



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Why We Still Believe

### 2 Corinthians 4

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It sounds like a bad disaster thriller. That was the case this week from the firestorms of Southern California. Nearly 40 different fires had forced nearly one million people into some type of refuge. Some were staying at the local stadium and others in hotels and with friends. Thousands of homes have been lost and hundreds of thousands of acres have been scorched. What is amazing about some of the reports is how in some instances, almost like a tornado, one home burned down while another near by was spared. It is in these moments of tragedy and feeling helpless that we have those questions of why it occurred and what does it mean, if anything.

These are theological questions which arise in our minds during such tragedies. In such moments people begin to question faith, God's existence and how they can continue to believe in God if they did before the event. There are many in our culture today who have just let go of faith because of tragedy, poverty, suffering, innocent victims and natural disasters. In their reasoning they just cannot understand that if God is real, present and loving, how such moments can happen.

But corporate tragedy is not the only thing that causes us to question faith. There are our own personal struggles. It is the word cancer or Alzheimer's. It is the deep pain that the loss of a loved one can bring. It is the desperation of a job loss. It is the loneliness of a marriage gone badly. It is the disillusionment of a church that abuses or is in scandal. It is the bad witness of a Christian who pushes one away from faith instead of encouraging the faith of another. There are many reasons for us to lose faith, give up and, as Paul would say, lose heart.

So the question is why should we still believe? Why should we not give up, lose faith and lose heart? Paul answers this question for us in 2 Corinthians 4 as he encourages us to not lose heart but to recapture hope.

Paul first reminds us that life can be hard. Paul was a realist. Paul is not some sappy, cheesy, smiling, out of touch Christian. He is not someone that as others have described as being so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good. Paul is not someone who tries to sugar coat tragedy, hardship and persecution. He is very honest about the difficulties that can come to one's life.

Now there are some Christians who seem to always be happy, and although they might inspire for a while, for most of us this type of "don't worry be happy" Christianity finally becomes thin and shallow. Many times these well-meaning Christians do encourage for the moment, but then a day comes when life is overwhelming and this leaves many a person disillusioned with God and their own faith. They feel guilty that they cannot just smile and sing away the blues. They begin to question God's love for all people if some people seem blessed and they do not.

I would suggest to you that it is not until we admit that, yes, life can be hard and sometimes taste of its bitterness that we can truly appreciate the hope that the love of God can bring.

Paul tells us life is difficult. He describes it in wonderful terms in verses 7-10. Paul gives us four word pictures to describe the difficulty of life. First, Paul says "we are pressed on every side, but not crushed." Some translations say "afflicted in every way." The term "pressed on every side" comes


from the word that means to be afflicted. The picture is of someone's life that is being afflicted in every way. There are many ways we experience affliction. There is the affliction of illness and disease. There is the affliction of relationship struggles. There is the affliction of anxiety and uncertainty. There is the affliction of economic stress. I think that Paul gives us a picture of someone who believes that all of life is falling apart. There are many who know this type of feeling. When sickness comes, many times the stress of relationships, responsibilities, money and uncertainty accompany it. The picture is of someone who feels life is closing in on her. Paul writes "we are pressed on every side, but not crushed." Paul acknowledges that there are times when there seems no way out and life is pressing in on us, but yet we remain. We are not crushed.

His second picture is "we are perplexed, but not in despair." This is a mental struggle. We are perplexed, confused, uncertain or stressed. To be honest, more of us might fit into this category than the first. We find so much to worry about. Some of our worry is founded. We have a real disease, a real disappointment, a real concern and there is worry. However, many times we find ourselves worrying about things that we cannot control or are very unlikely to ever affect us. But we still worry. We still are perplexed. Paul did not understand it all. He was not sure how God was going to work it all out. He admits that there are times when he is perplexed. Yet, he adds "but not in despair." One scholar tells us that the best way to interpret this for our day is, "I am stressed but not stressed out." I like how Barclay puts it: "I am at wit's end but not at hope's end." It is true sometimes we find ourselves in mental anguish.

Paul's third picture is "persecuted but not abandoned." The implication is abandoned by people but not abandoned by God. The idea here is that we might be lonely in regards to others, but God will not leave us. It is said that Joan of Arc commented at the time when others who should have supported her had abandoned her that "it is better to be alone with God. His friendship will not fail me, or his counsel, or his love. In his strength, I will dare and dare again until I die." There are

moments when we feel so alone, but we are not abandoned.

The fourth description of difficulty is "we are struck down, but not destroyed." The term *struck down* indicates actual blows to the body and being physically beaten. Paul would endure many a beating in his life for his faith, and yet even in moments when he was left for dead, he had survived. He had been struck down but not destroyed. One way of putting it is, "we are knocked down but not knocked out."



*"It is the very fact that you are standing in the midst of such [difficult] moments that is the evidence of God's grace and not the evidence of God's absence."*

You have seen it before in a boxing match. One fighter is taking a beating. He has been knocked down over and over again, but because of his training, stamina and sometimes pure will, when the final bell rings he is still standing. That is the picture here. We are knocked down but not out. We are still standing.

Paul tells us life is difficult. For some of us it is a series of events that has overwhelmed us. We feel like we take two steps forward and three steps back. Life is pressing in upon us. Some of us are in constant mental anguish. We worry about everything and anything. Some of us are miserable because we are alone. We are sitting here in this large crowd today, and yet we feel all alone. Some of us feel we have been knocked down and the count to ten has begun. We are not sure we can get on our feet again. Paul the realist says, yes, this is the way life is, but you are still here. You are not crushed, in despair, abandoned or destroyed. It is the very fact that you are still standing in the midst of such moments that is the evidence of God's grace and not the evidence of God's absence.

A few years ago my son Tyler and I went hiking in the Smoky Mountains. We climbed in the area known as the Chimneys. Like most of the Smoky Mountains the trail is through thick, green trees and underbrush. You know you are climbing by the grade of the trail, yet you really are not sure how high you have come. Then all of a sudden, there it is at the top of the trail. The stone structure is known as the Chimneys. The last part of the trail to the top is not a trail; it is what is referred to as a scramble to the top over the rock

formation. A scramble means leaning in and hand and feet working together. The last part is the hardest, but when you reach the top it is worth it all. All of a sudden you are on top of the world. You look back down the mountain and you can catch glimpses of where you have come. It is only at the top of the mountain that you realize how low you were when you started. In the same way, it is only the experience of the valley that gives the mountain top meaning.

I think that is why Paul is a realist. There is something about embracing life's difficult moments instead of ignoring them and pretending they do not exist. It is in embracing the reality of the valley that the climb and the top of the mountain receive its full meaning. Paul tells us that life is difficult.

That, however, is not where Paul finishes. Paul does not leave us in our difficulty or struggle. He gives us hope by reminding us that God is at work. Let me suggest to you that Paul tells us that God is at work in three ways in this text.

First, God is at work in Jesus' work on the cross. Paul writes, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that his life may be revealed in our mortal bodies."

Paul reminds them of the work of Jesus on the cross and through resurrection. We carry around the death of Jesus so the life of Jesus might also be revealed. We remember the death of Jesus so his resurrection might be revealed. This verse means many things, but what I want to focus on is that it is a reminder of the power of God that has already been demonstrated in Jesus' life. The cross and resurrection of Jesus is a constant reminder of what God can do in the lives of those who believe in Jesus. Paul would tell us that the same resurrection power that was demonstrated in Jesus' life is now a part of our lives. We know that this applies to our own mortality and immortality, but it also is the reminder that all things are possible with God. The cross of Jesus is the great moment of affliction, despair, forsakenness and destruction. Yet, through resurrection, Jesus emerges from the darkest moment the world has ever known.

That is what we carry around with us. We carry around the knowledge that God is able to deliver us from our dark moments. Now that does not mean that God always does what we want God to do. The cross is not the way that we would choose, but it does mean that God, in God's way, will bring us through our difficulties as well. What we must do is to be obedient even as Jesus was fully obedient. God is at work by reminding us of the work of Jesus.

God is at work by transforming us in the midst of difficulty. Paul writes in verse 16, "though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." Paul was aware that although life was hard, even in the moment of the difficulty God was at work in our lives. He was renewing them spiritually day by day. The way this is written indicates a continual process, and that is restated with the phrase day by day. The reminder is that God is at work producing his character in our lives, not after the moment of difficulty, but sometimes at the very lowest point is where God can be found at God's very best.

Paul also suggests that God's work is to give us a new perspective. Paul reminds us that our troubles

are light and momentary in comparison to eternal glory that outweighs them. Paul is not suggesting that they are not real. He is not suggesting that they are not painful, but he is suggesting that when we take our troubles and place them into perspective with eternity and all that God has for our lives, they are momentary and they are light. The word *light* means without pressure and weight in comparison to the weight of eternal glory. It is taking two measurements, and they do not

compare. One is so light it cannot be measured, the other is so heavy it cannot be measured. Paul also says these troubles are momentary. Now we must put this into eternal perspective as well. Many times in the scripture we are told that trials and persecution are to last a little while. We can read this in two ways. First, we can say that, yes, we all pass through hard times, but they do not last. There will come a time when we come through those moments stronger and victorious. The troubles are momentary and for a little while. Yet, some of us know that our troubles last a life time. Some people experience difficulty that



*"...when we take our troubles and place them into perspective with eternity and all that God has for our lives, they are momentary and they are light."*

never ends until death. Does this mean that this promise is not true? In no way! In regards to eternity, *momentary* and *a little while* might be our whole life. To understand the promise, we must have the perspective of eternity.

So our response is to not focus on that which we are experiencing but to focus on that which is eternal and that which we are awaiting. Our troubles are for a little while and they are not the ultimate measure of our lives. Our lives are found in the perspective and measure of eternity. Paul reminds us that the way that God works is to remind us of perspective. Yes, there is trouble, but in the big picture what God has in store is so much more.

Paul suggests that life is filled with trouble, but God is at work and that is why we still believe. We do not believe because life is easy, but because God is able. We do not believe because we are trouble free, but because God is at work. This is why Paul would say, “do not lose heart.” Paul first uses this phrase in the beginning as a testimony, “We do not lose heart.” Then in verse 16 as an encouragement, “do not lose heart.”

This phrase can mean several things. It can mean do not become discouraged or to be weary or to be lax or reluctant in our faith. Does that describe you? Has life discouraged you? Has life finally made you weary? Have the troubles of this world so overwhelmed you that you have a reluctant faith? Have you come to a place where you struggle to keep on believing?

Paul says, “Keep on believing!”

I am convinced a little more everyday that some of the best theology is expressed in country music. Now some of the worst is found there as well, but there are many songs that just say what you want to say. Martina McBride’s new hit song “Anyway” echoes what Paul has been saying in 2 Corinthians.

Listen to the words:

You can spend your whole life buildin'  
Somethin' from nothin'  
One storm can come and blow it all away  
Build it anyway

You can chase a dream  
That seems so out of reach  
And you know it might not ever come your way  
Dream it anyway

(Chorus)  
God is great, but sometimes life ain't good  
When I pray it doesn't always turn out like I think it should  
But I do it anyway  
I do it anyway

This world's gone crazy and it's hard to believe  
That tomorrow will be better than today  
Believe it anyway  
You can love someone with all your heart  
For all the right reasons  
And in a moment they can choose to walk away  
Love 'em anyway

(Repeat Chorus)

You can pour your soul out singin'  
A song you believe in  
That tomorrow they'll forget you ever sang  
Sing it anyway  
Yeah sing it anyway

I sing  
I dream  
I love anyway

*Martina McBride/Brad Warren/Brett Warren (BMI)*

Sometimes it is against all odds and against all evidence that we say “I believe.” We are hard pressed, but not crushed. We are perplexed, but not in despair. We are persecuted, but not abandoned. We are knocked down, but not destroyed. God is still at work. That is the very reason we still believe.

