

2 Corinthians 4

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon on 2 Corinthians 4 emphasizes the power of God's glory in our weaknesses and the importance of faithful ministry amidst suffering.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:1

Topics: "Faithfulness in Ministry", "The Glory of God"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on 2 Corinthians 4, emphasizing Paul's unwavering commitment to preaching the gospel without deceit, highlighting the importance of presenting the truth of Christ without veils. He explains that any blindness to the gospel is due to the hearts of the lost being blinded by the god of this world, not through any fault of the messenger. Darby stresses the necessity of preaching Christ and His glory, and how the treasure of the gospel is contained in earthen vessels, showcasing God's power rather than human strength. He encourages believers to embrace their identity in Christ, recognizing that their outward struggles lead to inward renewal and eternal glory. Ultimately, the message calls for a return to the pure proclamation of Christ, urging believers to live in light of the eternal weight of glory that awaits them.

Transcript

Paul comes now to the ministration of it. He says "we faint not." We are right out in the light. But then there is another thing, and that is - he explains how he gives out the word of God as purely as he took it in; he did not handle it deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commended himself "to every man's conscience in the sight of God." The consequence is, there is no veil, and not only no veil on the face of Jesus Christ, but Paul put no veil on by want of faithfulness on his part; so that really, if any were lost, it was not through any fault of Paul's. The veil, if any, would be one on their own hearts. "If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost in whom the god of this world hath blinded the eyes of them that believe not." "Are lost" is characteristic. It has nothing to do with time at all; it is "the ones that perish." There is no veil on the glory, and if my gospel comes out in all its glory, the devil has put a veil on the hearts of them that believe not. This would be true now if the gospel was preached as clearly and powerfully as Paul did.

324 A man now, if he does not actually refuse a message, may hear it and be instructed, and come again and again. If it is actually hid to him, it is all over. I can say that of the thing I preach, but not of my own preaching. I should say just as much of what I preach that, if a soul does not believe, he will be condemned. There is a difference, of course, between coming and hearing, and positively rejecting.

"The manifestation of the truth" is here in connection with the word of God. I have no doubt Paul did it practically too. There is another thing in the preaching that makes a difference; there was then a great deal more preaching of the person of the Lord and less about being saved than there is now. I do not mean that there is anything wrong now, but there was a claim put in by God to submission by men to this Son of God; and if that claim were rejected, there was no hope for them. It was not the cry to "poor sinners" (they were that of course), but it was "Here is Christ: now submit to Him." And if they said, "We will not bow," it was all over.

I think the more we get back to the old manner of preaching the better, especially as in Acts - preaching Jesus and the resurrection, though all the world now acknowledges Christ risen from the dead. I am satisfied, the more we insist on the fact, the more real power there would be to set people free. I know we are so accustomed to these things that they have lost their edge; but suppose I were to say to Jews, "There is a man in the glory of God," they would stop their ears and stone me. Ask anyone, "Do you believe there is a man at the right hand of God, because He died for our sins?" It is the insisting on the fact that is important. Suppose you were sitting down and talking to some man, and then found out it was the Son of God! The habit of hearing is so deadening. Yet by calling yourselves Christians you already say that you are in a world that cast out the Son of God.

325 Well, Paul could say, "not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully." He faithfully declared his message and that is the first point we have. Here is the full glory without a veil; no veil on it at all so that if it were hidden to any, it would be to such as were lost, being blinded by the devil. For Paul did not preach himself, "but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." "For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts." There we have a very important thing in the character of the gospel compared with the prophets, for even in the communication the Holy Ghost shines into Paul's heart and gives him the sense of the value of all this for himself first, but also in such a way that he would give it out to others. He says, "when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood," and so on. We find there a revelation of Christ to himself, and for himself, but he was also to give it out, just as here "God shined into our hearts," not "to give" exactly, but for the shining out of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

There is more power when I say in me, than to me, and it was in him, for his own soul as well as for others. In John 7 a man comes to Christ and drinks and then "out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." The man does not thirst for rivers, but he thirsts to drink, and the draught taken becomes rivers. "In me" in the passage from Galatians does not refer to the church, but to God's Son. In the Acts you find Paul preached that Jesus was the Son of God, and this is what Peter never did. We meet with all sorts of notions of that kind if you look for them, such as that Paul did not know anything about the church until he was in prison at Rome. The old Latin quotation is to the point, "He reads scripture well who brings back a meaning from it instead of carrying one to it."

We now come to the instrument; we have had already the fact of the ministry. "We preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake; for God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined 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"; the treasure and the instrument. God caused the "light to shine out of darkness" (v. 6). God did so in Genesis 1. He who did the one, now does the other. Saul was in this darkness, and God said, as it were, "Let there be light," and there was

light. Not that in Genesis it was the beginning of light, as I believe, but still so God says to Saul's heart. In Genesis it says "darkness was upon the face of the deep"; it does not say that darkness was everywhere. The face of the deep was without form and void, it was chaos; there it was all dark, and God said, "Let there be light, and it was light." Scripture does not tell us when God made the light, though "all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made"; whatever it was He created it.

326 All geology is left in the background when you see the difference between the first and second verses of Genesis 1. The first gives us, that the things that were made "were not made of things that do appear" - "in the beginning": there it was. "And the earth was without form and void"; it was all chaos and darkness. And then He makes this earth as we have it. And, just as by His own fiat and power God made the light, so He acted in Paul's heart. Universal creation is in verse 1. Then follows specific forming of this world which had fallen into a state of chaos - Scripture does not say how - and of darkness. In verse 3 He begins this form of earth which we have now, with fishes, animals, and so on. All that we find in the chapter is this earth as we have it now, except in verse 1 the fact of universal creation by God. Verse 3 resembles God's dealings with a soul to bring it out of darkness as a general idea, but I could not take it in detail. It looks as if all creation were made in analogy with spiritual things; trees as kings and empires; and grass for people, and so on; but I could not take it more in detail, and it is only an image: there is no doctrine as to it.

There might have been millions and millions of years between those two verses. In Genesis 1:1, 2, I suppose geological times all came in there. Philosophers, who have examined the matter most accurately, have made twenty-six or twenty-seven catastrophes occur, and give the difference by the strata containing various shells and other fossils. But all that, if so, would come between those two verses, there is plenty of room for it all. For my part I do not believe nine-tenths of what they say about time. For instance, one of the greatest infidels in London made borings in the Nile and brought up a piece of burnt brick, from a depth of twenty-eight feet, proving that man's hand had formed the brick, and by this he made out that so many thousands of years had elapsed since it was deposited, long before the time of Adam. But there were no burnt bricks in Egypt till the time of the Romans, and when told so of course he had not a word to say. And you constantly find such things.

327 "Hath shined in our hearts to shine out." The light is put in a vessel that it may shine out. Paul was in open enmity at the time, but it was the revelation of the glory of the Lord to him - "shined into our hearts." In verses 4-6 it is Christ's person that is presented, and in a certain sense that is as high as you can go. Paul's gospel here is confined to that, but I do not say that is everything, for at the end of chapter 5 we have more, "God reconciling," and so on. But here he is speaking of the glory; and redemption was not accomplished and brought down to man until Christ went into the glory. It is clear that no man can eat bread come down from heaven, unless as he eats the flesh and blood in that way: "except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood ye have no life in you"; but when we know that - here "eaten" - all His life becomes the very thing that takes possession of our affections.

He was the invisible God; His coming down was the testimony of love, and there I see God in another character. It was not God sitting in righteousness and holiness, for that was law, but God come down in love. True, that was of no avail, because of man's wickedness and therefore Paul goes on "we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God; for he hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." That is, we have Him on the cross for the embassy; but when I have the embassy I say "God was in Christ reconciling"; that is the message.

In John 17 there are two glories, so to speak; the glory as God and the glory as Man, and it is the latter He gives to us. In John you will always find Christ's oneness with the Father and yet He receives everything, and so it is He says, "Glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." It is a glorious thing being God and being one with the Father; but then, all that He has as man we have. There is His unity with the Father, and we cannot have that; but as it is displayed in man, we have it all. He goes up on high into the glory He had with the Father before the world was; He will come again and we shall see Him as He is. I do not believe the world will ever see Him as He is; flesh and blood would be struck down blind if they were, as Paul was.

328 The treasure is the light of the knowledge of the love of God; and it is in an earthen vessel, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. He puts this amazing glory in the vessel in order that all the power may be of God. There is no fitness between the vessel and the thing that is put into it, and there you will find God and the vessel both brought in. "We are troubled on every side," that is the vessel; "yet not distressed," because God was there; "we are perplexed," see no way out; "but not in despair," for there was a way out after all, for God was there; "persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed." The vessel is all broken and dealt with, but still God is there all the while. Into such an earthen vessel all this glory is put, and so in that sense we can now rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. The vessel is made nothing of; but it is sustained by another power, which is neither the treasure nor the vessel, and so the man is dependent.

Then you come to the way the vessel is dealt with. A thing with a will is not a vessel: a person is acting for himself if he has a will; he must not think or will anything for himself, and therefore it says, "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus." That is obedience, of course. Christ was obedient unto death; that is not a man's will, and I am always to bear about in my body His dying; that is, Christ's dying or being put to death. There are two Greek words used in verses 10 and 11, for "dying" and "death." The first is the fact of death, just the matter of fact, and the other is rather the moral character of it, or includes that here. The fact in Christ becomes the moral character of us. As we have it in Peter, "Forasmuch, then, as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind." Christ did actually die, and Peter had just been speaking to them not to suffer for evil doing, but, if it were God's will, for well doing. Christ had once suffered for sins: arm yourselves, therefore, with the same mind. This would be carrying about the dying Christ had died; and this dying of Christ I apply to myself, so that the body never stirs, and the will of the body never moves.

329 We have, then, these two things: first, Paul, as a faithful man, never allows the vessel to have, for one instant, a will or a thought of its own. Just as much as Christ died, and completely died, so Paul was carrying this about constantly, and says, "Now you are as dead as Christ was." And, though Paul was very faithful in that, the Lord helped him by sending him through circumstances, so that he despaired of his life. It was not a chastening, but he was having the sentence of death written in himself. He held himself practically for a dead man, and the Lord says, "Well, now I must bring death right on to you, and so you will be a dead man." In his case, it was making it good by the trials he went through, and with this object, that nothing but the life of Christ could come out. The Lord says, "I must make this thorough, that he may realise it fully in himself"; and then Paul sums it up by saying, "So then, death worketh in us, but life in you"; that is, Paul was so entirely a dead man, that nothing but the life of Christ wrought in him towards the Corinthians. Wonderful description! If the vessel thinks or acts, it is spoilt. There is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ to come out, and if the vessel is anything, by so much the light is hindered; but if the vessel is kept dead, nothing but the life of Christ is there to come out. It ought to have been the same in

them as in himself, but it was not; of them he says, "life in you." Death was working in him, and so nothing but Christ's life worked out in them. Death and life are both taken morally in this verse.

Read verses 10-12. There would be no "so then," if it had been death in the Corinthians already. There was nothing but the vessel seen. It is a wonderful thing to say for anybody, but it is said of Paul. It did work among them, but it was in them. What was it that wrought that way but the power of the life of Christ in Paul, to effect all this humiliation in them. They had all the engraving of Christ in their hearts, but it was all filled up with mud, and nobody could read it; and now the mud was all cleaned out, it could be read. The treasure was, as we have seen, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It "shined" into Paul's heart. But the vessel is in danger of working, and so he applies Christ's death to the vessel, and then there is nothing but Christ's death to come out. But it was death to him as a man.

330 Paul may have been at work as a tentmaker at this time; he was doing so habitually there. He was very willing to receive from Philippi, but he would not receive anything from the Corinthians, because they were fond of their money. He went on working both at Ephesus and at Corinth. We know he worked, and we know he read too, for he asks for his books in the end of Timothy. Then, "we having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believe, and therefore I have spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak, knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us, also by Jesus, and shall present us with you" (v. 13, 14); that is, 'I do not mind death, I have faith in my Lord.'

The next verse in Psalm 116 is, "I was greatly afflicted; I said in my haste, All men are liars." Everybody was against him, and in the pressure of it he said, "All men are liars." It should be, "I said in my anguish or distress," in the sense of the pressure upon him; and then it may apply to the Lord; but, certainly, I should not apply it to Him if it were, "I said in my haste." In the Psalms, except in a very few, you must always first take the remnant in, but sometimes Christ will quote a passage which does not at all apply to Himself in its next clause. Thus, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit," is followed by, "Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth" (Psalm 31:5), but this would not do. It was necessary to bring Christ in if any blessing were to be given to the remnant. We find the remnant in Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction. In Psalm 1 they come with judgment; in Psalm 2 with the King in Zion, and they are called upon to trust Him. In some of the Psalms we have direct prophecy of Christ, but in spirit He is connected with them all.

Verse 13 of our chapter, already quoted, is the great principle that, though the whole power of the pressure was upon him, even as to life, yet Paul went on preaching just the same. He tells the Thessalonians he was "bold in our God," despite what had gone before, "to preach the gospel of God with much contention." This is not an authority for preaching, but it is the going on in spite of the opposition of man, and it is an encouragement against the opposition of man.

331 This chapter is a wonderful picture, for we have the whole glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and this put into a vessel, and for all that it is such a thing, that if the vessel is not absolutely dead, it will so far be spoiled. And that is not all: there is the positive power of God beside; you must have the vessel made nothing of, so as not to spoil the treasure, and then, when you have done that, some other power must come in and act. It is a wonderful description of ministry in its sphere and operation in creatures like us; and, looking death in the face, to continue still. Verses 10, 11, have both the same end: only he puts "mortal flesh," when he is actually delivered to death. The effect of that is, that Paul becomes a vessel of absolute life to others. All was for God's glory, but as its object, it is for the elect's sake, the church. "All things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might, through the thanksgiving of many, redound to the glory of God." There we have the truth of the church, that everything was for their sakes - all this even in

Paul.

Then it had another effect. He says, "For which cause we faint not, but though our outward man perish, our inward man is renewed day by day." There was a power sustaining him, and the inward man was renewed. And then he tells us the bearing of the next world upon him: "Our light affliction which is but for a moment worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Thus I am going to get all the glory, and this practically acts to perfect the man while he is not looking at the things which are seen, but at the things that are not seen. The vessel would be linked with this world, and the new man and the Spirit are linked with the other. Now he puts all the glory into the vessel, and the vessel is made nothing of - it goes through the process of annihilating, and then he finds the result. Paul's testimony is wonderfully complete in this chapter, and its effect in us is carried out in its fullest way.

The difference between the Old Testament and the New is this: the Spirit gave them no communion and left them to "search" what He signified; but whatever He reveals to me belongs to me, and so "all things are for your sakes"; only then, Paul laid it by, as it were, and speaks of "what I have committed unto him against that day" - all his own happiness for the other world. And now he says, Work away through this world and get there. This is all applicable to the saints at large now in their measure. He himself has broken all links with the present world, and now says, "The life I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God." That is what we should seek to realise in our service; we ought to be always in immediate contact with Christ, and to bring out nothing else but according to divine wisdom and guidance in dealing with others. And it should be recollectively so; it is not merely in the main that Christ is the object, but there is another thing, the not being distracted, and also the having our object recollectively: constantly carrying it about with you. If, for instance, I am ministering, I should be consciously ministering direct from Christ to the people. The apostle expresses it when he says, "Whether we are beside ourselves, it is to God; or whether we are sober, it is for your cause"; if he was out of sobriety of thinking, it is to God; or if he was in sobriety, it was for them. It shews what a serious thing ministry is, blessed indeed, but most serious.

332 In Philippians, Paul said, "I am in a strait betwixt two." To depart was far better, he says, but to stay was at least more needful for them. "Yet what I shall choose I wot not." It is worth my while to live, because I am working for Christ; and if I go to heaven, I cannot do that. To live is Christ, and dying is gain, and he does not know which to choose; it is better for the Philippians he should stay, and so he says he shall.

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