

The King's Ambassadors: Gospel Power in Weakness

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Grand Avenue Baptist Church

Michael Felkins

May 18, 2025

In the last three sermons, we have examined the ten motivations for carrying out the King's Commission. In other words, we looked at *"why we share the gospel."* Now, I want us to consider how we carry out the King's Commission in the face of struggles and opposition. I want to begin by telling you the story of Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley.

Latimer and Ridley are fastened together in history primarily because they were fastened to the same stake on October 16, 1555, in Oxford, England. These two men were two of England's most influential reformers.

They lived during the reigns of four English monarchs: Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary I (Bloody Mary). They witnessed the Reformation's tug and pull under Henry VIII's tentative acceptance of Protestant doctrine, and they flourished under Edward VI's warm embrace, but it was Bloody Mary's violent resistance to the Reformation that sealed their fate.

Latimer and Ridley were anything but casual disciples of the Reformation. Hugh Latimer was born around 1485 and was a committed Roman Catholic bishop who worked hard to defeat the Reformers and their doctrine. Yet it was a young Cambridge theologian named Thomas Bilney who requested that Latimer study the Scriptures with him so he could explain to him what he believed. Latimer said it didn't take long for him to *"begin to smell the word of God, and forsook the school doctors and such fooleries."*

Latimer gathered his arrows and turned his bow from the Reformers and began to shoot in the other direction. For 20 years, Latimer was a fervent reformation preacher. However, in 1553, Queen Bloody Mary came to the throne and sent Latimer to the Tower of London.

Bishop Nicholas Ridley was nearly 20 years younger than Latimer. Ridley was born on the border of England and Scotland. He became one of England's sharpest intellects. He even memorized the entire New Testament epistles in Greek.

We do not know when Ridley joined the Protestant Reformation movement. All we know is that he signed the decree against the pope's supremacy in 1534 and renounced the doctrine of transubstantiation in 1545. Ridley's scholarly abilities launched him to the forefront of the English reformation. Yet, when Bloody Mary became Queen in 1553, she had him locked in the Tower of London with Latimer. The two men had never met until they were tied to the stake on October 16, 1555.

Writer Scott Hubbard recounts how the two men died for their faith in Christ. Hubbard writes:

"With Latimer in a frock and cap, and Ridley in his bishop's gown, the two men talked and prayed together before a smith lashed them to the wood. Ridley was the first to strengthen his friend. 'Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it.' As the bundle of sticks caught fire beneath them, Latimer had his turn. Raising his voice so Ridley could hear, he cried, 'Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.'"

And light a candle, they did light. Bloody Mary died three years later and passed the kingdom to her half-sister Elizabeth (a Protestant queen). Suddenly, Latimer and Ridley's candle burst into a torch that lit up all of England.

My question is: *Why would these two men allow themselves to be burned at the stake when all they had to do was recant their belief in Reformation doctrine and the gospel?* Friends, they didn't die for an intellectual

idea. They didn't die for a religious movement. They didn't die because they desired to be martyrs. They didn't die because they were stubborn. They gave their lives because they knew Jesus had given His life for them on the cross and that He was alive. They had genuinely encountered the risen Christ through His gospel. They hoped in Christ and knew they had a better home in heaven. This hope allowed them to see what Jesus would do through them as they laid down their lives.

"How" they shared the gospel was grounded in the "why" they shared the gospel. These men were able to endure through weakness, suffering, and death because of the *hope* the gospel put in their hearts. This morning, we will back up a few verses and consider the "how" of sharing the gospel in weakness, suffering, and death in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was writing to a church that was being persecuted. The church in Corinth is usually known for its internal problems among its members, but this church was also being persecuted from the outside. As a result, the members of this church felt weak and defeated. However, the Apostle Paul wanted the church to know that God has a purpose in its weakness.

The members of the church in Corinth were in danger of giving up or, as Paul said twice in chapter 4, "losing heart." Given their circumstances, it would have been easy to lose heart. Even the Apostle Paul could have lost heart. He had every reason to lose heart because of all he had endured. Yet, he didn't. He found strength in the person and work of Christ. He knew his suffering was a display of the glory and power of God in the gospel. The mercy God had given him in the gospel was the power to renew his heart.

One of the main characteristics of this text is its paradoxical nature. In other words, Paul should have been losing heart, but the paradoxical nature of the gospel is that when we are weak, the gospel is powerful. Friends, the power of Christ in His gospel shines through our weaknesses, suffering, and even in our deaths. So, let's get to work on 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. I have three points to help us walk through these verses.

I. Weakness displays the power of God in the gospel (2 Cor. 4:7)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

What is the "treasure" that we have in "jars of clay?" First, our *fragile bodies* are the *weak, breakable jars of clay*? The *treasure* is the gospel that is empowered by the life of Christ that dwells in us despite our weaknesses. If you are using your Bible, look back at vv. 5-6 and listen to what Paul said:

"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The message that we proclaim is the *treasure* of the gospel. As we proclaim it, the glory of God is shown to others. Verse 6 says "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" was "shone in our hearts." He means the glory of the good news of the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross is the priceless treasure in v. 7. Then, v. 7 says that *priceless treasure* was put in "jars of clay" to show the power of God working in us.

Have you ever considered that the power of the gospel is revealed in the weakness of our bodies? Brothers and sisters, *God has a design for our weaknesses, and that design is that our weaknesses will be a witness to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

If you were here last Sunday, I talked about how Japanese artists repaired valuable pottery by sealing the breaks and cracks in the pottery with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. The word for this tradition is called *kintsugi*. *Kin* is the Japanese word for *gold*. *Tsugi* is the Japanese word for *join*. *Kintsugi* means “to join with gold.”¹

This illustrates what Christ does with us. Instead of throwing the weak, broken, useless ceramic jars of our lives in the trash, Jesus takes the broken pieces and, by His blood that is more precious than gold, He puts our lives back together. The priceless blood of Jesus creates a stunning work of art with our lives, resulting in a life that is more precious than gold because now it has a blood-bought redemptive story. It is the gold of God’s grace that creates a priceless work of art that is on display for all to see. Our broken bodies are still weak and fragile, but even in our brokenness, we proclaim the power of God working through the gospel.

Friends, blessed is the man or woman who gets to the place where they can see the value of their weaknesses under the sovereign hand of God. A God-centered view of your weaknesses will deepen your confidence in God as you look forward to a glorious future in heaven.

The story of David Brainerd always inspires. Brainerd was a missionary to the Indians in Crossweeksung, New Jersey, in the 1740s. Brainerd left all the comforts of life to live in the wilderness with the Indians to teach them the gospel. He suffered many difficulties while working with the Indians. He contracted Tuberculosis, struggled with depression, and loneliness while ministering there. However, he pressed on in his suffering.

Listen to what Brainerd wrote in his diary while struggling with depression on September 2, 1746, he wrote:

“Was scarce ever more confounded with a sense of my own unfruitfulness and unfitness of my work, than now. Oh, what a dead, heartless, barren, unprofitable wretch did I now see myself to be! My spirits were so low, and my bodily strength so wasted, that I could do nothing at all. At length, being much overdone, lay down on a buffalo skin; but sweated much of the whole night.”²

David Brainerd was a fragile jar of clay that God used mightily. He died on October 9, 1747. Then, in 1749, his friend, Jonathan Edwards, took Brainerd’s diaries and published them in a book titled *The Life of David Brainerd*. Listen to the names of the lives of the ministers and missionaries that were impacted by Edwards’ book on Brainerd’s life: John Wesley (18th century pastor and evangelist), Henry Martyn (missionary to India and Iran); William Cary (19th century missionary to India); Puritan Pastor Robert Murray McCheyne of Scotland; David Livingstone of England; Andrew Murray of South Africa and Jim Elliot a 20th century American missionary. Friends, God used the fragile, weak life of David Brainerd to inspire these great ministers of the gospel to take the gospel to a lost world.

Friends, God uses fragile, weak jars of clay, “to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” May God give us faith to rejoice in our weaknesses so that the power of God in His gospel be proclaimed to others through our lives.

II. Suffering reveals the power of God in the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”

¹ Paul Tautges, *Remade: Embracing Your Complete Identity in Christ*, 259.

² Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, 137.

When suffering hits our lives, we tend to lose heart. Often, we just want to quit, especially here in America. We are so programmed for success in the U. S. that if we ran into what the Apostle Paul ran into as a church planter, we would think the problem is us. We tend to make statements like,

“God . . . I am serving you, why isn’t this easy? You called me to do it, so make it successful.”

Have you ever said things like that to God? The Apostle Paul endured a lot of suffering to take the gospel to the nations. Listen to what he writes a little later in 2 Corinthians 6:3-11,

We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. ¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.

Do you understand what Paul is saying here? He is commending himself and his mission team to the Corinthians not by giving them a resume of success but of suffering for the sake of the gospel. So, he commends himself and his mission team to them with a long list of suffering and persecution, not of his triumphs.

Paul knew that suffering, affliction, and persecution were a part of God’s plan to get the gospel message out to a lost world. Listen to what he says in Colossians 1:24-27,

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

What did he mean when he said *he was filling up what was “lacking in Christ’s suffering?”* Had Christ not suffered enough, and Paul had to finish it? No. That’s not what he meant. Jesus’ suffering was more than enough.

What the Apostle Paul meant was that what was “lacking” was that not everyone had seen Christ suffering. So, as Christ’s followers suffer as they share Christ, they also share in His sufferings so that others see Christ’s suffering in His people. In this way, they are making Christ’s sufferings and the word of God fully known to all who see and hear it. In this way, they are “filling up what was lacking in Christ’s suffering.”

It is like what the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:6,

“If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation.”

It is not that Paul’s suffering comforted them and saved them. He means that if His afflictions and sufferings bring them to Christ, they will find comfort and salvation in Jesus, which is worth it. The Apostle Paul understood that his suffering was a witness to a lost world. His suffering proclaimed the importance of the gospel and the power of God.

Think about it this way: The story is told of an African man who came to faith in Christ and decided to travel around to the neighboring villages to share his faith in his newly found Savior. He traveled many miles, and when the man came to the first village, he began to preach to the people. However, the villagers were steeped in tribal religion. A mob gathered, and they beat him and, thinking they had killed him, they threw him out of the village. After he woke up and went back into the village and began preaching again, once again he was beaten and thrown out for dead.

When he came to, he crawled over to a tree to gather his strength. As he was sitting there, a group of people came out of the village to see if he was really dead this time. When they walked up to him, they noticed his feet were bruised and cut.

They asked him why his feet were in such bad shape, and he told them that he had traveled many miles to share the good news God had given him. The people asked for his forgiveness because they did not realize he was a holy man. Then they invited him to return to the village and share the message God had given him.

In their culture, the feet of holy men would be in bad shape because of the length of their travels. When they saw the condition of his feet and how he had suffered to bring the gospel to them, they invited him to share his message, and, as a result, many trusted Christ.

You see, the display of our suffering fills up what is lacking, not that we add to Christ's suffering, but that others will see the glory of Christ in our suffering as we hold fast to the good news of the gospel. May we be a church that holds fast to the gospel even in our suffering, afflictions, and persecution.

III. Death displays the power of Christ in the gospel (2 Corinthians 4:11-12)

"For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you."

The paradox of the gospel continues. Paul has moved from the *treasure in jars of clay* to *suffering and persecution*, and now to *death*. Here's the bottom line: No matter what the context is, the gospel wins. It may look like defeat, but it is not.

One might think, *"Surely death will stop the gospel of Jesus Christ"*, but it never does. How is this possible? It is because we have a Savior who died and was resurrected for sinners. Jesus is not a dead Savior—He is alive. Jesus defeated death, and now His gospel goes forth.

I want you to notice something: This is the third time Paul has used the Greek word for *"show"* or *"manifest"* in these six verses.

What is his point? His point is that the power of the gospel overcomes our weak hearts, our weak bodies, our suffering, our persecution, and even our death so that the fame of Christ and the gospel may be made known.

Listen to what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16:

"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads [same Greek word as manifested] the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?"

The Greek word *"spreads"* is the same Greek word as *"to show"* and *"manifest."* When we suffer for the sake of the gospel, we spread the aroma and fragrance of Christ to others. However, not everyone will love it. For some, the gospel stinks and smells like death, but there are others who get into the word of God, and it is the aroma of life.

Remember, the story I told you at the beginning about Latimer and Ridley. Latimer studied God's word with Thomas Bilney, and it was the aroma of life for him.

What does Paul mean when he says Christ leads us in "*triumphal procession*?" First, he means Jesus is alive and is in heaven! Second, he is saying that when you spread the knowledge of Jesus through the weakness of your life, and through the suffering of your life, YES, even through your death, the power of the gospel is at work.

Remember the men who were inspired by "*how*" David Brainerd's weak life was a testimony to the power of the gospel? These men were inspired after his death. Here's the thing: *Death doesn't stop the power of the message of the gospel*. It is like what Hebrews 11 says,

"Though dead they still speak."

Why does the life of God's faithful servants still speak after they are dead? It is not because these men and women were superheroes. It is because Jesus came in weakness, suffering, and experienced persecution. He died in our place and for our sins. Then He rose from the dead and defeated death. This is the Savior they proclaimed and we now proclaim.

Let me close with the question – How? How was Paul and his mission team able to endure weakness, suffering, and even the possibility of death as they carried out the King's Commission? One word – hope. It is the hope of the gospel. Listen to 2 Corinthians 5:1-5. We covered it a couple of Sundays ago, but it describes the hope that lived in the hearts of Paul and his mission team:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

The Apostle Paul and his mission team could risk it all for Jesus because they knew they had a better home waiting for them in Heaven.

Think about it like this: Imagine two women are both given the same job. It is a very, very boring, drab, tedious job. They will have to do this very boring, drab, tedious job repeatedly all day. It will be 80 hours a week for one year and no vacation.

Both women do the exact same job under the exact same conditions, but one woman is told, "*At the end of this time, you will have earned \$15,000.*" However, the other woman is told, "*At the end of this time, you will have earned \$15 million.*" Here's the deal: Though they're doing the very same job, they're going to experience their days quite differently.

The one woman, who is only going to receive \$15,000 dollars is going to find it boring and unbearable. About three months into it, she's going to quit. However, the other woman will be whistling as she works. She's going to be happy. Sure, the job is boring, monotonous, and tedious, but it's okay. Why? *It is because her mind is focused on the future*. She will continually think about what she will do with the \$15 million.

Think about it: Here are two people having the very same experience of the present, and yet experiencing the present absolutely differently, and it is all because of what they believe about the future. Friends, what you believe about the future completely controls how you experience the present.

Brothers and sisters, when the Holy Spirit makes the life, death, and resurrection of Christ so present and so real in your life, it will create a living hope in your heart that impacts the daily grind of your life. It impacts how you view your weaknesses, your suffering, and how you will approach your death.

Friends, when we, as Christians, consider the future, we need to remember that what is coming is infinitely better than \$15 million dollars. When you remember what God has planned for His people in the future and it pierces your heart so that it lodges deep in your heart like an arrow, you can face absolutely anything.³ Let's carry out the King's Commission with this kind of hope in the future Jesus has planned for us.

³ Timothy J. Keller, *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).