

“The Glorious Gospel of Christ”

Lesson Scope: 2 Corinthians 2:12 through 4:7

References in brackets relate to Lesson Scope unless noted otherwise

Lesson Focus

Although Paul found an open door to preach the Gospel at Troas, he remained deeply concerned for the difficulties at Corinth. Paul expected to meet Titus at Troas to receive a report from Titus concerning the response of the Corinthians to his first letter. Not finding Titus at Troas, Paul moved on to Macedonia, hoping to meet Titus there. In Macedonia, Paul met severe difficulties (7:5). He also did meet Titus, and was greatly comforted by the favourable report of the saints at Corinth (7:6-7). Paul’s relief and comfort brought the burst of thanksgiving and praise in 2:14 for the efficacy of the Gospel and for the triumph of its ministers.

Paul’s confidence, both in preaching the Gospel in new areas, and in maintaining the Gospel in the established churches, was that the power of the Gospel must surely prevail. He was also keenly aware of Satan’s efforts to “get an advantage” of God’s people. Therefore, he continued to preach the power of the Gospel to provide the resources to overcome. Paul was so confident in the triumph of the Gospel that he declared the struggling Corinthian church to be his letter of recommendation that was read and known by all men.

In the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul bares his heart to the Corinthian church. In Corinth, perhaps more than anywhere else, his apostleship was challenged. However, he continued to seek only their spiritual prosperity. He had laboured much in their behalf and would continue to do so. He acknowledged their tribulation even as he reminded them of his own.

Throughout the text, Paul uses illustrations to help his readers understand his main points. Since these illustrations may not be familiar to us, we may struggle to understand them as clearly as the original readers did. Concentrate on each one separately, and endeavour to not mix the metaphors, as this tends to confuse the main point that Paul had for

each illustration. Be careful not to stretch the illustrations to mean things beyond the intent.

The Gospel is God's glorious revelation to mankind. Its provisions transform the believer, empowering him to live it and to proclaim it to a needy world.

Lesson Aim: To understand the power of the Gospel to change men's lives.

Theme Verse: [Romans 8:29](#). For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Lesson Text

“Triumph in Christ”

[2 Corinthians 2:14-17](#)

¹⁴ (KJV) Now thanks *be* unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. ¹⁵ For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: ¹⁶ To the one *we are* the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who *is* sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

“The Ministration of the Spirit”

[2 Corinthians 3:1-18](#)

¹ (KJV) Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you, or *letters* of commendation from you? ² Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: ³ *Forasmuch as ye are* manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. ⁴ And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: ⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency *is* of God; ⁶ Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. ⁷ But if the ministration of death, written *and* engraven in

stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which *glory* was to be done away: ⁸ How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? ⁹ For if the ministration of condemnation *be* glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. ¹⁰ For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. ¹¹ For if that which is done away *was* glorious, much more that which remaineth *is* glorious. ¹² Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: ¹³ And not as Moses, *which* put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: ¹⁴ But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which *vail* is done away in Christ. ¹⁵ But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. ¹⁶ Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. ¹⁸ But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, *even* as by the Spirit of the Lord.

“God...Hath Shined in Our Hearts”

2 Corinthians 4:1-2

¹ (KJV) Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; ² But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

2 Corinthians 4:6-7

⁶ (KJV) For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

Questions for Study

“Triumph in Christ”

1. In the midst of his difficulties, what things could Paul point to as triumphing?

2. In What ways is the Gospel a savour of life to some, and a savour of death to others?

3. How can our lives and our congregations be a sweet fragrance to God and to others who are receptive to the Gospel?

“The Ministration of the Spirit”

4. How does living by the letter kill, but living by the Spirit give life‘?

5. In what Ways does the Gospel excel the Old Testament Law?

6. In what ways should our beholding the glory of the Lord change our lives?

“God...Hath Shined in Our Hearts”

7. List a few characteristics of earthen vessels and how they illustrate the believer.

8. How does having this treasure in us who are but earthen vessels cause us to live?

Analysing the Passage

In 2:14-16, in discussing triumph, Paul drew from the well-known victory marches of the Roman conquerors. For the victory celebration, the air was heavy with the aroma of burning incense. The victory procession contained two groups of prisoners. One group of prisoners from the nation that was conquered was condemned to die, and to them the aroma was the aroma of death. The other group of prisoners was allowed to live as slaves in the empire. They were “saved,” and to them the aroma was the aroma of life. Paul portrays the Gospel as a “sweet savour” of fragrance (2:15). To those who reject the Gospel, it becomes a savour of death. To those who are saved by accepting the Gospel, it is the savour of life. Either way, however, the Gospel being lived out is a “sweet savour” to God.

The letter of recommendation that Paul refers to was a common practice in the early church (Acts 18:27). When a minister came from a distance who was not known to a congregation, a letter of recommendation was sent from someone the congregation did know. Paul declared that the Corinthians themselves were his letter of recommendation that all men read. He preached the Gospel, and the Gospel brought a changed life which proved the validity of the Gospel and Paul’s authenticity.

In 3:6-18, Paul showed the fallacy of holding on to the Old Testament Law as the glory was fading away and was replaced with the more glo-

rious Gospel of Christ. He uses phrases such as “the letter killeth,” “the ministration of death,” and “the ministration of condemnation” to describe the Old Testament Law.

In 3:13-18, Paul refers to Exodus 34, where Moses veiled His face to cover the glory that shone so brightly that the people could not bear to look at it. This veil then also prevented the people from seeing the fading of that glory. Paul uses this allegorically to speak of a veil over the Jews’ hearts that prevented them from seeing the true glory of the Law. This veil then also prevented them from seeing the fading of that glory as it was replaced with the more glorious Gospel of Christ.

Principles and Applications

“Triumph in Christ”

1. The Gospel enables the Christian to have continual victory over Satan (2:14). Natural man fails when he endeavours in his own strength to have victory over sin and Satan and to live a life acceptable to God.

Despite his greatest effort, he remains a part of the needy world because of his own weakness and his fallen nature. Only the power of God in one’s life can enable a person to have victory. Through faith in Christ and by the aid of the Spirit, we can receive the divine nature and live in victory.

2. The power of the Gospel is demonstrated in the lives of its adherents (2:14-16; 3:2). All who observe the life of the sincere follower of Christ will see a living testimony of the Gospel. The world notices the upright living, the Christian brotherhood, and the godly homes that do not happen outside of the power of the Gospel. They like to do business with people who are honest and fair. The challenge rests with us to never mar that testimony by inconsistent living. It has been well said that the Christian is the only Bible many people read.

“The Ministration of the Spirit”

3. In contrast to the Law, the Gospel is spiritual and life giving (3:6). The letter of the Law brought condemnation through pointing out man’s transgressions and assigning penalties for the transgression. Since the Law did not provide the power man needed to live above sin, it became a “ministration of death” to many. Many under the Old Testament Law failed to live in the spirit of the Law, and so lived only by the letter of the Law, which led to spiritual death. In contrast, the New Testament

provides the power for righteous living through a remedy for sin, a renewed life, and the power of God. We who have this more glorious spiritual and life-giving covenant available to us must choose a life that is spiritual and reflects that glory and power.

4. The Gospel gives the Christian hope, emboldening him in his witness to the world (3:10-12). The hope of the Christian that is in focus is the hope of the glorious Gospel to provide spiritual life and righteousness through the work of Jesus and the indwelling Spirit. Our hope in the Gospel to accomplish these things enables us to speak with confidence and simplicity. We can describe with boldness and frankness what God has done for us in forgiving us and enabling us to live in victory.

5. Unbelief prevents the Gospel from accomplishing its work in men's lives (3:13-16). The work of the Gospel is only accomplished in those who turn to the Lord in faith. Through belief in Christ, the darkness which blinds the understanding is lifted.

6. The glory of the Gospel is light for the soul (3:17-18; 4:6). Those who believe in Christ and have their understanding unveiled witness the glory of God through the light of the Gospel shining into their hearts. Seeing the glory of the Lord results in a life that is transformed and growing ever more like God.

“God . . . Hath Shined in Our Hearts”

7. The power of the Gospel is expressed in a practical life of righteousness (4:1-2). The mercy we received through the Gospel demands renouncing the works of darkness and living according to the light of the glorious Gospel. The fruit of the Spirit replaces the works of the flesh.

Do our neighbours know us as honest, blameless, compassionate people? We must carefully avoid evil and anything that has the appearance of evil.

8. The power of the Gospel is a gift of God to unworthy humanity (4:6-7).

We earthen vessels, weak, frail, fallible, and perishing mortals—have been entrusted with a priceless treasure from God—the glorious Gospel message. This priceless treasure is not of any cleverness, intellect, or strength of our own. It is entrusted to us both for our own benefit and for the benefit of the kingdom of God. God uses us to do His work, which includes strengthening our brethren and spreading the glorious Gospel to humanity. Since we are unworthy of this priceless gift

and unable to accomplish these things of ourselves, we must never draw honour to ourselves, but rather always point others to God, the source of the gift, and the One worthy of all honour.

Important Teachings

1. The Gospel enables the Christian to have continual victory over Satan (2:14).
2. The power of the Gospel is demonstrated in the lives of its adherents (2:14-16; 3:2).
3. In contrast to the Law, the Gospel is spiritual and life giving (3:6).
4. The Gospel gives the Christian hope, emboldening him in his witness to the world (3:10-12).
5. Unbelief prevents the Gospel from accomplishing its work in men's lives (3:13-16).
6. The glory of the Gospel is light for the soul (3:17-18; 4:6).
7. The power of the Gospel is expressed in a practical life of righteousness (4:1-2).
8. The power of the Gospel is a gift of God to unworthy humanity (4:6-7).
9. Through the Gospel, believers become like their Lord (3:18).

Answers to Questions

1. In the midst of his difficulties, what things could Paul point to as triumphing?

Paul found the Gospel to be triumphant in all circumstances. He saw triumph in Christ working through men to make the fragrance of the knowledge of God known in every place. He found an open door to preach the Gospel in Troas. The Word of God did "not return . . . void" (Isaiah 55:11). Paul saw the Gospel at work in the lives of the Corinthians in their choice to follow his direction. He saw triumph in those who followed the Gospel being a sweet fragrance to God and to those who were choosing salvation. He saw Satan not gaining an advantage over the Christians.

2. In what ways is the Gospel a savour of life to some, and a savour of death to others?

To those who choose to be receptive to the Gospel message, it is that which brings life and therefore becomes a sweet smell. To those who

choose to reject the Gospel message, it is that which brings condemnation and death and therefore becomes a savour of death. Some receive the Gospel as good news; others reject the Gospel as repulsive. Some see truth and value in the Gospel; others see the Gospel as a stumbling block and a threat to their desires and agenda. Some appreciate the upright living of those who live the Gospel; others despise those whose life is a living Gospel.

3. How can our lives and our congregations be a sweet fragrance to God and to others who are receptive to the Gospel?

To God, the lives of believers give a sweet smell in that they have believed in Him, they worship Him, and they follow His will. As the Christian triumphs over sin and Satan, the power of God is manifest in his life, which is a sweet fragrance to God. The Christian is the light of the world and proclaims the Gospel to the world, fulfilling God's purpose for him, which also is a sweet fragrance to God.

The faithful life of the believer, which is the only Bible many read, is a sweet savour to those who are seeking the Gospel. We can be a positive influence and an encouragement to those who are seeking and are in the time of choosing whether they will accept Christ.

4. How does living by the letter kill, but living by the Spirit give life?

Both Testaments have both a letter and a spirit. Living only by the letter is largely an outward obedience and is living to be seen by others. Many in the Old Testament lived only by the letter and found that living by the letter brings death. God sees both the outward obedience and the condition of the heart. True worship needs to involve the heart. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). It is in our spirit that the battle is won or lost. In the New Testament era, we have greater provisions to aid us in living by the Spirit.

5. In what ways does the Gospel excel the Old Testament Law?

The Old Testament Law brought knowledge of sin and a condemnation for sin. Man's weakness in the flesh prevented him from experiencing victory over sin. Man tended toward living only by the letter of the Law because of the much symbolic ritual in it. The Gospel excels in that it provides the power for righteous living. The Gospel is written in our hearts and we have the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The New Testament excels in that it fulfilled and replaced the Old Testament.

6. In what ways should our beholding the glory of the Lord change our lives?

We should be changed in that our lives are transformed and we are growing more like God. We should be magnifying and praising God because of the glory of the Lord and His revelation of that glory to us even though we are unworthy. As we behold the glory of the Lord, we will live holy lives that are acceptable to God and lived according to the Gospel message. We must renounce the old man and the works of darkness and the prince of darkness, Satan.

7. List a few characteristics of earthen vessels and how they illustrate the believer.

Earthen vessels are pottery containers that are burned in a kiln to harden them. They are brittle and easily broken and without much value or beauty in themselves. This illustrates humanity in its weakness. Our bodies are frail, and we are fallible. However, even the lowliest earthen vessel can contain a valuable substance that is placed in it. Our bodies are where our souls dwell, where our hearts and minds are, and where the light of the knowledge of the Gospel shines. When the believer accepts the knowledge of the Gospel, he then contains a glorious and priceless message.

8. How does having this treasure in us who are but earthen vessels cause us to live?

Realizing the value of the gift of God and our own unworthiness causes us to live in humility and in service to the One who gave the gift. We need to live to the glory of God, who has given us His power.

It causes us to live carefully, renouncing the things of the flesh and of the world that would rob us of the priceless gift that we have. It causes us to spread the message of God and the Gospel, the priceless gift to man, and not to promote ourselves in any way. We must cause people to look to God, and not to us, who are frail earthen vessels like everyone else.

Summarizing the Lesson

Christ's Everlasting Gospel is ringing out again

Its message of salvation, its peace, goodwill to men;

Though sin has hurled its weapons, and evil hosts assailed,

The Gospel of Christ Jesus has ever more prevailed.

Research Guide

1. Do a word study on the phrase beholding as in a glass in 3:18 to better understand the illustration.
2. Do a word study on the word face in 4:6, and endeavour to understand the phrase that contains it.
3. Study earthen vessels to better understand the characteristics that are in focus.