



# Cracks Are OK!

## 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:12

July 21, 2024

Last week in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, we talked about changes of plan: they happen, and often we're not very happy about that. Paul had planned to make two visits to the Corinthians: one while on his way to Macedonia, and another on his way back from Macedonia to Judea. But some kind of problem happened in the Corinthian congregation, and Paul had to make what he called a "painful visit". Everyone, including Paul himself, was upset. So Paul decided it would be better to postpone another visit to Corinth until everyone had calmed down. He went to Macedonia without stopping by, as he'd originally planned to do; and the congregation didn't like his change of plans.

This week we're going to be talking about how the glory of God shines in our hearts, and how that glory shines through us in our ordinary lives – even when our ordinary lives are difficult. Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 3:17-4:12.

SLIDES 2-13

<sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate<sup>(a)</sup> the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

**4** Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup> For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"<sup>(b)</sup> made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup> For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup> So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

Have you ever wondered why some people are very much aware of Jesus, and other people aren't? I've wondered that; to me, it feels like Jesus is right here. I may not be seeing him with my physical eyes, but I'm aware of him. I sense his presence in my thoughts and feelings. Sometimes strongly. But I'm also aware that some of my relatives would say that I am imagining things; that if Jesus ever did live on this earth, he was just one of many Jewish men who were executed by the Romans. Sometimes I wonder how something that to me seems obvious, doesn't seem so obvious to others.

So I'm glad to know that Paul also wrestled with that question. Jesus was blindingly real to Paul, when he saw Jesus on that road to Damascus. Literally blinding! Jesus' light blinded Paul temporarily; and changed his life forever. And many of the people Paul spoke to were convinced, turned their lives over to God through Jesus, and became part of communities who worshiped God as Christians. But on the other hand, there were also plenty of people that Paul did not convince. How could that be, when Jesus was so present?

SLIDES 13-14

To explain that, Paul uses a metaphor of a veil – a veil like what Moses used. In Exodus 34, we read that when Moses went to talk with God, he was so close to God's glory that his face became radiant. That scared people; so Moses wore a veil, unless he was telling them what God had specifically said. Paul refers to that veil metaphorically, to explain why some people respond to Jesus and others don't. He says that we who believe in Jesus are like Moses with his unveiled face: we are

reflecting the Lord's glory. And not only that, we are being transformed into Jesus' likeness with ever-increasing glory.

#### SLIDES 15-16

But, Paul also says that the gospel is veiled to those who are perishing; they don't see its light or power. In verse 4:4 it says, "The god of this age [i.e., Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

#### SLIDE 17

Remember that Paul is writing to a congregation, not to people in general. For the members of the church of Corinth, who do believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, the light of God shines within them. Paul says in verse 6 that God "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." That applies to all believers, in every time and place – which includes us, here in Cupertino, in 2024. God gives us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

#### SLIDE 18

But if that's true, then why don't we see God's glory shining everywhere we look? Take a minute. Look around at each other. Do you see the glory of God blazing out through others' faces? Maybe a little; but we don't glow like angels. Why not? Paul says in vs 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

In Paul's day, throughout the Roman world, clay jars were used to store everything: oil, wine, olives, scrolls, wheat, water, fish – you name it. Clay was cheap, easy to get, and easy to form into a suitable shape. If you were rich, you probably stored your treasures in clay jars, to keep them unobtrusive. If you were poor, you stored what you had in clay jars because you could afford them. I suppose the closest equivalent we have today would be cardboard boxes. Everybody's got lots of those – the same way that everyone in Paul's day had lots of clay jars.

Paul says that human beings are like jars of clay. After all, Genesis 2 tells us that Adam was formed from the dust of the ground; and what is that but clay? To the extent that God does dwell within us, that's like treasure inside of us jars of clay. We have that treasure because of God's initiative in Jesus – IF we are receptive to what God is doing through Jesus.

#### SLIDE 19

Can light shine through a clay jar, though? Well, not if it's perfect! Not if it's sealed shut, with no cracks in it. How could you even tell if there was light inside, if the clay jar was perfect and sealed shut? There might be light shining away in there, but nobody would be able to see it. But if the jar is unsealed, or if it has cracks in it, then you can see whether there's light inside or not. In the same way, if God's glory dwells in us through Jesus, how would anyone know if we were so sealed up tight, and were so perfect, that no one could see that glory at work in us?

## SLIDE 20-21

Maybe that's one reason why none of us are perfect – including not Paul. He and his companions were certainly bashed around by the life they led. He writes, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." In other words, he's saying that the life of Jesus can shine through him because of all these cracks caused by his earthly life.

## SLIDE 22

I think that's good news! Who here has had some tough times in life? I have; how about you? Relationship problems, health problems, work problems, family problems, computer problems, financial problems, you name it – we've all had problems, haven't we? And who here is imperfect? I sure am not perfect; how about you? Are you imperfect too? We've all got cracks, some of which are caused by circumstances, and some of which are caused by our own sinfulness. All humans have cracks of various kinds. The good news is, if Jesus is dwelling in us, our cracks make it possible for his light to shine through us. Others can see Jesus' light in us through the cracks.

For example: when I was in seminary in Virginia, all of us students were required to do an internship in a local church. I was fortunate enough to serve as an intern under Bill Boyce. He was in his mid-sixties, had some health issues, and was looking forward to retirement. He wasn't perfect, and he was the first to admit it. And he was very tired; some days it looked to me as though it was hard for him even to pick up a pencil.

But spiritually? Oh, my goodness! Bill just glowed with the love of Jesus. He had known Jesus nearly all his life; and Jesus' light shone through him, no matter how tired he was. He was well known throughout the presbytery for his pastoral care skills. He could hear what was really going on with a person, underneath the words that they were saying. And he was amazingly good at remembering names and family connections – which in the South is REALLY important. I asked him once how he managed to remember names that he'd heard only once, months ago; and he said, "I guess it's just a gift of the Holy Spirit." [I wish I had that gift!] He had cracks, all right; but those cracks were windows through which Jesus shone.

Being transformed into ever-increasing glory is an amazing thing. It doesn't mean that we're going to be perfect. It doesn't mean that we're necessarily going to be healthy – Bill wasn't. It doesn't mean that those cracks in our lives, or our personalities, are necessarily going to be glued back together. But those are not the best thing for us, nor for the people around us. The best thing for us is to know that we aren't perfect; and that we do need Jesus, more and more. And the best thing for the people around us is to see more and more of the light of Jesus, coming through those cracks of imperfection. And perhaps, as we grow in ever-increasing glory, the people around us who aren't aware of Jesus now, will come to know him through his glory shining through us. Perhaps through us, Jesus will work in them, as well as in us. Let's pray.

O Lord our God, we acknowledge before you that we are not perfect. We are not always kind or patient with one another or with ourselves; we don't always think the best of others; we don't always forgive past injuries or injustices; we don't always look to the interests of others; we don't always react calmly when something upsetting happens. But we trust that Jesus' life is at work in us, to transform us into his image with ever-increasing glory. May that glory shine forth through us into the world around us, for Jesus' sake. In his name we pray. Amen.

Let's praise God by singing How Great Thou Art together.