

1. How not to lose heart

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[0 : 00] Well, let us bow our heads together and we'll join in prayer. Before I lead in prayer, let's take a moment to pause and wonder at the great way, the wonderful way in which God, the creator of all of us, is lovingly willing to open his ear to our prayers and that he loves to hear the cries of those who turn to him in faith.

And let's allow ourselves to to wander afresh at the rock of ages who has been cleft for us, the Lord Jesus, who was prepared to leave the glory and the peace and the bliss and the wonder of heaven and to come to earth and to die for us.

So, dear God, our Father, we come to you this afternoon with thankful hearts, thankful that your ears are open to our prayers and thankful almost more than for anything else.

For your Son, our Savior, because through your giving of him to us, you have given us the greatest blessing that we could possibly have. The blessing of a way opened for us to come to you, to come to the kingdom of heaven eternally because of what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

And so we thank you again. We think of him, dear Father, taking that long road from heaven to earth and the way in which he was prepared to be born as a human baby and to be brought up in the carpenter's workshop and to live a life of hard work and humility and then to begin his teaching ministry, his time spent with many people as he opened up to them the truth about you and about the way to eternal life.

[2 : 10] And then we think of that wonderful and yet cruel and horrible death, wonderful for us as we look back to it, but so cruel and horrible for him. And we think of the two or three days lying quietly in the grave and then that wonderful resurrection.

So we thank you, dear Father, for having mercy upon sinful men and women, which is what we all are. And we pray that today, as we listen to your word from the Apostle Paul, it will be a source of real encouragement to all of us.

And we ask it in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Well, let's turn together to 2 Corinthians. And if you have one of our visitor's Bibles, you'll find this on page 965.

965. So as I said a moment ago, chapter 4 is the passage we'll be studying over these few weeks. We might well go into chapter 5 as well, I think.

Haven't quite worked it all out yet. But this afternoon, our passage is verses 1 to 6. And leading up to chapter 4, Paul has been talking about his ministry, the gospel ministry entrusted to him, which is so different from the ministry that was entrusted to Moses.

[3 : 27] He speaks of the ministry that Moses had as a ministry which brings death because the law, the law of Moses, brings condemnation to those who listen to it and understand it, whereas the ministry of the gospel brings life.

So chapter 4, verse 1. Therefore, having this ministry, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. But by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

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

[4 : 39] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us. Now, friends, I'm not going to embarrass anybody by asking you to raise a hand, but if I were to say, put your hands up if you're feeling a little bit weary, I guess quite a few hands here in this hall would go up today, especially if you're over 50 and you're beginning to dread the approach of Christmas.

Now, if I were to say, again, I'm not going to say this, but if I were to say, put your hands up if you're ever tempted to lose heart as a Christian, then maybe quite a few hands also would go up.

It can be quite difficult to persevere in Christian faith, to persevere in joy, in evangelistic activity, and in Christian fellowship, especially as you think of the long length of time that many people live the Christian life.

If you're a Christian, you might well have become a Christian when you were 12 or 15 or 20, and now you're much older. And if you think of that long distance of life from your conversion through to the end of your human life, it's a long way to Tipperary, isn't it?

[5 : 59] And it's a long way from our conversion to the end of our life. And to keep going for all those many years can be rather difficult. And that's why temptations come to many Christians, I guess to every Christian sooner or later, to give up, or at least to lose heart.

Now, it's because of this temptation, which I guess so many of us know, that I've chosen this passage from 2 Corinthians. So let me first point out three statements here from the Apostle Paul.

Have a look with me at chapter 4, verse 1. Therefore, having this ministry, the ministry of the gospel, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

And then look over the page to chapter 4, verse 16. So, he says, having explained himself a lot in the intervening verses, so he says, we do not lose heart.

And then look on to chapter 5 and verse 6. So, we are always of good courage. So, this theme of not losing heart and keeping up good courage is clearly the thread that is running through this section of Paul's letter.

[7 : 04] Now, we're bound to ask, but why was Paul, of all people, tempted to lose heart? Why should he be dwelling on this subject? Wasn't Paul, after all, a man of indomitable resolve and indefatigable energy?

Well, Paul was an unusually determined man. There's no doubt about that. But Paul was a human being just like us. He had an up-and-down emotional life, just like you and me. And he tells us in 2 Corinthians, perhaps more than in any other of his letters, of some of the difficulties and afflictions that he had to face.

So, for example, in chapter 1, verse 8, he says this, for we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

For we were so, this is the Apostle Paul, this indomitable man, for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Now, we don't know quite what experience he's talking of there, but clearly he and Timothy and his other companions were having to go through some dreadful experience.

They'd got to the point of despairing of life itself. They were at the end of their tether, perhaps even further than that. And then, as you read on later in this epistle, you find, especially in chapter 11, that Paul speaks of his sufferings, about the way that he was often imprisoned because he'd been preaching the gospel, how he'd often been beaten and whipped.

[8 : 31] He'd been three times shipwrecked in his gospel travels. He'd been frequently cold and weary and hungry. And he was suffering from persecution from both Jewish opponents and Gentiles wherever he went.

Now, I honestly think that Paul must have suffered more in one week than I have suffered in my whole life. There must have been times when the apostle Paul was tempted to creep back very quietly home to Tarsus, his hometown, and buy a little cottage in the hills and plant potatoes and rambling roses and retire from the battle.

Now, we too will be tempted to lose heart as Christians, not because of beatings and stonings and shipwrecks like Paul, but for other reasons. So, for example, we may be discouraged by the decline of integrity in our national life.

We see it all around us. We may be greatly discouraged by the greed and dishonesty that seems to be filling our nation, by sexual immorality, and by the weakness of many of our churches, by the loss of confidence in the Bible that some Christian ministers and preachers seem to show these days.

We may feel a deep sense of anxiety about the global economic situation. There's another make-or-break meeting going on, isn't there, at the moment in Europe.

[9 : 53] We may wonder if our bank accounts and our hard-earned savings are going to disappear and maybe we shall end up in a penniless old age. And no doubt there are other factors that might lead to us being discouraged and disquieted.

So let's learn from the apostle Paul why he doesn't lose heart and how therefore we don't need to lose heart ourselves. I know that our circumstances are quite different from his in many ways.

He was an apostle and we are not. But several times in his letters he says to his Christian readers imitate me as I imitate Christ.

That's one of the reasons why Paul features so heavily in the New Testament as an example for Christians to follow. He's not just here to teach us doctrine in his letters but to show us a living example of how to live the Christian life.

So looking at these six verses at the beginning of chapter four now I'd like to point out three marks of the Christian who does not lose heart in the Christian life.

[10 : 54] And here's the first from verse two. We state the truth openly and honestly. Look at verse two again. We have renounced disgraceful underhanded ways.

We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. But by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Now what Paul is saying here is that it's possible for Christian preachers to be dishonest. Look at those phrases. Disgraceful underhanded ways.

Practicing cunning or tampering with God's word. Distorting the Bible's message. Now that has always been a temptation for Christian preachers ever since the first century AD.

The problem is that preachers so often want to be popular and want to be able to attract a following. Perhaps to be able to say our church has got more people coming to it than the church down the road.

[11 : 55] And often preachers who have been a bit clever have distorted the Bible's message so as to attract more people. To attract a greater following. Let me mention two classic temptations into which the Christian preacher can fall.

The first temptation is to play down the Bible's teaching on sin and the need to repent. We're not really all that sinful.

Some preachers will say don't believe those doom and gloom merchants who are forever denouncing sin. God loves us just as we are. We're his children.

He coos and delights over us as a mother coos and delights over her baby in the crib etc. etc. Now, thank God it is true that he loves us greatly.

But we can't come to him and we can't belong to him except via repentance. Kneeling at the foot of the cross realizing that Jesus has been broken like a rock cleft for us.

[12 : 52] Acknowledging that we're sinners who are condemned by him and who need the rescue that only a crucified saviour can give us. If sin is played down in Christian teaching God's just judgment will also be played down and this will mean that Christ's cross is marginalized and its meaning becomes distorted and weakened.

A weak understanding of sin and judgment will always lead to a weak and distorted gospel. Now why should some preachers want to distort the gospel like this?

Surely the answer is because it flatters the listener. The listener is not made to face the truth about his or her own sinfulness or the truth about the cross. He's being told that he can hold his head up high and be pleased with himself.

And some folk prefer to be flattered than to be humbled. But the real gospel is deeply humbling. Now a second classic temptation and there's a great deal of this in the world today is for the preacher to promise his listeners that if they come to Christ all their illnesses will be healed and their bank balances will be greatly enriched.

Now that kind of preaching will always attract a following because well most of us aren't fully well. I should imagine almost all of us in here have got at least one thing wrong with them. Probably half a dozen things in many cases.

[14 : 17] and all of us would like to have more money in our pockets and our bank accounts. Now it is true of course that the Lord graciously sometimes does restore the health of those who are seriously ill in answer to our prayers.

And it's equally true that sometimes our bank balances get strangely boosted up almost miraculously. But very often for the great majority of Christians it is simply not like this.

The normal thing is for Christians in most countries over the 20 centuries of the Christian church. The normal thing is health problems and shortage of money.

Now the Bible promises us complete freedom from all affliction in the world to come. But not in this world. We only have to look at the example of Paul himself to see that he was very often short of money and food and his life was marked by suffering and pain and affliction.

and his life sets the pattern which our lives follow. Think of Jesus himself the man of sorrows acquainted with grief. It was Jesus who said to his disciples in this world you will have tribulation.

[15 : 29] No ifs and buts in this world you will have tribulation. So turning back to verse 2 here it's these kinds of temptations and no doubt other ones as well which Paul has renounced.

He refuses to be a dishonest preacher. What does he offer people instead? Well there it is in verse 2 the open statement of the truth.

Isn't that a lovely phrase? He's completely honest and straightforward and we can follow him and his example whether we're preachers or whether we're simply sharing the gospel with our neighbors over a cup of tea at home.

If we're dishonest with the gospel if we twist it in some way we'll shrink away from other people in the end and in the end have to shrink away from God himself.

But to state the truth openly and fearlessly that is one of the marks of the Christian who doesn't lose heart. Now the second mark of the Christian who doesn't lose heart is that we learn to recognize the power of the devil.

[16 : 32] And this is what Paul is talking about in verses 3 and 4. Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

Now the God of this world means the devil. Remember how Jesus sometimes calls him the ruler of this world. And Paul's point here is that those who persist in unbelief have had their minds blinded.

Now normally we think of blinding as being something that happens to our eyes. But Paul here speaks of minds being blinded. Minds that lose the capacity to see the light. That lose the capacity to see that Jesus Christ is the glorious image of God.

Now I'm sure we've all met folk like that. People who cannot see that Jesus is the very image and expression of God's nature. And it's very sad for us when we see this because we so want our friends, we so want our loved ones to see who Jesus is and to come to follow him.

Let me tell you a very striking example of this blinding of the mind. In the early 19th century, just over 200 years ago, there were two great parliamentarians in the House of Commons, William Wilberforce and William Pitt the Younger.

[18 : 01] Now Wilberforce, as I'm sure you know, was a devoted Christian who spent a great deal of his life's energy working both within the House of Commons and outside parliament for the abolition of the slave trade.

William Pitt was prime minister for more than 20 years in total. He, I think, became prime minister at the age of 24 and he died at the age of 46.

And he was prime minister for almost all of that 22 years. And they were very difficult years for Britain. The struggle with Napoleon Bonaparte was coming to a climax.

tax. And there were great pressures of many kinds, including lack of money in the national treasury, just like we have today. I think it was William Pitt who introduced income tax, actually.

Now, William Pitt and William Wilberforce were very close friends. They'd been at Cambridge together. They were part of a little group of young men who had grown up together and spent a lot of time in each other's company.

[18 : 58] And Wilberforce's great desire was to help Pitt to become a Christian because Pitt, he would go to church, but he was only a Christian in a kind of formal or nominal sense.

Anyway, one day, Wilberforce had the opportunity to take his friend Pitt to church. And they went to hear the preaching of a fine preacher, a fine Bible preacher called Richard Cecil.

And the two, I think they were sitting up in the gallery, so the two men were there in a very crowded church one Sunday morning. And Richard Cecil apparently preached a wonderful, clear gospel message, the kind of gospel message that you hear and you think, if anyone here is not a Christian, they're going to become a Christian when they hear this message.

Well, as they sat together, you can imagine Wilberforce was looking at Pitt, you know how you do out of the corner of your eye, to see how he was taking in the message. Anyway, the service finished, they sang the last hymn, they walked out of the gallery, down the stairs, and walked off home to lunch.

And William Pitt turned to William Wilberforce and he said to him, do you know, Wilberforce, I simply don't understand what that man was talking about. Isn't that extraordinary?

[20 : 06] And there was nothing wrong with Pitt's mind. He was one of the greatest intellects, one of the cleverest men of his generation. But in Paul's words here, in verse 4, the God of this world had blinded his mind.

So that meant, still in the words of verse 4, that he could not see the light of the truth of the good news about Christ. He couldn't see the wonderful glory of Christ, that Christ is the image of God.

God. Now, as we look at verse 4, we might say, how is it that recognizing Satan's activity is going to help us not to lose heart?

Well, I think the answer is this. Paul is teaching us to expect this kind of satanic activity. He's teaching us not to be surprised, not to be confounded when our friends and neighbors and loved ones seem unable to understand the gospel.

We would lose heart if we thought that it was all our fault. If I've given my neighbor Christian books and taken my neighbor to church and I've done my best to tell my neighbor the good news and still my neighbor says I can't make head or tail of it, I could easily lose heart and write myself off as a complete failure.

[21 : 18] But Paul is showing us that my neighbor's blindness is actually the result of the devil's malicious activity, not the result of my incompetence. Now verse 4 is a sobering truth, but it's not a truth that knocks us off balance or knocks us out of the race.

It's a truth that keeps us steady and persevering. We learn to recognize the devil's activity. This is the way things are. The devil is the god of this world. He is very much about and doing things.

Now we know that the devil in the end is a defeated foe, but he still has power and influence here and now. And when gospel work is hard and numbers of people coming to Christ are rather small, we need to remember this verse 4 so that we don't get too discouraged.

It's the devil who rots people up and prevents them from seeing the truth about Christ. He won't be allowed to do that forever, thank God. But for now, that is a painful reality and we need to recognize it.

Sometimes, of course, the devil has to release his grip. If you're a Christian, as many here are, weren't you once blinded by the devil? Of course you were.

[22 : 31] So was I. But then your eyes were opened. So just think of your friend or loved one who is now holding out against the gospel. It may be that his or her eyes will be opened just as yours were and mine were.

So don't let's give up. This is the devil's activity. Now here's the third thing that will help us not to lose heart. And really it's the reverse of the last point.

If verse 4 teaches how the devil blinds minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel, then verse 6 shows us how the God of Genesis chapter 1, that's the God who said, let light shine out of darkness.

He is the one who opens minds and enables the hearts of believers to be filled with light so that we can see the truth about Jesus Christ. So what the persistent unbeliever cannot see is the glory of Christ.

But what the believer comes to see is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Now Paul here is drawing on his extensive experience as an evangelist.

[23 : 38] He has often in his preaching described Christ to his believers. He has, if you like, shown them the face of Christ. Christ, he's portrayed Christ to his hearers. He's described the life and teaching of Jesus, the character of Jesus, and supremely the meaning of his death and resurrection.

Those who are perishing, when they listen to Paul, they would respond by saying, I can't see it. I can't understand what you're talking about. But those who are being saved respond by looking into the face of Jesus Christ as Paul portrays him and then saying, yes, in the face of Jesus, I can see the glory of God.

And really, verse 6 here is a wonderful New Testament description of what it means to become a Christian. The new Christian says, I now know where to look if I want to see the glory of God.

I need look nowhere else than in the face of Jesus Christ. But I want us to notice verse 5 as well, because verse 5 helps us again to see why Paul doesn't lose heart.

Verse 5 is about what Paul proclaims or preaches. What we proclaim, he says, is not ourselves. It's an important thing.

[24 : 54] Not ourselves. We do occasionally hear preachers who are full of themselves and full of their achievements. I've certainly heard preachers say this kind of thing. I've preached in 39 countries and I've spoken to 15 million people and at least 75,000 people have come to Christ through my ministry.

All the glory to God. And all the credit to me. You know the kind of thing I'm talking about, where a man is very full of himself and his achievements as he would see them. Now we know there's something very unsavory about that kind of self-proclamation.

Paul says in verse 5, no, we are not in the business of proclaiming ourselves. What we proclaim is Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves merely as your servants.

The preacher is serving his listeners. That's what he's there for. But he proclaims Jesus as Lord. And it's by means of that proclamation that some of those who are listening will come to realize that this Lord, Jesus Christ, is the one in whose face the glory of God is seen.

So friends, do you feel that sense the direction that the apostle is taking us in these six verses? He is saying, despite the pressures that we're under, and we'll look at some of these pressures a bit more next week.

[26 : 12] Despite these pressures we're under, we don't lose heart. We keep going with our Christian life and our gospel work. And what is it that marks out the persevering Christian?

First, we state the truth openly and honestly. We don't twist it so as to attract more people or to pull the wool over somebody's eyes. We state the truth openly.

Secondly, we recognize that where minds have been blinded, that is the devil's activity and he's responsible. And we're familiar with his ways. We know this is what goes on. And thirdly, we know that as we keep on proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord, God will graciously shine his light with Genesis 1 power to enable blind eyes to see that Jesus is the revelation of the glory of God.

God. So friends, we have great reasons here for keeping on going cheerfully and not losing heart. Our dear brother Paul understands our hearts and he has sent Paul and the Lord has sent Paul to teach us these things.

And as we close, let's notice the great incentive to persevere that we have in verse 1, which I haven't really pointed out yet at all, but it's there and it's important. Why do we not lose heart? Verse 1.

[27 : 28] Because the ministry that we have of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord has been entrusted to Paul and to us by the mercy of God.

Let's pray together. how we thank you, our dear father, for the example of your servant, Paul the apostle.

And we thank you so much for his command that we should imitate him as he imitates Christ. We see him following in the footsteps of Jesus, footsteps of suffering and very often rejection and pain and yet being able to persevere and to finish his course and to finish it gladly and cheerfully and confidently and prayerfully.

And so we pray that you will help us. Please especially, dear father, help any here here this afternoon who are bowed down and care worn and are finding it very hard to keep going as Christians.

please bear them up and give them a fresh sense of your trustworthiness and a fresh sense of confidence in you. And so we pray, dear father, that you will write these lessons in our hearts and help us by persevering to bring glory and honor to your great name.

[28 : 49] And we ask it through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.