

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

by Ray C. Stedman

These first six verses of Second Corinthians, Chapter 4, will answer a lot of questions as to why so many people do not believe the gospel when they first hear it, or even after they have heard it over a long period of time. They will answer questions about why many who do believe the gospel quit after they have been walking in the Christian way for some time; and also questions about why some people whom you think will never believe it, suddenly do so.

The passage begins with a tremendous declaration by the Apostle Paul, about his reaction to his own ministry:

Therefore, having this ministry [the word means "this kind of a ministry"] by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. {2 Cor 4:1 RSV}

All through this passage he has repeated that theme -- "We do not get discouraged"; "we do not feel like quitting"; "we are confident"; "we are encouraged." Again and again you will find that note dominant throughout the passage.

I run into a lot of Christians who are getting discouraged today. Just recently, in our leadership seminar, we had a pastor, who came to us from a church in a different locality, who told us that a few years ago he assessed his ministry. He said he looked about him at what was regarded as a successful church. He had a good attendance; the financial situation was clear; and yet he said that every morning he felt a severe sense of failure and emptiness in what he was doing. Increasingly he felt that he was going through religious motions, that he was accomplishing nothing of any real and lasting value. He told us that so intense and deep was his depression that if it had not been for the shame he would have brought upon his family he would have taken his own life.

I find a lot of men in the ministry who are like that. Now, in a sense, as we have seen throughout this letter, every Christian is "in the ministry." I find many Christians who are ready to quit, feeling that they are not achieving anything. But when you talk with them you discover that, basically, they do not see themselves as Paul did, as being the instrument of God at work. They are focusing on what they are doing for God, or, as they feel at the moment, what they are not doing for God. They do not seem to understand the basis for this ministry that Paul speaks of which he calls the "new covenant," the new arrangement for living, which God has provided in Christ.

In these next two verses the apostle gives us two great reasons why the new covenant does not allow for discouragement. If you have struggled with this, I suggest you take this very seriously and think through why you feel so discouraged at times. Do you understand this great principle which keeps Paul from ever being discouraged, despite the many obstacles he ran up against?

Here is his first reason, found in the first half of verse 2:

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word. {2 Cor 4:2a RSV}

He says, "We have turned our backs on the ways and practices that bring discouragement." That is why he did not get discouraged.

I am always amazed at how up-to-date the Scriptures seem. You would think that Paul had just been listening to some Christian radio broadcasts, or television programs, when he wrote this. Evidently there were people in his day, preaching in churches and evangelizing, who were practicing disgraceful, underhanded ways. They were relying on cunning approaches and even tampering with the Word of God. Paul says, "I have given all

that up," (if he ever did it). "Seeing other people do this, I want nothing to do with it."

Notice particularly what this consists of, because this speaks to our own time. First, he says, "I have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways," that is, the practice of deliberate deceit. Every now and then an article appears in the religious papers about some evangelist who hires converts to stand up in his meetings and confess Christ, or to come down front and give a testimony to being healed, in order to make the evangelist look like a success. That is deceitful.

You read of Sunday Schools that bait and bribe people to come to church. Not long ago there was a report in the local papers of a pastor in San Jose who said that, if he got a certain number of people out to Sunday School, he would preach from his church belfry. He got the number he wanted so he went up in the belfry and preached his sermon. That is simply a form of bribery, getting people to come for some secondary, superficial reason.

- I know of Sunday Schools that give kids candy if they will get aboard their buses and come to Sunday School. Some even offer prizes, bicycles, etc., in order to get kids out. That is to gain an appearance of success by relying upon wrong methods, deceitful things, disgraceful, underhanded ways.
- I have met preachers who have phony degrees, obtained for \$10 or so sent to some diploma mill somewhere. They put those letters after their name to impress people that they know something they do not really know. That is deceit.
- I know of missionaries who send reports home to their supporting churches about things that have no basis whatever in fact in their ministry. They tell of things that never occurred, reporting achievements in the preaching of the gospel that never really happened, deliberately lying in the name of Christ.
- I know of Christians who tell someone else's experience as though it happened to them, and thus they lie in the name of Jesus.

But Paul says, "I don't need any of those things anymore." Anyone who relies on that type of thing will gain an appearance of success, but sooner or later the bottom will fall out and they will be left with intense feelings of depression and failure and folly.

Paul says he refuses to practice cunning. Now what does that mean? Well, it means to rely on some psychological trick played on people to get them to respond, some intense pressure tactic in a meeting, perhaps beautiful seductive music to get them to give way, telling stories that bring tears to people's eyes, playing upon their emotions, this kind of thing. Paul says, "We don't need any of this any longer. We don't rely upon that."

In our day it is largely a matter of going in for Christian showmanship, seeing who can put on the biggest spectacle to attract people to come in by hiring a special band or getting trapeze artists to come and put on a show, etc., Paul says we do not rely on those kinds of things anymore.

- Nor does he tamper with God's word. Can you imagine anybody in the name of Jesus tampering with God's word? Yet it happens all the time. Peter speaks of those who "twist the Scriptures." In 2 Peter 3:16 there is his reference to Paul's letters where he says: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures." It is not difficult to do that. You can take a great biblical word and give it another meaning, and using the same language, talk about something else entirely:
- The word "resurrection" is disemboweled of its biblical content and made to mean something that it does not mean in the Bible.
- The word "Christ" is made to stand for a person or a being who does not exist in Scripture at all. Yet people who hear you use that kind of language are fooled. That is twisting the Word of God; and it happens all the time in our day.

- You find people who infer that the Bible is inferior to the discoveries of modern knowledge -- present day scientific discoveries have proved it wrong, therefore, it is not to be trusted. This is tampering with the Word of God, because nothing in the Bible has ever been proved wrong by scientific discovery.
- But the most common way of twisting the Scriptures is to resort to what is called "proof-texting." This is coming to the Bible with an idea of something you want to teach and then going through it, picking out a few isolated passages here and there that sound like what you wanted to say, and listing these so that when people hear you, they say, "Well, that is biblically supported; he's got the Bible for that."
- Every Christian cult that has ever existed has done that. But unfortunately there are a number of widely respected Christian spokesmen, for the most part very earnest and godly men, who still do this very thing. Perhaps they are unconscious of what they are doing. They are taking part of the Scripture and supporting what they say. That is called "proof texting." It is "tampering" with the Word of God; and many people are being misled today by that kind of approach.

Paul says, "I don't need that anymore. I don't rely upon those kind of things. In fact, I've renounced all this; I have given it all up. I refuse to practice psychological cunning on people or to tamper with the Word of God."

What does he do? Well, he tells us:

... by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. {2 Cor 4:2b RSV}

That is why Paul does not get discouraged. He does not have to think through some new gimmick which will get people out to hear the good news. He knows that truth is the most exciting and attractive thing in the world. He knows that when you come to people with the truth about themselves, about their lives, about the world in which they live, when you strip off all the veils of illusion and the delusions by which man in any generation lives and reveal the basic reality of what is there, then you get instant attention.

The test of any religion is not whether people like it or whether it is comfortable or whether it makes them feel good. The test, of course, is always, "Is it true? Does it fit reality? Does it explain what is going on in such a way that it conforms with the basic experience of every single individual?" The great thing about the good news is that it is the truth of God; it is revealing of the underlying reality of life. When you are talking about the Word of God you are talking about the way things really are.

Ron Ritchie and I have had the privilege in recent weeks of going to a number of college and seminary campuses and speaking, by and large, to Christian young people. Yet in many of these places we found that they really do not think of the Bible as being a revelation of reality. They think of it as some kind of religious flavoring to life, a kind of a low calorie dessert which, if you like that sort of thing, is nice, but if you do not, you do not really need it. They think that the real insights into life are out in the secular world.

In every one of those campuses we have had the privilege of opening up the book and beginning to teach them what it says in language that perhaps is fresh to them, but that reveals what the Word of God is saying. And every time we have gotten an instant reaction of fascinated interest. They sit quietly and listen as though they had never heard it before. They suddenly realize you are talking about them, about their sexuality and what it means, about marriage and how it operates, about how to handle the awful load of guilt, and what to do with fear and anxiety when it ties your stomach in knots.

That is reality. That is what Paul is talking about. "The open statement of the truth" has fascinating power to attract people. It did when Jesus proclaimed it. Everywhere he went the multitudes hung on what he said, and yet they wondered. They said to themselves, "He doesn't do it like the Pharisees and the Scribes do, quoting all those authorities, etc. Yet what he says rings a bell within us. Something inside says, 'That is right'." That was the universal reaction to the preaching of Jesus, because that is the truth as it is in Jesus.

Now that is what Paul proclaimed. He said, "When you've got that you don't need any gimmicks; you don't

need any buildup; you don't need to bribe people and trick them to get them to come because they are expecting something else. Just take the wraps off what God has given and they will be tremendously attracted to it."

Furthermore, he says, "It speaks to the conscience, and not merely to the mind." Now I do not want you to misunderstand. Truth is addressed to the mind. God never sets aside human reason. He addresses truth to be considered and weighed and evaluated by the mind. But behind that is the conscience, and a man's conscience can sometimes reach him when his mind is rejecting truth.

Isn't that strange? Paul knew that. He said we should not argue with people. That is why he warns Christians, "Don't get yourself involved in long controversies over words. They will get you nowhere," {cf, 2 Tim 2:14}. "Don't get tied up with arguments, because you can't reach people that way. Tell them the truth. Depend on the fact that there is a voice inside them which God put there called 'the conscience,' that even when their minds reject what you say will keep saying to them, 'Ah, yes, but he is right, isn't he?' Sooner or later it will reach them."

C. S. Lewis, the great English defender of the faith, said that when he became a Christian he did so as an intellectual agnostic. He said when he came to Christ he came as though he were dragged, kicking and screaming, darting his eyes around in every direction, trying to escape. His mind was fighting it all the way, but his conscience had succumbed to the Word of God. He said that the night he came to Christ he was the most reluctant convert in all of England. But he came, and he became one of the greatest defenders of the faith that the Christian gospel has ever had, outside of the Apostle Paul.

Well, that was because his conscience was reached. Paul says, "That's what I count on. I don't have to depend on me and my personality and my ability to persuade people. I go with a simple statement of the truth, and the conviction that God is able to reach the conscience even though the mind and the emotions may reject what I have to say."

Well, you say, "If that is the case, then why don't more people believe this gospel?" That is the question they evidently asked Paul, which he is facing here at this point, because he goes on to say:

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 likeness of God. {2 Cor 4:3-4 RSV}

I want you to be careful how you read this because it is often misread. Some of the commentators I read on this passage put it this way: Paul is responding to the question, "Why are people perishing?" and his answer is, "Because they are blinded by the devil." And then he asks, in effect, "Why are they blinded by the devil?" and his answer is, "Because they won't believe."

That is the way it is often misunderstood. It means, if you take it that way, that the basic reason for people being lost is because they refuse to believe, and that is what gives the devil an opportunity to blind them. But that is not what Paul says. It is the other way around: People are perishing because they do not believe; and they do not believe because they are blinded by the devil. That is what he is saying. The god of this age, the god behind the scenes of world events, the god whom the world unconsciously worships and pays allegiance to in everything they think and say and do has brainwashed them. Therefore, they cannot understand what the good news is saying; they do not believe it.

This is a great, revealing passage. Paul says the devil's tool is the veil. The devil is responsible for the unbelief of men, and men and women are helpless victims in the hands of the god of this age. That veil is the delusion that we are adequate to handle life by ourselves, that independent sense of pride that says, "I don't need any help; I can handle it by myself; I need no religious crutch; I don't need a savior." Put in the words of William Henley's famous poem, *Invictus*, it is saying:

"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,

I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."

That is the veil that lies over the minds of people to keep them from seeing the death and condemnation that awaits at the end of the fading glory. The devil's purpose, Paul says here, is to keep men and women from seeing that Jesus Christ is the secret of being like God, of being godlike, "... to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God."

One of the great proofs that the Bible knows what it is talking about in life is that it confirms that everywhere, all over the earth, in any generation, in any culture or background, men long to be like God. They want to be in charge; they want to run things; they want to make final decisions about what happens to them; they want to control others and the events of their lives and they are frustrated and challenged if they cannot. They long to be like God.

There is nothing wrong with that. That is what God made us for. The very dignity of humanity is that it was the intent of God from the very beginning that here on this earth we would manifest his qualities and his character. He has implanted that in the hearts of men and women everywhere in the world.

But what is wrong is our prideful arrogance that assumes that we can do this by ourselves, by our own efforts, by our own power, by our own abilities. "We can run the universe. We don't need God." This is the lie, the veil, that the devil uses to brainwash human beings everywhere to keep them from seeing that the only way they will ever be godlike is through Jesus. He is the secret of godliness.

That word is a shortened form of the word, "godlikeness." A godly person is a godlike person, reflecting the character of God. The great secret the devil seeks to hide is that Jesus Christ is the secret. Jesus said it: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6 RSV}.

So what hope is there that anybody who has been blinded by the devil will ever believe the good news? It looks hopeless, doesn't it? If a veil lies over their minds, and if, as we have already seen in the previous passage, only when someone turns to the Lord is the veil removed -- yet, in order to turn, men must see the glory of Christ that the veil obscures -- what hope is there? It is very evident from this that men cannot remove the veil themselves. Only Christ can take it away. How then can men be saved? That is the question Paul is facing.

"Ah," he says, "that is where preaching comes in. That is why I have been sent." Verse 5:

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. {2 Cor 4:5-6 RSV}

That is a fantastic statement. We must carefully examine what it is saying. Notice the points in it:

First, the apostle says, "Don't look to us for any help. We don't come preaching ourselves. We ourselves can't do a thing for you."

I was listening to a man on the radio the other day who was supposedly preaching the gospel. He closed his message by saying, "If you have faith in my prayers, then do such and such." That is not preaching Christ. That is preaching himself and that is a false gospel. You sometimes hear people say, "If you have faith in my ministry, do such and such" (especially, "send money"), but that is not preaching the gospel.

Paul says, "We don't do that; what we preach is not ourselves. If you want to know where we fit in, here it is: we are your servants for Jesus' sake. We are not your masters; we do not own you; we are not your bosses; we do not come to tell you everything to do and give you orders and be a little pope in every church we come into. No, we are your servants. We have come to help you. We have come to minister to you, to labor among you, to teach and instruct you, but we are not here to boss you." The apostle is careful to make that plain.

On the other hand, he wants them to understand, "You are not our masters either. We do not come to do what you tell us to do. We are your servants for Christ's sake. It is he who tells us to be your servant. He is our Master and our Lord." And then he turns their eyes to the One who can help.

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. {2 Cor 4:5a RSV}

That is the key. In the 1st century this was the fundamental declaration of the good news: Jesus is Lord. Not "he is going to be Lord some day when he returns," but he is Lord. When he rose from the dead he said to his own disciples, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," {Matt 18:18 KJV}. He is in control; he is in charge right now; he is running human history. All the events that occur in the world today occur because he has permitted them or has brought them into being. He is in charge; he is Lord, and the need of human hearts everywhere is to see that he is Lord.

Here are two of several verses where it is very clear what the issue of salvation is:

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom 10:13 {KJV})

... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord ... you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9 {RSV})

That is the key. It is not Jesus as Savior. A lot of people are being told, "If you receive Jesus as your Savior, you will be saved." But nowhere in the Bible does it ever say that. He must be Lord. He is Lord whether you know it or not, whether you receive him or not.

But when you bow to that Lordship, when you know that he is Lord, and you consent to him exercising his Lordship in your life, then he saves you. Lord is who he is; saving is what he does. When you realize "you are not your own; you are bought with a price" {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}, and you agree to that, then he is not only your Lord, but he begins to deliver you, to save you from yourself and the world around.

On the basis of Lordship, then, Paul goes on to say that the moment a person sees that Jesus is Lord, God's creative power begins to operate in his life and light comes into his darkness; the veil is removed. Notice how he puts it:

For is is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts ... {2 Cor 4:6a RSV}

He takes us back to creation, when the whole world lay in darkness. Nobody could do anything about it except God, who said, "Let there be light," {Gen 1:3b}. Suddenly, out of the darkness, light sprang up in obedience to the creative word of the living God.

That is what Paul says must happen before any man or woman ever becomes a Christian. God has to say again that creative word, "Let light shine out of darkness." When he does, the darkness disappears; the light shines into the heart, as Paul says it did in his on the Damascus road: "The light shone into the darkness of my deluded heart, and I saw that Jesus was Lord." He goes on to say that, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is, therefore, seen in the face of Christ."

Many years ago a man came to see me in response to a contact made by one of our members here who worked at Lockheed. He had made friends with this man, a brilliant engineer with a tremendous mind, but a declared agnostic. They had talked many times, but he showed no openness at all to the gospel.

After a while this engineer fell into a very severe depression which was so intense and so prolonged that eventually he was fired from his job. But that only increased his depression. He was so morose and so vegetable-like that his wife finally threatened to leave him, and his children all left home. He became so pathetic in his terrible depression that this Christian friend of his asked him if he would at least consent to come and talk with me.

So he showed up at my door, and told me his story. He was so depressed it was difficult for him to talk; he showed no sign of any hope at all. I asked him the usual questions about what he believed, but he did not believe anything. He did not believe there was a God; he did not believe in Christ; he did not believe the Bible; he did not believe Jesus ever lived. I could find no ground of faith at all.

After trying to help him for an hour or two, I said to him, "I'm sorry. There is nothing I can do to help you. But I don't want to abandon you. I believe there is help for you. If you will come here every week I will meet with you and I will do two things for you. One, I'll read the Bible to you, and two, I'll pray for you. I don't know what will happen; that is all I can do, but if you are willing to do that I will do those two things."

To my amazement he consented. He kept coming week after week. I would read a portion of scripture, and I would say to him, "Does that mean anything to you?" But he would say "No." Then I would pray for him, for his family, and for his home. By that time his wife had left him. He was living all alone in an apartment, unable to carry on at all, unable to work.

At least eight months went by, and we did that every week without fail. One day I said to him, "Isn't there anything I have read to you that means anything to you?" He replied, "Well, there is one thing. This morning I was thinking about it. You read the other day these words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.' That suddenly meant something to me."

Well, I didn't have the nerve to ask him what! It did not mean anything to me at that moment in relationship to him. But I said, "Mal, if that meant something to you, then let me ask you to do this: pray that prayer over and over again. Whenever you sense you need some help, when you are despairing, or whenever, pray that prayer." He said he would.

So a few more weeks went by. I read other passages and nothing clicked. Then one day I read something, and he said, "Oh, yes. That's good, isn't it?" We took note of that and I asked him to memorize it and say it over and over. Then a couple of weeks later he found something else, and gradually there came a dawning light into his heart. Truth began to be real to him; he began to understand it. We prayed week after week, and as this light began to dawn, it came on stronger and stronger. More and more of Scripture began to reach him, until the day came when he openly acknowledged that Jesus was Lord of his life and he surrendered to his will. Then he began to blossom and grow. He devoured the Word of God, he read it endlessly, hour after hour.

That was fifteen years ago, and I still get letters from him. He lives in Florida now; he joined a Christian group there. His family never did come back to him, but his letters are the most exuberant radiant, and rejoicing of any I receive. He has nothing but praise and thanksgiving to the living God, the Creator himself, who took away the darkness by a creative word, a fiat, who said of his darkness, "Let there be light." Seizing on that one gleam of light, Jesus is Lord, he was transformed at last.

That is what God is saying to us in these words. Where do you find the light of the glory of God? In the face of Jesus Christ. And where do you find the face of Jesus? In the Scriptures. This book is all about Jesus. The Gospels give you the record of his amazing life on earth; the Epistles explain the implications of that life, his death and resurrection, and his working for us; the Old Testament is full of anticipations of his character and his being. As you read them and let the Spirit of God interpret them, the "face of Christ" comes clearer and clearer. That is how light comes into a darkened heart.

Are you walking in darkness? Well, then, begin to seek the "face of Christ." That is where the light shines. Not the Christ you hear about in all the popular presentations around us. There is nothing historic about the Jesus you meet in many of the presentations today. Oftentimes that is a false Christ.

But in the Scriptures you have the authentic Jesus, and in the fellowship of the people of God the character and the love of Jesus come through. In moments of communion and prayer you see the "face of Christ." That is what turns off the darkness and brings the light into your life. You do not have to walk in darkness in this day and age when you can look at the "face of Christ," for there is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" for all to see.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the light that has come into our darkness. Blinded by the devil, convinced that we had what it took to handle life apart from you, sure that we had what it took to serve you even after we came, Lord, you have faithfully revealed to us that we are helpless victims apart from the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Help us to walk in that light, to glory in it and rejoice that One has loved us and come and has given himself for us that he might live in us to be Lord of our lives. We ask in his name, Amen.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-6

1. Opposition from Without, 1-6
 - A. An undiscouraged ministry, 1-2
 1. Needs no phony supports, 2a
 - a. Underhanded ways
 - b. Cunning practices
 - c. Tampering with God's word
 2. Depends on God at work, 2h
 - a. Open statement of truth
 - b. Addressed to the conscience
 - B. An overpowered enemy, 3-6
 1. The work of the devil, 3-4
 - a. His method -- the veil
 - b. His victims -- unbelievers
 - c. His domain -- the world
 - d. His purpose -- hide light
 - (1) Glory of Christ
 - (2) Likeness of God
 2. The power of God, 5-6
 - a. The right proclamation, 5
 - (1) Jesus as Lord
 - (2) Ourselves as servants of Christ
 - b. The sovereign transformation, 6
 - (1) A creative God
 - (2) A revealing face

Title: Nothing but the Truth
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Series: Studies in Second Corinthians
Scripture: 2 Cor 4:1-6
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 3682
Date: October 28, 1979

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