

2 Corinthians 4:

The context of 2 Corinthians:

Paul seems to have had a complex relationship with the Corinthian church. He wrote at least 3 letters to them (of which we have two), and the content is quite personal.

He writes defending his own ministry and integrity, an issue which seems to have persisted given that it appears in both 1 and 2 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 1-3, 1 Cor 9 for example).

In particular, Paul defends his own authority to teach about Jesus, despite not being particularly impressive by their contemporary standards. Reading between the lines, it seems like he was a pretty weedy, uncharismatic kind of guy, in stark contrast with the bombastic, confident 'super-apostles' whose ministry competed with Paul's.

But 2 Corinthians is not just about Paul; it is not just his self-centred whining about how tough things are in his ministry. Instead, Paul applies his own situation to theirs. His ministry should be a model for their ministry, and his ministry is modeled on Jesus' (see 1 Cor 4:16: 'be imitators of me' and 1 Cor 11:1 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ').

So when you read 2 Corinthians 4, keep this in mind. *Paul is speaking of his own ministry, but everything he says applied to the church then, and applies to us today.*

The passage: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18

The ministry Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 4 is gospel proclamation/evangelism. See 4:2-3 for that.

Paul sandwiches this passage with one refrain: '**we do not lose heart**'. See 4:1 and 4:16.

What comes in between is his explanation of *why* he has not lost heart in his ministry (despite opposition within the church and persecution outside it), and the *practical implications* of that on his ministry.

You might find it helpful to break up the passage this way, asking the same question each time: 'why not lose heart?'

4:1-2

- The passage starts with a 'therefore', indicating that Paul is continuing his point from the previous passage. It might be helpful to quickly skim chapter 3, to get a sense of what Paul is talking about. Paul says that our sharing of the gospel is a glorious 'ministry of justification', rather than a 'ministry of condemnation' (3:4-9). He trusts in God's power, rather than his own, to bring people to faith (see 3:5 and 3:16).
- For this reason, Paul does not compromise on integrity or on the gospel message, even when he or his message are opposed.

4:3-6

- This commitment to integrity is bolstered by his belief that it is God who ‘unveils’ our minds. Again, look to chapter 3 for an understanding of what ‘veiling’ and ‘unveiling’ means. In short, Paul means that a veil keeps people from seeing Jesus as he is, and thus from coming to faith in him. It is only in Christ that that veil is set aside (3:14).
- The implication of this is that it is the *gospel* that we should expect to bring people to faith, not our cleverness or persuasion, or how attractive our church services are (or whatever else we might think will bring someone to faith). *That* is why Paul refuses to play around with his message or method in 4:1-2; it is not our power but God’s that will change someone. He just wants to present the message plainly to people.
- Verse 4 might be a bit tricky for people. When Paul talks about ‘the god of this world’ he is talking about Satan (whom he also refers to as the ‘ruler of the power of the air’ in Ephesians 2:2, and whom Jesus refers to as ‘the ruler of this world’ in John 16:11). Try not to get bogged down in discussions of predestination here. The thrust of the passage is much more towards *God’s power to bring people to faith*, than towards Satan’s power to keep people in unbelief. Make sure your group notes this.
- Verse 5: This is the sort of verse that you could meditate on for months and still get something out of! I personally believe that if we were really convinced of verse 5, it would transform our ministry: **“We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake”**.
 - *Evangelism is not at its essence about us, but about Jesus. It is not about us being awesome or perfect, but about Jesus being awesome and perfect. We are involved, obviously, but as slaves for Jesus’ sake.*
 - *We serve him* and the message about him. Often our attempts at sharing the gospel are framed around serving our *culture*: trying to make the gospel more pleasing to whatever is popular around us. Of course our message has to connect with our culture, but it does not have to bow down to it. Knowing that our job is to serve Jesus means that we want to honour him by telling the truth about him: he is Lord.
- Why would we do this? Verse 6: because God showed *us* the truth about Jesus, we know He can do it with other people too. Think about when God said ‘Let light shine out of darkness’: Paul is talking about when God *created the world* (Genesis 1). A God who has this kind of power surely has the power to bring ‘light’ to anyone.

4:7-12

- The theme of God’s power continues in this chunk.
- Verse 7: the metaphor of the clay jar emphasises our weakness. A clay jar at that time was fragile. One commentator has compared it to a takeaway container – disposable, nothing special. Though Paul uses this metaphor to describe us, he is not being down on humanity. He is simply pointing out that the vessel is not the important thing. What matters is what it carries. And what we carry is the knowledge of Jesus; the gospel.
- Have your group reflect on the language Paul uses here: ‘this *extraordinary power*’ which belongs to God, not us. Sometimes, when it comes to ministry in general, and sharing the gospel in particular, we act like agnostics. We expect little power from God, and we don’t act or speak because we are afraid that people will respond negatively. Paul’s own experience

affirms that fear this is reasonable *to an extent*; he describes his own suffering for the gospel in verses 8-12. But importantly, he understands that his difficulty somehow shows God and God's power all the more clearly. This is a bit mysterious, but I think the idea is that if it is obvious that we are weak, when God does work, the work is attributed to Him and not to us.

- That means that... see the next chunk!

4:13-15

- Despite the opposition he experiences, Paul continues to speak about Jesus.
- He is bolstered by the knowledge that 'the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence' (verse 14).
- That is, Paul knows that his security doesn't lie in his present circumstances. His security is in his sure hope of being resurrected to be with Jesus.
- If we want to be secure now, we will never share the gospel, because the gospel is challenging and risky. But if we know where real security lies, it will give us the capacity to face difficulty.

4:16-18

- This chunk extends on this theme. As Pete pointed out on Sunday, verse 17 is incredibly encouraging: 'this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...'
- Knowing we will be with God in the new creation helps give us perspective on what we go through now.

Applying the passage:

For application, have people think about situations (*especially* evangelistic ones) in their lives at the moment, where they have 'lost heart'. What about the passage would encourage them?

What would it look like to live with the same kind of confidence in God's power that Paul writes about? Get people to get specific with this. Have them think about people in their lives that they could share the gospel with. What does this passage encourage you to do or not do? (i.e. It encourages me to pray a lot before I try to share the gospel with someone, and it encourages me not to skimp on aspects of the gospel that are more challenging for people to hear).

Pray for yourselves and for your friends, family, and enemies who don't know Jesus.

If you have non-Christians in your group:

This might be a tricky passage to go through with them! This could be an opportunity to explain to them how central to Christianity the gospel is, and to explain that we have no desire to manipulate or argue anyone into belief (from 4:2). When we share our faith, it's not because we think we are better than anyone, but because we love Jesus: 'for we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord...'