

We Have A Treasure

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[0 : 0 0] Can we open our Bibles, please, in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.

I'm not looking for a job. I'm really quite happy in the job I have but I sometimes wonder what sort of job would I like to do?

I'm not really very employable. I'm in my mid-60s. I'm past my best. I've got a degree in Chinese politics. I'm not really very, very employable.

And so I looked out there to see what are people looking for and there's two companies I would quite like to work for. Believe it or not, even with Elon Musk, who probably wouldn't be there much longer, I would quite like to work for Tesla.

[1 : 1 1] So they're at the cutting edge of technology. They are manufacturing electric cars and really some of the smartest people in the world work for Tesla. So what are they looking for? Well, according to Cindy Nicola, the former VP of Global Marketing, she said, we are looking for excellence, people who can come in and make an impact right away.

So they're looking for someone who really is impactful, someone who gets the product noticed. Another company I'd quite like to work for are Apple. Everybody loves Apple and again, they're very, very innovative, very cutting edge.

And their products look really just beautiful. They are works of art, a global brand. So Tim Cook, the Apple CEO, what are they looking for?

He says, we've learned to value a magnetic personality just as much as proficiency. So I thought, right, well, magnetic personality, that's me out of a job right away.

And that's what people out there are looking for. If you are in a jobs market and if you want to get on in the world, folk are looking for people with a little bit of an edge, a little bit of a pizzazz, not someone who is at all weak and vulnerable.

[2 : 3 0] What we see here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 is that Paul is reflecting on the sort of people who he has working with him and the sort of people he imagines Christians to be.

So that's what we have in 2 Corinthians 4, a kind of profile of those who work not just in the church, but the culture of the church. Every organization's got a culture.

A culture is just the way we do things. And a culture is very, very distinct to the culture of this church. It may be very different to the culture of another church.

So what makes the culture here in 2 Corinthians chapter 4? Well, let me give you the context. The Apostle Paul here is struggling and he's struggling at lots of levels.

Number one, there's his own personal suffering. He really finds it very, very difficult. In fact, in one verse he says that he struggles just like the strugglings of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3 : 33] So life for him is not a walk in the park. He has got difficulties within and he's got difficulties without. And there is a temptation, and he uses this phrase again and again, to lose heart.

Indeed, this passage is bookended. Verse 1, we do not lose heart. And again, verse 16, we do not lose heart. The same phrase bookends this particular passage.

So he's got the trouble internally. He wants to give up. He gets a bit fed up. He's weary in well-doing. But there's also the wider church context.

You see, the folk there, there were people in the church who were known as super apostles. And the super apostles were kind of like celebrity preachers. They were really good at talking.

And they measured their success by the crowds of people they had round about him. And they were really developing their own unique brand. And so Paul said, really, I'm not like that.

[4 : 37] I'm not a super apostle. I'm just an ordinary guy. So he was ministering as a weak person in an age of celebrity.

And so we really also have our own celebrity preachers. You didn't have to come along here to listen to me. You could have gone on the internet. And you could have listened to the great and the good of world Christendom.

Anywhere in the world, you could tune in to a preacher who is a hundred times better communicator than I am. And someone who really does preach to a congregation, not of tens, but of congregations of hundreds and thousands.

So really, Paul is in that context. He is wondering, am I really cut out for this? And that impacts even us as a church.

What is the church all about? What are we trying to do? What are we trying to achieve? So as we look at this passage, I just want to notice three things.

[5 : 39] I want us to notice the ministry. I want us to notice the message. And I want us to notice the minister. I don't normally have three alliterated headings, but it just happens that these are quite natural this morning.

So first of all, the ministry. Well, he says here, verse 1, we have this ministry by the mercy of God. I read the Bible, I guess, like you do, and I think that's a little bit weird.

We have this ministry by the mercy of God. I would think, yes, we have this salvation by the mercy of God. We've got this new life by the mercy of God.

We've got forgiveness of sins by the mercy of God. All that makes sense. But we have this ministry by the mercy of God. I think as Paul is reflecting on his own experience, he's saying, here am I, I'm an apostle, but how am I here?

It's by the sheer mercy of God. Remember how Saul became a Christian. He was on his way to Damascus to kill Christians.

[6 : 57] Some folks said, well, what's the modern equivalent of the apostle Paul? Folks say, well, it would be a bit like Richard Dawkins, the militant atheist, coming to faith in Jesus.

You know, the guest preacher next week will be Professor Richard Dawkins. Folks say, wow, he wrote the God delusion. Why is he now here? But Saul was Dawkins on steroids.

He wasn't just against Christianity. He was actively trying to snuff Christianity out. And so the apostle Paul here is preaching.

And I'm sure he said to himself, having this ministry of the mercy of God, here I am, I'm preaching the gospel. I cannot believe this is by just the sheer mercy of God.

That's the wonderful thing about the Christian faith. That's the wonderful thing about grace. You can't control it. You, maybe indeed there's someone here who in 10 years time will be here speaking about the gospel.

[8 : 07] And trust me, in 10 years time you'll stand up and you'll say, why am I here? This is by the mercy of God.

I read an article last week. I think it was on the internet, but it was from The Guardian. And it was one of those kind of articles where this young lady, I think she was about 30, she gave herself a year to kind of experiment and find God.

That's not the way it works. You don't give God a timetable. You don't say, listen, I'm going to experiment and I've got a year.

God will say, I'm coming for you beautifully and I'm drawing you now. I set the timescale, not you. And you see, Paul here is speaking about the salvation, the privilege of doing this thing is by the mercy of God.

We are all here this morning by the mercy of God. If you had said to me, you know, when I was growing up, that there would be a day when I would be in this particular place proclaiming the gospel, it would be more likely for a banana to be grown in Mars than I would be here.

[9 : 29] It's amazing what God does. God is not controlled by us. And even when we work for him, especially when we work for him, it's by the mercy of God.

So Paul is seeing himself here as a servant. Now, even in business these days, folk are talking about servant leadership. It's the big thing.

Where did all this come from? All this came directly, indeed, from the Lord Jesus Christ, because all the great characters in the Bible, Abraham was a servant of God, wasn't he?

The Job was a servant of God. Jacob, my servant. All through the Bible, you read that expression, Abraham, my servant. Jacob, my servant. Job, my servant. Paul, my servant.

Ultimately, we read in Isaiah, Jesus, my servant. These are the values of the kingdom.

[10 : 30] The way up is the way down. The way to enthronement is servanthood. The way to the top is to go to the bottom.

And so we're seeing here the sheer mercy. And then he doubles up. He's talking here, remember here, about the ministry. He's saying the ministry is marked by mercy.

The second thing the ministry is marked by is very, very in, is by transparency. Folk are really into transparency in the modern world.

Folk want to see everything. Folk want to see a record of everything. And so he doubles up. But verse 2, he says, We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.

The Christian faith should be absolutely transparent. It really should be. A few months ago, I signed up to a kind of sky package, not the island of, but the TV people.

[11 : 38] And I got my Sky bill a couple of months ago, and it's ridiculous. It's like a mortgage. And, you know, I phoned the guy up, and he says, Yeah, but, you know, didn't you remember?

You ticked this box, and you did this, and you really did. But I don't need a sports package. I hate sports. The people used subterfuge.

They were not clear. If you do work for Sky, apologies, but please pass the message on. It was not clear. Religion can be like that also. It is vague.

It's almost like a Masonic ritual to understand it. The language, the way in, it's weird. It's vague. It's strange. Paul says, We have renounced all these disgraceful, underhanded ways.

I live in Edinburgh. You walk down. Every day when I'm going home, I walk down the high street. I turn right onto a street called Southbridge, and there's someone outside an office, and they're offering a free personality test.

[12 : 50] Now, they'd have some job with me in there. But it's not a free personality test. It is an introduction into the Scientology cult.

And so they don't say, We would like you to join a money-grabbing, mind-altering cult. That's not how they present themselves.

We are offering you a free personality test. Pong says, No, we've renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.

J.B. Phillips translates it like this. We use no hocus-pocus, no clever tricks, no dishonest manipulation of the Word of God. We speak the plain truth.

That's how we are aiming and preaching for clarity. We're aiming for language that people understand. We are aiming at stuff that is really intelligible, laying it all out honestly.

[13 : 58] I remember reading of a minister. It said that he was so deep that he did not understand his own preaching. And this was seen as, Wow, amazing.

It's not amazing at all. We have renounced. That wasn't disgraceful or underhanded, but it wasn't clear.

So, he's saying here that the ministry is by the mercy of God. Mercy. The second element of it is that there's transparency. And the third element is, it is marked by truth.

It says, We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word. The Word of God has not changed.

Many things change. My day job is to help churches to be outward-facing, to help churches speak to folk who don't go to church.

[14 : 57] That's what I do. And it is really important here that we are sticking to the truth.

I say this to churches. Some things must always change. Some things must never change. Now, the knack is figuring out what's what.

It says here, We do not tamper with God's Word. God's Word speaks about the virgin birth. God's Word speaks about the reality of hell. God's Word speaks of itself as being the inspired Word of God.

God's Word speaks of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. God's Word speaks of the creation of this Word from nothing. God's Word speaks of all these things. God's Word speaks of the need to be born again.

That's what the Bible says. We cannot change that. We cannot tamper with God's Word. God's Word. And whenever churches begin to tamper with God's Word, that is when they lose absolute focus.

[16 : 06] So, that is what we have here. That is the ministry. What about the second M? The second M here is the message.

What we have here is an emboldened church going on with an emboldened message. But there's a problem. And the problem is seen there in verse 3.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In this case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers.

Isn't that an interesting expression? The God of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. William Wilberforce was a leading politician.

It led to the abolition of the slave trade. And his friend was William Pitt, who became the prime minister. He was known as Pitt the Younger, as opposed to Pitt the Elder.

[17 : 07] So, William Pitt the Younger was not a believer. He had no interest in a Christian faith. In London at that time, there was an amazing preacher who was a phenomenal communicator.

And Wilberforce took Pitt along and the guy preached. Oh, knocked it out of the park. He was, as clear as a bell, phenomenal in terms of explaining the gospel.

Really, Wilberforce said, one of the best services he ever heard. And his friend happened to be there and he thought, wow, this is a great day to come.

Walking home, he said to Pitt, what did you think? Pitt said, I didn't understand a word the guy said. Well, he picked one of the smartest people ever.

But he just didn't get it. And the same happens with us. You could have the best communicator ever and you take someone from roundabout here to church or tell them the gospel and they're very polite.

[18 : 18] They listen, but they say, weesh, folk could be talking Greek for all I know. I just haven't got a clue. That's when we need to unpack that verse for verse.

The God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers. It was like a spiritual cataract. What does that mean? Well, there's three possibilities. I think one is more accurate.

One possibility is God has blinded folks' eyes. That's what the early church fathers said, like Romans 9, God hardens heart. God is in control.

It's God who has blinded folks' eyes. That's one possibility. Romans 9 suggests that's not impossible, but I don't think that's what it's saying here. The other possibility is Satan.

The God that this world worships. We read about the parable of the sower. It talks there about Satan, doesn't it? Taking the seed away of the devil's activity.

[19 : 17] He calls himself the prince of this world. But I don't think that's what it is. I think, because of just the way the sentence is constructed, that it's really saying the God that consists of this world.

So, this world, that people have made their God, because folk worship. I was looking at the skyline of Edinburgh recently, looking out my window, and I can see the skyline of the city.

You can see old Edinburgh, dominated by St. Giles. St. Giles Cathedral's got a beautiful crown steeple. And beside that, there's a Highland Tallbooth, a really lovely steeple.

And you can see lots of other steeples. That's kind of Victorian. But then, you look again through new eyes at the Edinburgh skyline, and the God of this world is seen not in steeples, but in office blocks, shopping malls, apartment blocks.

The God which consists of this world. I mean, who needs God when you've got everything? Who needs God when you can drive a Tesla?

[20 : 34] It's perfect. It's heaven and earth. It's like driving an iPad. This world has been made so amazing. We've got food.

You know, you see that, don't you, when you hear that the ferry's delayed for a day. It's like a swarm of locusts in the supermarkets. It's as if there's going to be a 40-day famine.

And yet, we've got everything. We will not starve. This world, this world's got its stuff. We don't need God.

Because we've got the co-op. We don't need God. We've got Amazon. We've got lovely things in this world. So, you see what it means there?

The God of this world, the things that we worship in this world, has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. The God of this world is, I think, an idolatrous preoccupation with this world.

[21 : 40] We recognize that. Whatever means more to us than God is an idol. And we are idol factories.

We produce idols all the time. So, they turn their back on the obvious. The God who makes the light.

I don't find the Christian faith difficult to explain. It's obvious. Two weeks ago, I was walking again down the street in Edinburgh, and this guy came towards me and he was wearing a t-shirt.

And the t-shirt said, Atheist Inside. And I smiled. I stopped him and said, That is a fascinating t-shirt. Tell me your story.

And his name is Kevin. He was Scottish-Chinese. He was an artist. And he told me how he was an atheist. He was a lovely guy.

[22 : 44] I says, Kevin, that's a really interesting story. Let me tell you how I became a Christian. And he used one expression. He said, I suppose so.

It's kind of obvious, isn't it? Now, Kevin didn't become a Christian. You know, he didn't move from that wall to that wall. I can't give a great story, you know, that Kevin, you know, I went into Waitrose and got a bottle of water and baptized Kevin on the spot because he'd come to faith.

That's not the way it worked. But what Kevin saw there was something obvious. He moved a little bit from atheism to, ah, yeah, there is a God.

You can't get something from nothing unless there is a God. So, maybe the veil had come off him. Now, again, another really interesting thing here is it mentions light, doesn't it?

And, you know, we see here the light of the gospel. In this passage, we get the three dominant worldviews at the time. We've got the Jewish worldview.

[24 : 02] What do the Jews like? Jews love light. There's the men are, you know, the candle, the seven-pronged candle, the men are, the light that burns all the time in the synagogue.

So, Jews like light. What do the Greeks love? The Greeks love knowledge, don't they? They like to know stuff.

What do the Romans like? Romans like power. So, in the gospel, all these things that the world systems crave light, knowledge, power, imperfectly, are seen perfectly in the gospel.

Jesus is the light of the world. God is all powerful. If you want knowledge, if you want things to make sense, you'll find it in the Bible. So, this is what we have in the gospel.

We have an encompassing worldview that explains the way things are. When I read the Bible, I don't read a selected group of fairy stories.

[25 : 11] Yesterday, I discovered my new favourite store and coffee shop, Beckett's and Son. I didn't know it existed until this year. So, I love Beckett's and Son.

I'm sitting there, and one of the reasons I love it is it's full of books. So, I sit down at a table, and there's all these books to read, and there's one that says, a collection of Scottish fairy tale stories.

So, I'm kind of interested in folklore, so I read of the fairy woman of Badenoch, and that was the story.

So, I just read the chapter there, and it was weird. It really was weird. When I read the Bible, it's not weird.

Do you know how it's not weird? Because it makes sense. The way the world is just now fits the way the Bible says that the world will be.

[26 : 10] Wars and rumors of wars, moral confusion, kind of lots and lots of stuff. That is explained to me in the Bible by the big story of the Bible made perfect, the fall of man, the redeeming of fallen man by the Lord Jesus Christ.

It kind of makes sense, but let's move on. We've seen here the ministry. We have seen here the message. Thirdly, finally, and reasonably briefly, let's notice the minister.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The minister here is in, he's described here as a jar of clay.

We have treasures, absolute treasures. It's unusual for folk to point out treasures.

Sorry, unusual for folk to point out their receptacle. Again, I was in the co-op in Stornley yesterday, and I had brought a bag from the back of my car.

[27 : 20] I don't know where the bag came from, but the lady in checkout said, I love your bag. A little bit of girl talk, I said, yeah, it's quite nice, but it's unusual to notice the receptacle, isn't it?

We usually notice the contents. My Amazon package is irrelevant, it's the content. So Paul is saying here, verse 7, we have this treasure in jars of clay.

In the early world, early Greek world, jars of clay were just cheap receptacles that you put things into, they were a penny each, you could throw them away, they were absolutely worthless in themselves.

So Paul was talking about his ministry, and he's saying, at the end of the day, I'm like a jar of clay, but there's this treasure within. Now, I'll tell you one more, at least, I keep saying interesting things, I find interesting.

Maybe you don't. Verse 8, verse 9, verse 8, and verse 9. If you read the commentaries, what they say is, this is in the form, it's kind of a posh word of a res gestai.

[28 : 38] What on earth is a res gestai? Res gestai or gestai is a Latin phrase that was used for a CV or a resume if you're American.

a CV, that's the posh name for a CV. So, what the commentators say is, verse 8 and verse 9 is in exactly the form that a CV would be.

So, I'm handing my CV to Tesla, I'm handing my CV to Apple. And notice what it says here. It's like a resume and he lists four things that would not be considered at all impressive.

we are afflicted in every way. Is that you? We are crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed.

In verse 10 here, we have the mathematics of the kingdom, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Listen to the next bit. Folks, this is the gospel. Listen to the next bit.

[29 : 42] so that the life of Jesus in verse 10, so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our bodies.

What's the big bit there? The math of the kingdom is that death, the death of Jesus brings life.

Let me tell you about a man. His name was David Brainerd. David Brainerd was one of the most effective missionaries ever.

He was a missionary amongst the Delaware Indians in what's now the USA. Phenomenal genius. David Brainerd was expelled from university, was expelled from Yale.

He was barred from ministry. He was a natural melancholic. He had a melancholic personality. He had chronic and severe mental health problems and physical problems.

[30 : 53] And yet he inspired John Wesley, the famous hymn writer, Henry Martin, missionary to India and Persia, William Carey, founder of the modern missionary movement, Jim Elliott, missionary in Ecuador, Adoniram Judson who went to Burma.

All these people were inspired by an expelled, depressive, sick guy. God has treasure in broken vessels.

Death brings life. What's the application? application? We do not lose heart. Verse 1.

We do not lose heart. Verse 16. The application is, this is the gospel. Who wouldn't buy into this?

You may feel a bit of a clay pot, but folks, by the power of Jesus Christ, there is a treasure in this clay pot.

[32 : 07] May God make that treasure shine. Let me pray. Father,