

DISPLAYING THE GOSPEL

Believers can face life with confidence, knowing that the power of the gospel will be revealed.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-18

MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:9

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 2:14–5:10, First Thoughts (p. 104), and Understand the Context (pp. 104–105). As you read, notice the word pictures Paul used in his letter to contrast human suffering and despair with God’s power and hope.
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 4:5-18, using Explore the Text (pp. 105–109). As you study, look for words or phrases that reveal Paul’s priorities in his life. Reflect on how these priorities impacted the way he approached life.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110–111) and More Ideas (p. 112). Refer to Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras for more ways to grow as a leader.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Groups Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides. Make copies of: **PACK ITEM 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 5** (*Map: Center of Ancient Corinth*). For More Ideas (p. 112): Sheets of paper and pens or pencils; A Bible dictionary or commentary.



KEY DOCTRINE

God's Purpose of Grace

Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end.

BIBLE SKILL

Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage included Old Testament quotations.

Paul quoted Genesis 1:3 in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and Psalm 116:10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13. Read the entire Old Testament chapter for each quotation. How does the context of the verse quoted help you better understand why Paul quoted that passage? What factors are the same or similar? How do the quoted passages help you better understand Jesus and the gospel?

FIRST THOUGHTS

LifeWay Research surveyed Americans about their perceptions regarding religious liberty. Sixty percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, "Religious liberty is on the decline in America." Almost two-thirds (63%) agreed with the statement, "American Christians face growing intolerance." Religious liberty has become an increasingly contentious issue in American culture.

(In PSG, p. 91) **Do you agree or disagree that religious liberty is declining? Explain your answer. What actions should be taken in places where Christianity is actively persecuted or suppressed?**

Christianity was not tolerated as a legal religion anywhere in the Roman Empire of the first century. Thus, when Paul and other apostles wrote to encourage believers who faced persecution, they were dealing with a much more challenging cultural situation than any of us has faced.

Paul had no expectations of being free from cultural or political pressure. In fact, he expected it. The same LifeWay survey revealed that 43% think that Christians complain too much about how they are treated. Paul didn't complain. Instead, he focused on how God was shaping and using him to spread the gospel in any situation. As we study 2 Corinthians 4, look for ways Christians can display the gospel, no matter our personal circumstances and no matter what cultural or political environment we live in. Will we, like Paul, be confident that, if we proclaim Jesus as the Christ—whatever our weaknesses or life situation—the power of the gospel will be revealed?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14–5:10

We identified briefly the first major section of the body of 2 Corinthians in last week's Understand the Context (pp. 94-95). As you may recall, in part one of the epistle Paul provided the believers with an expanded account of his ministry (1:12–7:16). His purpose was largely to defend himself against the charge that his apostleship was somehow a fraud. We may broadly organize his comments in this part of the letter under three headings:

- *Paul's itinerary (1:12–2:13)*. We considered part of this in last week's focal text.
- *Paul's message (2:14–5:10)*. This is the broader text from which this week's lesson is drawn.
- *Paul's purpose (5:11–7:16)*. This is the broader text from which next week's study is taken.

Paul masterfully described his message—the context passage for this week’s lesson—in several ways. The following points summarize what the apostle emphasized in the “message” section of his letter:

- *Paul had a ministry resulting in life or death (2:14-17).*
- *The Corinthians were Paul’s living letters (3:1-3).*
- *Paul’s competence came from God, not himself (3:4-6).*
- *Paul’s message focused on the new covenant (3:7-8).*
- *The light of the gospel shined in Paul’s message (4:1-6).*
- *The gospel is like treasure hidden in clay jars (4:7-18).*
- *Believers face a wonderful future after bodily death (5:1-10).*

Our verses for this week’s lesson are drawn from two of these sections, both of which provide powerful images for us as we seek to live out the gospel today. First is the image of light shining out of darkness. Second is the picture of a fantastic treasure hidden in a clay pot. As you investigate these verses, look for ways that you can apply Paul’s teaching to your life. Are you ready to be a channel of light shining in the darkness? Can you think of yourself as a plain clay pot, in which Christ and the gospel are a precious treasure? Will you face life with confidence, believing that the power of the gospel will be revealed?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROCLAIM (2 COR. 4:5-6)

VERSE 5

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul acknowledged that many persons he preached to had refused the gospel and were perishing. Their minds had been blinded and the devil had done his work. But might it have been the case that persons refused Christ because somehow Paul’s message was defective? Could he have had some kind of self-centered agenda and distorted the gospel? He strenuously refuted this idea in verse 5. He was not preaching his own opinions or drawing attention to himself.

The apostle’s message instead centered on **Jesus Christ as Lord**. *Jesus* refers to the historical person who lived, was crucified, and rose from the dead. *Christ* means “Messiah,” the fulfillment of biblical prophecy about a coming King. *Lord* means that He is supreme—not Caesar or some object of religious worship.

Those who acknowledge Jesus in this way have bowed to His lordship. They have become His servants, loyal, and obedient. Paul noted that he had been called to serve the Corinthians **for Jesus’ sake**. He was first of all Jesus’ servant; he would therefore serve others if that was his Master’s bidding. His ministry was not primarily for their sake but for Christ’s.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “‘Righteousness’ in Paul’s Writings” in the Spring 2018 issue of Biblical Illustrator. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5

⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

VERSE 6

Paul preached Jesus rather than himself because he had become a new creation. He compared what had happened to him spiritually to what had happened when God created the heavens and the earth. He recalled that God’s creative work began by calling forth the light: **“Let light shine out of darkness”** (a paraphrase of Gen. 1:3). In like manner, God called forth the light of the gospel into Paul’s spiritual darkness: **God ... has shone in our hearts**. Paul was perhaps remembering his dramatic experience with the light that flashed around him at his conversion. That light physically blinded Paul for a few days (Acts 22:6-11).

The apostle described his spiritual transformation as receiving **the light of the knowledge of the glory of God**. (Paul likely knew that Jesus had called Himself the light of the world; John 8:12; 9:5.) In the gospel, Paul had received revelation about the true nature of God’s glory—His greatness and worthiness to be praised. The original creation displayed a measure of God’s glory. His works as described throughout the Old Testament showed His splendor. But the fullest display of the glory of God is found in one place: **the face of Jesus Christ**. Only when people embrace the Person and presence of Jesus do they begin to experience the life-changing glory of God.

Paul’s experience was not unique. The same thing happens every time a person—previously spiritually blind—responds to gospel proclamation with repentance and faith. Paul declared this inclusivity a few verses later: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

What do you think of Paul’s comparing the original creation of light to the light God sends into someone’s life at conversion? How does this teaching support Paul’s insistence on proclaiming Jesus instead of himself? What does it mean for believers today to proclaim Jesus exclusively?

2 CORINTHIANS 4:7

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

LIVE (2 COR. 4:7-15)

Paul listed life situations that highlighted his weakness as a human, yet in contrast he overcame through God’s power, demonstrated through the gospel. True life is found only through faith in the resurrected Jesus.

VERSE 7

On one hand, being transformed by Christ is like light shining in our hearts. On the other hand, receiving the gospel is like gaining an enormous treasure. Jesus Himself had compared God’s kingdom to a priceless pearl (Matt. 13:45-46). Paul developed the analogy, however, by likening himself (and other believers) to **jars of clay**. Earthenware vessels were common in Paul’s day, and it wasn’t unknown for jewels or other expensive items to be hidden from view in ordinary pottery. We do similar things today, such

as a grandmother's habit of hiding cash in a shoebox along with the other shoeboxes in the top of her closet.

In Paul's illustration, however, the point was not to keep the treasure hidden, but rather to contrast the value of the gospel with the frailty of the gospel messengers. God has seen to it that mere humans, with physical bodies subject to sickness and lives fraught with trouble, were His instruments. He did this so that the instruments might not be praised for their greatness, cleverness, and power, but that all will recognize God as the source of this extraordinary power. Although believers are God's chosen instruments, we are nevertheless instruments of clay (see Acts 9:15).

VERSES 8-9

To demonstrate the difference between the clay pots (frail human preachers) and the treasure (the powerful gospel), Paul noted the hardships he had endured. He used four contrasting pairs, with the first element describing his human weakness and the second element showing that the treasure had been preserved through God's sustaining power. They demonstrate the paradox of living as followers of Jesus in this present evil age:

Clay jar (Paul; believers)	Treasure (Powerful Gospel)
<i>Afflicted in every way</i>	<i>Not crushed</i>
<i>Perplexed</i>	<i>Not in despair</i>
<i>Persecuted</i>	<i>Not abandoned</i>
<i>Struck down</i>	<i>Not destroyed</i>

The apostle did not specify the particular situations of his personal trials. The Book of Acts provides examples. Nor did he give specifics of how God had sustained him. Yet he had always found God sufficient for his needs. Throughout the centuries, believers have taken courage from Paul's example as they have gone through the same kinds of difficulties.

VERSES 10-12

Paul saw himself as following the pattern Jesus demonstrated in His dying and living. Three times in verses 10-12 the apostle noted his constant experience of death: ***always carrying in the body the death of Jesus ... always being given over to death for Jesus' sake ... death is at work in us.*** Clearly Paul was constantly aware of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. If his Lord had been given over to death, then it was no surprise for His followers to endure sufferings repeatedly.

Paul was constantly mindful of the death of Jesus as it impacted him. He was equally aware of Jesus' resurrection to life. Paul also experienced the resurrection life of Jesus throughout his ministry (even as he waited for his own final resurrection). Thus, three times in this passage he noted his understanding of this kind of life: ***the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ... so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ... but life in you.*** Not only in this life but also in the resurrection, Paul was characterized by the life of the living Lord Jesus.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-9

⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

2 CORINTHIANS 4:10-12

¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Further, the Corinthians had also begun to experience this life as well. Clearly the death and the resurrection life of Jesus go hand in hand.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:13-14

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak,

¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

VERSES 13-14

Paul had just written about himself in contrasting terms: clay jar versus treasure; death versus life. This reminded him of something written in the Psalms. He quoted a line from Psalm 116:10: **“I believed, and so I spoke.”** When we read the entire Psalm, we recognize that it recounts affliction and suffering yet also rescue and thanksgiving for deliverance. The psalmist, like Paul, experienced both death and life. He too focused on God. Thus, Paul claimed to have the same spirit of faith as the psalmist, because both trusted in God. Further, just as the psalmist believed in God and then spoke about his troubles in his composition, so it was with the apostle: **we also believe, and so we also speak.**

In verse 14 the apostle’s thoughts turned to confidence about his future life in the presence of the Lord forever. How could he be sure of this? Because **he who raised the Lord Jesus** had promised to do so. Those who are united with Jesus in His death are also united to Him in His resurrection (Eph. 4:2-7). Thus, Paul was certain of his coming resurrection. He was equally certain of the Corinthians’ future resurrection. Together, Paul and the Corinthians—**us with you**—will be raised. By extension, all believers—everyone joined to Christ by faith—may be confident of their future resurrection.

It was more important for others to come to faith in Christ than for Paul to experience a comfortable life.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:15

¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

VERSE 15

Everything Paul had just written about—his sufferings, his experience of death yet life, his confidence in his future blessedness—was not about him in isolation from others. Indeed, **it is all for your sake.** He served the Lord for reasons outside himself. First, he thought horizontally: through his ministry more and more people experienced God’s grace through the gospel. It was more important for others to come to faith in Christ than for Paul to experience a comfortable life. Second, he thought vertically. His ultimate purpose in life was to glorify God. Thus, when more people were saved, this would cause thanksgiving to increase in their prayers, which in turn displayed God’s glory. Paul understood that God’s purpose for his life and ministry was to manifest the glory of God.

(In PSG, p. 96) **How would Paul define a win for himself? For other believers? How should believers understand success in this life?**

FOCUS (2 COR. 4:16-18)

VERSES 16-18

Paul had written of God's power demonstrated through him despite frailty and suffering; he had also noted his hope in the resurrection. For these reasons, ***we do not lose heart***. Paul kept on following the Lord's calling on his life, as difficult as this had been and would continue to be. He acknowledged the physical toll: ***our outer self is wasting away***. As one of the "jars of clay" with "mortal flesh" (4:7,11), he was moving toward bodily death. Both his human mortality and his Christian sufferings were included in his thought.

Yet these things were not worth comparing with the glorious spiritual reality that Paul already enjoyed— ***our inner self is being renewed day by day***. Already his true self, his spirit, had the daily delight of new life because of Christ's life. All believers, along with Paul, have received the indwelling Spirit as the down payment of their inheritance (see Eph. 1:14). Spiritual blessings are ours already, but we have not yet received full salvation. Only when we receive our resurrection bodies at Christ's return will we fully reach the endpoint of day-by-day renewal.

Paul was further strengthened in his daily struggles by giving them an assessment from the perspective of heaven. They were merely a ***light momentary affliction***. This no-big-deal evaluation contrasted with his assessment of his struggles from an earthly perspective, which he had noted in 4:8-9. He judged them as insignificant when measured by the absolutely incomparable ***eternal weight of glory*** waiting for him.

Theological facts are fine as far as they go. But they do not help us until we act on them. Paul determined to ***look*** at invisible realities (***things that are unseen***) rather than what is visible. In this instance, the apostle was not contrasting physical realities and spiritual realities. He meant to distinguish between his present sufferings and the future experience of full salvation at Christ's return. This salvation will include both physical and spiritual realities. Future salvation is invisible because it has not yet arrived.

Paul further explained the value of his chosen focus. If he had paid attention to the visible, he would have been looking at things that are ***transient***. They will all disappear when Christ returns. By fixing his spiritual gaze on ***the things that are unseen***—everything that believers will enjoy after the resurrection of the body—Paul kept the eternal before him. The future blessedness of believers will never end.

(In PSG, p. 98) **How does the glory reserved for us in the future serve as motivation in the now to be faithful and courageous in suffering?**

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: As the group arrives, share information from the LifeWay Research survey in the first and third paragraphs under First Thoughts (p. 104).

DISCUSS: *Do you agree or disagree that religious liberty is declining? Explain your answer. What actions should be taken in places where Christianity is actively persecuted or suppressed?* (PSG, p. 91)

EXPLAIN: Christianity was not tolerated as a legal religion anywhere in the Roman Empire of the first century. Direct attention to **Pack Item 11** (*Handout: Key Idols in Corinth*) to provide background on Paul's environment. Locate the different temples to the gods in the city (listed on the handout) on **Pack Item 5** (*Map: Center of Ancient Corinth*).

TRANSITION: *When Paul wrote to encourage believers who faced persecution, he was dealing with a much more challenging cultural situation than most of us have faced. Amid these challenges, Paul focused on how God was shaping him and using him to share the gospel.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As you read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, ask the group to listen for words that describe what Paul was and was not proclaiming.

GUIDE: Lead the group to distinguish between what Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were proclaiming and what these apostles were promoting. Use the comments under Verse 5 in the PSG (p. 93) as needed.

DISCUSS: *How were Paul's actions different from other teachers in Corinth? From the PSG (p. 94): What are the implications and consequences for proclaiming someone or something other than salvation in Christ alone?*

MINI-LECTURE: Use the comments under Verse 6 (PSG, pp. 93–94) to give a mini-lecture about God's illuminating work in our hearts. Refer to Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:7-13; and Hebrews 1:3. Emphasize that Paul said God's glory isn't merely *on* Jesus' face but is *in* His face. Say: *Moses' face was veiled, but Jesus' face is shining brightly to overcome the darkness in our hearts. Christ alone is the one to proclaim!*

ASK: *What are the implications and consequences for proclaiming someone or something other than salvation in Christ alone?* (PSG, p. 94)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, as the group listens for ways Paul contrasted human weakness with God's power.

EXPLAIN: Direct attention to Verse 7. Explain that "treasure" is valuable and costly, while "clay jars" are weak and common. The weakness of the vessel (clay jar) allows God's extraordinary power to be shown and for others to realize the power came from God and not from us.

GUIDE: Read Verses 8-9 responsively. Read, or enlist someone to read, the phrases that begin with *We are _____*, (stopping before the word *but*) and instruct the rest of the group to complete the phrase by reading *but not _____*.

APPLY: Lead group members to reflect on the challenges or difficulties they are facing. Instruct them to write in the margin of their PSGs *I am _____*, briefly describing their situation in the blank. Then suggest that they complete the rest of the phrase (*but not _____*) by writing words that reflect God's power.

DISCUSS: *How might the threat of death impact a person's faith? How can potential persecution strengthen a believer's resolve to take a stand for Christ?*

TRANSITION: *Paul didn't dwell on death, but instead magnified life.*

GUIDE: Review the last paragraph under Verses 8-14 (PSG, p. 96) and the comments under Verse 15 (PSG, p. 96) for guidance in living victoriously in Christ, even in situations that threaten to destroy us. Invite a volunteer to read 1 Thessalonians 5:18.

DISCUSS: *How would Paul define a win for himself? For other believers? How should believers understand success in this life?* (PSG, p. 96)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, as the others listen to the way Paul contrasted life on earth with eternal life in heaven.

ASK: *How does the inner person get renewed daily? How does that daily renewal fuel and motivate the believer?* (PSG, p. 97)

SAY: *Paul challenged the Corinthian believers to focus on the unseen and the eternal. He reminded them that doing so would produce an incomparable reward in heaven.*

GUIDE: Lead the group to locate the information on "eternal glory" under Verses 17-18 (PSG, pp. 97-98). Discuss: *How does the glory reserved for us in the future serve as motivation in the now to be faithful and courageous in suffering?* (PSG, p. 98)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

GUIDE: Read the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 99). Invite the group to propose additional insights that could be added to the list.

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to consider their responses to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 99): *What actions do you need to take to safeguard against proclaiming anyone other than Jesus? Discuss with the group ways you can hold each other accountable for making Jesus the focus of our message.* Lead the group to brainstorm potential actions they can take individually and as a group.

PRAY: Before closing in prayer, read the Key Doctrine statement (PSG, p. 96). Pray, thanking God for His grace through which believers can face life with confidence.



PRACTICE

- Pray for each member of your group by name, asking God to help him or her face life with confidence and display the gospel in challenging situations.
- Take time this week to connect with the group, encouraging them to come to the next session. Make sure to communicate which session to study with those who missed the group meeting.
- Look at ways of arranging the group in a different way and using a different focal wall.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, survey the group about religious liberty. Prior to the group's arrival, write on the board: (1) *Religious Liberty is on the decline in America.* (2) *American Christians face growing intolerance.* As the group enters, distribute sheets of paper and pens or pencils. Ask individuals to write "yes" or "no" to the questions on the board. Collect the papers, and enlist a volunteer to tabulate results while you share information from the LifeWay Research Survey from First Thoughts (p. 104). When results from your group have been compiled, compare them with the LifeWay survey.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:5-6, turn off the lights in the room. Lead participants to recall the last time they experienced a power failure and the lights went out. Invite volunteers to share experiences. Assure them that no matter how dark their situation seems, God's light is eternal. Turn on the lights.
- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, use a Bible dictionary or commentary to present a mini-lecture on clay jars. Ask: *What other comparisons would you make for the temporary nature of the human body?* Refer to 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, where Paul described our physical bodies as "earthly."
- To enhance the study of 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, invite volunteers to read the passage from a variety of translations. Then form small teams and invite them to re-state the passage in their own words.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill on page 94 of the PSG. Form two teams, and ask one team to respond to the questions based on Genesis 1:3 in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and the second team to respond to the questions based on Psalm 116:10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13. Invite volunteers to share responses with the large group.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Invite a volunteer to re-read 2 Corinthians 4:16. Close by singing or playing a recording of "We'll Understand It Better By and By," by Charles Tindley.