

# **BaptistWay Bible Series for Sept. 26: God gives strength, mercy enough to persevere\_92004**

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## **God gives strength, mercy enough to persevere**

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

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Ministry is anything but an easy, cushy vocation. On the contrary, it is a calling that requires, among other things, thoughtful convictions, perpetual preparation, skillful communication and intentional interaction. Because of unrealistic expectations, considerable challenges and consistent demands, not a few ministers decide to throw in the towel along the stony way.

Even those ministers who do survive the arduous journey that is ministry throw up their hands in frustration and bewilderment on occasion. When it seems ground is not gained and may be being lost, it is difficult to keep going in ministry. It is tempting to succumb to doubt and disillusionment.

While the Apostle Paul was in some respects no ordinary individual, he was clearly human. He too experienced astonishment, anxiety and anger (2 Corinthians 11:28-29; Galatians 1:6; 5:12). Nonetheless, he persevered in the race he had been called to run (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians 3:12-15; 2 Timothy 4:7). How did he and how might we stay the ministerial course? This week's text from 2 Corinthians 4 offers uncommon insight into this question. In this passage, the apostle indicates how he maintained a heart for ministry amid adversity. Paul's autobiographical reflections in these verses regarding his service can direct and illumine our own ministerial paths.

At the outset of chapter 4, Paul declares he and his colleagues do not lose heart as ministers of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 4:6). What enabled the apostle to be steadfast in suffering and not become disheartened? Among other things, we may point to Paul's theological understanding of his calling. Far from seeing his apostolic labors as an endurance test he had to pass by depending upon his own resources, Paul regarded his ministry as a divine, if sometimes severe, mercy.

From the apostle's perspective, the "Father of mercies" (2 Corinthians 1:3) not only rescued him from spiritual destruction through the "light of the gospel" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4); God also graced him with the perception to see and the power to share "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6-7).

Whatever Paul's detractors said to the contrary, Paul insisted he executed his ministry with utter integrity and total transparency. Before God and everybody else, Paul stated unequivocally that he had in no way attempted to manipulate others or negotiate the truth of the gospel (2 Corinthians

4:2). Because the apostle was fully aware that everything is laid bare before “the Father of lights with whom there is no shifting or shadow of turning” (James 1:17), he conducted his ministry accordingly.

Additionally, Paul iterates in 4:5 that the message he proclaimed did not focus upon him; on the contrary, it centered upon the lordship of Jesus Christ. In Paul's day, it was not uncommon for unbelievers to regard and confess Caesar as lord. Along with other early Christians, Paul was convinced the Lord reigned in eternity not in Italy (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11). It now appears “Jesus is Lord” was (among) the earliest Christian confessions.

We would do well to remember the baptismal waters where we verbally and/or graphically declared the same. When other commitments, no matter how noble or spiritual, distract our attention, redirect our affection or curb our devotion to Christ, we need to make immediate course corrections and return to the “Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). When inclined to self-absorption and self-promotion, we would do well to remember it was none other than the God who said “Let there be light and there was,” who sent Christ as the Light and exalted Christ as the Lord (4:6).

Because Christ is Light and Lord, he should be the subject of our preaching and the model for our living. Far from preaching ourselves or living unto ourselves, we are to be servants of Christ and of other believers (4:5). We, like Paul, are to be jars of clay. While we might fancy ourselves to be expensive porcelain eggs or costly crystal vases, in the gospel economy, we are ordinary vessels who possess and proclaim the message of an extraordinary God (4:7).

Although Paul was empowered by God, he was not exempt from suffering. In fact, affliction and opposition marked his ministry. Paul offers a sampling of his apostolic hardships in 4:8-9. Instead of regarding trying experiences

as a negation of his calling, Paul came to understand such conflicts and clashes as constituent to his calling. The apostle's hard-knock life became a model of the gospel-his "dying" for Jesus resulted in Christ's living in him. Paul's "death" made it possible for others to find Jesus' life (4:10-12).

For Paul, the gospel was not a limited commodity to be bought, bartered, or bottled; it was an indescribable gift to be shared and an indestructible hope to be embraced. To the apostle's mind, the greatest gift of all is God's acceptance of sinful, yet faithful people, into his presence through Jesus Christ the Lord and the greatest hope of all is God's resurrection of the dead in Christ unto eternal life (4:13-15). It is the Christian vocation to be faithful, charitable and hopeful. In so being, we model the gospel. This is the ministry to which all of Christ's followers have been called.

### **Discussion question**

- ◆ What causes you to grow weary in ministry?

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