

Therefore, We Do Not Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:1–12 (with a glance at verse 16)

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Introduction

Since Easter we have been working through the book of 2 Corinthians, and our passage today is 2 Corinthians 4:1–12, with a short glance down to verse 16. The passage opens with a *therefore* — *Δι* in Greek — and immediately gives us the thesis of everything that follows: “*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*”

That phrase, *we do not lose heart*, is just two words in the Greek: *ο κ γκακο μεν*. *Ο κ* is the negative — *not*. The verb *γκακο μεν* is a compound of the word for *in* and the word for *bad* (*kakos*), so together the phrase means something like *we are not in a bad state*, or *we are not in a bad place*. Culturally, in the Greek world, *ο κ γκακο μεν* was a way of saying: we have not lost courage. We are not giving up. We are not discouraged. The ESV renders it simply, *we do not lose heart*.

Paul, the author of this letter, is telling the church in Corinth that despite affliction, despite being utterly burdened beyond his strength, despite seasons when he despaired of life itself and received what felt like a sentence of death — despite having to defend his integrity against those who called him fickle, despite his apostleship being called into question, despite a painful previous visit and the anguish of heart that followed — despite all of these things, he is not discouraged. He is not in a bad place. On the contrary, he is in a remarkable place: by the mercy of God, having been commissioned by God, speaking in Christ and for Christ. That is what today’s message is about. *Δι ο κ γκακο μεν* — therefore, we do not lose heart.

The Devil’s Favorite Tool

There is an old preacher’s story you may have heard before, about the devil having a yard sale. It goes something like this.

The devil announced he was selling off the tools of his trade. The day of the sale, prospective buyers gathered around the table where his tools were laid out and priced. There was the dagger of jealousy. The hammer of anger. The rope of hatred. The chisel of pride. The lens of

lust. Each had its price tag attached, and the prices were high — these were proven instruments, much used, much effective.

But off to one side, on a small pedestal of its own, lay a worn, battered, ordinary-looking wedge. It was the most beat-up tool on the table. It was also priced higher than all the others combined, and it bore a sign that read: *Not for sale*.

One of the buyers came forward and asked the devil to explain. Why is this old wedge priced so high? Why won't you part with it?

The devil smiled. *I can spare any of the others*, he said. *But not this one. This one is the most useful tool I have. With this tool I can get into a heart that is bolted shut against everything else on this table. Once I get this tool inside, I can pry the heart open and bring in any of the others I want. The other tools are loud — people see them coming. But this one, no one suspects belongs to me. They think it is just life. They think it is just their circumstances. They never realize they have invited me in.*

The buyer asked: *What is the tool called?*

The devil answered: *Discouragement*.

Paul, Seen from the Outside

If you were living in the year 57 AD — approximately the year Paul wrote this letter — you might have thought Paul a failure.

His most recent church plant in Ephesus had sparked a riot, prompting him to flee for his life. There was a group of Jewish opponents hunting him down with intent to kill him; the evidence is in his last-minute change of travel plans, his decision to avoid Ephesus on his return to Jerusalem, and the fact that when he finally arrived, those hunting him found him, captured him, and imprisoned him for at least the next five years. The Jerusalem church, under James, held him at arm's length — so cool toward him, in fact, that the great collection from the Gentile churches, money Paul had spent years gathering as an act of solidarity and love, was barely worth a mention when he arrived. His beloved Corinthian church, the church he had planted and spent nearly two years building, had rejected him, though that was changing now. The Galatian churches he had planted were still being overrun by false teachers. Other apostles — more polished, more impressive — were winning his congregations away from him.

Paul was beaten, scarred, and poor. He had no wife, no children, no settled home, no estate to leave behind. His opponents said his bodily presence was weak and his speech of no account. He worked with his hands to feed himself. He carried on his body the marks of three rod-

beatings, five lashings, one stoning, and three shipwrecks. By every metric the world uses to measure a man's life, Paul was a failure.

Yet, despite all of this, Paul *ο κ γκακο μεν*. He was not discouraged. He was not in a bad place. He did not lose heart.

Why? What kept Paul from despair in the year 57 AD? Our passage today answers that question. Paul gives us reasons — four of them — why he is not discouraged, why he can say, as he does when we peek down to 5:6, “*So we are always of good courage.*” Let us work through them.

Reason One: God's Mercy, Calling, and Sufficiency

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. — 2 Corinthians 4:1

The first reason Paul is not discouraged is that he never forgets God's mercy and the grace given to him. He never forgets where he came from. He never forgets the road to Damascus — that he was a persecutor of the church when Jesus stopped him in his tracks and called him by name. He never forgets that everything he now has — his apostleship, his calling, his life in Christ — came to him not because he earned it, not because he was worthy, but because of the mercy of God.

The *therefore* at the opening of verse one reaches back into everything Paul has described in chapter three: a ministry of the new covenant, a ministry of the Spirit, a ministry that beholds the unveiled glory of Christ, a ministry that speaks in Christ. And all of that rests upon what Paul declared in 3:5–6 — that his sufficiency is not from himself but from God. The sufficiency and mercy of God are the ground on which he stands. That is why, despite what the eyes see and what the body feels, he is not discouraged. Because his ministry is anchored in God's sufficiency and mercy, Paul can trust the Lord in whatever *egkakos* — whatever bad situation — comes his way.

Notice what he says next:

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. — 2 Corinthians 4:2

When a person stops trusting in God’s sufficiency, that person starts trusting in himself. And when a person starts trusting in himself, his ministry and his life begin to bend in three directions.

It bends toward **hiding**. Paul says, “*We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.*” Those two words belong together in the Greek and literally mean *the hidden things of shame*. When a man stops trusting God, he starts hiding. He covers his failures. He polishes his image. He projects a public face that says, *Everything is fine, and look how well I am doing*. Paul renounces that. Paul will not hide.

It bends toward **scheming**. Paul says, “*We refuse to practice cunning.*” The word *cunning* in Greek literally means *by any means whatsoever* — the willingness to do whatever it takes to get the outcome you want. Flatter the right person. Manipulate the situation. Run over whoever stands in the way. Cunning is what a man does when he no longer trusts God to handle the outcome. Paul refuses that. Paul will not scheme.

It bends toward **softening the word**. Paul says, “*We refuse to tamper with God’s word.*” To tamper is to dilute — to water it down, to cut out the uncomfortable parts, to preach platitudes instead of truth, to twist the text to fit the audience. A man tampers with the word when he no longer believes the word is sufficient on its own. Paul rejects that. Paul will not soften.

Hiding. Scheming. Softening. Three temptations that come knocking the moment a person stops trusting God. Three temptations Paul has nailed shut and will not let discouragement wedge open.

And what does he do instead? The end of verse 2 tells us: “*by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.*” Because Paul is not discouraged, because he is anchored in the mercy and sufficiency of God, he is free to do the one thing every faithful minister of the Word must do. He speaks the truth — plainly, openly, in the sight of God.

Reason Two: The Light of the Gospel and the Glory of Christ

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled 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.
— 2 Corinthians 4:3–4

The second reason Paul is not discouraged is that he has seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ — and that sight changes everything.

That phrase, *the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*, is a summary of everything Paul argued in chapter three: the Spirit of God dwelling in us, the veil that once separated us from God removed in Christ, and the result — that beholding his glory, we are transformed from one degree of glory to the next. Paul has compressed all of that into a single luminous phrase. *I am not discouraged because the Spirit of God is in me. I am not discouraged because the veil has been lifted and I behold the glory of God in Christ.* And once a people have seen that glory, you cannot tell them their life is meaningless. You cannot tell them their ministry is a failure. You cannot tell them to give up. They have seen the glory.

But not everyone does see it, and Paul knows that firsthand. He has preached the gospel and watched people walk away unchanged. Verse 4 tells us why: “*the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers.*” A translation note worth pausing over: the Greek word rendered *world* here is not *kosmos* — as in *God so loved the world* — but *aion*, meaning *age* (*θεος το αἰῶνος*). Paul is not saying that Satan is the sovereign Lord of the created order. He is saying that Satan exercises a dominion in this present age of darkness — an age that is coming to an end, but in the meantime, Satan and his toolbox are keeping people blind.

This matters enormously for Paul’s encouragement, and it should matter for ours. We all know the sting of rejection — being told to go away, to be quiet, or simply being ignored. Now multiply that by every synagogue that threw Paul out, every city where he was flogged or stoned, every congregation that turned to the false apostles. Every unbeliever who walked away from his preaching could have felt like a personal failure. Every Corinthian who defected could have felt like a personal defeat. But Paul has the wisdom to understand that people’s rejection of the gospel is not ultimately about him.

He says so directly:

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. — 2 Corinthians 4:5–6

What Paul says here is profoundly encouraging. Yes, we live in this present darkness where the enemy keeps the minds of the unbelieving in blindness. But we serve the God who, at the moment of creation, spoke a single word into that darkness — *Let there be light* — and there was light. That same God has spoken that word into our hearts, giving us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. And by extension, every time we preach the gospel, the light shines in the darkness. Therefore, we do not lose heart.

Reason Three: God's Power Is Revealed Through Our Weakness

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. — 2 Corinthians 4:7

The third reason Paul is not discouraged is that he has come to understand what his weakness is *for*.

Paul knows he is weak. He says it everywhere. His body bears the marks of beatings and shipwrecks. His opponents judge his bodily presence weak and his speech of no account. He works with his hands to feed himself. He has no wife, no children, no settled home, no estate. By every worldly measure, Paul is a clay jar — fragile, common, cheap, easily broken.

And here is what Paul has figured out: the clay jar is not the problem. The clay jar is the plan.

In the ancient world, a clay jar was the cheapest container you could buy. Households had stacks of them. They were used to store grain, oil, wine, scrolls, coins. They were so common that a broken one was simply thrown on the trash heap. You can walk across an ancient site today and find shards of them scattered on the ground. They were, in a sense, the cardboard boxes of the ancient world.

And Paul says — that is what God has chosen to put his treasure in. Not gold boxes. Not marble vaults. Clay jars. Disposable, fragile, common, easily broken clay jars. Why? *To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

If God put his treasure in a gold box, you would look at the box, admire the box, and perhaps even credit the box for what is inside. God puts his treasure in a clay jar — in Paul, in you, in me — so that when the light comes shining out, no one in the world can say, *What an amazing vessel.* They have to say, *What an amazing God.*

Weakness, then, is not the disqualification of the ministry. It is the design of the ministry. And Paul goes on to describe what that looks like in practice:

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. — 2 Corinthians 4:8–12

The God of the universe so loved the world that he sent his Son to die — and the Son's death became life to all who believed in him. And this apostle who follows that Son lives the very same pattern. His dying becomes other people's living. His weakness becomes the channel of God's power. His clay jar gets cracked, and the light comes out, and people are saved.

Paul is not discouraged by this. Paul *boasts* in this. Because Paul has figured out that the cracks in the jar are not failures. The cracks are how the light gets out.

Reason Four: The Resurrection to Eternal Life

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, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 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. So we do not lose heart.
— 2 Corinthians 4:13–16

There it is again: *Δι ο κ γκακο μεν.*

The fourth reason Paul is not discouraged is the resurrection. Paul knows that the same God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise him too. The dying he is doing now is not the last word. Beyond this clay jar, beyond this present age, beyond the wasting of his outer self, there is a resurrection coming — an eternal home, a weight of glory beyond all comparison. Paul is going to spend the next fifteen verses, all the way through the end of chapter four and into chapter five, unpacking that resurrection hope. But that is next week’s sermon.

The Four Reasons, Together

Today’s message is this.

Paul is not discouraged because the mercy of God has grabbed hold of his life.

Paul is not discouraged because he has seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul is not discouraged because he has learned that the cracks in the jar are how the light gets out.

And Paul is not discouraged because he, too, shall rise again.

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Δι ο κ γκακο μεν.

A Word for This Day

Normally at this point I would draw out some broader applications from the text. But today is Mother's Day, and so the application is directed particularly toward mothers — with one thing said plainly first.

Mother's Day is not the same day for everyone. Some of you are mothers in the full and ordinary sense, and the day is sweet. But it is not so for all. Some mothers have buried a child. Some have a child who is estranged. Some of you had a difficult mother, or a mother who is now gone, and this day reopens that wound every year. And some of you have mothered children who were never biologically yours — students, nieces, neighbors, the children of this church. Whatever this day holds for you, Paul's four reasons not to lose heart are for you too. They speak true to all who have been laid hold of by the mercy and grace of God.

So, to every mother here today, young and old: do not be discouraged. Here is why.

You have an amazing calling given to you by the mercy of God. Every child placed in your arms — biological, adopted, fostered, spiritual — was placed there by the mercy of God. And that means this: you are not the ultimate guarantor of who your children become. God is. The crushing whisper that says, *If you fail, they will be ruined* — set it down at the foot of the cross. You are an instrument of mercy, not the source of it. The God who called you to this work is the God who sustains the work. So do not lose heart.

You carry the light of Christ into your children's darkness. Every bedtime prayer, every Bible story, every hymn hummed over a crib, every word about Jesus spoken at the kitchen table — you are carrying the light of Christ into that child's life, pushing back against the darkness of this age. And the light you carry is not yours to manufacture. It is Christ's, already shining, placed in you, to be spoken into them. That is sacred work. So do not lose heart.

God's power is shown in your weakness. Some of you are exhausted in ways you cannot put into words. You feel like a clay jar with too many cracks. But Paul's words in verse 12 apply here: *"So death is at work in us, but life in you."* Every mother knows what it means to die to self so that a child may have life. Sleep dies in you so that health grows in them. Time dies in you so that character grows in them. Your body itself dies a little — your back, your knees, your nights — so that they can flourish. Do not despise the dying. The dying is the ministry. So do not lose heart.

There is a resurrection to eternal life, and you are laboring for souls. Not for behavior. Not for performance. Not for a child who turns out respectable. You are laboring that your children would know Christ and be raised with him on the last day. That is the prize. Everything else is dust.

For many of you, you may never see the full result of your work. You plant in soil you cannot dig up to inspect. You water seeds you may never see flower. You pray over sleeping children,

and you do not know what God will do with those prayers — only that he hears them, and that he is faithful, and that he is the one who saves.

Some of you have grown children walking with the Lord, and you give thanks. Some of you have grown children far from the Lord, and you grieve. What should you do? Keep praying. Keep speaking the gospel. Keep being faithful. The outcome was never in your hands. It is in the hands of the God who said, *Let light shine out of darkness* — and there was light.

Our God is faithful. Faithful to love. Faithful to hear our prayers. Faithful to forgive.

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Δι ο κ γκακο μεν.