summarising what he has just said in 3:4, 3:12, v.1 and v.7.

The same spirit of faith. Most interpreters have understood this not as a reference to the Holy Spirit but as a reference to the same kind of attitude of trust in God that David had, in spite of his affliction, as Paul quotes from him: <<*I believed, even when I spoke: "I am greatly afflicted"*>> (Psalm 116:10 ESV). Some hold, however, that this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, since the Holy Spirit is the one who creates faith, who conforms one to Christ, and who secures the promises of God: <<*by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment*>> (2 Corinthians 1:22). In this case, Paul's quotation of Psalm 116:10 would suggest that he views his experience of suffering, reported in vv.7-15, as a continuation of the experience of suffering as a righteous person that David expressed in Psalm 116. What is clear is that Paul and David had in common a faith that prompts outspokenness.

The reader may well wish to pause here and read the whole of Psalm 116, for it fits Paul's situation and message here like a glove. Both David and Paul had suffered terrible afflictions. David stayed faithful, and spoke to God himself in desperate prayer, in the anguish of his heart, and to those who would read and sing his psalm. Paul too remains faithful, and speaks in prayer and thanksgiving to the God who raised the Lord Jesus.

What motivates a person to speak out regardless of their personal consequences? For Paul it was not a matter of feeling that he was the best qualified or had superior credentials. It was, rather, a question of conviction – a conviction that constrained him to speak out, even when it was not to his advantage to do so. What was this conviction? It was not the belief that Jesus is the Christ – as might be expected of a Jew – but rather the certainty that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.

The one who raised the Lord Jesus is God the Father: <<*But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in*>>
New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 2Corinthian4-8

its power>> (Acts 2:24), who did so through his Holy Spirit; and he will raise us also with Jesus, giving new life to all: <<*For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Will bring us with you into his presence shows that the reconciliation is complete and that believers will actually stand in the very presence of God: <<*so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish*>> (Ephesians 5:27), <<*he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him*>> (Colossians 1:22), and: <<*Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing*>> (Jude 24).

The prayers and righteous actions of believers raise up thanksgiving which pleases God: <<*as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted to us through the prayers of many*>> (2 Corinthians 1:11), and: <<*You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us*>> (2 Corinthians 9:11). This is what he desires.

I.e.ii 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10 - Living by Faith

The power of God provides a sure sign that he will experience the resurrection at the end of the age (vv.16-18). In spite of the fact that Paul longs to be ‘at home’ with the Lord, he does not lose heart while he is away from the Lord (5:6 and 5:8). His confidence in the future resurrection and in the reality of the judgment to come keeps him faithful in the present as he pursues his goal of pleasing Christ.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

2 Corinthians 4:16

So we do not lose heart. Paul returns to the initial thought of verse 1. He has given his readers four reasons that the demands made on him by the Gospel ministry do not cause him to grow weary:

1. The privilege of being a minister of a covenant whose splendour will never fade (3:7-18).
2. The mercy God showed him on the road to Damascus (v.1).
3. The privilege of being God’s instrument for revealing the life of Jesus (vv.7-11).
4. The enhancement of God’s reputation through the growing community of faith (vv.13-15).

Outer nature, inner nature. Many commentators believe this refers to the weakening of the physical body in contrast with the strengthening of the spirit. It can better be seen as a contrast between Paul’s life of suffering in this present evil age, his outer self; and the moral and spiritual transformation of his life into the

image of God as seen in Christ, his inner self: <<*And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit*>> (2 Corinthians 3:18), that is part of the now but not yet of the Kingdom and will come to full maturity in the age yet to come.

For the inner/outer contrast in reference to the believer's moral transformation amid worldly evil refer to Romans 6:5-6, Ephesians 3:16 and 4:20-24, and Colossians 3:5-14.

¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸ because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Earlier Paul's suffering was a burden too heavy to carry, Greek *bareō*, (1:8), but now it is light or slight momentary affliction in view of the eternal weight, Greek *baros*, of glory beyond all measure: <<*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us*>> (Romans 8:18). This is not about rewards in the next life but those that can be had in this one, for affliction does not give way to glory; affliction produces glory. Far from harming him permanently, the affliction is preparing him to receive great eternal reward and that knowledge brings a positive blessing now.

Affliction does not by itself bring this benefit, however, but only as it is seen in the light of God's eternal perspective, as we look not at what can be seen, i.e. Paul's suffering and all the shortcomings of this present age, but to the things that cannot be seen, the full restoration of all things at the resurrection to come, and the sure fulfilment of God's purposes for history.

Temporary or transient, eternal. This contrast shows that eternal refers not to timelessness but to that which lasts forever. Eternal here is literally 'belonging to' or 'characterised by the age', Greek *aiōnios*, yet to come

In this chapter, Paul is still talking about his apostolic vocation and ministry, and explaining why, although his sufferings might look as though he should be losing heart, in fact he does not. In order to make this point he has now laid out almost a complete picture of the future resurrection, and how it relates to the present suffering. He will now go on to fill in this picture and show where his ministry fits within God's entire project to reconcile the world to himself.