

The Book of 2 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:1–18

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Second Corinthians 4 takes the honest realism of Paul's ministry and turns it into a theology of weakness, power, and hope. Doctrinally, the teacher should be ready to handle several threads. Paul gives a clear account of why some reject the gospel: not because the message is unclear, but because "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." He defines the content of Christian preaching as "Jesus Christ as Lord." He links the first creation to the new creation, the God who made light now shining the knowledge of His glory into human hearts. And above all, he grounds Christian endurance in the resurrection and in an eternal perspective: the One who raised Jesus will raise us, and present affliction is preparing an eternal weight of glory.

The pastoral genius of this chapter is that none of these truths floats free of real suffering. Paul does not offer a triumphalism that pretends believers are spared hardship. He is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and wasting away in his outer self. The teacher should be careful here to avoid two errors: a grim stoicism that denies the goodness of God's promises, and a shallow prosperity-style optimism that denies the reality of suffering. Paul holds both together. The affliction is real, and it is not the last word, because resurrection life is already at work and eternal glory is coming.

So aim at both targets. Help students understand the surpassing power of God displayed through weak vessels, the true content of gospel proclamation, and the resurrection hope that anchors Christian endurance. And lead them to actually carry their afflictions differently, with honesty about the pain and confidence in the unseen and eternal, so that they do not lose heart but are renewed day by day.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (v. 7). What does this image teach about why God entrusts the gospel to weak and ordinary people, and what is lost when we try to present ourselves as impressive rather than letting God's power be displayed through our weakness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by setting the picture clearly. In the ancient world, treasure was often stored in cheap, common clay pots. The container was deliberately unimpressive. Paul applies this to himself and

to every Christian: we are the clay, the gospel is the treasure, and the arrangement is intentional.

Draw out God's purpose: "to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." If God used only the gifted, the eloquent, and the strong, the glory could be mistaken for human achievement. By working through the weak and ordinary, God makes it unmistakable that the power is His.

This reframes our weakness entirely. Our limitations are not obstacles to God's work but the very canvas on which His power is displayed. The cracks in the jar are not a problem to be hidden; they are where the light shines out. This is deeply freeing for ordinary believers who feel they have little to offer.

Guard against two distortions. One is despising ourselves as worthless; the treasure inside gives the jar real dignity and purpose. The other is taking credit for the treasure; the power is God's, not ours. The right posture is humble usefulness: an ordinary vessel, gladly carrying an extraordinary treasure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's deliberate use of weak vessels to display His own surpassing power
- Human weakness as the canvas for God's glory rather than an obstacle to it
- The gospel as a treasure that gives the ordinary believer dignity and purpose
- Humility that neither despises self nor claims the glory that belongs to God

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God so often choose to work through the weak rather than the impressive?
- How does it change your view of your limitations to see them as where God's power shows?
- What is the difference between despising our weakness and offering it to God?

Question 2

Student Question:

Most of us work hard to hide our cracks and project strength. Where are you most tempted to cover up your weakness and limitations, and what might it look like to let God's power show through them instead of around them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses on our instinct to hide our cracks. We curate images, project competence, and fear being seen as weak. Paul invites the opposite: a willingness to let God's power be displayed precisely through acknowledged weakness.

Help students name where they are most tempted to cover up, perhaps pretending to have it all together in front of other believers, hiding struggles behind a confident front, or refusing to admit need. The energy spent maintaining the image is energy not spent letting the light shine.

Be clear this is not a call to broadcast every flaw or wallow in weakness. It is a call to honesty and dependence, to stop pretending to be the source of the power and to let God be the source. Often our most fruitful ministry to others flows from the very weaknesses we are tempted to hide.

Encourage one concrete step toward authenticity, perhaps admitting a struggle to a trusted believer, asking for prayer, or simply stopping the performance of strength. The aim is to let God's power show through our cracks rather than around our carefully maintained facade.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to project strength and self-sufficiency rather than depend on God
- Authenticity and honest weakness as channels for God's power
- The exhausting futility of maintaining an image of having it all together
- Ministry that flows out of acknowledged weakness rather than pretended strength

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to hide your weakness and project strength?
- What does it cost us to keep up an image of having it all together?
- How might God use an acknowledged weakness in your life to help others?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says the gospel is "veiled to those who are perishing," because "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers," and that what he preaches is "Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants" (vv. 3–5). What do these verses teach about why some reject the gospel, and about the true content and aim of Christian proclamation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul explains why some reject a message that seems so clear to him: the gospel is "veiled to those who are perishing," because "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers." The problem is not a defect in the message but a blindness in the heart, a blindness Satan actively works to maintain.

Help students hold this in balance. On one hand, it relieves us of thinking that unbelief is always a failure of our argument; there is a spiritual battle behind every rejection of Christ. On the other hand, it does not excuse the unbeliever, for the blindness is bound up with their refusal to come to the light (John 3:19–20). Both the enemy's work and human responsibility are real.

Then note the content of Paul's preaching: not himself, but "Jesus Christ as Lord," with himself merely as a servant for Jesus' sake. This is the heart of true proclamation. The aim is never to commend the preacher but to lift up the Lordship of Christ.

This is a useful corrective for any era tempted to build ministry around personalities. The gospel announces a Lord, and calls for submission to Him. Where the focus drifts to the messenger, the message has been compromised. Paul keeps Christ at the center and himself in the servant's place.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual blindness, fostered by Satan, as a cause of unbelief (v. 4)
- Human responsibility in rejecting the light alongside the enemy's blinding work (John 3:19–20)
- The content of true preaching as Jesus Christ as Lord, not the messenger
- The minister as a servant for Christ's sake, never the center of attention

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the gospel is "veiled" to those who are perishing?
- How do we hold together Satan's blinding work and a person's own responsibility?
- Why is it so important that we preach Christ as Lord rather than ourselves?

Question 4

Student Question:

Whose servant does your life actually proclaim? In what ways are you tempted to point people to yourself, your opinions, your reputation, your accomplishments, rather than to Jesus as Lord? What would it look like to decrease so that He might increase?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question asks students whose servant their lives actually proclaim. It is easy to say we serve Christ; it is harder to admit the ways we subtly serve our own reputation, opinions, and comfort.

Help students examine the everyday evidence. In conversations, are we more eager to be right than to point to Christ? In service, are we quietly seeking recognition? Do people walk away from us impressed with us, or drawn toward Jesus?

Recall John the Baptist's posture: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). This is the servant's joy, not a grudging self-erasure, but the glad willingness to fade so that Christ shines. The goal is not self-hatred but a reordering of who gets the attention.

Encourage one concrete area where they can decrease this week, perhaps holding back a self-promoting comment, giving God the credit for something, or serving without being seen. The aim is a life that, when read by others, points unmistakably to Jesus as Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to point others to Christ rather than to ourselves
- The servant posture of John the Baptist: He must increase, we must decrease (John 3:30)
- The subtle ways self-interest competes with the Lordship of Christ
- Humility as gladly fading so that Christ may shine

Discussion Prompts

- Whose servant does your everyday life actually proclaim?
- Where are you tempted to point people to yourself rather than to Jesus?
- What would it look like to decrease so that He might increase this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says 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” (v. 6). How does Paul connect the first creation with the new creation, and what does it mean that the same God who made light now shines the knowledge of His glory into a human heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 6 is one of the most beautiful in the letter. Paul reaches back to the first day of creation: God “said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness.’” The same God now “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Help students feel the magnitude of this comparison. The conversion of a human heart is no small thing. It is an act of new creation, as mighty in its way as the original making of light. God speaks light into the darkness of a soul, and where there was blindness, the glory of God is now seen in the face of Christ.

Note where the glory of God is found: “in the face of Jesus Christ.” We do not glimpse God’s glory in abstractions but in a Person. To know Christ is to see the glory of God; to gaze at Him is to behold the Father’s light.

This grounds the whole chapter. The treasure in the clay jar is precisely this light, the knowledge of God’s glory in Christ. The same creative power that made the universe is the power at work shining in and through ordinary believers. Our hope rests on a God who creates light where there was none.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conversion as an act of new creation, paralleling the first creation of light
- The glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, not in abstraction
- God's creative power as the source of spiritual illumination
- The knowledge of God's glory as the treasure carried in the clay jar

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that conversion is like God creating light all over again?
- Why does Paul say the glory of God is seen "in the face of Jesus Christ"?
- Where do you most need God to shine fresh light right now?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where do you most need that creating light to shine right now, a dark place of confusion, discouragement, or hardness? What would it mean to ask the God who said "Let there be light" to bring fresh light there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question invites students to bring a specific dark place to the God who creates light. Discouragement, confusion, hardness of heart, a relationship that feels hopeless, these are the kinds of darkness into which God loves to speak.

Help students resist two false moves. One is to manufacture light themselves by sheer positive thinking. The other is to resign themselves to the darkness as permanent. Paul's God is the one who says "Let there be light" over the formless void; no darkness is beyond His creative word.

Encourage them to actually ask. The God who shone in their hearts at conversion is the same God they can ask to bring fresh light into present darkness, through His word, through prayer, through the encouragement of His people.

Make it concrete. Name the dark place, and bring it to God this week with the simple, believing prayer that He would shine there. The aim is to approach our darkness not with despair but with the expectation that our God brings light.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as the one who speaks light into present darkness, not only at conversion
- The difference between self-generated optimism and God-given light
- Prayer as bringing our dark places to the Creator of light
- Hope grounded in God's creative word rather than in circumstances

Discussion Prompts

- What dark place in your life most needs God's creating light right now?
- What is the difference between positive thinking and asking God for light?
- How could you bring that darkness to God in prayer this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (vv. 10–12). How can it be that the life of Jesus is displayed precisely through our sufferings and dying, and what does this teach about how God brings resurrection life out of our weakness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul gives the paradox at the center of the chapter: we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." The very sufferings that look like defeat become the place where resurrection life is displayed.

Help students grasp the logic. When a fragile believer endures affliction without being crushed, perplexity without despair, persecution without being forsaken, the only explanation is a life at work in them that is not their own. Their endurance preaches the resurrection. The dying of Jesus, embraced in their bodies, becomes the showcase for the life of Jesus.

This transforms the meaning of suffering for the Christian. It is not merely something to be survived. It is an arena in which the power of the risen Christ becomes visible, both to the sufferer and to those watching. Paul even says this dying is "at work in us" so that life is at work in the Corinthians; our endurance serves others.

Be careful not to romanticize pain. Paul never says the suffering is pleasant or that we should seek it. He says God redeems it, making it the very stage on which the life of Jesus shines. The cross-shaped pattern, death giving way to life, runs through the whole of the Christian experience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The cross-shaped pattern of Christian life: dying that displays resurrection life
- Suffering as an arena where the power of the risen Christ becomes visible
- Endurance under affliction as a witness to the life of Jesus at work in us
- Redeemed suffering that serves others, not pain sought for its own sake

Discussion Prompts

- How can the life of Jesus be displayed through our suffering and weakness?

- What is the difference between glorifying suffering and seeing God redeem it?
- When have you seen God's power shine through someone's endurance in hardship?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of an affliction you are carrying right now. Are you tempted to lose heart, to conclude that God has forgotten you? How would it change your perspective to believe that even this is an arena where the life of Jesus is being made visible in you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question brings the paradox to the student's own affliction. The temptation in suffering is to lose heart, to conclude that God has forgotten us or that our struggle is meaningless.

Help students name a current affliction honestly. Paul does not ask us to pretend it is not hard. He asks us to believe that even here, the life of Jesus is being made visible, in us and through us, even when we cannot see it.

Offer a reframing question: instead of only asking "How do I escape this?", we can also ask "How might Christ be displayed in me through this?" That second question does not remove the pain, but it gives the pain a purpose and keeps us from despair.

Encourage them to refuse to lose heart, leaning on the promises that follow in the chapter. The aim is not a forced smile but a settled confidence that their affliction is neither pointless nor final, because the risen Christ is at work in it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to lose heart and conclude God has forgotten us
- Reframing affliction as an arena for Christ to be displayed
- Honest acknowledgment of pain alongside confidence in God's purpose
- Refusing despair on the basis of God's promises rather than feelings

Discussion Prompts

- What affliction are you most tempted to lose heart over right now?
- How might it change things to ask how Christ could be displayed through it?
- What promise from this chapter could steady you in that struggle?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul anchors his courage in the resurrection: “he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also” (v. 14), and he refuses to lose heart because “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look... to the things that are unseen” (vv. 16–18). What do these verses teach about the believer’s resurrection hope and eternal perspective, and how does this hope reshape the way a Christian endures suffering without minimizing how real that suffering is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it should be taught with full confidence and warmth. Paul grounds his refusal to lose heart in the resurrection: “he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.” The resurrection of Christ guarantees the resurrection of all who belong to Him. This is not wishful thinking but the sure hope on which everything rests (1 Corinthians 15:20–23).

Draw out the contrast in verse 16: “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” The body declines, but the believer is being inwardly renewed by the Spirit even as that happens. Aging, illness, and the slow breaking of the clay jar are real, but they are not the whole story. A renewal is underway that the eye cannot see.

Then comes the great perspective shift of verses 17 and 18. Paul weighs present suffering against future glory and calls our affliction “light” and “momentary,” not because it is trivial, but because, set beside “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,” even the heaviest earthly sorrow is outweighed. The scales are not close. The teacher should let students feel both sides: the affliction is genuinely heavy now, and the glory is incomparably heavier and forever.

Be careful here to avoid two errors. The first is minimizing suffering, as if Christians should not grieve or feel pain; Paul himself was nearly crushed. The second, on the opposite side, is a prosperity-style teaching that promises believers escape from suffering in this life. Paul promises no such escape. He promises something better: that the suffering is producing glory, and that resurrection lies on the other side of the wasting away. The Christian does not look away from the affliction in denial; he looks through it to the unseen and eternal.

Finally, note Paul’s practical counsel: “we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.” The way to endure is to fix our attention on what is eternal, the risen Christ, the coming glory, the inheritance kept for us, rather than on the visible and temporary. Where we set our gaze determines whether we lose heart or are renewed. Help students make this a daily discipline, not a one-time resolve.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bodily resurrection of believers, guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ (v. 14; 1 Corinthians 15:20–23)
- Daily inward renewal by the Spirit even as the body declines

- The incomparable weight of eternal glory set against light and momentary affliction
- Endurance through eternal perspective, looking to the unseen and eternal
- The rejection of prosperity teaching that promises escape from suffering in this life
- Honest acknowledgment of real suffering alongside sure resurrection hope

Discussion Prompts

- How does the resurrection of Jesus anchor our hope in the middle of suffering?
- Why can Paul call heavy affliction “light” and “momentary” without minimizing it?
- What does it look like, practically, to fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, the treasure in clay, the light of Christ, the dying that displays His life, the resurrection hope, the unseen and eternal. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the chapter and asks for one specific change. Help students avoid generalities. The chapter has pressed on weakness and God’s power, proclaiming Christ rather than self, enduring affliction, and fixing our eyes on the eternal.

Invite each student to discern which truth the Spirit is pressing on. For one it may be releasing the need to look impressive. For another it may be a fresh courage to endure a current trial. For another it may be the daily discipline of looking to the unseen and eternal.

Ask for both the change and the first step. The change is the inward shift; the step is the concrete practice, perhaps a daily moment of fixing their eyes on Christ, an honest admission of weakness, or a renewed refusal to lose heart in a specific hardship.

Close with the chapter’s great encouragement: we do not lose heart. The clay may be cracking, but the treasure is secure, the inner self is being renewed, and an eternal weight of glory is coming. That is the hope this lesson is meant to form in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual formation, not mere information, as the goal of study
- The Spirit’s daily renewing work in the believer
- The role of eternal perspective in shaping present obedience
- Endurance and hope as marks of a maturing disciple

Discussion Prompts

- Which truth from this chapter is the Spirit pressing on you most directly?
- What single change is Jesus inviting you to make?
- What is one concrete practice that would help you fix your eyes on the eternal this week?