

Don't Lose Heart

The book of 2 Corinthians is a book that helps those of us who are in ministry, serving the Lord, with a lot of practical insights about what we can expect to face as servants of the Lord.

One of the things Paul says throughout this book is, **"You can expect to face hardships."**

He illustrates it out of his own life. If you have your Bible, you may want to flip to some of these passages. **2 Corinthians 1:8**, Paul says,

We don't want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. **2 Corinthians 1: 8–9.**

Now I would say, "That's rough."

He says, **"Life was hard at this season of life.** We were burdened so much beyond our own ability to handle it that we didn't think we could go on living."

Second Corinthians 11:24 contains quite a catalog of hardships.

Five times I received from the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

If you have ever studied that, you know this was a cruel and harsh punishment.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, danger from false brothers. I mean, what a life! Verse 27

In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches (vv. 24–28).

Can you imagine being called to serve the Lord in this way?

I think of that passage in Acts chapter 20:23 where Paul says, "The Holy Spirit tells me in every city I go to that there are going to be hardships and persecutions" (paraphrased). And Paul told Timothy those who "live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Life is hard this side of heaven, and the temptation we face is to lose heart.

One of the things that helps me in my journey when I'm tempted to lose heart, as is often the case, is to look at how Paul handled those hardships, how he responded to them, and the fact that he steadfastly refused to lose heart.

Now the place that we see that clearly spelled out is in 2 Corinthians 4, and I want us to discover some secrets that Paul learned that helped to keep him from losing heart.

But let's just take a look first at the beginning and the end of this chapter, 2 Corinthians 4:1.

Now keep in mind the context—he's been through all these sufferings, all these hardships that he's had to go through. In 2 Corinthians 4:1 Paul says, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." Now, if you go to look at verse 16 toward the end of this chapter, you'll see the same phrase: "We do not lose heart."

That phrase is like a bookend at the beginning and at the end of 2 Corinthians 4:1 and 16. "We do not lose heart." It's a word in the original language that is used six times in the New Testament. Sometimes it's translated, "We don't faint." Sometimes it's translated "to be weary." It's a word that means "to be utterly spiritless, to be wearied out, to be exhausted."

And Paul says, "In spite of what we have been through, and in spite of what we are going through, and in spite of what God has told us we are going to go through, we do not lose heart." Now, he admitted that there were times when they were pressed beyond measure, beyond what they felt was their strength to endure, times when they despaired of life itself. But in the midst of the hardships, he said, "We do not lose heart."

Now, for the next several days, we are going to look at 2 Corinthians 4 and discover why he didn't lose heart.

I want to share with you eight principles from this chapter that will help you to keep from losing heart, will help you to persevere when the going gets tough. But as we close this portion, let me just ask: Are you perhaps, even at this season of your life, in a place where you have been tempted to lose heart? Perhaps you are discouraged?

If you are, let me suggest you start by just admitting that you are. Start by doing what Paul did in being honest, not pretending like you are a good Christian; therefore, there is no pain; you don't feel any hurt. Just get honest with God and say, "Lord, this is hard. I'm struggling. I'm tempted to give up. I'm tempted to lose heart." And then ask the Lord, "Lord, would You open my eyes and open Your Word to my heart, to show me how I can keep from losing heart?"

Can I just say to you, "There is hope as big and as great as God for your circumstance, for your situation, for your life." And I would just say to you, "Don't give up! Persevere! Don't lose heart!"

I will tell you that I am often tempted in the course of walking with the Lord and serving the Lord to get discouraged, tempted to lose heart. There are some days when I just have no motivation to keep going. It's hard to persevere. You've been through seasons like that yourself. You may be in one right now.

We're looking at 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and we're talking about how to keep from losing heart. The Lord has used this passage in a great way to encourage me.

We are going to find in this passage eight principles that will help us keep from losing heart.

Paul says in verse 1 of 2 Corinthians chapter 4, "We do not lose heart." Then again in verse 16, as kind of a bookend to this chapter, he says once again, "We don't lose heart," although, as we saw that Paul had a lot of reasons why he could have lost heart. He faced a lot of hardships, physical hardships, spiritual hardships, relational hardships, financial hardships—all kinds of crises in his life and ministry that could have made him throw in the towel.

A lot of people do drop out. There aren't a lot of people who keep running faithfully all the way to the finish line. My goal for myself and my goal for you is that we would be faithful all the way to the finish line, that we would not lose heart and jump out of the race or fall out of the race. So what can we do?

Well, let's look at 2 Corinthians 4:1.

Paul says, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

Now, before we look at the first principle, let me just make a comment here.

Paul says, "We have this ministry," and you may be thinking, Well, I'm not in ministry, so this chapter doesn't really apply to me. This chapter obviously applies to people who are in vocational ministry.

Let me just point out something about the word ministry. In the original language it's the word diakonia. **It's the word for "service," and it includes all kinds of service**—any business, any vocation, any calling which requires labor that is for the benefit of others can be covered here.

That could include being a mother, being a wife, marriage, parenting, vocation, ministry through your local church, acts of compassion—any aspect of life where God has called you to serve and to be a blessing to others is a ministry.

We are all called to diakonia. We are all called to service. We are all called to ministry, and we are all tempted at times to lose heart. So how do we keep from losing heart in the sphere of service that God has entrusted to us?

Here is the first principle: Receive God's provision.

In verse 1 Paul says, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart."

One translation says of that verse, "Therefore, having this ministry as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart" (NASB). As we have received mercy.

Can I encourage your heart with this?

Every form of ministry comes with the gift of God's mercy. Anything God calls you to do in serving Him or others comes with the gift of God's mercy. You see this all the way through Paul's writings.

In 1 Timothy 1:12–14, Paul says,

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost of sinners, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (vv. 12–14, 16).

All through the Scriptures, **Ephesians chapter 3**, Paul says, **"I was made a minister [of this gospel] according to the gift of God's grace, which was given to me by the working of his power" (v. 7).**

When God calls you to serve Him in whatever He has called you to do, with that calling comes the gift of God's grace, the gift of God's enabling, the gift of God's mercy.

The same mercy that saved you and called you, the same mercy that put you into that diakonia, service ministry, that same mercy will sustain you and preserve you in the ministry.

If God called you to be a wife, if God called you to be a mother, if God called you into the workplace to have a vocation, if God has called you to serve in your local church—whatever God has called you to do, He will supply His mercy to do that ministry.

There's always a fresh supply of God's mercy. Aren't you glad? His mercies are new every morning. There is always a sufficient supply.

The Scripture talks about the exceeding great mercy of God. He is plenteous in mercy. He is abounding in mercy. Think about what God has called you to do—to love your husband, to mother your children, to teach your children, to lead a small group Bible study, to represent Him in the marketplace or the office or in your school, maybe where you are surrounded by unbelievers. There is mercy as a gift from God, a provision from God to do whatever He has called you to do. Receive it. Thank Him for it. Receive God's provision.

And then secondly, if you want to keep from losing heart in the ministry, Paul says we need to renounce ungodly practices.

Renounce ungodly practices. Determine to be pure. Determine to obey God and to do it His way regardless of what anyone else does.

Look at verse 2 of 2 Corinthians 4,

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.

Paul says, "We are not going to take shortcuts and do this ministry in a way that is not pleasing to the Lord.

We are going to follow God's rules for serving Him."

He refused to adopt any practices or any methods of serving God that were dishonest or that were not true to the Scripture.

He said, **"We operate in the sight of God recognizing that one day we will give account to Him."**

So Paul is saying, "I am living a life of integrity, a life of authenticity, in private as well as in public."

And so regardless of what your mate does, regardless of what your children do, regardless of what your boss does, regardless of what others in your church may do—**renounce ungodly practices.**

Say, "I am not going to take shortcuts. I'm going to determine to be pure, to be obedient, to do my ministry, my service in a way that is pleasing to the Lord."

So what does that mean? Well, it depends on what situation and service you are in. It may mean that you will not nag your husband—that's an ungodly practice. You will not criticize him. You will not gossip and speak evil of him.

It means you will not take matters into your own hands. You will not try to control or manipulate or fret or whine or pout or be bitter or lose your temper or say angry, hurtful things back to the person who has hurt you. It means in your marriage, you will not withhold sex from your husband.

We renounce ungodly practices. You will not initiate divorce. You will not give up on your marriage. You will not have an affair to get your "needs met." It means you will not become deceptive in your marriage. It means you will not quit. Those are ungodly practices. You will not do those ungodly practices.

What it does mean is that you will do some things.

You'll do the things that are pure.

You will forgive again and again and again.

You will love.

You will give.

You will serve.

You will meet the needs of the other person.

You will be self-controlled.

You will guard your tongue.

You will pray.

You will wait on the Lord.

You will trust Him to act.

See, there are plenty of right things we can do. And Paul says, "We are determined to live our lives as before God."

So your husband loses his temper. Paul says, "If you don't want to lose heart, make sure you do what's right regardless of what your mate does."

So your children are resisting authority. Are you going to be manipulative and controlling and pull rank, or are you going to keep a gentle and a quiet spirit.

Paul says, "We renounce ungodly practices." Others may take shortcuts. Others may do things that are not pleasing to the Lord. We are determined that we will please the Lord in how we live.

So if you want to keep from losing heart, first of all receive God's provision.

Receive the mercy and the grace that He wants to give you and will give you if you receive it to do the service, the ministry He has entrusted to you.

Then renounce ungodly practices. Determine to be pure regardless of what anyone else does.

Oh Lord, how we need Your protection and Your enabling to live that way. Sometimes we feel we're all alone, we're going against the flow. We feel like we're the only one in our court, the only one who wants to do what's right. Lord, give us the courage and the grace, by the power of Your Holy Spirit to do what is right.

And we know that as we do, You will encourage our hearts and keep us in the race. I pray in Jesus' name,

Amen.