

SECOND CORINTHIANS

Chapter 4

Treasures in Jars of Clay

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. ¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. ¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

4:1-6 The first six verses of chapter four serve as somewhat of a bridge between the previous section (that began with 2:14), in which Paul emphasized that the new covenant is superior to the old, and the one that follows (4:7-5:10), in which Paul turns his attention to the fragile nature of those who serve as ministers of the new covenant. (PBC)

4:1 THEREFORE – The chapter starts with the word "therefore, a word that tells us a conclusion is being reached on the basis of something that has come before. (PBC)

this ministry. See 3:6 and **note**. (CSB)

The apostolic ministry (4:1) has enduring glory which is able to change us from glory to glory (3:18). While Moses' face reflected a fading glory, we who reflect the glory of our

Lord Jesus Christ are transformed with ever-increasing glory. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 1, Part 1)

Paul explains why those engaged in ministry do not let discouragement prevail. God has given them a double blessing: he has shown them mercy and has entrusted the work of ministry to them. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 1, Part 1)

The sharing of the new covenant in Jesus (cf. 2:17; 3:3,6) (TLSB)

God has been merciful to Paul, merciful first in that He had brought him, chief of sinners, to faith and, secondly, in that he had given to him the powerful, effective ministry of the new covenant (cf. 1 Timothy 1:12-15). (PBC)

we do not lose heart. When God through his mercy calls and commissions his servants, he also supplies the strength necessary for them to persevere in the face of hardships and persecutions. (CSB)

Not to give up in the face of trials and temptation. Can also mean not “to give in to evil. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 7, Part 1)

To be a minister of that office which he has just praised so highly was Paul’s privilege: Therefore, having this ministry, even as we have received mercy, we do not become faint. It was an unmerited act of God’s mercy which made him a minister of the Gospel, Eph. 3, 8. He had received this ministry, not for any reason for which he might boast, but by a free gift of God. This fact sustained him amidst the difficulties and trials of his official duties and kept him from becoming finally and definitely discouraged. Humble heroism was the key-note of Paul’s character; his exalted position did not fill him with pride. The mercy and the grace of God, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, was the inexhaustible fount of his strength and courage. (Kretzmann)

4:2 *we have renounced secret and shameful ways.* Paul is referring to the false teachers in Corinth. By contrast, he is able to appeal to the conscience of every one of them and also to his integrity in the sight of God, because his practice was always that of setting forth the truth plainly, i.e., without veiling it or resorting to deception (cf. 1:12, 18–24). (CSB)

The worst type of shame for ministers results from adulterating God’s pure Word (v 2). In our ministry we must make sure that we do not change the Word, but that the Word changes us and our hearers. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 1, Part 1)

No. We have disavowed the kind of practices that people hide because they are ashamed of them. We do not sneak around. We do not perform tricks with the Word of God. Instead, be clearly setting forth the truth, we make our case before God to every human being who has a conscience. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

He returning here to the thought expressed at the beginning of this section: “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit” (2:17). Only one who does not have the gospel or who has no confidence in it will have to resort to manipulative, secret, and shameful ways, ways that are not open and above board, to win a following. (PBC)

DECEPTION – It literally means “a readiness to do anything,” an end justifies the means” philosophy. This does not conflict with what Paul had told the Corinthians in a previous letter: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22). A minister of the gospel will try to put himself into another’s shoes. He will seek a point of entry, some common meeting ground, which may open the door to an opportunity to bring to the person the saving gospel of Christ. (PBC)

Paul was falsely accused of discrediting the integrity of his ministry with the Corinthians. (TLSB)

But not only has Paul a certain remedy against discouragement and faintness, but also against the evils which he saw in the case of the false teachers: But we have renounced, disclaimed, the hidden things of shame. He wanted openness, candor, frankness to stand out most prominently in all his work. For unless the work of a pastor is at all times carried on in this manner, he will become identified with hidden things, with matters which shun the light of the sun, and which thus produce or bring dishonor upon him and his office. This behavior is almost invariably associated with such false prophets as try to break into organized congregations and steal the hearts of the members. And with reference to the same people Paul writes: Not walking in craftiness nor handling the Word of God deceitfully. He was not found engaged in, not busying himself with, intrigues and schemes by which men without a conscience sought to make a way for themselves and to acquire influence; he did not try to insinuate himself into powerful positions by false ambition. Nor did he adulterate the Word of God for such ends by preaching so as to obtain favor with the people, instead of proclaiming the Law in all its severity and the Gospel in all its beauty, 2 Tim. 4, 3. Rather by the manifestation of the truth he commended himself, literally, to every conscience of men in the sight of God, to every possible variety of the human conscience. In his public and private teaching he brought out the truths of the Gospel plainly, so that no one could be in doubt as to the way of salvation. To every variety of human conscience he thus commended himself; they must needs acknowledge his sincerity, they must give him this testimony, that his motives were above reproach, that his teaching conformed to the highest ideals of truth and duty. He knew also that all his work was being done in the sight of God, that God was present at all times to hear him. Men recognized the truth and the honesty of his preaching, and before God he had a clear conscience. (Kretzmann)

COMMEND...CONSCIENCE - Paul possessed a clear conscience with regard to his proclamation of the truth of the Word of God. By faithfully transmitting God’s Word, he commended himself to the consciences of his hearers (v 2). Paul’s conscience would not permit him to adulterate the Word of God. He knew that the Father said to Peter, James, and John, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to

him!” (Matt 17:5), and that listening to Christ meant faithfully receiving and passing on his teaching. Luther, too, was bound by his conscience to the Word of God; he could not do otherwise. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 1, Part 1)

Paul’s proclamation of Jesus is bold and public. He is vulnerable to judgment by others. (TLSB)

4:3 *if our gospel is veiled.* See 3:13–18. (CSB)

It is because of unbelief. (TLSB)

If the Good News we preach is covered by a veil, it is in the people who are being lost that it is covered. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 4, Part 3)

WHO ARE PERISHING – Those who do not believe in God’s provision of grace in Jesus and are judged in their trespasses and sins (1 Cor. 1:18). (TLSB)

This fact being established, Paul can once more refer to his words in chap. 1, 15. 16 and 2, 12-18, by saying: But even if our Gospel is veiled, in them that are perishing it is veiled. The Gospel in itself is anything but dark and obscure, chap. 3, 13; it is a light that shines in the dark place of this world, intended to illumine the hearts of all men. But the opposition of men, their refusal to accept its simple statement of grace, places the veil of willful ignorance before the bright beauty of the Gospel, thus preventing its clear rays from entering into their hearts. Thus it is the punishment of their own guilt that they are lost, 1 Cor. 1, 18; they are judged already, John 3, 18. “But it must be so, the Word of God must be the most peculiar thing in heaven and earth; therefore it must do both things at the same time, enlighten and honor in the highest degree those that believe and honor it, and blind and disgrace in the highest degree those that do not believe it. To the former it must be the most certain and best known: to the latter it must be the least known and most hidden. The former laud and praise it in the highest degree; the latter blaspheme and disgrace it in the highest degree, so that its works bear full sway and are not unimportant, but peculiar, terrible works in the hearts of men.” (Kretzmann)

4:4 *god of this age.* The devil, who is the archenemy of God and the unseen power behind all unbelief and ungodliness. Those who follow him have in effect made him their god. (CSB)

Satan, the ruler of this passing age (Rv 12:9–12). Irenaeus of Lyons: “Satan, who was designated God to those who believe not” (ANF 1:575). (TLSB)

this age. Used in contrast to the future eternal age when God’s creation will be forever purged of all that now mars and defiles it. In Gal 1:4 it is called the “present evil age.” (CSB)

blinded the minds of unbelievers. Paul continues to use the imagery of the veil that covers the divine glory so that those who reject the gospel fail to see that glory (3:12–18). (CSB)

the light of the gospel. Satan's work is to "darken" hearts and minds. However, the Gospel, the forgiveness of sins through Jesus, remains a clear and visible light to the whole world, even though some have closed their eyes to it (cf Jn 3:19; Col 1:13; Eph 4:19). (TLSB)

image of God. Christ, who is both the incarnate Son and the Second Person of the Trinity, authentically displays God to us, for he is the very radiance of divine glory (Heb 1:3). He is the image of God in which man was originally created and into which redeemed mankind is being gloriously transformed (3:18), until at last, when Christ comes again at the end of this age, we who believe will be like him (1Jn 3:2). (CSB)

Jesus Christ, who is both God (1Jn 5:20) and man (1Tm 2:5) in the flesh (Heb 2:14), clearly reveals to the world who God is (Jn 14:9). He and the Father are in essence one (Jn 10:30; 17:11, 21). Jesus is also the perfect image of humanity for our sake. In Him is restored the image of man, lost in Gn 3. (TLSB)

The cause for this condition is very distinctly not in the Gospel itself, but in man, due to the machinations of the devil: In whom the god of this world, of this present age, has blinded the minds of the unbelieving. Satan is the god, the prince, of this present age, chap. 2, 11; John 12, 31; 14, 30. He has his work in the children of unbelief, Eph. 2, 2; 5, 6; 1 John 3, 10; they give him willing obedience. But he, in turn, as a fitting wage, has blinded the minds of the unbelieving. Because they were guilty of rejecting the truth, the blinding could make progress in their hearts, could be a judgment upon them; for Satan could not perform this wickedness in the hearts of the believers, of them that are being saved, because to them the Gospel is not veiled. And the purpose of the devil in blinding the hearts of the unbelieving is: That the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not shine forth, should not dawn upon them, or that they should not see it clearly, it should remain hidden before them. The sum total, the content, of the Gospel is the brightness of the glory of God in Christ Jesus, the glorious revelation of Jesus as the Savior of the world. But so well is the design of Satan realized in the children of unbelief that this glory of Christ, who also in regard to His work is the perfect image of God, is not seen by them, does not penetrate into their understanding. (Kretzmann)

4:5 *we do not preach ourselves.* As did the false teachers, puffed up with self-importance. Paul does not lord it over their faith (1:24), for there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and he is the theme of Paul's preaching. (CSB)

your servants for Jesus' sake. Paul, and indeed every apostolic overseer, is a servant to God in his work with God's people, just as Jesus Himself was servant to all (cf Mk 10:45; Jn 13:1–20). Paul contrasts his servanthood with his critics' boasting of themselves. (TLSB)

To justify his calling the Gospel which he preached the proclamation of the divine glory, the apostle now writes: For not ourselves preach we, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for the sake of Jesus. If Paul had been preaching himself, his own wisdom, if he had been seeking honor and glory for himself, it would have been

wicked presumption on his part to condemn those that refused to accept his teaching as being on the way to perdition. But his one thought, his one object, was to set forth Christ Jesus before his hearers as the Lord, to whom they owed the obedience of faith by reason of His redemption. And far from asserting any authority, power, or lordship over them, he stated, on the contrary, that he considered himself and his fellow-teachers the servants of the congregations, not absolute slaves bound to do their will as they dictated, but servants for the sake of Jesus, ministers of Christ, stewards of the mysteries of God. And in this sense also every true preacher of the Lord Jesus Christ is a servant of the congregation entrusted to him, as he becomes all things to all men in order to gain souls for Christ, 1 Cor. 9, 19. (Kretzmann)

4:6 *Let light shine out of darkness.* God said this at the creation (Ge 1:2–4), and God says it again in the new creation or new birth (see 5:17; Jn 3:3, 7; 1Pe 1:3) as the darkness of sin is dispelled by the light of the gospel. (CSB)

Paul alludes to the power of God in creation, when His Word literally brought light into existence. (TLSB)

shone in our hearts. That miraculous Word of creation is at work through the Gospel, which alone can enlighten hearts that are dark with sin. (TLSB)

the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. The light that now shines in Paul's heart (qualifying him to be a proclaimer of Christ) is the knowledge of the glory of God as it was displayed in the face of Christ—who has come, not just from an earthly tabernacle, but from the glorious presence of God in heaven itself (see Jn 1:14). (CSB)

There is another reason also which causes Paul to be so fearless and frank in his ministry: For it is God that said, Out of darkness light shall shine, who has shined in our hearts for the enlightenment of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It was in the beginning of the world that the creative power of God's word caused the light to shine out of darkness, Gen. 1, 3. And the same God who thus created the physical light is the Author of the true spiritual light. It was not merely that he blew a dying ember into flame, as Luther remarks, but that he brought forth light out of darkness. There was darkness in the heart of Paul, as in that of all men by nature, spiritual darkness and death. But God created spiritual life and light in his heart in his conversion; and this reflection of the glory of God is now used to illuminate others; God has given to the preachers of the Gospel the ability to give to others the light of the knowledge of God through Christ, as manifested in Christ. Note: This function of the converted people is not confined to the pastors, but every believer that has experienced the illuminating power of God in his own heart will, in turn, act as a light tower to lead others to know Christ as their Lord and be saved. Mark also the contrast in the entire passage: The god of this world, the devil, blinds; the ministry of the Gospel gives light. Without the Gospel and its illuminating power the heart of man will remain forever in spiritual darkness; but if that power removes the darkness, there is a fullness of light and glory. (Kretzmann)

in the face of Jesus Christ. The righteousness, love, and grace of God (indeed God's very heart) are seen in Jesus (cf Jn 14:6; Rm 5:6–8). (TLSB)

4:1–6 The essence of Paul's ministry was "mercy" through the Lord Jesus alone. Such mercy compelled him to be straightforward, authentic, and transparent as a servant to God's people. Merciful ministry exposes and binds us to the people we serve. We must never give in to the temptation to think that merciful ministry can be done from afar, as a master and not as a servant. The same Lord who made "light shine out of darkness" will strengthen our hearts to be courageously transparent servants. • Thanks be to God, who is generously merciful to us. May He prepare us and bind us to those who need such mercy. Amen. (TLSB)

4:7 *this treasure.* The gospel. (CSB)

jars of clay. It was customary to conceal treasure in clay jars, which had little value or beauty and did not attract attention to themselves and their precious contents. Here they represent Paul's human frailty and unworthiness. (CSB)

Like invaluable gifts wrapped in plain paper, ministers of the Gospel, such as Paul, were frail; they dispensed the Gospel's treasures. (TLSB)

all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. The idea that the absolute insufficiency of man reveals the total sufficiency of God pervades this letter. (CSB)

God's overwhelming, all-encompassing power in His grace toward the world, in contrast to human incapability (cf Rm 1:16; 1Co 2:14). (TLSB)

4:8–9 Sharing the Gospel with others is challenging in a sinful, rebellious world (Jn 16:33). "Great and grievous, indeed, are these dangers and temptations, which every Christian must bear. We bear them even though each one were alone by himself" (LC III 105). But one can always trust in the Lord and the power of the Gospel to see one through. He never lets His people down (Mt 28:20). (TLSB)

4:10 Paul, as a minister of the Gospel, not only preached Christ crucified (1Co 1:23), but also was literally wounded for that message. Christians reflect that Christ is love by willing self-sacrifice and service, so that others might come to know Jesus' love. (TLSB)

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus. The frailty of the "clay jar" of Paul's humanity (v. 7) is plainly seen in the constant hardships and persecutions with which he is buffeted for the sake of the gospel and through which he shares in Christ's suffering (see 1:5; Ro 8:17; Php 3:10; Col 1:24). (CSB)

4:11 *given over to death.* Paul and his companions were persecuted, beaten, and threatened with death (11:23–33). (TLSB)

that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. The reference is to Christ's resurrection life and power. Once again (see **note** on v. 7), human weakness provides

the occasion for the triumph of divine power, and daily “dying” magnifies the wonder of daily resurrection life (see 1:9). (CSB)

In Paul’s frailties and struggles, the Gospel message exhibited its power all the more (cf 12:9; Rm 8:31–39). (TLSB)

4:12 Believers are not exempt from pain and suffering. When earthen vessels are broken, they even more clearly reveal the treasure of God’s power and grace within. (TLSB)

4:13 *same spirit of faith.* Believers from every generation and time possess the same faith in God’s Word, which delivers a spirit of perseverance to speak of God’s grace no matter the cost. (TLSB)

I believed; therefore I have spoken. See NIV text note. Faith leads to testimony. Paul therefore tirelessly labored and journeyed to bring the gospel message to others. (CSB)

Just as David boldly trusted in the Lord and proclaimed His grace (cf Ps 145:1–8), so Paul boldly proclaimed the same Lord. (TLSB)

The mention of the life in and with Christ raises the apostle to the very heights of an exultant declaration: But since we have the same spirit of faith (as the Psalmist), according to that which is written: I believed, therefore I also spoke, we also believe, and therefore also we speak. The apostle quotes Ps. 116, 10, where the Easter joy of the Old Testament believers is expressed, declaring that the same spirit of joyful and confident faith lived in him also. His faith, being grounded so firmly, and being so sure in its hope, could not remain silent; it must break forth in a confession of the mouth. As one commentator says: No sooner does faith exist than she begins to speak to others, and, while speaking, recognizes herself and grows in power. Just as the Psalmist was surrounded by enemies, so Paul was in the midst of dangers; but in either case their faith would not hold its peace; it is impossible for the true believer to be quiet concerning the wonderful things which he has seen and heard, Acts 4, 20 (Kretzmann)

4:14 *He.* God the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf Rm 8:11; Gal 1:1). (TLSB)

into His presence. Redeemed to live eternally in God’s presence in heaven. (TLSB)

4:15 *grace extends to more.* The goal of Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians was to reach more people. (TLSB)

4:16 *Therefore we do not lose heart.* Repeating the statement in v. 1. The intervening paragraphs explain why the apostle continues to have a cheerful heart, and the remaining verses of the chapter summarize the argument he has developed. (CSB)

wasting away. Because of the hardships to which he is subjected. (CSB)

All that belongs to this sinful world, which is passing away. (TLSB)

inner self. The new person, who will live forever in God's presence (cf 1Co 15:42–55; Php 1:6). (TLSB)

being renewed. Because of the inextinguishable flame of the resurrection life of Jesus burning within. Moreover, the inward renewal overcomes the outward destruction, and ultimately overcomes even death itself. (CSB)

God's Word and Sacraments give strength for each day of our lives (cf Mt 28:18–20; 1Co 10:16–17), prompting us to daily repentance (Ps 51:1–12). (TLSB)

4:17 *light and momentary troubles.* Seen in the perspective of eternity, the Christian's difficulties, whatever they may be, diminish in importance. (CSB)

eternal glory that far outweighs them all. By comparison, the eternal glory is far greater than all the suffering one may face in this life (cf. Ro 8:18). (CSB)

Afflictions and struggles are temporary; therefore, they are light compared to the glory of being God's reconciled and restored people, living in His presence forever (cf 5:17–20). (TLSB)

Therefore he writes, in the same strain of exultation: For our present momentary, light burden of tribulation works out for us from one excess to another an eternal heavy burden of glory. All the troubles which can come upon us Christians are with us only at this present time, for the length of this fleeting life, at the worst, for a moment as compared with the coming eternal life. And it is light, easy to be borne, comparatively speaking. But the time is coming, and that soon, when the eternal glory will be revealed to us, and this is so wonderful, so great and extensive, so weighty and endless that the slight oppression of the life on earth will be forgotten, Rom. 8, 18. The miracle is so great which is to follow this present tribulation as though produced by it, though it is a reward of grace, that Paul cannot find words enough to express the thought that is clamoring for utterance. Exceedingly, abundantly, from one excess to another, will God give us the glory which He has prepared since before the foundation of the world for them that love Him. (Kretzmann)

4:18 *what is seen ... what is unseen.* The experiences and circumstances of this present life, often painful and perplexing, are what is visible to the Christian; but these are merely phenomena in the passing parade of our fallen age and are therefore temporary and fleeting. To fix our eyes on these visible things would cause us to lose heart (vv. 1, 16). By contrast the unseen realities, which are no less real for being invisible (cf. Heb 11:1, 6, 26–27), are eternal and imperishable. Accordingly, we look up and away from the impermanent appearances of this present world scene (see Php 3:20; Heb 12:2). (CSB)

The glory of God, His angels, and heaven. (TLSB)

4:7–18 Living and sharing the life of Christ with others often has a cost. Paul instructs us to look beyond the momentary affliction to the eternal glory of salvation in Jesus. He tells us to look to the treasure, not to the earthen vessel, for our confidence with God. God’s promises of life and salvation are the most real things in our lives. Because that is true, believers can look at afflictions and struggles purposefully as opportunities that make God’s power more evident to those around them. Afflictions are temporary nuisances that will surely give way to the glory of life eternal with our Savior. • Lord, show me Your purpose in the struggles and in the victories of my life. Amen. (TLSB)