

INSIDE-OUT SALVATION 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-15

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Because the Corinthians had questioned his motives and methods, Paul offered them further insight into his ministry. To evaluate his ministry properly, the Corinthians needed to know that Paul's experience in ministry was a mixture of wonderful blessings from God and terrible suffering for their sakes.

SERVING IN AN UNVEILED MINISTRY (4:1-6)

Paul defended the confidence he had as a minister of God by explaining his total reliance on God's grace. He was confident of success in his ministry, even though Satan and his minions opposed his work, and he did not resort to underhanded tactics to combat these evil powers. Rather, he expected God to triumph over Satan, re-creating people through the plain proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as God had worked to re-create Paul himself through this same revelation.

4:1. Paul began by drawing attention to a result (**therefore**) of his experience as a minister of Christ. He reflected that **since** he had received **this ministry**, certain effects had taken place in his life. The "**ministry**" to which he referred was serving in the new covenant, the glory of which greatly exceeded that of the old covenant under Moses (3:6-11). Paul confessed that he felt so honored to have this place in God's purposes that he did **not lose heart** for his work as an apostle. From the verses that follow we see that to **lose heart** meant at least two things: 1) Paul did not give in to the temptation to use deceit in his ministry (4:2-6); and 2) he did not capitulate to the pressures of persecution and hardship (4:7-10).

4:2. Rather than losing heart, Paul **renounced** certain behaviors that would have been inappropriate to his high calling. As we have seen in earlier chapters, some of the members of the Corinthian church had accused Paul of insincerity because he had not fulfilled his planned visit (1:17-2:1). Perhaps they had even asserted the more serious charge that Paul was a manipulative, false teacher. There are also indications that other teachers in the church, perhaps rivals of Paul, did use insincere tactics (2:17). In response, Paul insisted that his awareness of the glorious ministry to which he had been called compelled him not to manipulate or to teach falsely.

Paul described the inappropriate practices that he resisted with three phrases. First, he said that he would not resort to **secret and shameful ways**. This phrase has been

translated in a number of ways (“the things hidden because of shame” NASB; “disgraceful, underhanded ways” NRSV), but the basic idea is clear enough. Paul did not resort to underhanded activities or methods in his ministry that would have been shameful if exposed. To be sure, Paul did not suggest that there was nothing shameful in his life. He was not a perfect man (Rom. 7:14-25; Gal. 5:17). Instead, he spoke of his goals and strategies in ministry. In this respect, Paul had nothing to hide. If the most secret aspects of his service to Christ were revealed, he would still have nothing of which to be ashamed. He had always ministered in holiness and sincerity, according to God’s grace (1:12), and had even sworn with God as his witness that his motivations had always been pure (1:18-24). Paul had no skeletons in his closet.

Second, Paul insisted that he did **not use deception**. Often in the New Testament, the term here translated “**deception**” (*panourgia*) denotes deplorable action or speech that tricks others. For example, Paul also used *panourgia* to describe the serpent’s deception of Eve (2 Cor. 11:3), the trickery of scheming false teachers (Eph. 4:14), and the sophistry of human philosophers (1 Cor. 3:19). Luke also used the word to describe those who tried to catch Jesus in a theological trap (Luke 20:23). When their outlooks cannot stand the test of truth, despicable characters resort to **deception**. Paul, however, was so confident of the glory of ministering in the new covenant that he never resorted to this means of persuasion.

Third, Paul rejected the accusation that he would **distort the word of God** in his preaching and teaching. Paul’s opponents could have considered any number of Paul’s teachings to be distortions. For example, he rejected a legalistic outlook on the role of Old Testament law in the Christian church (Acts 15:1-27; 1 Cor. 7:18-19; Gal. 2:14-21; 5:1-11; Col. 2:21-23). In his earlier Corinthian epistle, Paul had also attacked those who relied too heavily on human wisdom (1 Cor. 1:17-31; 2:1-5, 11-16; 3:18-20). He had taught that Christians could eat meat that had been offered to idols, but also insisted that the weaknesses of others should take precedence (1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:25-33). When among Gentiles he had lived like a Gentile, and taught others to do the same (1 Cor. 9:21; compare Gal. 2:14-21). He also recommended only excommunication as opposed to death for incest (1 Cor. 5:1-13). He told men that it was disgraceful for them to pray with their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:4), and even taught by example that Jewish men did not need to go to Jerusalem for Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8). The natural response of Paul’s opponents on these issues would have been to accuse him of distorting the Scriptures. Paul, however, utterly rejected this accusation as unthinkable.

Instead (**on the contrary**), Paul took an entirely different approach in his teaching and preaching. He presented **the truth plainly**. In the previous chapter Paul had contrasted his ministry of the new covenant with Moses’ ministry. Moses had worn a veil to hide the fading glory of his covenant (3:13). Unbelieving Jews continued to wear the same veil (3:14-15). But in the new covenant, the veil is entirely removed. The gospel of the new covenant is plain. Paul was so convinced of this character of his ministry that he **commend[ed] his ministry to every man’s conscience**. Paul did not fear scrutiny of his message or methods of ministry. In fact, he welcomed it so long as

those who judged him did so **in the sight of God**. In other words, if his opponents sincerely sought to evaluate his ministry from good motivations rather than from evil desires, Paul was happy to receive them.

4:3. Why was Paul so open to evaluation? Some had argued that Paul's **gospel** was **veiled** because it deceived and distorted, but Paul knew otherwise. The gospel of Christ appears **veiled** only **to those who are perishing**. This precise terminology (*tois appollumenois*) also appears in 2:15 where Paul described his ministry as a fragrance of death to those who rejected Christ (see also 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:10). Here he alluded to the metaphor of the Roman triumphal parade once again. The reception and rejection of the gospel is not a matter of intellectual insight or philosophical acumen. It is a matter of spiritual condition.

4:4. Paul went on to explain in what sense the gospel he preached was veiled to unbelievers. It was not that the message itself or its true ministers hid the glory of Christ. Instead, **the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers**. Needless to say, when the Christian message is conveyed by ministers who deceive (2:17) or who rely on worldly wisdom (1:12), the gospel itself may be veiled. But when it is plainly proclaimed with a focus on the glory of Christ in his death and resurrection (1 Cor. 6:14; 11:26; 15:3-49; 2 Cor. 1:5,9; 4:10,14), then the problem does not reside in the gospel itself or in its ministers. The problem is that **unbelievers . . . cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**.

This spiritual blindness is terrible because it cannot see the proclamation of **Christ, who is the image of God**. Paul and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews spoke of Christ in this way in other passages (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Put simply, as the perfect human being, Christ was the image of God much as were Adam and Eve before sin entered the world (Gen. 1:26-27). The writer of Hebrews, however, pressed the matter further, saying that Christ is "the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3). Christ is the greatest revelation of God the world has ever known. His person and work reveal the very glory of God (John 1:14; 14:9; Rom. 6:4; Phil. 2:11). Christ magnificently displays the wonder of God, but the unbelieving world cannot see this glory.

The **god of this age** causes this terrible spiritual blindness. This precise expression does not appear elsewhere in the New Testament, but it certainly refers to Satan. As he had in his previous letter to Corinth (1 Cor. 1:8), Paul here adopted the Old Testament use of the word "god" in reference to supernatural or angelic beings, not to the Lord God (compare 1 Kgs. 11:33; Ps. 82:1; see also Deeper Discoveries). This use of "god" does not assert the true divinity of the beings it identifies. Rather, it merely indicates that the being so identified is worshiped as if it were divine. In reality, of course, it is not the divine Creator (1 Cor. 8:4-6).

Satan is known in the New Testament as the ruler of this age (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 4:4; 5:19). The term **this age** in Paul's epistles refers to the present world of sin and death as opposed to "the age to come" which has been

inaugurated in Christ's first coming (Heb. 6:5), but awaits its consummation in his glorious return (Matt. 12:32; Mark 10:40; Luke 18:30; Eph. 1:21). Satan and his demons have been given a measure of temporary dominion over the fallen world (Acts 26:18; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 6:12). One of their greatest powers is the ability to deceive and blind people to spiritual truths. Paul affirmed that this was the case when unbelievers rejected the gospel of Christ.

4:5. Why was Paul so convinced that the problem with unbelievers was in them and not in his presentation of the gospel? His reason (**for**) was straightforward. True ministers of the gospel **do not preach [them]selves**. They do not draw attention to their own clever or eloquent speech; they do not lord their authority over others (1:24). Instead, they draw attention to **Jesus Christ as Lord**. The true Christian gospel always focuses on Christ's honor, not on the ministers who bear the message.

In fact, Paul insisted that instead of exalting themselves in their preaching, he and other true apostles presented themselves as the Corinthians' **servants for Jesus' sake**. Paul had sacrificed much for the Corinthians and the other churches to whom he had preached (2 Cor. 11:23-27). He had not even exercised his right to be paid for his work (1 Cor. 9:4-12; 2 Cor. 12:13). He humbled himself in this way so **for Jesus' sake**, so that Jesus alone would be honored.

4:6. Why did Paul abase himself and honor Christ exclusively? His reason (**for**) stemmed from God's incredible act toward him. Paul described this astounding divine act by drawing a connection between the light of creation and the light of re-creation in Christ.

As the Genesis account reports, on the first day of creation, "**God . . . said, Let light shine out of darkness.**" Paul did not quote the Genesis record precisely (Gen 1:3), but paraphrased it to draw the connection to Christ. God's creative act of calling for light broke the darkness of the primordial world.

Paul's confidence that true preaching focused on the glory of Christ rather than on its ministers rested in the fact that just as God first created light, **God . . . made his light shine in their hearts**. Put simply, when God sent Christ, he acted intrusively and astoundingly much as when he originally created physical light. Jesus spoke of himself as the "light of the world" when he ministered on earth (John 8:12; 9:5), and taught that his followers were also the "light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). For this reason, the New Testament also describes life in Christ as walking in the light (John 8:12; 11:9-10; Eph. 5:8; 1 John 1:5-7; 2:8-10).

The illumination of the **hearts** of individuals is not simply an individual mental state of enlightenment. From Paul's perspective it is an act of re-creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Christ's coming into the world, and the illumination of individuals to see his light, is a gracious divine act by which believers receive **the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ**. Thus, when Paul came to know Christ personally on the road to

Damascus (in a bright light; Acts 9:3; 22:6,11), this act of God compared to, if not surpassed, the original act of creation in its ability to reveal the glory of God.

Paul expressed this theological and experiential conviction to validate his claim that his preaching was about **Jesus as Lord** and not about himself or some other. He was so captivated by the greatness of the revelation of Christ, that he could do nothing else.

SUFFERING FOR THE GOSPEL (4:7-12)

Paul continued to express his confidence in and devotion to the ministry of the new covenant by reflecting on the sufferings he underwent as an apostle. He explained that his ministry included much suffering so that it might be demonstrated that all the credit and glory for Paul's success belonged to God. Because he knew that his weaknesses and failures only existed to demonstrate God's glory, Paul's weaknesses actually gave him further confidence in the gospel.

4:7. Paul began this section with a clear thesis statement that he would develop in the verses to follow. Although Paul and other apostles were determined to serve in ministry because of the light of Christ in their hearts (4:1-6), they had **this treasure in jars of clay**. The image of this metaphor is twofold. On the one hand, there is **treasure**. The **treasure** represents the new covenant ministry empowered by **the light of the knowledge of the glory of God** (4:6). In Paul's day earthenware containers were used to hold many different items. Paul had in mind very precious items such as silver or gold. It is possible that this metaphor is simply an extension of the analogy of a triumphal parade in the previous chapter. Plunder from battle was often carried in earthen vessels. In all events, as the preceding context demonstrates, Paul viewed the gospel and its powerful ministry as precious cargo indeed.

On the other hand, this priceless gospel ministry was carried about **in jars of clay**. Artifacts from Paul's day indicate that not all items were stored in earthenware containers. Boxes of gold and ivory, decorated with precious stones were available for the wealthy. Yet, it was quite common for items of great value to be stored in relatively inexpensive pots of clay. These jars were not much to look at; they were relatively fragile and ordinary.

The counterpart to the **jars of clay** in Paul's metaphor is the ministers themselves, with particular emphasis on their bodies. As the following verses indicate, Paul had in mind not only the physical body, but also the many trials and troubles that came upon him and those who ministered with him. At this point, however, he introduced the idea that God had placed the treasure of the gospel ministry in frail, ordinary humans. A priceless treasure was contained in mere earthenware.

Paul chose this metaphor of a priceless treasure in clay jars because it so aptly symbolized the reality of his ministry. He had received the incredible light of God in

Christ and was commissioned to spread this gospel throughout the world on Christ's behalf. Yet, this precious treasure did not raise Paul himself out of ordinary human life. He still faced the weaknesses of physical trials and persecutions in this world.

What was the purpose of this design? The grand message of Christ was carried through the world by ordinary, weak human beings **to show that this all-surpassing power was from God and not from the ministers**. The expression **all-surpassing power** alludes to 4:6 which focused on the divine power demonstrated first at the command that light appear (Gen. 1:3), and later in the order that the light of Christ shine in the hearts of believers. God merely spoke and the light of creation shone; he merely spoke and the light of re-creation shone as well. This power of God was also evident in the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 1:16; 15:18-19; 1 Thess. 1:5). The weakness of Paul and other ministers, coupled with their refusal to use deception, never could have produced the powerful, re-creative effects that the gospel produced. God chose weak creatures to minister the gospel so that it would be all the more clear that he himself had accomplished the work through these ministers (2 Tim. 1:8).

The effectiveness of their ministry might have caused some to attribute some honor to the ministers themselves. But Paul insisted that the weakness of the **jars of clay** demonstrated plainly that ministers of the gospel deserved no glory for their work. The power came through weak instruments to demonstrate that it was **from God and not from the ministers**.

4:8-10. To illustrate what he meant by **treasure in jars of clay** (4:7), Paul described some of the hardships he and other ministers of the gospel faced in their human lives. He began with a series of examples (4:8-9), and followed with a summation (4:10).

By using four pairs of terms (8-9), Paul described specific ways in which the lives of gospel ministers were like earthenware containing great treasures. The first member of each pair described hardship they experienced as frail **jars of clay**. The second member indicated how God demonstrated his power (**treasure**) in them by sustaining them through the hardships. The following table of these pairs illustrates the apostle's perspective.

<p>Jars of Clay hard pressed perplexed persecuted struck down</p>
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<p>Treasure not crushed not in despair not abandoned not destroyed</p>

The precise meaning of each term is somewhat difficult to discern. Therefore, one must be careful not to tie too specific a meaning to any of these terms. Our comments will remain rather general.

Hard pressed . . . but not crushed: This first pair of terms flows from the metaphor of the **jars of clay**. The image is of earthenware vessels placed under great strain that still do not break. To be **hard pressed** (*thlibo*) or “afflicted” (NASB, NRSV) is to be troubled from without by any number of undeserved physical or psychological difficulties. While Paul and other ministers of the gospel endured many afflictions as did frail earthenware, they were not **crushed** (*stenochoreomai*). They were not overcome by these afflictions because they had the treasure of the gospel of Christ.

Perplexed . . . but not in despair: Here and in the following word pairs, Paul’s choice of words began to rely more on the prior word pair (**hard pressed/crushed**) than on the original metaphor (**jars of clay**). He expressed himself with a wordplay: **perplexed** (*aporoumenoi*, from *aporeo*) and **despair** (*exaporoumenoi*, from *exaporeo*) are based on the same root in the Greek language. The latter is simply more intensive. To be **perplexed** is to be in a mental state of confusion and discouragement due to afflictions and troubles. In 2 Corinthians 1:8 Paul admitted that he had **despaired** (*exaporeomai*, the second member of this pair) **even of life**. This passage does not contradict 1:8. The contrast between the verses simply indicates the elasticity of the term. When used alone, **despair** (*exaporeomai*) describes well the discouragement which Paul and others felt. When contrasted with **perplexed** (*aporeo*), however, **despair** (*exaporeomai*) means something narrower. **Despair** (*exaporeomai*) in this context means something comparable to “utter despair lacking all hope or positive counterbalance.” Paul said that even though he and his company were deeply troubled at times, they never gave up entirely because they possessed a great treasure.

Persecuted, but not abandoned: To be **persecuted** (*dioko*) is to be hunted down or chased about by others intending to do harm. Persecution from many other groups was widespread against the early church (Acts 9:4,5; 22:4,7,8; 26:11,14,15; Rom. 12:14; 1 Cor. 4:12; 15:9; Gal. 1:13,23; 4:29; 5:11; 6:12; Phil. 3:12; 2 Tim. 3:12). The persecution of the ministers of the gospel indicated how much they truly were mere earthenware jars. Yet, Paul insisted that even in persecution they were **not abandoned**. In other words, as those who had the treasure of the gospel, God never left them utterly alone. He was present with them in all of their persecutions (Matt. 28:20; John 14:16; Heb. 13:5).

Struck down, but not destroyed: When Paul spoke of being **struck down** (*kataballo*), he likely had in mind a wrestling metaphor, rather than actual physical blows. A wrestler was **struck down** when he was thrown to the floor. To be thrown to the floor was certainly a setback for a wrestler, as it was for apostles and ministers of the gospel. Yet, to be thrown down was not the same as being **destroyed** (*apollumi*) or entirely defeated in the match. The path to victory for Paul and his company included setbacks, but it was still a path to eventual victory over foes.

After listing these four pairs of experiences, Paul summarized the mixed experiences that he and his company endured. As **jars of clay** (4:7), they **always**

carr[ie]d around in their body the death of Jesus. Paul frequently mentioned that Christ's suffering and death on the cross overflowed into the life of the church (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 1:5; Gal. 6:17; Phil. 3:10; Col. 1:24). To **carry around** the death of Christ was to suffer time and again in various places and ways. Both in this verse and in 4:11, Paul said that these sufferings happen **always**. Paul and his company did not experience their union with Christ's sufferings in one simple act. They endured the suffering repeatedly, in some measure or another, everywhere they went.

Even so, there was a purpose (**so that**) to all of this suffering with and for Christ. The goal was that **the life of Jesus** might **also be revealed in their body**. Paul taught throughout his epistles that the reward for those who suffered for Christ was a resurrection body for eternal life (Rom. 6:4-5; 8:11,23; 1 Cor. 15:12-57; Phil. 3:10-11). This resurrection in the future will result from our union with the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:20-23). In this sense, the troubles through which believers go in this world result in the glory of the next world.

4:11. Paul explained why (**for**) his statement of 4:10 was true. He spoke of "**we who are alive**," meaning the apostles and those other ministers who had not died or been killed, especially those who ministered alongside him. Even though they are still alive, they are **always being given over to death**. The experience of Christian ministry is constantly to go through the process of dying. The voice of the verb meaning "to give over" is ambiguous. It may be passive — "**being given over**" — or it may be middle — "we give ourselves over." The latter translation fits well with Paul's teaching that Christians are to volunteer to suffer for Christ (Rom. 8:12-18).

For what purpose did Paul and his company suffer so? **So that** Christ's **life** might **be revealed in the mortal body**. The corruptible, mortal human bodies of believers will one day fully enjoy the resurrection power that brought Jesus back to life. His **life** will be displayed in what God does with our **mortal body**.

4:12. Paul closed this section with a two-sided conclusion (**so then** NIV; "so" NASB, NRSB). This is one of the few times Paul clearly distinguished **we** (apostles, himself, and those in his company) from **you** (the Corinthians to whom he wrote). First, Paul drew a conclusion about himself and other Christian ministers of the gospel: **death was at work in** them. The meaning of this expression is clear from the preceding context. Specifically, they "**are always being given over to death**" (4:11). Second, Paul drew an unexpected conclusion about the Corinthians (**you**). They were not dying. Instead, **life was at work in** them as well.

Paul did not want the Corinthians to forget that they benefited from the sufferings of the ministers of the gospel. The pain and trials endured by Paul and others made it possible for the Corinthians to have eternal life in Christ. Those who suffered brought the gospel to the church, taught, and led the church. As a result, the Corinthians and other Christians who benefited from the sufferings of gospel ministers should have

realized that their new life in Christ came at the heavy cost of severe suffering by those who ministered to them.

CONFIDENCE THROUGH THE SUFFERING (4:13-18)

Having described the ministry of the gospel as a mixture of suffering and blessing which eventually results in life coming to believers, Paul closed this section with a strong affirmation of the beliefs that undergirded his discussion throughout this chapter. He expressed his confidence that he had been entrusted with the new covenant ministry and that his suffering worked to further this ministry.

4:13. Why had Paul spoken of the suffering and blessing of being a minister of the gospel? How did he hold both of these themes together? To answer this question, Paul referred to Psalm 116 by quoting from one line: **"I believed; therefore I have spoken."** Psalm 116 is a prayer of thanksgiving for God's deliverance from affliction. In this verse (Ps. 116:10), the Psalmist recounted how he had trusted the Lord and how he had spoken of his afflictions to the Lord. He had done so with the hope that the Lord would answer his prayer and deliver him.

In all likelihood, Paul thought of this psalm because it coupled these ideas of faith with complaints of the suffering and death of God's servants. For instance, Psalm 116:3 reads, "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow." Similarly, Psalm 116:15 proclaims, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Paul had just written that he himself had been persecuted and had despaired (4:8-9), and that death worked in him (4:10-12). Still, his faith remained strong. Under these conditions, he identified closely with the psalmist. Thus, Paul quoted the psalmist's assertion of faith, and said that he spoke **with that same spirit of faith**. Just like the psalmist, he and his company **also believe[d] and therefore** spoke both laments over their suffering, and praise for divine deliverance.

4:14. Paul then explained why (**because**) he believed as the psalmist that even in the midst of great suffering God would deliver the ministers of the gospel. His reason began with the affirmation that God **raised the Lord Jesus from the dead**. Yet, this conviction about Jesus bore on the subject at hand only because Paul also believed that God would **also raise** him and his fellow ministers **with Jesus**, just as he would raise all believers. Elsewhere Paul designated Christ in his resurrection as the firstfruits of the entire harvest to be raised up on the last day (1 Cor. 15:20,23). From his perspective, Christ's resurrection only began something much greater which was to follow: the resurrection of all believers. Paul dealt extensively with his reasons for this belief in 1 Corinthians 15:12-58.

So far, Paul has merely spoken of God raising **"us"** (i.e. Paul and his company who suffered so much). He added another thought which expressed the greatness of his

vision even further. Not only will God eventually raise ministers of the gospel with Christ, he will also **present “us”** (ministers of the gospel) **with “you”** (the Corinthians) **in his presence**. Paul hoped that God would reward him and other ministers for their suffering by resurrecting them in Christ, but he also believed that they would share that resurrection life with all believers. In this way, the suffering of those who proclaim the gospel results in life for all believers.

4:15. All of this (i.e. the suffering of ministers, their confidence in speaking the gospel, and even their future resurrection) was **for** the Corinthians’ **benefit**. Throughout this passage Paul repeatedly drew attention to the fact that he and his company had suffered severely for the sake of the Corinthian church. He had not been insincere or duplicitous (1:12; 2:17; 4:2). He had not pursued worldly goals (1:17) or peddled God’s word for profit (2:17). And he had not acted from spite or love of power (1:23-24). Instead, he and his company had served faithfully, enduring all kinds of hardship for the sake of the church at large and for the believers in Corinth in particular.

But Paul knew that as important as benefiting all believers was, it was still not the ultimate basis of his confidence in the future. Instead, he aligned his thoughts with the Psalms of thanksgiving, like Psalm 116 from which he had quoted. Thanksgiving Psalms were offered in Old Testament worship before groups of people who, in turn, joined in the thanksgiving. They were largely designed to help others join in God’s praise (Pss. 22:26-27; 34:1-3; 67:3-5; 74:21; 99:2-3; 106:48; 107:31-32; 147:1-20; 148:1-14; 149:1-9; 150:1-6). The ultimate purpose (**so that**) of the entire apostolic ministry was **that** the gospel might **reach more and more people** throughout the world. These large numbers of people would then **cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God**. Paul knew that God desires to be honored by many human beings for his goodness. God’s glory is the reason for all creation (Rom. 11:36). In the verse at hand, Paul used this principle to explain both the suffering he and his company experienced, and the future resurrection for which they and the Corinthians hoped. Paul’s confidence flowed from his understanding that God purposed everything in his ministry to contribute to the **glory of God**.

4:16. In summation (**therefore**), Paul reaffirmed that he did **not lose heart** (compare 4:1). As he had already illustrated so clearly (4:7-12), Paul could draw a sharp distinction between what was happening to him **outwardly** and **inwardly**. In terms of his physical existence, what he had earlier called "jars of clay" (4:7), the suffering and hardship he faced as an apostle caused him to say that he was **wasting away**. This negative assessment of the present human condition is true in a general sense for every person. On a physical level, we are all mere mortals moving inexorably toward death. Yet, Paul had in mind not only physical suffering but hardships of every kind. In terms of the externals of his life, Paul was **wasting away**.

By contrast, however, **inwardly** Paul found the opposite to be true. He was **being renewed day by day**. This distinction between the outward and inward dimensions of

human existence does not indicate that Paul hated his body, or that he somehow wished to escape physical existence. On the contrary, in the biblical perspective, to be without one's body was to be in a state of nakedness remedied only by the physical resurrection to come when Christ returns (2 Cor. 5:1-10).

At the present time, however, a paradoxical situation exists for followers of Christ. On the one hand, they have believed the gospel and been granted salvation at the present time. The Holy Spirit lives within believers as the "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14) and brings many spiritual blessings into their lives. But on the other hand, they have yet to be granted full salvation, which includes the resurrection of their bodies at the end of the age (1 Cor 15:12-19). For this reason, Paul spoke of himself simultaneously decaying and being renewed. As he waited for his physical existence to be renewed at the resurrection, he took comfort and joy in the renewal of his inward person by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

4:17. In this passage Paul had a more specific explanation (**for**) of his inward renewal in mind. He found encouragement and refreshment during his sufferings by assessing them to be **light and momentary**, in other words, to be relatively insignificant by comparison with the **eternal glory that far outweighs them**. In line with the teaching of the Old and New Testaments, Paul was confident that all true believers would receive the eternal reward of glory and honor in the new heavens and new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). The difficulties of this life pale by comparison with the wonder of our ultimate eternal salvation.

4:18a. Even so, this theological fact was of little practical help to Paul until he went beyond merely knowing its truth. He resolved (**so**) to **fix** his **eyes** on the future glory. Paul determined to focus his attention and center his hopes and priorities away from this life to the next. In a paradoxical manner, Paul insisted that he looked away from **what is seen** to **what is unseen**. We have to be careful here not to confuse **seen** and **unseen** with physical and spiritual realities. The contrast is actually between the current reality of suffering and the future reality of full salvation at Christ's return. Future salvation will be physical as well as spiritual, but it is unseen because it has not yet come (2 Cor. 5:1-10). By fixing his attention on the future salvation in Christ, Paul found strength in the disappointments and hardships of this life.

4:18b. Why did this concentration on the future help Paul so much? He explained (**for**) that the value of this gaze of the future rests in the fact that what can be **seen** now **is temporary**; it will pass away on an individual level at death and generally at the return of Christ. But the **unseen**, the future salvation to come at Christ's return, **is eternal**. Once Christ returns in glory and brings the fullness of salvation to his people, that state of blessing will never end.

When these beliefs are kept central in the outlooks of believers, the difficulties and trials of this life become relatively insignificant. In eternity, the temporal will seem ever so short.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. God (4:4)

Often in the Old Testament, and sometimes in the New Testament (John 10:34,35; 1 Cor. 8:5), the term “**god**” applies to a false god rather than to the Lord. This can be seen quite clearly in references to “gods” (*elohim*) (Gen. 35:2,4; Exod. 12:12; 15:11; 18:11; 20:3,23; 23:13,24,32,33; Num. 25:2; 33:4; Deut. 6:14; 7:4,16,25; 11:16,28; 13:13; 17:3; 29:26; 30:17; Josh. 23:7,16; 24:2,14,15,16,20,23; Pss. 82:1,6; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4,5; 97:7,9; 135:5; 138:1). There are also many references to a single “god” (*e*) that is not true God (Exod. 34:14; Deut. 3:24; 32:12; Pss. 44:20; 81:9; Jer. 46:25; Dan. 11:36,3). Sometimes, even the “plural” form *elohim* identifies such a single false god (Deut. 4:34; Judg. 8:33; 9:27; 11:24; 1 Kgs. 11:33; 2 Kgs. 1:2,3,6,16; Isa. 37:38).

Modern translations sometimes reflect this fact by substituting words other than “god” for those occurrences that do not refer to the one true deity. For example, the NASB translates Psalm 86:1: “God . . . judges in the midst of the rulers.” In this verse, both “God” and “rulers” translate the same Hebrew word *elohim*. Paul followed this Old Testament precedent by using “god” to refer to a supernatural or angelic being that was not the Lord God.

B. This age (4:4)

The term “this age” (*tou aionos toutou*) derives from a common rabbinical terminology at use in Paul’s day (*’olam hazeh*). It often refers to the present fallen world in contrast to the renewed heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; Rom. 8:19-22; 2 Pet. 3:13) in Christ (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:19-20), rather than to a simple temporal distinction between the present time and the time after the Day of Judgment (compare Luke 16:8; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 1:20; 2:6,8; 3:18). In this use, “this age” pertains to the current fallen state of the world even while it is in the process of being restored into that state in which it will exist when the kingdom of God finally reaches its consummation.

In this sense, coming of “the age to come” also derives from rabbinical parlance (*’olam haba*) parallels the coming of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God comes in three phases: 1) the inauguration that took place in Christ’s earthly ministry and the work of the apostles (Matt. 10:7; 12:28; 16:19; 18:4; 21:43; Luke 7:28; 11:20; 17:21; Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:20); 2) the church age which continues today (Matt. 13:36-43,52; Rom. 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Jas. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3; 1 John 2:18); and 3) the return of Christ in the consummation of the kingdom (Matt. 7:21-22; 13:43; 25:34; Luke 13:28-29; 1 Cor. 15:50-52; 1 Pet. 1:5).

The “age to come” invades “this age” in just the same way that the kingdom of God invades the current world order. Those of “this age” oppose the kingdom (Luke 16:8) and the principles of “the age to come.” Those who participate in the kingdom now, however, also now participate in the age to come (Heb. 6:5).

While this is not always the force of “this age,” it seems to be Paul’s emphasis here. Paul certainly did not mean that Satan now controls the world and will continue to control it until the judgment — Jesus is already reigning above those who rule in “this age” (Eph. 1:21). Paul’s point seems to have been that Satan is the “god” of those who live according to the fallen world order, the ruler of those who live according to the principles of “this age.”

C. “Let light shine out of darkness” (4:6)

By referring to Genesis 1:3, Paul did not merely intend to suggest God’s power. Rather, he meant to highlight God’s re-creative power in salvation. Paul understood that Moses did not intend Genesis 1 to be a simple historical record. It was the introductory story to the whole book of Genesis. Moses wrote the book of Genesis in order to teach Israel that leaving Egypt and possessing Canaan was God’s plan for them, and this first chapter gave Israel a way to understand that their exodus from Egypt was a re-creative act. In fact, the Old Testament regularly identifies God’s salvation and restoration of his people as a re-creative act (compare Gen. 13:10; Isa. 51:3; 65:17-18; 66:22; Ezek. 36:35; 37:1-14).

Salvation continued to be a re-creative act in the New Testament as well. Jesus receives all the blessings offered to Israel in the Old Testament (Gal. 3:16) and shares them with those who are in him (Gal. 26-29). Thus, the Old Testament salvation scheme continues into the New Testament era. This extension of Old Testament salvation to New Testament believers continues to rely upon God’s re-creative power. Paul stated this explicitly in several of his epistles (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Given the difficult situations Paul encountered in his ministry, why did he not lose heart? How did he find confidence even in the rejection of his gospel? How did he find confidence even in suffering and persecution?
2. In Paul’s description of God making his light shine in believers hearts, what is the condition of the person before God does this work? What is the condition of the person after this God does this work? What role in this transition did Paul ascribe to the person affected?
3. What does Paul’s attitude seem to have been toward those who were perishing? In what other places in his writings did he present a similar view? In what other places in his writings did he present a different view? Why do you suppose he presented this particular view here?

4. Why did Paul compare God making his light shine in people's hearts to the creation account of Genesis 1? How are God's actions in salvation similar to his actions in creation?
5. What is the significance of the metaphor of treasure in jars of clay? How was Paul's life and ministry like a jar of clay containing treasure?
6. What did Paul mean when he said he carried around the death of Jesus in his body? How did Paul feel about this? Why?
7. How was Jesus life revealed in Paul's mortal body? How did Paul's suffering cause life to be at work in the Corinthians?
8. How did Paul's situation in ministry parallel the situation of the writer of Psalm 116? How closely does Paul's situation parallel that of ministers you know? How closely does it parallel your situation?
9. Why do you think Paul mentioned Jesus' resurrection in 4:14? How does this detail fit into his argument?
10. How did the grace that was reaching more and more people through Paul's ministry benefit the Corinthians?
11. Explain the flow of Paul's argument through the first four chapters of 2 Corinthians. How does chapter 4 flow from and depend on the material in the earlier chapters? How does it anticipate the material in chapter 5? What role does chapter 4 play in Paul's defense of his ministry?