

11,13,25 2 Cor. 4:1-12 God's Means of Manifesting The Life of Christ Through Us

We are moving into 2 Cor. 4, so let's begin with the first four verses;

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

Paul begins by saying that God's mercy has brought him into what he calls "this ministry". In the next few verses, he reiterates what that ministry is; "the manifestation of the truth" through "our gospel".

When we think of the "gospel" we think of how a person is saved, but as we saw when we went through Romans, to Paul that would only be the initial part of the gospel. The word "gospel" which just means "good news" includes the way of salvation, but also the mystery of the Church as the body of Christ and the destiny of all who are part of the new creation.

That's why in Gal. 1:11-12 Paul put it like this;

I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was I preach is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul's gospel is the revelation of a completely unprecedented New Covenant founded on the blood of Christ and His resurrection; and all the implications of those events as they are related to the eternal purpose of God. This was a supernatural revelation given to Paul to be taught to all who are born-again in Christ. And Paul calls this "my gospel", not "the gospel".

(Rom. 2:16 & 16:25-26) In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel . . . Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ,

according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest . . .

(2 Tim. 2:7-9) Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things. Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer . . .

Paul knew that the “gospel” which was entrusted to him was the knowledge of God’s purpose that had been “kept secret since the world began, but is now made manifest”.

The way of salvation by faith had been presented to the world by God’s people since Adam taught his sons the importance and meaning of a blood sacrifice. The way of salvation has always been known; it was the opposite of anything hidden or “kept secret”. It has never been a “mystery”. But what the Lord revealed to Paul (and to us through him) was not only previously hidden and is completely new, it is also something much more than how to be saved.

Through Paul, the Spirit of Truth opened up an entirely new revelation of God’s Son and of God’s eternal purpose in Him that Peter expands on in 1 Pet. 1:10-12;

This (so great) salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

Neither the prophets nor even angels understood what was coming. Here’s a brief commentary on the passage in Peter;

While Old Testament prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit to deliver God's message, they did not fully grasp its meaning or application, especially concerning the Messiah and the future. This "fuller sense" of a text implies that the divine intent of Scripture contains depths beyond the prophet's personal understanding, though they still understood they were serving God by delivering His truth.

We have been shown things that none of God's servants before the sending of the Holy Spirit at Christ's ascension had any knowledge of. So, when you see the word "gospel" in the New Testament, or the phrase "this ministry", it's important to realize how comprehensive that gospel and ministry really are. It's the revelation, the spiritual knowledge, of those things that bring us into a fuller understanding of Who God is, who we are in Christ, why we are here and what our destiny is. Those are the things Paul was entrusted with and he considered his ministry and mission in life to be doing all he could to make certain that all of God's children knew what was entailed in what Paul called, in Acts 20:27; " . . . the full counsel of God" (AKA, "my gospel").

Each of us has been given the same responsibility, just not in a way that's as extensive geographically as the apostles did. We need to do all we can, within our sphere of influence, to ensure that as many Christians as possible hear and understand what Paul's "gospel" really is.

Again, listen to vs. 1 in the light of these things; "Therefore, since we have this ministry (this calling), as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart"; meaning, we do not give up, because we know this is God's will and He will provide all we need for us to be able to do our part in fulfilling that calling.

We don't have to be able to define the specific outworkings of our calling; we don't even have to know what we will be doing tomorrow. We just have to make sure we are fully available to the Lord for whatever he brings into our lives to shape us, prepare us and use us as He desires. We are bondslaves of Christ and it will be His mercy that carries us through.

So, Paul calls his gospel a "mystery" hidden until after the ascension of Christ and then revealed to the apostles by the Holy Spirit. I want to share Spark's explanation of this, so as I read what he wrote, try to think through the implications for us personally, as well as for the Church universally, of what is contained in the revealed secret of Paul's gospel;

What is this mystery of the Gospel which is the mystery of Christ, which is the mystery now disclosed? What exactly is it? Can we put it into few words? In brief, the mystery is the incarnation of God in Christ, with the intent that God's Son should be the firstborn among many brethren, so that there shall

be a Divine seed or family or Body. If only we could get inside of a statement like that! God's secret!

How did God decide to solve the whole problem of this universe after the chaos and ruin that resulted from the working of Satan, and men's complicity with him, and the entrance of sin? How was God going to deal with this whole situation? By Himself coming right down in the form of man and begetting a new race of beings as sharers of His own Divine life; not His Deity but His Life, partaking of His own inner nature, becoming as a family, His own moral and spiritual reproduction in the universe. That is infinitely ingenious. There is a wisdom about that that is profound. He didn't work from the outside to try and remedy and patch up a broken-down situation, He wasn't dealing with the thing objectively at all but Himself coming right into it, God incarnate, God manifest in the flesh to reproduce after His own kind. That is the secret which God kept hidden through ages and generations.

You can probably see why the religious leaders of Paul's time thought that Paul and the Nazarene Paul followed were insane or deceived. Paul proclaimed that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that when He was raised from the dead, He became the first born of an entirely new species of humanity. No one in the Old Testament understood this plan; it was God's secret.

To be honest, I don't think many Christians fully understand the implications of this now; even though we have the knowledge of this through Paul's writings. When Sparks said, "If only we could get inside of this", he meant that it would be a revolutionary thing for all of us if we could see, really see, that we are part of a species of humanity that has never existed before and that this new humanity contains within it the image of God's Son.

All of that is so much more than just being forgiven and given a place in Heaven. The true gospel of God's grace is a much greater thing than most Christians realize; and that's why it's so important that we continue to learn all we can of what God has done for us in Christ.

Yes, we are forgiven and we are safe, but we are also indwelt by God and are destined to be princes of the heavenly realms; far above archangels (God's most powerful and glorious creatures).

Even if all God did for us was to save us, He would be worthy of our eternal praise and thanksgiving – but to join us to His Son and raise us to the place of highest honor in His eternal kingdom should draw out unending worship from us.

As we'll see in 2 Cor. 4:17, 'Don't let the momentary afflictions of this present life distract us from realizing the glory that will be revealed once this life is finished'. Here's Paul's exact wording;

Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory . . .

Ok, let's look at what Paul wrote about Satan's work of putting a veil over the minds of those who don't believe; and how that reality can provide some clarity to why we are here.

Here are verses 3 & 4; "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ . . . should shine on them . . . "

When Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the Lord made it clear to him what his calling was. Even though we aren't all apostles, this part of what the Lord told Paul definitely applies to all of us;

(Acts 26:17-18) I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God . . .

(1 Jn. 5:19) The whole world lies under the power of the devil.

When you stop and think of this world's population, it is divided into those who, by putting their faith in Christ, have stepped out of darkness into light. The majority of the world's population are living in spiritual darkness under the power and authority of Satan.

Our calling is to allow the Lord to use us to free all who are deceived by "turning them from darkness to light".

Unfortunately, part of this mission applies to Christians also;

(2 Tim. 2:20, 24-26) In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor . . .

a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

Unbelievers are not in the “great household” of God and they are *already* captives of the enemy. Paul is reminding Timothy that part of what he is called to do is to prevent those he ministers to, those who *are* in the household of God, from being caught in the snare of the devil and end up doing “his will” instead of the will of God.

We won’t take time now, but there are numerous passages warning believers to not walk in darkness, to not be overtaken by darkness, but to stay in the light. Deception is the work of the enemy and since he already holds *the world* in darkness, *Christians* are the target of his greatest effort in the realm of deception.

Darkness has fallen on the Church globally, but before the light is completely snuffed out, the Lord will rapture His faithful remnant.

(Rev. 3:8,10) . . . you have a little strength, have kept My word . . . Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world.

While we still have the light of Life, it is our responsibility to do what we can to set free anyone, Christian or otherwise, who has been ensnared through the darkness of deception.

As I mentioned last time related to believers, if milk is a person’s ongoing, sustained source of spiritual nutrition, that person will lose any understanding of what they once had – at that point deception is inevitable.

Which is why I warned that if we don’t supplement the instruction we receive from a pastor who does not go in-depth in God’s Word, then over time we will lose whatever discernment we once had and we will be assimilated into a Christian culture of superficial theology that can’t distinguish between truth and deception.

So, Paul says that his gospel is veiled to those who are perishing; that the god of this age has blinded those who do not believe. That is the spiritual condition of those who are outside of Christ.

I'll share some various comments by authors who explain the implications of this. First from David Guzik;

This doesn't mean they are innocent victims of Satan's blinding work. Satan's work upon them is not the only reason they are blinded. John 3:19 says, "This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light . . ." Though men love the darkness, and choose the darkness, Satan still works hard to *keep* them blinded to the glorious gospel of light and salvation in Jesus.

Everyone who is offered light has a decision to make. The path that leads to life is narrow and few find it; the road that leads to death is broad and most go that way. Since the Lord is the only One capable of searching the hearts; He is the only One who knows when an individual has made what we could call, his "final decision".

I heard the gospel numerous times growing up and I rejected it every time. But I never reached a place of final and full rejection; I continued to search for the Truth; I just had no idea that I had already been offered the Truth.

The reason I mention this is because there's a passage I'll read in a minute that shows that there *is* a point of no return. Light can't be rejected forever without consequences.

(2 Thess. 2:10-12) Because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason, God will send upon them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth.

The context of this passage in Thessalonians is referring to the time when God will allow Satan, in the person of the Antichrist, to deceive the world at the beginning of the Tribulation. Missiologists tell us that out of the current 8 plus billion people on our planet, there are still several billion who have never heard a clear presentation or offer of the gospel of Christ. This, obviously, doesn't apply to them.

But at the time of the rapture, when this age of Grace and of the global dissemination of the gospel comes to a close, all who have heard and finally rejected it will become the followers of the Antichrist – God will have sent them “. . . a strong delusion so that they will believe the lie.”

Then during the Tribulation, the Lord will send out 144,000 Jewish missionaries, along with Moses and Elijah, to ensure that the gospel is offered to the billions who had not heard it prior to the rapture – and according to Revelation, countless numbers of men and women will respond and become followers of Christ during those seven years.

The following is from a commentary on the passage we touched on in 2 Thessalonians addressing the blinding influence we’ve been looking at;

The Antichrist, the Man of Sin or Lawlessness, the Little Horn, the Beast of Revelation, whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders and with all the deception for those who are perishing because they did not receive the truth; the implication being that they had exposure to the love of the truth so as to be saved. But because of their unbelief and willful rejection of the truth, God will send upon them a deluding influence (God actively gives them over to the power of deception, which is divine retribution). It is a judicial hardening (similar to what which happened to Pharoah), so that they will believe what is false in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth.

We don’t know who has reached the place of final rejection of the Truth; just as we don’t know which Christians have made their decision to reject the light of New Testament truth related to the true meaning and purpose of the Christian life. So, our calling is to offer any light we’ve been given, whether related to the gospel for the lost or spiritual advance to the saved. We have to leave the outcome of our efforts to the Lord Who alone can determine whether what we have shared will bear fruit.

We know what we are being asked to do and we also know that whether our offer is rejected or accepted depends entirely on what the Lord can see in the heart of the one we are talking to.

Here’s our next section in 2 Corinthians 4; it’s verses 5 through 7;

We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to 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. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

First, we must never forget, our goal is *not* to try and persuade people to believe in *us*. We are to simply present to them the One Who *is* worthy to be trusted.

At best, we are "earthen vessels". The treasure of Christ's life and light in us has its source in Him, not in us; and because of that, we can count on a "power" beyond anything we could ever produce being the only thing that can make our offer to those who are open, effectual. The "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" is *only* in the "face of Jesus Christ". He is the One others need to see.

It seems to me that our contemporary Christianity is based more on "Christian celebrityship" than on us being diminished so that Christ can be seen. No matter how many ads and posters and infomercials we see showing us the faces of awesome worship leaders and pastors claiming "It's all about Jesus!"; there is only One Celebrity, and the only thing all those other faces are doing is blocking the face of the One Who matters.

In the Expositor's Bible, one of the editors, James Denney, wrote this;

This is probably the simplest and most complete directions given for preaching the Gospel. The preacher is to make the Truth manifest. It is implied in what has just been said, that one great hindrance to its manifestation may easily be its treatment by the preacher himself. I am primarily a teacher and this struck a convicting cord in my heart for I love to use lots of "power point" slides and illustrative props. If a pastor relies on those things, the manifestation will not take effect. If he wishes, in the very act of preaching, to conciliate a class, or an interest; to create an opinion in favor of his own learning, ability, or eloquence; to enlist sympathy for a cause, a movement or an institution, the truth will not be seen.

A.T. Robertson was a little more blunt;

Often, people love it when the preacher preaches himself. It is revealing, it seems intimate, and it is often entertaining. It is also tempting for the preacher, because he sees how people respond when he focuses the message on himself. But the bottom line is that the preacher himself can't bring you to God and save your eternal soul; only Jesus can.

Is it wrong for a preacher to tell a joke? To use a story from his own life? Of course not. But it is all a matter of proportion. It's like asking, "Is it all right to put salt in the soup?" Of course, but don't put in too much. And if, week after week, too much of the preacher is in the sermon, it is wrong. The preaching of one's self is surely as poor and disgusting a topic as a preacher can find. Don't we have a greater message than ourselves?

It wasn't only that Paul did *not* preach himself. He also did not preach a gospel of social reform, or a list of rules you must follow to be right with God. He preached Jesus! Paul's goal in preaching was to bring men to Jesus, not to make good citizens of them.

Now, let's look at the term "earthen vessels", since that's what we are. In the next few verses Paul discusses several implications of what it means to be an earthen vessel. The first one is vs. 7; "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." We are by nature weak, or as the Lord told the Philadelphian church in Rev. 3, we "have little strength". If we are growing in our knowledge of the Lord and of ourselves, then we are increasingly aware of how little our strength really is.

That awareness is *not* a problem; it's the only way we can ever be useful to the Lord. As we'll see in 2 Cor. 12:9, the only time God can "perfect" *His* strength in us is *in* our weakness. In Paul's case, that was brought about by an excruciating physical condition that moved him to beg God three times to remove it. The principle behind this "weakening" process the Lord takes us into, what it looks like in real life, and what the intended outcome is, are all explained in our next few verses in 2 Cor. 4 (vs's 8-10);

We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

As I read these terms as the original language portrays them, see if you can relate to any of these things in your own life.

- The experience of pressure beyond our ability to cope
- Confused; nothing makes sense
- Persecuted (either by the enemy or by others, or both)
- Knocked down with great force
- Delivered over to death, sharing the sufferings of Christ.

Paul's response to each was to take a stand of faith: ". . . but not crushed, not despairing, not forsaken, not destroyed". He may have fully disagreed emotionally with each stand he took; but he took it anyway. The first half of each verse is Paul's actual experience; the second half is his response by faith. The Psalms are overflowing with David doing the same thing.

All of this has a very specific intent and outcome for those who are willing to have the Lord bring them into these things;

(2 Cor. 4:11-12) For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So, then death is working in us, but life in you.

Paul's summary for all of these pressures and this internal confusion is the word "death". And the reason we are brought into this "death" is to so weaken the natural man, the flesh, that Christ will have freedom to manifest His own life through us. And the outcome of *that* is that life is then brought to others.

That's the advantage of being an earthen vessel – all the power has its source in God, not us; and all the glory of our ministry goes to the Lord, for the simple reason that we discover in this process that the sufficiency of all true spiritual ministry is not from us, but is from the indwelling Christ within us.

If we can't take what we've just learned in these passages and believe them, we are going to be fearful, insecure and sometimes certain we are being punished for something we've done. It doesn't do any good to become theologically sound on this whole process of the death-unto-resurrection life in Christ if we can't personally apply it to us when we are suffering.

The only way to have any degree of peace or rest under this kind of pressure is to believe that all we are experiencing is happening in order to “bring life to others”.

I’m going close our study with a series of comments by various authors who are *very* personally acquainted with what we’ve been looking at. These are their explanations, experiences and discoveries. First, from Sparks;

What, in the thought of God do Christians exist for? What does the Church exist for? There is only one answer. The existence and the function are to be an expression of Christ. There is nothing less and nothing more than that. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and all between! Let that be the starting point; let that be the governing rule and reality in all matters of life and work, and see at once the nature and calling of the Church. This vast, incomprehensible heavenly system, of which Christ is the personal embodiment, touches every detail of life, personally and collectively. But remember that only the Holy Spirit sees and knows how it is so; hence, as at the beginning, for us, there has to be a complete submission to and direction by the Lordship of the Holy Spirit. What the bloodstream is to the human body, the Divine Life is to and in "the Church which is *His* body." What the nerve system is in the physical realm, the Holy Spirit is in the spiritual. Understand all the workings of those two systems in the natural, and you will begin to see how God has written His great heavenly principles, first in the person of His Son, and then in His corporate Body.

Now from Watchman Nee;

If you feel the Lord is handling you in that way, bruising, using the flail on you, hammering, that's a hopeful sign. The Lord is meaning something more of value in your life for others. You know, friends, the idea has been very common in Christianity that it's a great and wonderful thing to be mightily used of the Lord: "It's wonderful to be mightily used of the Lord! If only I was a great evangelist, or a great teacher!" Let me tell you, that's an entirely false conception! The truth is that those who serve the Lord most truly go through the deepest sufferings . . . You may be having a more or less easy time, I don't want to dishearten you by saying it may not always be so, but if you really want to be of greater use to the Lord, remember it may be by a deeper discipline of the Lord. And if you're having a particularly difficult

time, most likely it's because the Lord is going to meet the needs of others more fully through you.

And from William MacDonald;

Life out of death is one of the deepest principles of our existence. The meat we eat and by which we live comes through the death of animals. It is so in the spiritual realm. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." The more the church is afflicted and hunted and pursued, the more Christianity spreads. And yet it is difficult for us to accept this truth. When suffering comes to a servant of the Lord, we normally think of it as a tragedy. Actually, this is God's normal way of dealing. It is not the exception. Constant exposure to death for Jesus' sake is the divine manner in which the life of Jesus is manifested through our mortal bodies.

Finally, just some personal comments on some things I learned as I was trying to understand all this. The greatest demonstration of God's power happened through a Man in the place of the greatest weakness any man has ever known; a Man Who was scourged, crucified and completely abandoned. The greater the weakness the greater the need and expression of spiritual strength.

The *only* time we are strong is when we are weak and looking exclusively to God for enablement. That's not just a doctrine to keep in mind; it's a mindset we have to come into personally if we ever hope to understand it, let alone see the fruit that can come from it.