

TGC



*Edited by*  
**D. A. CARSON & KATHLEEN NIELSON**

# **GOD'S LOVE COMPELS US**

**TAKING THE GOSPEL TO THE WORLD**

*Contributions by*

**D. A. CARSON • DAVID PLATT • JOHN PIPER • J. MACK STILES  
ANDREW DAVIS • MICHAEL OH • STEPHEN UM**

**GOD'S LOVE COMPELS US**

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**D. A. CARSON AND KATHLEEN B. NIELSON, EDITORS**

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# PREFACE

One of the most encouraging signs in recent years of God's hand of blessing has been the surprising number of serious students who are coming forward for theological training. Students often come through seminaries in distinguishable waves, and many of us who have been teachers for a few decades gladly testify that the current wave is one of the most encouraging we have seen. Thousands of young men want to be church planters, and they are looking for teachers and mentors who will spend time with them. Others, both men and women, simply want to handle Scripture better, to learn how to do evangelism and Bible studies in the transcultural environments of our big cities, or to write with clarity, faithfulness, humility, and unction. Neither is this phenomenon happening in America alone: in various degrees, in many countries, serious students are coming to grips with the serious nature of the gospel, and wanting to serve.

Some of the men on the Council of The Gospel Coalition, and a few others, began to wonder if some of this grace-driven energy should be challenged with the needs beyond America's borders. Even though world mission is no longer "from the West to the rest," but more like "from everywhere to everywhere," the worldwide needs are gigantic. Not only do thousands of unreached people groups remain, but there are far larger populations where knowledge of Scripture is desperately thin, where nominalism or syncretism reigns supreme, and where the gospel is poorly understood



and widely disbelieved. So we decided that, ahead of the 2013 National Conference of the Coalition, we would sponsor a preconference on world mission, designed especially, though not exclusively, for students. That took place in April 2013. Before the year was out, the Cross Conference organized a further mission conference in Louisville—longer, more detailed, but with similar hopes and vision.

The chapters of this book are slightly edited print forms of the seven plenary addresses of the April 2013 mission conference. Four of them are devoted to exposition of 2 Corinthians 4–5. As usual, we encouraged a diversity of styles of exposition, provided that the Word of God was faithfully unpacked, so that people might better see the glory of God in the gospel. Also, because mission theology is today challenged by a handful of “hot topics,” we decided to devote three plenaries to address some of them: Andrew Davis spoke on “Are People without Christ Really Lost?”; Michael Oh addressed “The Individual’s Suffering and the Salvation of the World”; and Stephen Um spoke on “Jesus and Justice.” Though they are topically arranged, all of these chapters are packed with thoughtful, substantial biblical reflection.

I am grateful beyond words to the plenary speakers for being willing to provide full manuscripts; to Kathleen Nielson for her careful administrative and editorial work; and to Crossway for continuing to make so much of the audio and video ministry of TGC available in print form.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

Don Carson  
President, TGC

# THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR MISSIONS

*Treasure in Jars of Clay*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-12

**D. A. Carson**

What is the biblical basis for missions? And how shall we go about answering that question?

We might simply tease out the Bible's entire storyline. We begin with creation: God makes everything good. Then comes the anarchic revolution against God that Christians call "the fall." Yet, wonderfully, as early as Genesis 3:15, God himself promises that the seed of the woman will crush the Serpent's head. In perfect justice, God could destroy the race at that point, but already he is promising redemption. And then, a few chapters later, when hatred and idolatry multiply, he could wipe out the entire race in the flood, but he spares eight human beings.

As evil and idolatry multiply yet again, God starts, as it were, a new humanity, calling Abraham as the patriarch of a new race. From Abraham's seed, God avers, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Yet Abraham, though he is called a friend of God and a man of faith, manages, more than once, to be a liar whose deceit

puts his wife in jeopardy. His son appears to be a bit of a wimp. His grandson Jacob is a deceiver. Jacob's sons, the twelve patriarchs—well, one sleeps with his father's concubine and another messes around with his own daughter-in-law. Two of them butcher all the males of a small village, while ten of them try to decide whether to kill the eleventh or sell him into slavery. And these are the patriarchs! Even so, God spares them, preserving the promised line until, toward the end of the book of Genesis, there is a promise that from one of these patriarchs will eventually spring a redeeming king, the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

In the book of Exodus, God constitutes the Israelites a nation and gives them the law. This instruction commands certain behavior; it also institutes certain rites and rituals that anticipate what is yet to come. The sacrifices of the Day of Atonement, for example, offered up for the sins of the priest and of the people, repeated year after year, have the effect of reminding God's people of their sins even as they serve as the means by which God forgives them.

Soon we arrive at the utter degeneration described in the book of Judges—endless cycles of depravity, sinking lower and lower until, by the end of the period covered in the book, the scene is so dark that you cannot tell the good guys from the bad guys. Even the good guys are frankly so embarrassing and barbaric that the chapters describing them are difficult to read in public. "O God, how we need a king, for everyone is doing what is right in his own eyes."

Eventually, God raises up David, described as "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). This man after God's heart manages to commit adultery and murder. One wonders what he would have done if he hadn't been a man after God's heart. That dynasty rules over the twelve tribes for only two generations; then the nation splits. Two centuries later, wallowing in corruption, idolatry, depravity, endless malice, and greed, the ten northern tribes go into captivity. A century and a half after that, the southern tribes, passionately enjoying similar sins, experience the same judgment.

In this short chapter, I cannot flesh out Israel's further experi-

ences, not to mention the diverse ways in which God speaks to them, displaying amazing patience. But we would be remiss to forget the words of some of the prophets. One of them foresees a coming servant who will be wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53). That same prophet also foresees a day when God will say, “In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth” (19:24),<sup>1</sup> anticipating a time when the locus of the people of God will not be one nation or one tribe: “The LORD Almighty will bless them saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance’” (v. 25).

In the fullness of time, we come to the Lord Jesus, his ministry, his death and resurrection, and the Great Commission. Empowering his people to do what he commands, Christ bestows the Holy Spirit. The closing chapters of the Bible display a consummating vision of men and women, drawn from every tongue, tribe, people, and nation, one redeemed community, the blood-bought from around the world, gathered around the throne of God in resurrection splendor.

In other words, we could assert that the biblical basis for missions is nothing other than the storyline of the entire Bible: God graciously goes after sinners and wins over a vast number of them.

Alternatively, we might simply focus on Jesus himself. We could consider, for example, his various titles and functions. He is the King, and as the King, he declares: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:18–19). Or we might reflect on the fact that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. Again, Jesus is the High Priest who offers himself as the perfect sacrifice. He is the Word of God—God’s ultimate self-expression, declared to the entire world. Or we might meditate on the obedience of Christ. In Gethsemane, his prayer is not, “Oh, I really do want to go through with this because I really love those sinners so much”; rather, he

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prays, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The driving power behind Jesus's determination to go to the cross is, first of all, his obedience to his Father. This is the heavenly Father's plan, and the world must know, Jesus says in John 14, that he always does what pleases his Father. Again, we might consider great events in Jesus's mission and their bearing on the biblical basis of missions: the cross, the resurrection, his session at the Father's right hand, or the second coming, when every knee shall bow to him. There are so many legitimate ways to establish the biblical basis of missions.

Yet another way of getting at the biblical basis for missions is to focus on a specific passage. There are many texts to which we could turn, but I will fasten our attention on 2 Corinthians 4:1–12:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 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. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 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. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," 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. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 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. 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. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

How does this passage contribute to our grasp of the biblical basis for missions? Verse 1 opens by talking about this ministry we have: “Since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” This ministry, according to verse 2, is bound up with setting forth the truth plainly. According to verse 4, we are placarding the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. When we discharge this ministry, we are nothing more than clay pots (according to v. 7 and following). And yet, all this achieves eternal glory (v. 17) as we fix our eyes on what is unseen (now, there’s a paradox!)—unseen but eternal. These verses do not so much *define* world mission as *describe* it. Sometimes the most powerful and moving basis for world mission lies in the Bible’s depiction of what it looks like.

It will be helpful, I think, to unpack three parts of this description.

### **1. Gospel Ministry Demands Unqualified Integrity (vv. 1–3)**

In our English Bible, this passage begins with the word *therefore*. When I was a little whippersnapper, my father, who was trying to teach me elementary interpretation principles, said, “Don, whenever you see a *wherefore* or *therefore*, see what it’s there for.” In this case, *therefore* connects the previous chapter with what is found in our verses. Second Corinthians 3 establishes the fact that apostolic ministry, the ministry of Paul in particular, is blessed with many privileged advantages over the ministry of Moses at the time of the giving of the law. To put it another way, the ministry of the new covenant sealed in Jesus’s blood is superior to the ministry of the old covenant. So we read in chapter 3:

Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us

competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (vv. 4–6)

Again, note some of the contrasts between the two covenants as they're teased out later in chapter 3:

Now if the ministry that brought death [that is, ministry under the law], which was engraved in letters on stone [referring to the Ten Commandments], came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! (vv. 7–9)

Again:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (v. 18)

Then comes chapter 4:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. (v. 1)

In other words, Paul understands full well that Christian ministry, despite its deep privileges, coughs up many reasons for losing heart, many reasons for deep discouragement. But since it is through God's mercy that we have this ministry, and since, as 2 Corinthians 3 has shown, this ministry belongs to the surpassingly wonderful new covenant, *therefore*, we do not lose heart.

Before we go any further, we should ask two questions.

First, do these references to "this ministry" or "our ministry" refer only to apostolic ministry? If so, we should be cautious about applying them to us and to the work of world mission today. But although 2 Corinthians 3 focuses on Paul and apostolic ministry,

at the end of chapter 3 and right through chapters 4 and 5, Paul elides the discussion into the ministry of all believers. You can see this, for example, at the end of chapter 3: “And *we all*, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (v. 18). Again, in chapter 5: “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (vv. 9–10a).

So although Paul begins with his own ministry (and, doubtless, that is in some ways a model for all of us in any case), he specifically elides the discussion into so broad a set of parameters that he includes Christians like you and me.

The second question: What is the nature of the discouragement that Paul faces? Why is he tempted to lose heart, granted all of these incredible privileges belonging to the new covenant? It is pretty obvious that many people are offended by the straight talk of Scripture. That is surely what hides behind verse 2:

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.

Why would anyone use deception? Why would you use slightly shady language or ambiguous categories? The reason is that all of us know full well that some of what the Bible says isn’t going to be too popular. So it becomes a perennial temptation to use softer language, to avoid the Bible’s sharp edges and unyielding but often unpopular truths.

In every culture, many people absorb and then reflect their surrounding values and priorities without much critical thought. For example, you could have deep discussions with devout Muslims in the context of Islamic culture, and they may understand what you are saying at the level of your sentences and paragraphs, but fail to



grasp what the gospel is about. They don't see it. They understand it at some level, but they do not see it. Or you could have deep discussions with hedonists who simply cannot really see the transcendent value of the gospel: they are blind to it. The god of this world has blinded them (4:4). Also, some common values in Western culture are painfully antagonistic to the gospel. For example, some popular forms of tolerance are remarkably intolerant: if you proclaim an exclusive Jesus today, you are readily dismissed as a bigot.

So what are your options? Well, of course, we might adopt "shameful ways" that "distort the word of God" (4:2). After all, everyone has his or her own point of view. Maybe Jesus is not the only way; maybe there are other ways of getting to God after all. Maybe Peter was sincere but sadly mistaken when he said that "there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Maybe Jesus was exaggerating a bit when he said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). After all, those sound like narrow-minded, bigoted, intolerant statements, don't they? But as a result of these distortions, the god of this age, of this particular culture, blinds the eyes of countless people. Again, it is very difficult for many younger people in this culture to think of themselves as guilty. We are much more prone to think of ourselves as victims. But how do we come to grips with a Savior who dies for our sin if, at the end of the day, we don't think of ourselves as sinners? Maybe what we really need is a Savior to take us out of the muck of our misfortune. Certainly today there is a pretty hard-nosed skepticism about the existence of hell. But the person who talks most about hell in the Bible is Jesus himself. It is pretty hard to say nothing about hell and be faithful to Jesus.

In other words, sometimes, quite frankly, the truth itself is what is offensive. Jesus knew that in his own day, of course. Do you remember the remarkable passage in John 8:45? He says to some interlocutors, "Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!" It would be bad enough if that sentence began with a concessive in-

stead of a causal: “*Although* I tell the truth, you do not believe me.” That would be tragic. But the word by which Jesus introduces his charge is a causal: “*Because* I tell the truth, you do not believe me.”

So again, what are your options? Tell untruths in order to get people to believe? What then will people believe? Untruths.

It can be very discouraging to articulate the truth, to preach the truth, only to discover that many people, far from simply listening and then rejecting the truth, write you off as a narrow-minded bigot. That is truly disheartening. It is worth remembering that in the first three centuries of the Christian church, until the time of Constantine, the most common pagan criticism against Christianity was that it was too narrow, too exclusive. Sound familiar?

Some of us have responded to the call to cross-cultural ministry, and we may have been tempted to think of ourselves as fledgling heroes of the faith. We may have read our share of missionary biographies and imagined how we, too, might be used of God to preach the gospel with great power and fruitfulness, instrumental in seeing hundreds converted, maybe thousands. Then, when we actually get there, we discover how difficult and even dangerous some places can be. We like to hear the stories of preachers and missionaries who were privileged to see enormous fruitfulness, but then, there’s always a Samuel Zwemer, who preached forty years in the Muslim world and saw eight converts—and five of them were killed. It’s enough to make a person lose heart.

Even Paul is tempted to lose heart, but, he says, “since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” 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. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (2 Cor. 4:2–3)

Elsewhere, Paul faces other temptations. He writes in 2:17:

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.

It is possible to shape your message to increase the income. Paul faced this temptation and rejected it.

A very different temptation emerges in 11:20–21:

In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!

In other words, some people look for Christian preachers and missionaries who are bullies. They somehow feel secure if a strong man is telling them where to step off. But how does that breed character, the humility of Christ, godliness, and maturity that trains up leaders? “I admit that I was too weak for that,” the apostle Paul says, his pen dripping in sarcasm.

No, no. He has resolved not to use deception, not to distort the Word of God, and not to peddle the Word for money. He is not going to try to win popularity or increase his income by slanting the truth. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, he says, we Christians “commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (4:2). What is required is courage, backbone, resolve. Our priority is submission to the Word of God. So if you want to know what biblical mission looks like, hear this: gospel ministry demands unqualified integrity.

## **2. The Gospel Itself Displays the Glory of Christ (vv. 4–6)**

Our task is to herald the gospel even if some cannot see its light. Paul says:

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. (4:4)

Quite some years ago, I knew a young woman at the University of Cambridge, a graduate student to whom I had given a copy of the book *Basic Christianity* by John Stott. She read it carefully enough that she looked up a lot of the biblical references that littered its pages. When I asked her some weeks later what she made of it, she said, "I've decided that Christianity is for good people like you and Carol [her Christian roommate], but it's not for me."

How on earth does an intelligent graduate student at Cambridge manage to read an author like Stott, who writes with great clarity and limpid prose, and think that the gospel is all about being "good people"? When I heard her words, this passage came to mind: "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." They cannot see it.

What exactly does this gospel display? "The glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (v. 4)—or again, as Paul puts it in verse 5: we preach "not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." The notion of Jesus as the image of God is bound up in Paul's thought with the incarnation. Do you want to know what God looks like, when, after all, no one can gaze on him and live? Study Jesus. He is the image of God. Similarly, the epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory" (1:3). That's a bit like saying he's the light of God's light, the shining of his shining. He's the exact imprint of who he is. He's not only the effulgence, the radiance of God's glory, but "the exact representation of his being" (1:3). He is the image of God.

The gospel is bound up in the first place with Jesus and who he is—not just Jesus as a cipher, but Jesus who is thus identified with God himself. Small wonder we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Undoubtedly that title was his before the world began: he was the Son of God before he became a human being, the man Jesus. But the confession "Jesus Christ as Lord" is bound up with his vindication as the resurrected God-man. His sacrifice has been accepted. Although he emptied himself and became a nobody, dying the ignominious death of a condemned criminal, God highly exalted him and gave

him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee must bow (Phil. 2:9–10). We preach Jesus Christ as Lord.

In other words, this confession is predicated on Jesus's death and resurrection, on his cross work. We are never to imagine that the word *Jesus* is a magical religious "abracadabra" word: mention the name *Jesus* and you'll get answers to your prayers. Rather, we preach God incarnate—Christ crucified, risen again, vindicated, and sovereign—so that all of God's authority (according to 1 Corinthians 15) is mediated through him, until every knee bows on the last day and the last enemy, death itself, is destroyed. That is what we preach.

It is always worth asking, "What is the gospel?" We have to remember, first of all, that the gospel is news. That is what it is: dramatically powerful news, very largely good news. What do you do with news? You announce it. It is news about Jesus—about who Jesus is and what he has done by God's own decree, especially in his cross, resurrection, and ascension, in order to redeem men and women for himself from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, to constitute this new blood-bought community as his church, the assembly of the living God, until, in God's purposes, the entire creation is swallowed up in a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, and there is resurrection existence on the last day. That's the good news.

The good news is not belief. Faith is the proper result of the good news. The good news is not an exhortation to turn over a new leaf. Certainly repentance is required because of the good news, but we announce *what God has done in Christ Jesus*. That's why Paul places much emphasis in our new covenant ministry on announcing and preaching Jesus. What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and in consequence of this, we are "your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). The transformation, the obedience of faith, the love to do the Word of God—all of this flows out of the gospel. These things are the inevitable result of the gospel as it takes hold of people's lives. But what we preach, what we announce, is news about Jesus.

So if we have come to see the light of the gospel, Paul tells us, it is because God has “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” (v. 6). In other words, if we have come to see the truth, it is not because we are brighter, more insightful, or Western. It is because God has somehow illumined our hearts. He has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of his glory.

The language is evocative of creation: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). The darkness could not stop it. Similarly, when we now preach this gospel, every conversion is a result of God’s speaking again and saying, in effect: “Let there be light! Let light shine out of the darkness!”—and the darkness cannot stop it. Here is sovereign regeneration. Otherwise, the darkness remains. Bright graduate students at Cambridge read Stott and still remain in the darkness until God says, “Let there be light!” Then there is light.

My confidence, therefore, in heralding the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, in obedience to his command, as a fruit of the mercy we have received in this ministry, is not that everyone will be impressed by my articulation of the truth and become adoring Christians. Rather, my confidence is that, again and again, whether to many or to few, God will say, “Let there be light”—and blind men and women will see. His light will shine into more hearts to give them the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. If you want to know what the biblical basis for missions looks like, hear this: the gospel displays the glory of Christ.

### **3. Gospel Ministry Is Characterized by Paradoxical Death to Self and Overflowing Life in Christ (vv. 7–12)**

I have a son. When he was a lad of about fifteen or sixteen, although his serious instruments were violin and viola, he was one of those chaps who could pick up almost any instrument and pretty shortly

could get some decent sounds out of it. Somewhere along the line, he picked up an Irish penny whistle, and he became pretty good at it. One day he said to me: “Dad, you know what would be nice? If you made me a box for this.” He knew, of course, that I dabble a bit in woodwork. I said: “Nicholas, that’s a seven-dollar instrument. If I made a decent box, it would be worth ten times that amount, maybe more. If you lose this instrument or it goes rusty or something, buy another one. Buy ten! They’re cheap.” He said, “Yeah, Dad, but it’d be cool.” Well, how could I possibly resist that? So I bought a nice piece of walnut, my favorite wood to work with, and shaped it and routed it out in the inside. I put in a velvet lining for the instrument, and shaped the wood to receive inlaid magnets, a piano hinge on the back, and, on the top, an inlaid brass plaque with his name, “Nicholas J. Carson.” I buffed up that box and put a nice sheen on it. When I gave it to him, I told him it was his anti-gospel box. He said, “What do you mean?” I said: “Well, according to 2 Corinthians 4, with respect to the gospel, all the treasure is on the inside and on the outside is the cheap clay pot. This is the reverse.”

But some of us act, now and then, as if all of the potency for the music of the gospel comes from the box. Paul won’t have it:

But we have this treasure [Christ and the gospel] in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power [the power that actually transforms people] is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Cor. 4:7–9)

If you have read on in 2 Corinthians to chapter 11, you know that Paul reminds you of some of the things that he has suffered for the sake of the gospel. By the time of his writing of this letter, he has been shipwrecked three times—and that’s before the shipwreck recounted in Acts 27. Once, he spent a day and a night on the open sea. Five times he received the synagogue whipping—thirty-nine blows—and three times the rod of the Romans. They just kept going until they killed you, grew tired of it, or their com-

manding officer told them to stop. Besides all the other things that he mentions—frequent hunger, dangers on the sea, dangers from brigands—Paul says he faces the danger of false brothers. He has seen it all.

In other words, he is often hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down—but not destroyed. He summarizes these experiences in verse 10 of our chapter:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

This is another way of saying that we are supposed to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We are to die to self. Yet, there is a “so that” halfway through verse 10, and another in verse 11:

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.

In other words, the appeal is not simply to suffering and sacrifice. There is a recognition that God is no one’s debtor. We willingly endure suffering and self-death *so that* the power of the gospel will work through our lives—Christ’s resurrection life actually working within us to bring about its own glory and reward.

You recall what Paul says elsewhere in this book (2 Corinthians 12). He has been suffering from what he calls “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan” (v. 7). He prays earnestly that the Lord will take it away, but the Lord simply says, in effect, “I’m going to add more grace instead.” Ultimately, Paul recognizes the superiority of experiencing such divine strength in the context of his own weakness, and he says, “I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, *so that* Christ’s power may rest on me” (v. 9).

When I was a boy, there was a lot of emphasis in missionary meetings, missionary calls, and the like on the importance of sacrifice. God knows we need to hear that side of things. We used to sing a song that virtually no one remembers any more:



So send I you to labor unrewarded,  
To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown;  
To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing.  
So send I you to toil for me alone.

So send I you to bind the bruised and broken,  
O'er wandering souls to work, to weep, to wake;  
To bear the burdens of a world weary,  
So send I you to suffer for my sake.

So send I you to loneliness and longing,  
With heart ahung'ring for the loved and known,  
Forsaking home and kindred, friend and dear one—  
So send I you to know my love alone.

So send I you to leave your life's ambition,  
To die to dear desire, self-will resign;  
To labor long, and love where men revile you,  
So send I you to lose your life in mine.

So send I you to hearts made hard by hatred,  
To eyes made blind because they will not see;  
To spend, though it be blood, to spend and spare not,  
So send I you to taste of Calvary.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, that's right. But it's only half the truth. For although Paul says he is hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, he also says, in 4:10, that it is "*so that* the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." And again, verse 11: "*so that* his life may also be revealed in our mortal body." He also says, verse 15: "All this is for your benefit, *so that* the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God." And again, back in 3:18: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who

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<sup>2</sup>From the hymn "So Send I You" by Edith Margaret Clarkson, 1954. Copyright © 1964 New Spring Publishing Inc. (ASCAP) (adm. at CapitolCMGPublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

is the Spirit.” Indeed, he insists in 4:17–18: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

These two emphases necessarily hang together. We are crucified with him and we see glory with him. We die to self and we experience more of his life. You cannot have one without the other. They hang together. You do not crave self-sacrifice because you are a masochist. God is no one’s debtor. But in following Jesus, who went to the cross, we learn to pick up our crosses and follow him, for that too is part of our gospel mission, knowing full well that as he was vindicated, so we too will reign with him.

So if you want to know what biblical mission looks like, hear this: gospel ministry is characterized by paradoxical death to self and overflowing life in Christ.

What is the biblical basis for missions?

What we find in these verses is not so much an abstract definition of the biblical basis for missions as a mind-expanding depiction of how the mission of gospel ministry works: how it is tied to gospel truth, is discharged with unqualified integrity, reverberates with God’s passion to display the glory of his Son Jesus Christ, and is heralded in the context of paradoxical self-death, which, nevertheless, overflows with the transforming life of Christ.

Here is the heart of biblical mission.





## THE GOSPEL COALITION

**The Gospel Coalition** is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

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–2 Corinthians 5:20

In this collection of biblical expositions, seven prominent Bible teachers lay the biblical foundation for missions based on the apostle Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians, addressing a number of oft-debated topics along the way. Chapters include:

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**D. A. CARSON** (PhD, Cambridge University) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he has taught since 1978. He also serves as president of the Gospel Coalition, and has written or edited nearly 60 books, including *Scandalous*, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, and *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*.

**KATHLEEN B. NIELSON** (PhD, Vanderbilt University) serves as the director of women’s initiatives for the Gospel Coalition. She is a popular conference speaker and the author of numerous books, including *Ruth and Esther: A 12-Week Study*, and co-editor (with D. A. Carson) of *Here Is Our God*.

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