

## 2. The Normal Christian Life

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, let us pray together. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead in prayer. But let's all of us, in this quiet moment, lift our hearts and our minds to the throne of heaven, the throne of our sovereign God who rules over history and who rules over our lives, every part of our life, the small things as well as the large questions of life.

And let's together lift up our hearts in trust to him. Charles Wesley writes, Till having all things done and all your conflicts past, you overcome through Christ alone and stand complete at last.

Dear God, our Father, we thank you for these words of your servant, Charles Wesley, and we thank you for the way that he himself had been through battles and conflicts and difficulties and yet was so conscious that there was victory to be had through Christ alone so that he and any Christian at the end was able to stand complete, to be still standing, not knocked over, not knocked out of the battle, but still standing after so many afflictions and difficulties.

And we thank you, dear Father, that the Apostle Paul, likewise, was a man who was sustained by your grace despite the difficulties of his life. We think of the other apostles as well, some of them beheaded, some persecuted, all of them opposed in different ways.

And we think of your church throughout the world, which has been characterized as the church militant, the battling church, soldiers of Christ, often having to engage in warfare with the deceit and lies of the devil and the world and the flesh.

[ 2 : 02 ] And we thank you, dear Father, that in Christ and in Christ alone, there is victory for those who trust in him. So we pray for ourselves today and ask that you will encourage us deeply that whatever difficulties we may be having to face, you will help us to believe the great truth of the gospel, that in belonging to Christ, not only will there be victory at the end, but there will be your presence and power to sustain us in life now.

And as we read the words of the Apostle Paul, please bring them to life for us, our dear Father, and help us to understand their message. And we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're continuing with our study in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Which I think may drift into chapter 5 in a couple of weeks as well. But today I want to read 2 Corinthians 4, which you'll find on page 965.

If you have one of our big church Bibles, page 965, I'll read verses 1 to 12. Though in fact our passage for this afternoon is verses 7 to 12.

So 2 Corinthians chapter 4, beginning at verse 1. And Paul is speaking about the ministry that he and the other apostles have been entrusted, the ministry of the gospel.

[ 3 : 29 ] 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.

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.

[ 4 : 3 6 ] 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, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

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.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us.

Well, I do hope, friends, that you may find this passage just as encouraging to yourselves as it is to me. What is happening here is that the Apostle Paul is opening up a window onto his inner life.

[ 5 : 5 1 ] He's showing us something of the difficulties and the afflictions that he suffered as a Christian. But in this passage, he is not at all wringing his hands as if to say, alas, woe is me, it's all too much, I can't carry on.

Not at all. He's showing that his sufferings, although they're great, are also the gateway to wonderful blessings. Blessings for himself and blessings to other people. And I want to suggest in my little sermon this afternoon that this is the pattern for the normal Christian life and that we can expect our lives to follow this same pattern if we are wanting to be real servants of Christ.

Sufferings but blessings. So let me come at the subject like this. Imagine that you're looking at the publicity of some Christian organization, a brochure describing the work of a particular Christian group, or perhaps the publicity put out by a local church.

Now, publicity of that kind usually includes a few glossy color photographs, doesn't it? Photographs of the leaders of the organization, or if it's a local church, perhaps photographs of the pastor and his wife.

And these photographs always show the people concerned at their very best. So if it's the publicity of a local church, you'll see the picture of the pastor.

[ 7 : 1 0 ] And there he is, smiling broadly, looking in very good health, slightly tanned, as if he's just stepped off a plane from Florida, which perhaps he has. And there's his wife, sitting next to him.

And although she's really 49, she looks about 37. And she is beautifully turned out. Her hair, not a hair out of place, lovely hair, beautiful skin, not a wrinkle in sight, and teeth, which a Colgate advertisement would be very pleased with.

Now, the hidden message behind that kind of publicity, I think, is something like this. Come to our church, and your life will be as happy and beautiful as the life of our pastor and his wife.

You too can be 49 and yet look 37, as the drabness and the dreariness of your life is sent packing by the vibrant experience of belonging to our congregation.

Now, just imagine that that publicity included a photograph of the pastor and his wife at the end of a really bad week. You know the sort of week we all have from time to time.

[ 8 : 1 2 ] A week of conflicts and battles and pastoral crises and perhaps terrible winter weather thrown in. And there they are, photographed at the end of a week like that, looking worn out, looking as if they've just been pulled through a hedge backwards.

Now, if you ask, which kind of photograph of himself is the Apostle Paul showing us here? The answer is the second one. This is Paul pulled through a hedge backwards.

Look at the words he uses about himself in verses 8 and 9. Very telling words. Afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down.

And then look at verse 12. Death is at work in us. It's a bit like one of those government health warnings that you find printed on the back of cigarette packets.

Smoking kills. You might read verses 7 to 12 and you might say Apostleship kills. Or possibly Apostleship may seriously damage your health.

[ 9 : 14 ] Now, this passage is not only about what happens to apostles. This is about any Christian who really follows Jesus. And I say that because Paul the Apostle several times in his letters says, not just to the pastors but to all the Christians he's writing to, he says, imitate me as I imitate Christ.

So every Christian in every generation is called to imitate Paul because to imitate Paul is to learn to follow in the steps of Jesus himself. But as I said earlier, this is actually a very encouraging passage because Paul's sufferings in the end produce a sweet and lovely fruit.

Not a bitter fruit of despair but a sweet fruit of great blessing. So let's look at verses 7 to 12 under three headings. First, Paul shows us treasure in jars of clay.

Verse 7. But we have this treasure. That's the treasure of the gospel. The gospel that Paul has been talking about in the previous verses. We have this treasure in jars of clay.

So Paul is asking us in our imagination to come into the potter's shop and look at all the ceramics displayed there. And he's saying, let your eye fall upon the plainest, most unadorned pot in the whole place.

[ 10 : 33 ] No beautiful coloured glaze. Just a bare clay pot. Even a rather ugly clay pot. Well, he says, that's what I am.

And that's what any Christian is. Not very pretty and rather fragile. But useful. Because even an ugly clay pot can hold precious treasure.

And Paul's point here in verse 7 is that it's good that the gospel is held in ordinary clay pots like you and me and Paul. Because, as the verse goes on to say, it's much easier to see the surpassing power belongs to God and not to the clay pot.

You see, if Christians are dolled up and applauded and presented as being terribly suntanned and beautiful and smiling and confident and on top of every situation, it might seem that the power and the glory come from them themselves.

Look at this radiant man and his beautiful wife. Aren't they wonderful? But no, Paul is saying, the truth is that the gospel is found in jars of clay. And that's to make it obvious that the power and the glory belong to God and to his gospel and not to the jars of clay.

[ 11 : 45 ] So, friends, let's not go around feeling that we've got to be polishing up our self-esteem day after day when Paul tells us that we can be content to be very ordinary clay pots.

What is important about us if we're Christians is not that we are beautiful or decorative but that we contain in our hearts and lives the surpassing power of the gospel for our own benefit and for the benefit of many other people as well.

So, there's the first thing. We're jars of clay but it's a good thing that we're jars of clay because if we were made of wedgewood or royal crown derby people might think that there was some kind of glory or beauty in us and they wouldn't be able to see the power to change lives which belongs to God alone.

Now, second, Paul shows us that Christians are often knocked down but are not knocked out. Do you see that phrase there in verse 9?

Struck down but not destroyed. I think it was J.B. Phillips who in his translation about 50 years ago his fine translation of Paul's letters he chose that phrase taken from the boxing ring knocked down but not knocked out.

[ 13 : 00 ] And I think verses 8 and 9 here are rather wonderful verses. They consist do you see of four contrasts. Let me read them again. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed.

Perplexed but not driven to despair. Persecuted but not forsaken. Struck down but not destroyed. Now, each of those four contrasts means almost the same thing as the other three.

Paul is really repeating himself there. But he repeats himself so as to emphasize how powerful is the contrast in his experience between very painful setbacks on the one hand and continued survival on the other.

Now, this is the normal Christian life for all Christians. It's not just for apostles or missionaries or ministers. It's the regular experience of any disciple of Jesus who is prepared to serve Christ and to be known as a Christian.

Look at these four words afflicted perplexed persecuted and struck down. First of all afflicted. In Paul's experience that means of course persecution and opposition but physical things beatings and whippings stonings imprisonments shipwrecks and in his case it often meant being hungry and ill-clad cold and half-exhausted.

[ 14 : 24 ] Many afflictions for Paul. Perplexed puzzled what am I to do now Lord? That would often be his prayer should I visit this city or that city?

Should I speak to this person or that person? Who should I take with me as my travelling companions? Paul's life was not regimented it wasn't a nine to five office life there was no job description no salary no pension no permanent residence like the Lord Jesus before him he had nowhere to lay his head very often it was not obvious to Paul what he should do next perplexed then persecuted persecuted violence and fierceness have always lain just under the skin of human nature it doesn't take very much to rouse them up and Paul's missionary activities frequently roused up the fierceness of people against him there were many Jews who hated him because they thought quite wrongly that what he was teaching undermined the faith of Abraham and Moses and there were many Gentiles also who hated him not because the gospel of Jesus not only because the gospel of Jesus countered paganism and pagan religious beliefs but also because the gospel of Jesus is such a fundamental challenge to human pride because the gospel insists that we cannot save ourselves by any amount of effort we have to submit to Christ as our saviour and then look at this final phrase struck down knocked to the floor you might say uppercut left hook jab to the solar plexus head spinning weak at the knees gasping for breath you ever done boxing

I did once or twice and I gave it up that's what he's like that's what it's like for him but now that's the key word that comes four times in verses eight and nine afflicted yes but not crushed perplexed yes but not driven to despair persecuted often but not forsaken not forsaken by God knocked down yes again and again but not knocked out now this is the normal Christian life and because it's normal we must expect these bleak experiences to come to us quite regularly and there's no need for us to think that God has forsaken us when they do come I imagine there are some folk here today who are feeling very much afflicted or perplexed or persecuted or knocked down possibly all of those things at the same time well if that's you just look at the second half of each of Paul's phrases not crushed not driven to despair not forsaken not knocked out isn't it encouraging to know that

Paul the Apostle Paul experienced such distress and difficulty and yet he was wonderfully strengthened to carry on and to keep on going right to the end which for him was judicial execution as you know my good friend Bob Fyle who teaches with me at the Cornhill training course up the road he sometimes does a session with our students which he calls running on empty running on empty it's a rather good title for a session for Bible students isn't it and I think what he means by that is is it possible for a Christian to keep on going even when he feels that he hasn't got a drop of petrol left in his tank answer yes it is possible by the grace of God and I would say that our passage here in 2 Corinthians 4 is Paul's version of running on empty if I can speak personally for a moment I remember being at a conference for ministers down in England when I was about 35 I'd been the senior minister of a parish church in Derbyshire for

I think 2 or 3 years and I was exhausted I'd been working hard and I was worn out and in my exhausted state I went to this conference at the big conference centre in Swanwick in Derbyshire and I remember one evening as the light was fading I think it was about this time of the year around 5 o'clock in the afternoon I walked out to the edge of the grounds at the conference centre and I felt like the most moth-eaten vicar in the whole of England and I prayed and I said to the Lord something like this Lord I just don't know how I can carry on this work is too hard for me I feel as if I'm like a man who's pushing a huge rock up a very tall mountain and I've only gone a few yards help me I don't know how to keep going now that was a long time ago and I've had a few similar experiences since then but I can echo these words of Paul with all my heart crushed sorry not crushed not driven to despair not forsaken not destroyed fragile and moth-eaten yes often but by the grace of God sustained that's my little testimony and I know that many other

[ 19 : 21 ] Christians would say something rather similar so there's Paul's second point Christians are often knocked down but not knocked out well now third and this is perhaps the most important point that Paul is making in this paragraph he is teaching us that we die so that others may live we've noticed those four phrases in verses 8 and 9 and each of those four phrases has the same pattern this not that and so on now verses 10 11 and 12 also have a pattern and each of these three verses 10 to 12 is constructed along the same pattern and the pattern is death first but then life just notice that pattern as I read verses 10 to 12 again always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies 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 so death is at work in us but life in you now it's quite tricky to understand exactly what

Paul means by every phrase here but I think the overall thrust of what he's saying is absolutely clear he's continuing to speak about the sufferings that he and other Christians go through but in verses 10 to 12 he introduces a new element and that is that the sufferings of Christ of Christians the sufferings of Christians are intimately linked with the sufferings of Jesus himself so Paul is saying that just as Jesus had to go through the process of dying before he could be raised up to glorious new life so Christians have to go through the experience of dying before we can enjoy the glory of a new life but Paul is not primarily talking about our physical death here he's talking about the day to day experience whereby Christians learn to renounce our rights and privileges and comforts and learn to endure affliction and perplexity and persecution look how he describes it in verse 10 and you'll see that Paul is not talking about his physical death he's talking about his daily ongoing experience he says in verse 10 always carrying in the body that is in his living physical body always carrying in the body the death of

Jesus so here is Paul very much alive a living active energetic human being I guess there were few people in the history of the world who've been quite as energetic as Paul and yet as he contemplates life in his physical frame he thinks of his own life as bearing very deeply the character of Jesus as he set his face towards the cross I'm in the same mold Paul is saying Jesus willingly faced scorn and jeering and hatred and malicious opposition and finally crucifixion and he was able to do it because he knew that after his crucifixion he would be gloriously raised and also because he knew that through his dying a gateway would be opened for many people to come to eternal life and Paul is saying that is why I'm prepared to endure all this affliction because my dying day after day after day is going to bring life to so many other people so the pattern set by

Jesus this pattern of death followed by resurrection that is the pattern taken up by Paul and it's the pattern that he is teaching all Christians to adopt as our own if we're to be true disciples of Jesus look at verse 11 for we who live are always day by day month by month year by year always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh so just picture the apostle Paul in his regular life he wakes up in the morning half past six or seven o'clock as the cock crows and I guess the sun shone a lot over there a bit more than in the west of Scotland but he would open his eye look out of the window and he would see the Mediterranean sun rising in the east and he would think about his breakfast over today to death for

Jesus sake but it's not just about dying it's also so that the life of Jesus may be demonstrated even in this mortal body of mine and then he sums up his life's pattern in verse 12 so death is at work in us and we're happy about that because it means life is at work in you now if it were only death is at work in us I guess he'd give up being a Christian immediately but it's because the life principle is at work in other people through the death principle being at work in him that he is able to keep going with joy and determination that's why he doesn't lose heart in the midst of all his sufferings that's why he's willing to suffer massive unpopularity as well as hunger and cold and shipwreck because he knows that if he's willing to lay down his life and his comforts and his popularity day after day it's going to mean life eternal life for the

[ 25 : 07 ] Corinthians and for so many other people as well now friends every Christian will be tempted to drop out of the battle when the going gets tough and our adversary the devil who is the father of lies has a very smooth tongue and he loves to say this sort of thing to us this is the kind of thing he says to me you haven't got to be like the apostle Paul he was an extremist he was a one off it was okay for him perhaps but you don't need to follow in his steps dash it man life is short I mean look at you you're getting old look at all those grey hairs what you need to do now is to pull out the deck chair pull out the chair pull out the chaise long buy yourself a few winston churchill cigars pour yourself an extra large glass of claret sit back and watch the rugby you can go to church if you want yes you can be a quiet little sort of mini Christian if you want to there's no no great harm in that but there's no need for you to take a stand on the truth of the

Bible or the uniqueness of the Christian faith or the non negotiability of Christian ethics I mean cut yourself a little bit of slack man pamper yourself a bit you deserve it now friends do you know that voice of course you do and you know where it comes from straight from the pit Paul is teaching us that the only way to life is through laying down our lives and isn't that exactly what the Lord Jesus had taught before him Jesus said whoever would save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel is the one who will save it now this paragraph in 2 corinthians 4 is one of the finest expositions in the Bible of that saying of Jesus will you and I be prepared for death to be at work in us so that life can be at work in other people if you and I day after day will take our stand with

Jesus against the opinions of the world and the devil we shall die a bit every day but others will live verse 12 so death is at work in us but life in you let's bow our heads and we'll pray Lord Jesus how we thank you for setting this glorious and yet demanding pattern we know that you set your face towards Jerusalem because you knew that execution awaited you and yet you knew that it would be at the price of that suffering and death that eternal life could be won for so many we thank you for setting the pattern and we thank you for Paul's willingness to take it up and to teach it to us and we pray that you will give us the grace to accept it as part of the normal Christian life and to follow in that same pathway with joy so that even if death is at work in us day after day it will mean life for many others and we ask it for your dear name's sake

Amen Amen Amen