

2 Corinthians 4:1

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn for a few moments to the second passage of scripture which we read, 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and we might look particularly at words which we find at the beginning and again at the end of this chapter.

2 Corinthians 4, the first verse, Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. And again in verse 16, Therefore, we do not lose heart.

We do not lose heart. One of the challenges that we face in the churches in the Western world, and particularly in Western Europe today, is that it is easy to lose heart.

We think of the number of churches that have closed in the past, say, decade even, or quarter century or even longer.

I know that in the city of Edinburgh, where I live, when I was a student there in the late 1950s, there were five churches between where I now live and the congregations that I now worship, which in the 1950s were operational, and today they have been closed.

[1 : 37] That pattern is a pattern which we see in many of our cities today. During that period of time there has been a dramatic drop in the number of people who attend religious services.

Virtually more than half have disappeared in terms of church attenders. Today, in the last census of church attendance that was taken in 2002, just over 10%, 11.2% of the population were in church.

And I think this is, again, a reminder of the fact that we are living in a very challenging situation.

And of course, there are those who tell us that Christianity is on the way out. This decline is terminal. There is a book published by Professor Callum Brown of the University of Dundee, entitled The Death of Christian Britain, in which he predicts the demise of Christianity not only in this country, but throughout the whole of the Western world.

According to him, Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die. Now, given that kind of scenario, it is very easy for people to lose heart and to give up and to accept that we in the church must adopt a kind of portrait mentality or at best a maintenance mode and we simply lose a vision of revival, a vision of expansion, and a vision of reformation.

[3 : 37] Certainly, such pessimism, although it is understandable, is certainly not biblical. And what I want to suggest to you today is that if we look at this chapter that Paul wrote, he presents those a case for not giving up, for not losing heart.

The problems that Paul faced in many ways were worse than ours. We read in verses 8 some of the difficulties that he was confronting.

He was hard-pressed on every side, he was perplexed, he was persecuted, he was struck down. And if we look at two later passages in chapter 6 and chapter 11, we discover that he was the victim of beatings, of imprisonments, of riots, of flogging, of stoning, of shipwreck, and of being exposed to bandits.

He faced problems which we know little of. He was pressured, he was perplexed, he was persecuted, and yet, he was confident.

Yet, he was able to face the future with hope. His sufferings involved real physical pain as well as emotional anguish. And yet, he did not lose heart.

[5 : 14] And I believe that if Paul were here today, he would be very critical of the pessimism that prevails in so much of the church.

He would encourage us not to lose heart. He would encourage us to have confidence. He would encourage us to have hope. Now, why?

What is the grounds of this exhortation by Paul? Paul, how can he encourage us today not to lose heart, to have confidence concerning the future of the people of God and of God's purposes in the world?

Well, he gives us two reasons, at least two reasons in this chapter. The first reason is that we are not to lose heart because we have this ministry, he says.

We have this ministry in verse 1. We do not lose heart. Now, the ministry that Paul is referring to here is the ministry of communicating the word of God.

[6 : 23] And that is a ministry that he as an apostle had in a special way. But it is also a ministry which the whole people of God have been given, at least in a measure.

all of us are called upon to be witnesses to the word of God. Simply to tell the story of the word of God, to share the essence of the gospel with others.

The Bible is not a compendium of ideas. The Bible is not a book of aphorisms. The Bible is a story. The Bible is a narrative.

And yes, there are many ideas and there are didactic or teaching passages in the Bible. But all of these are part of the story, part of the narrative that begins with creation and goes through the fall into the election of Israel and the coming of Jesus and the church and pointing to the great confirmation at the end of the age.

That is the story. And that is the story that Paul says we are to tell. And the reason he says that we ought not to lack confidence is that he believes that that story in itself will change the world.

[7 : 42] That that story is the power of God. That that good use is the good use that turns the world upside down. And that's why Paul proclaimed that message clearly without apology and without qualification.

He speaks of presenting this message without deception, without distortion. He did not seek to water down, he did not seek to dilute this message, he simply presented it as it is.

And this surely is a message to us today to recover our confidence in the story of the gospel, to recover our confidence in the power of the word of God and to simply share that word with others and to discover that that word is still the power of God and the salvation to all those who believe.

And so the challenge that we as a witnessing community are called upon to face here is a challenge to refuse to pander to human prejudice but rather to present the story and to appeal to the conscience, the God-given conscience of men and women with whom we share the story.

The story is there. It is still the power of God. There are many communities around the world today who are receiving that story and discovering its cleansing and transforming power.

[9 : 34] And one of the reasons that we are not experiencing the power of the story may be that we are simply not sharing it. We are simply not telling it to others. We leave it to the specialist, we leave it to the preacher, we leave it to the evangelist.

Now the preacher and the evangelist have an important ministry, important roles in the witness of the church. But the ministry has been given, this ministry of sharing the word of God has been given to the whole body of Christ.

And it is as we share that message with others that we will rediscover its power. In areas of the world today where the churches are growing and we thank God that there are many areas where such is the case like China, like India, like many African countries, like Latin America, the key to the growth of these churches is of course the power of God's Holy Spirit that the Spirit of God is using individual believers who are witnessing to the Lord.

And the one common factor, one common feature of all of these churches is that they are witnessing churches churches, and that the believers are witnessing people who share their faith with others, who are not ashamed of the gospel, and who have this confidence in the gospel to transform the world.

And Paul is recalling us to that confidence. And he is saying, look, he said, this is the message, don't water it down, don't distort it, don't make excuses for it, simply share it with others.

[11 : 17] Tell the story. But this ministry was not only a ministry of sharing a story, it was also a ministry of experiencing the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

In verse 5, Paul tells us, for we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 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 Jesus Christ.

And so what Paul is saying here is that we not only tell a story, that we also witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, and we share our relationship to him with others, so that not only do we see Paul emphasizing here that there is power in the truth of the gospel to convict, but there is also the power of Jesus to come through that story, through that message, and to intervene in the lives of men and women.

Martin Luther used to say that when he read the gospel, Jesus Christ would step out of the page and meet him. Now that's what makes the gospel the power of God.

It is as we share the gospel, Jesus Christ steps out of the gospel and meets men and women. And they have a personal encounter with him.

[12 : 58] It's not something that we can stage manage, it's not something that we can manipulate. it is something that he sovereignly does by his spirit. That he asks us to share the message in order that he might meet with men and women.

That he might step out of the page, step out of the story and meet with them. The language that Paul uses in verse 6 recalls his own Damascus road vision of Jesus in his end time glory recorded in Acts chapter 9.

Paul affirms that the bright glory that he saw then is in some way internalized in the hearts of all who confess Jesus as Lord. And the glory of the exalted Christ can dispel the spiritual blackout that the God of this age imposes.

Who he seeks the God of this age is veiling the gospel to those who are perishing. That although he is veiling the gospel yet the light of Christ is greater than the power of darkness and that darkness can be dispelled.

And Paul is urging us to recover our confidence in the power of Christ to save, the power of Christ to confront men and women.

[14 : 29] And so we find Paul here having this confidence confidence in the gospel because of the ministry that he was being granted by God.

And he encourages us also to have that confidence, that confidence in the gospel, that confidence in Christ, and that we may indeed face the future with confidence and with hope.

That we may not become escapist, pretending that reality is something other than it is, but that nevertheless accepting the grimness of the reality that we face, doing so in hope that the power of the gospel and the power of Christ can transform the reality and bring new life into the lives of men and women and into the life of the community.

And so the first reason why Paul tells us that we ought not to lose heart that we can have confidence is that we have this ministry, this ministry of the word, this ministry of Christ, and that has been given not only to their apostles, not only to those who teach and preach in the church, but to the whole people of God.

There is a sense in which this is a shared ministry, and we need to recover that concept of body ministry in the church today.

[16 : 04] But Paul gives another reason. Not only is his confidence in the gospel and in Christ, but his confidence is also in what Christ is doing in the people of God.

And so, if the first reason is we ought to have confidence because of the ministry God has given us, we also ought to have confidence because by the gospel, we as the people of God are being renewed.

Verse 16, therefore we do not lose heart, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we being renewed day by day.

So, Paul had this confidence that although he was facing all of these difficulties, although he was confronting many challenges, nevertheless God was at work in him renewing him.

He was being renewed day by day. now by modern standards when Paul wrote this letter, he was not an old man, but yet he was conscious of the aging process.

[17 : 19] We see this in verse 16, outwardly we are wasting away. And he even contemplates death here.

He speaks in verse 17, our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 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. Here we have Paul. He was confronting a lot of opposition, life was hard, life in many ways was grim.

And yet he's going. He's going not only because of his confidence in the gospel, his confidence of Christ to use the gospel, but he's confident because he knew that Christ was at work in him and in the people of God.

He's speaking here as we, and he's speaking not simply as I, he's speaking here not only on his own behalf, but on the behalf of the whole people of God.

[18 : 31] Though outwardly we're wasting away, yet inwardly we're being renewed day by day. One commentator suggests that Paul's renewal of himself inwardly was proportional to the progressive decay of himself outwardly.

Now, Paul is here speaking as someone who is contemplating death, someone who is aware that he is drawing near to the end of life's journey.

And as such he gives us a tremendous testimony. And I think this brings out to us the value, the great asset that we have in the church of people who have been believers for a long period of years and who can testify as Paul did to the faithfulness of God over many decades.

sometimes people complain about the prevalence of the elderly in the church. But in fact the elderly are an asset in the church. And that's an asset that we ought to use more than we do.

Because the testimony of someone who has been a pilgrim for many years and who can look forward with confidence has tremendous power today.

[19 : 54] And we ought to avoid segmenting the church into age groups. The church in the New Testament is a heterogeneous church. It's a church in which Jew and Greek and young and old, male and female, all come together.

It's a homogenisation, we're mixed up together in the church. And I believe that those who have been on the Christian road for a long time have a great contribution to make to the life of the church.

Paul certainly encourages us here. And so Paul is emphasising here that the life, he speaks in the earlier part of the chapter of telling the story, that he is speaking about living the story and of testifying to the power of the gospel in his own life.

Now I believe that such a testimony today is tremendously important. It's important that we tell the story, that is true. But it's also important that we share our experience of the story.

We live in an experience oriented society. We live in an age in which people are exploring their experience.

[21 : 24] We are moving, although we have noted that church attendance has dropped. Nevertheless, belief in God in Western Europe is increasing according to the European values survey.

The proportion of people believing in a personal God is increasing throughout Western Europe since the 1980s. In 1981 it was one third of the population.

In the 1990s it was up to 40%, four people in ten. And that's a very interesting movement.

We tend to judge spirituality by church attendance or church membership. But there is a move as an American theologian has said a move away from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking.

A spirituality of dwelling that values space and place like a church. But today we find people who are still searching spiritually.

[22 : 34] We're not really living in a secular society. sociologists have begun to speak about desecularization. Sociologists are much more aware than we in the church are very often to what is happening in society.

And sociologists are discovering this development of spirituality. People looking for a spiritual solution. People looking for spiritual answers.

Spirituality today is big business. You go into a bookshop. The amount of titles and of religion are very small, but the number under spirituality is enormous.

Now a lot of that spirituality may be leading people, and in fact is leading people in all sorts of false directions. But nevertheless that is an opportunity for us, is it not? To speak to such people about our spirituality.

Not simply to share the gospel with them, important and truthful as that is, but also to tell them what the story, what the gospel means to us. To testify out of our own religious experience.

[23 : 45] This is tremendously important today because of this new interest in spirituality which we have noted. But it's also important because many people in our society are living in denial of death.

death. Now Paul is confronting death here and he's encouraging us who follow the Lord Jesus Christ to do the same.

Death is the great unmentionable in our society. People don't talk about it and yet it is the one thing that is inevitable, the one frontier that all of us must cross.

what an opportunity to cheer the Christian hope of resurrection. What an opportunity to testify as to how we who believe expect to die well.

Tremendous opportunity today. We're living in a society I repeat that is seeking and searching. Unfortunately, much of that search is moving in a new age direction, it's looking within the self, it's looking to the cosmos, it's looking for some kind of pantheistic answer.

[25 : 07] But the tragedy is that so many of these people regard the church as to be unspiritual. And the challenge that we face is to demonstrate a true spirituality spirituality in the church.

And I believe that under God the churches that will prevail in the culture in which we live today are not only those churches that preach the gospel, but are those churches that demonstrate and exhibit a vibrant biblical spirituality.

So that as Paul said, when someone might come in, an outsider might come in, that person will be immediately conscious that God is present, that he or she is in the presence of God, that there is a spiritual reality, a sense of transcendence, a sense of the otherness and the majesty and the glory, the holiness of God that is present in the believing community.

And that each of us may carry that sense of presence with us as we go out into the community. And if we do, I believe that those who are seeking some form of spiritual fulfillment and meaning will take note that we have been with Jesus.

People today are hungry for a message of hope. Let us then share that message with them. Let us see the challenges that we face today not as a problem but as an opportunity.

[26 : 44] We need to get out of a problem oriented mode of thinking. Jesus when he looked out in the multitude saw them as sheep without a shepherd. Yes he saw them in all their need but he also saw that very same multitude as a harvest field waiting to be reached.

And so if we look out in the world today and as we think of people who are searching in the new age as we think of people who are looking here and there for some answer to the meaning of life.

Let us see that not simply as competition to the church but maybe see it as an opportunity to reach out with the good use of the gospel and to help them to come to know Christ and to find in him what they are looking for.

And so Paul says we do not lose heart. May God enable us today to share that confidence to have that same hope which comes from the gospel and comes from Christ and comes from his work within us.

And if there is someone here this morning who does not yet know Christ, who does not yet have this hope, then I say to you that hope is being offered to you, that hope is available to you, that hope is within your reach this morning and I invite you to put out your hand and to grasp it as it is offered to you in the gospel.

[28 : 21] Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father we come before you to thank you for the confidence that Paul encourages us to have and grant to God that we may not lose hope but that we may have a holy confidence trusting in who you are trusting in what you have done trusting in your good news and above all trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ we ask this in his name and for his sake Amen the God And