

JOHN MACARTHUR

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REMAINING  
FAITHFUL  
*in*  
MINISTRY

*9 Essential Convictions  
for Every Pastor*



“It seems only right that a book bearing this title should come from the pen of one whose life and ministry exemplify such faithfulness. Here is a helpful, challenging, resounding cry to the rest of us to keep on!”

**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

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Remaining Faithful  
in Ministry

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# Remaining Faithful in Ministry

*9 Essential Convictions for Every Pastor*

John MacArthur

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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*Remaining Faithful in Ministry: 9 Essential Convictions for Every Pastor*

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FIFTY YEARS OF  
FAITHFULNESS

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The  
work  
of the  
Word

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2 TIMOTHY 4:2

# Introduction

Four successive generations of my immediate ancestors included men who faithfully served the Lord as pastors. Two of them (my father and grandfather) were still alive and engaged in full-time ministry when I came along, and their steadfast devotion to serving Christ made a lasting impact on me.

My grandfather died of cancer while I was still a young boy. I remember vividly that before he became too sick to preach, he had prepared a sermon titled “Heavenly Records.” His one regret as he lay on his deathbed was that he wasn’t going to have an opportunity to preach that last sermon. My dad had copies of the manuscript printed and distributed them at the funeral. So my grandfather preached a sermon on heaven *from* heaven.

My father served the Lord faithfully until he died at the age of ninety-one. I watched and learned from him over the years—literally a lifetime of faithful ministry—and he passed on to me a rich legacy of dedicated ministry. His influence on me is immeasurable.

When I enrolled in seminary as a young man, my dad introduced me to Dr. Charles Lee Feinberg, who at the time was the world’s leading evangelical authority on Hebrew, Jewish history, and Old Testament studies. Dr. Feinberg grew up as an Orthodox

Jew and was trained to be a rabbi before he was converted to Christ. He had a PhD in archaeology and Semitic languages. He loved the Scriptures, and he took a particular interest in me. His instruction and encouragement were invaluable to me throughout those years in seminary.

So I was richly blessed with a number of close, highly qualified mentors who helped prepare me for ministry. I'm indebted to all of them and deeply grateful for everything they taught me.

But when people ask who has been my greatest influence and model for pastoral ministry, I have to say hands down it is the apostle Paul. During my earliest years in ministry I was captivated by the power of his example. I've always seen myself as a kind of latter-day version of Timothy, trying my best (though often frustrated by my own failures) to learn from and emulate Paul—especially his courage, his faithfulness, his deep love for Christ, and his willingness to stand alone.

Of all the words Paul ever left under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for us to consider, the text that has left the most indelible impression on my heart is 2 Timothy 4:6–8, the apostle's last recorded declaration of faith before giving his life for the gospel's sake. Just after encouraging Timothy with the words "fulfill your ministry" (v. 5), he writes:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

To come to the very end of life and be able to say all those things with such confident assurance is all too rare. In Paul's case, it is especially striking. It's an exultation rather than an elegy. But it comes from the pen of an apostle whose utter disdain for boasting was well known. Paul's steadfast refusal to exalt himself is evident throughout his epistles. So this final declaration of triumph must be read as an expression of deep gratitude, settled peace, and sweet relief.

No wonder. Perhaps no other minister has ever faced as many hardships, as much opposition, or such relentless suffering as the apostle Paul. Yet he followed Christ with unwavering faithfulness to the very end. Here's how he summarized his ministerial experiences. He says he served the Lord

with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:23–28)

Despite all those hardships, Paul was still devoted to Christ when he drew his final breath. Amazingly, when he “finished the race,” there were no earthly crowds to celebrate his triumph. No one gave him a trophy. No one hailed him or his achievements.

Notice, also, that as he began writing his last recorded words, his second epistle to Timothy, Paul didn't sound triumphant at all. From a human viewpoint there is a pervasive loneliness in that closing chapter of the apostle's final epistle. The thankless world was about to chop off his head. His life was about to end in ignominious fashion. This tireless man who wrote a significant portion of the New Testament had also planted more than a dozen strategic churches and trained countless other pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. He had personally taken the gospel to multitudes across the Mediterranean region—from Jerusalem and Antioch to Rome. But he was now going to die virtually all alone. To all earthly appearances, this was a tragic ending to a disappointing life.

But Paul himself had a better, more heavenly, perspective. He was neither frustrated nor disillusioned. Just before giving his life for the gospel, the apostle wrote this one final inspired epistle to Timothy, the protégé to whom he would hand the baton. The tone of his instruction and counsel suggests that as Paul's death drew near, his spiritual son Timothy may have been totally discouraged—perhaps even on the brink of bailing out of the ministry.

Paul faces facts squarely, without fear or regret. He does not downplay or try to gloss over the fact that many of his former fellow laborers and disciples had already forsaken him, and even those who were spiritually aligned with him were keeping their distance. He practically began that final epistle to Timothy by writing, "You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). Then in his final chapter, he added these details:

Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! (4:10–16)

What amazes me is that Paul was neither stymied nor embittered by all the adversity. In fact, he saw his circumstances as an occasion to give God glory. His very next words were: “But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (vv. 17–18).

Thus Paul remained faithful to the end. He persevered out of sheer love for the Lord, for the simple joy of obedience, with his hopes fixed firmly on heaven.

That attitude is the key essential for anyone seeking to be a faithful minister of Christ. Paul said, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 4:16). It is a mandate that has hung over my heart and conscience for all the years I have been in ministry.

A question I have long pondered is, How does someone do that? How can a person go through every ministerial setback Paul

experienced and remain steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord? How can we cultivate that same kind of commitment? How can we finish the race triumphantly when our course is filled with seemingly insurmountable obstacles—“afflict[ions] at every turn—fighting without and fear within,” as Paul himself describes it (2 Cor. 7:5)?

Detailed answers to those questions are outlined by the apostle himself in 2 Corinthians 4. That is the primary chapter I want to explore in this booklet.

### **The Background of 2 Corinthians**

The apostle Paul wrote his second inspired epistle to the Corinthians during a period in his ministry when he had every reason to be discouraged. He had founded the church in Corinth and served as pastor there for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). His missionary work necessitated his moving on, but he kept in close contact with the Corinthians. His first inspired epistle to that church is a long, detailed breakdown of several problems that were troubling the church. It is an exhausting array of very difficult pastoral challenges, but Paul answers each issue with fatherly kindness, rich wisdom, and simple clarity. Through it all, he shows a deep and genuine concern for the Corinthians. He is patient, helpful, encouraging—the epitome of a kind-hearted shepherd who genuinely knew and loved the sheep.

By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, however, he was under severe attack in Corinth by some peddlers of false doctrine—phony apostles—who had arrived on the scene in Paul’s absence and infiltrated the Corinthian church. The false teachers were doing their best to destroy Paul’s reputation. They were aggressively trying to undermine his influence in that church. Because

the teaching of these men was a corruption of the gospel, it posed a serious threat to the spiritual health and testimony of the Corinthian church. The false apostles had focused their attack on Paul personally. Both his character as well as the content of his teaching were under relentless assault. So he was forced to defend himself. He does so in an interesting way—never boasting of his own accomplishments or otherwise trying to elevate himself, but by exalting Christ in a way that exposed the hypocrisy and self-serving falsehoods of the false teachers.

The gist and the focal point of Paul's self-defense is summarized in 2 Corinthians 4:5: "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." That is a succinct statement of every true minister's calling and commission. The gospel is a message about Christ, and at all times he is to be the singular focus of the message we proclaim. False apostles and hirelings always seem to find a way to shift attention to themselves. They make themselves the central character of every anecdote. They paint themselves as the hero of every story they tell. Thus they make their preaching little more than a display of their own egos. Pulpits today are full of men who constantly preach themselves.

No one—least of all the Corinthians—could legitimately accuse the apostle Paul of doing that. Here's how he described his ministry in Corinth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Even when the audience demanded something else, or something more, Paul preached Christ. "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified" (1:22–23). In Galatians 6:14 he said, "Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." That was his perspective.



I think when he wrote, “What we proclaim is not ourselves,” Paul probably had in mind words from the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah about prophets who spoke out of their own imaginations: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD’” (Jer. 23:16). As Jesus said in John 7:18, “The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory.” Paul was definitely not seeking his own glory. Instead, he says, “We proclaim . . . Jesus Christ as Lord, *with ourselves as your servants* for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

The word “servants” somewhat tones down the force of Paul’s statement. He’s not describing himself as a butler dressed in expensive finery or a waiter at a classy restaurant. The word he uses means “slaves”—human chattel; someone who is legally the property of someone else. He’s acknowledging that he has been bought with a price, and he is no longer his own (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19–20). That conviction was the starting point of Paul’s entire ministry philosophy.

As he unpacks his philosophy in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul gives us a detailed answer to the question of how he remained faithful in the midst of so much adversity. He begins the chapter with this triumphant declaration: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart” (v. 1).

Notice, first, that phrase at the end of the verse: “we do not lose heart.” Verse 16 repeats the exact same words. So the brief testimony Paul gives in this chapter is bracketed with identical statements about his determination to serve Christ without “los[ing] heart.”

English translations tend to understate what Paul was saying. The King James Version says, “We faint not.” Modern translations typically say, “We don’t give up” (or some close equivalent). The Greek verb Paul uses (*egkakeō*) is a combination of two common words. The first is a form of the preposition *en*, which speaks of being at a state of rest or surrender “in” or “among” something. The main root is a noun, *kakeō*, meaning “wickedness” or “depravity.” So the sense of the expression is, “We do not give in to evil”—much stronger than if he were merely saying, “We don’t grow weary.”

In other words, this is not only about resisting fatigue, discouragement, or cowardice. There’s a powerful note of holy defiance in Paul’s tone. What he means is, “We don’t defect; we refuse to give in to evil in any way.”

What prompts him to say that in this context? In a subtle way, he is acknowledging by implication that his experience with the Corinthians had the potential to drive him to abandon the ministry. That problem-ridden church had caused him such deep difficulty and penetrating disappointment that a lesser person might have been tempted to throw in the towel. The Corinthians’ sins, their shallowness, their rebellion, and their fickleness toward Paul are all plainly evident in the two inspired epistles he wrote to them. There was moral impurity in that church, jealousies, lawsuits, incest, and shameful desecration of the Lord’s Table. On top of all that, their criticism of him was heartbreaking, and he tells them that (12:11–14).

In 1 Corinthians 16:12 Paul says he urged Apollos to take a team of qualified leaders to Corinth to try to resolve the problems there. But the Corinthian church was so fraught with trouble that

Apollos had no desire to return there. In short, this was a church no one wanted to pastor.

Paul actually wrote them at least four letters. Two are recorded in the New Testament, and the other two (not part of the inspired canon) are mentioned in the two we have. From the content of the letters, it is evident that whatever was remedied by Paul's admonitions in 1 Corinthians fell short of the mark, because the church so quickly opened up to these theological mischief makers who had an agenda to destroy the church's confidence in Paul. These self-appointed false apostles relentlessly accused and maligned the true apostle.

Paul paid a visit to Corinth that did not go well. He went away feeling worse than before he arrived. At that point he wrote a severe letter to them. Also, in the wake of that disastrous visit, he resolved not to go back to Corinth again (2 Cor. 2:1).

But when it became clear that these dangerous false teachers were gaining a dominant influence in the church, Paul's heart was broken. It was the kind of thing that could make a minister abandon the ministry. They were blasting his character. They were questioning his credentials. Perhaps they were exploiting his controversy with Peter (see Gal. 2:11). They were slandering him in every way possible. They said he was unimpressive as a speaker. They made this charge as personally insulting as possible, saying he was not only unskilled as an orator (2 Cor. 11:6), but his personal presence was contemptible as well (10:10). It was a depressing experience to work with that church.

Paul barely concealed his own frustration with the Corinthian church throughout this second epistle. You see it from the very start in the emphasis he gives to God's mercy and comfort: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the

Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction” (1:3–4). In chapter 2 he talks about pain. It is the pain of sorrow—his own pain in the aftermath of that disastrous visit to Corinth, and the Corinthians’ pain when they received his severe letter. Chapters 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, and 13 all address problems in that assembly, especially their sour, cynical attitude toward the self-sacrificial apostle who had founded that church and to whom they owed everything. Here is a man who is dealing with an obdurate and supremely disappointing congregation of people into whose lives he had poured his own life and energy. So when he lists all his hardships in 11:23–27 and punctuates it by saying, “Apart from [these] other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (v. 28), that statement is loaded with significance.

Yet in spite of all the antagonism, calamity, and deprivation he faced throughout every phase of his ministry, Paul did not give in to evil. Despite the problems he had to deal with in every church he planted, all the opposition he encountered, all the discouragements that assaulted him, all the suffering he endured, he nevertheless remained loyal and true to Christ in every respect. Of all the characters we meet in Scripture, other than Christ himself, Paul best embodies indefatigable faith, unflagging persistence, and steadfast determination. There is no more dramatic biblical example of pure devotion to Christ. In 2 Corinthians 4 the apostle himself explains the factors that contributed to this remarkable perseverance.

Here are nine reasons Paul did not lose heart. *One*, he saw himself as a steward of God, entrusted with a new and better covenant. *Two*, he saw that role as not only a high privilege but also a great mercy extended to him by the grace of God. *Three*,

he was determined to keep his own heart pure and upright, and he understood that faithfulness is a key element in the pursuit of true integrity. *Four*, he had one controlling passion—namely, his devotion to preaching the Word of God. *Five*, he understood that God’s Word never returns void (Isa. 55:11), so he was not stymied by man-made standards of success or failure. *Six*, he was a humble man, not looking for accolades or recognition, but pursuing God’s glory at all costs. *Seven*, he knew that God uses our suffering as a means of sanctifying us, and he was eager to be a partaker in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. *Eight*, he was familiar with the great heroes of faith in the Old Testament, and he sought to emulate their courage. And *nine*, he had his heart fixed on heaven and things above, knowing full well that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with such glory.

Those are nine unwavering convictions that kept Paul faithful. You’ll see them clearly as we work our way through the text of 2 Corinthians 4. Buckle in, and we’ll take some time to examine each one of those ideas in closer detail.

Perhaps no one else has ever faced as much hardship, opposition, or relentless suffering as the apostle Paul. And yet, through it all, Paul stood firm in Christ and remained faithful—to the very end.

The power of Paul's example has captivated veteran pastor John MacArthur for years, and here he outlines nine unwavering convictions that contributed to this remarkable perseverance. In an age when pastoral failure and burnout are increasingly common, this book is a call to endurance in ministry, encouraging pastors to stand strong in their role and not lose heart, regardless of what God sends their way.

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"A power-packed guide for the times that instantaneously clears away muddle-headed thinking about gospel ministry. If it doesn't make you want to be a more faithful servant of Christ, beware."

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Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

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