

The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Lesson 5

The Paradox of the Ministry – In the World but Not of the World

In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul beautifully describes Christian ministry by saying “we have this treasure in earthen vessels”. The glorious gospel of Jesus Christ has been entrusted to weak, frail human beings whose physical bodies are deteriorating and moving ever closer to death. This treasure is from God and is magnified in glory by the lack of glory of the vessel. For Paul, it is a simultaneous experience of his own incapacity and God’s power at work within him.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-18

1. Paul’s life demonstrated what it genuinely means to walk with God. What did Jesus tell his disciples to expect from “the world” when they went out to preach the gospel (John 15:18-21; 16:33)? Was Jesus going to leave them alone to face the world (John 14:16-17; 16:7-14)?
2. How do you explain the series of paradoxical statements in 2 Cor 4:8-12 (2 Cor 11:24-28)? What are his limitations as an “earthen vessel”, and what is the effect of the “treasure” within him (2 Cor 4:16)?
3. Paul was being persecuted from outside the church and criticized from within the church, but somehow the ministry to the church was still thriving. What was Paul’s perspective on this seeming paradox (2 Cor 4:10-15)? Ultimately, what will be the result (Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 5:10)?
4. In spite of opposition, criticism, and persecution, will God enable us to endure and provide a way to overcome (1 Cor 10:13)? Paul says he is not wiped out, hasn’t given up, doesn’t feel forsaken, and he is not destroyed. What positives can he “boast” about (2 Cor 12:9-10)?
5. How did Peter explain the benefits of suffering and persecution (1 Peter 2:19-25)? In 1 Peter 4:12-13, what was Peter not “surprised” about? Why would he “keep on rejoicing”?

6. In 2 Cor 4:10-12 Paul talks a lot about living and dying. Was suffering a way of life for him (1 Cor 15:31)? Was facing death a way of life for him? Were Paul's trials a sign of God's displeasure or actually a badge of honor (2 Cor 1:5, Phil 3:10, Col 1:24)?

7. What is the result of Paul's sacrificial service (2 Cor 4:12, Col 1:24, 2 Tim 2:10)? Why is Paul compelled to speak (2 Cor 4:13, 1 Cor 9:16-17)?

8. What is Paul's ultimate hope and expectation (2 Cor 4:14, Phil 3:10-11)?

9. What was happening to his "outer man" (2 Cor 4:16)? What was happening to his "inner man"? What was the glorious result (2 Cor 4:17)?

10. What did Paul's spiritual perspective cause him to "look" at (2 Cor 4:18)? What is the timing of the things seen and not seen? What things that are "not seen" is Paul absolutely sure of (2 Cor 4:14, 1 John 2:17, Phil 3:20-21)?