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**We Do Not Lose Heart:
Theological Encouragement for Endurance and Opportunities for Reflection
from 2 Corinthians 4:1-16**

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Telling a group of ministry leaders that ministry is difficult is like telling a group of Olympic swimmers that water is wet. It goes without saying. To say that the last three to four years of ministry has been especially difficult goes without saying as well. Recent research has shown the negative impact the last few years have had on pastors' confidence and zeal for ministry. One survey showed that in 2015, 72% of pastors said they felt "very satisfied" with their job as a pastor. As of 2022, those numbers dropped an astonishing 20 points, to merely 52% of pastors. Further, the percentage of pastors who say they have gone through a season when they significantly doubted their calling more than doubled, rising from 24% in 2015 to 55% in 2022.¹ The top three reasons given as to why pastors have considered quitting include "the immense stress of the job," feeling "lonely and isolated," and "current political divisions."² Numerous books and resources have recently been published to address this troubling trend in pastoral ministry.³

The difficulty of ministry is not a new phenomenon, of course. Long before recent elections and the COVID pandemic, ministers of the gospel have taken up their cross and

¹ Barna, "Excerpt: A Rapid Decline in Pastoral Security," March 15, 2023. <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-security-confidence/>.

² Barna, "Pastors Share Top Reasons They've Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year," April 27, 2022. <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>.

³ For just a sample of recently published books on the topics of pastoral burnout and the difficulties of pastoral ministry see Joel R. Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020); Tom Nelson, *The Flourishing Pastor: Recovering the Lost Art of Shepherd Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021); Jonathan K. Dodson, *The Unwavering Pastor: Leading the Church with Grace in Divisive Times* (The Good Book Company, 2022); Michael A.G. Haykin, Brian Croft, and James B. Carroll, *Pastoral Friendship: The Forgotten Piece in a Persevering Ministry* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2022); Glenn Packiam, *The Resilient Pastor: Leading Your Church in a Rapidly Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022); Mark Dance, *Start to Finish: The Pastor's Guide to Leading a Resilient Life and Ministry* (Brentwood, TN: B&H, 2023); Sean Nemecek, *The Weary Leader's Guide to Burnout: A Journey from Exhaustion to Wholeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023); Jeremy Writebol, *Pastor, Jesus is Enough: Hope for the Weary, the Burned Out, and the Broken* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023); Jason Young and Jonathan Malm, *Don't Burn Out, Burn Bright: How to Thrive in Ministry for the Long Haul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2023).

endured all manners of suffering. The ministry of the apostle Paul was especially marked by suffering, including, but not limited to, “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28).⁴ The pastoral heart and subsequent sufferings of Paul are clear in 2 Corinthians, which gives the letter “a strong claim to be recognized as the pastoral epistle par excellence.”⁵

One source of anxiety for Paul was the need to answer accusations leveled at him concerning the legitimacy of his ministry. To answer opposition that had arisen, first, from an individual in the church at Corinth (e.g., 2 Cor. 2:5, 7:12), and then, from a larger group (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:3-5, 18-21; 2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1-3), Paul gives significant time in 2 Corinthians to defending his apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 1:12-7:16; 10:1-13:10). A portion of his defense includes examples of the kinds of suffering he endured as a servant of Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-29). Despite the opposition he faced from some in the church at Corinth and the trials he endured away from Corinth, Paul desires to make it clear that he did not waver in his ministry. The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:1, “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.” He repeats this phrase in verse 16, “So we do not lose heart.” This word (*enkakeō*), translated here as “lose heart,” is used in only four other places in the New Testament (Lk 18:1; Gal. 6:9; Eph. 3:13; 2 Thess. 3:13) and means to “lose enthusiasm” or to “be discouraged.” Some have preferred “to be cowardly or timid.”⁶ In either reading, Paul describes his perseverance in ministry despite many trials. Again, if anyone had reason to experience a loss of enthusiasm, drive, joy, patience, or boldness in their ministry, Paul would be the obvious candidate.

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all English Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

⁵ Verlyn D. Verbrugge and Murray J. Harris, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, TEBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2008), eBook.

⁶ See David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 204; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2014), eBook.

Paul's words are specific to his own experience, however as inspired Scripture, all ministry leaders benefit from the truths Paul presents as the foundation for his enduring ministry. Paul Barnett explains, "the ministry of the new covenant was not confined to the generation of the apostle, but *continues* until the Lord comes."⁷ He continues,

the apostolic message did not cease with Paul but was to be entrusted to others (2 Tim. 2:2), so that the gospel torch is passed from generation to generation until the Lord comes. Thus the greater part of his teachings about ministry stand as a model and an inspiration to subsequent generations of missionaries and pastors. His comments about ministry...remain throughout the aeon to shape and direct the lives of the Lord's servants.⁸

Paul's determination and perseverance in the face of ministry challenges are both humbling and inspiring. We do well to consider the life of Paul so that we might persevere in carrying the "gospel torch" in our particular contexts.

While identifying and treating the causes of pastoral burnout is complex and includes assessments of mental, spiritual, and physical health, I believe that 2 Corinthians 4 provides unique theological encouragement for endurance in ministry, highlighting the important connection between mind and heart. Paul's usage of "therefore" (v. 1) and "so" (v. 16) indicate the motivations, or reasons, for Paul's endurance in ministry. Further, Paul's usage of "but" (v. 2, *alla*) introduces a section describing his ministry as a "sharp contrast" to a ministry characterized as having lost "heart."⁹ Thus, Paul's language in chapter four provides both *reasons* for perseverance as well as *evidences* of perseverance. While much more could be gleaned from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, the scope of this paper will be limited to 4:1-16, those

⁷ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 49. Emphasis original.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁹ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 235.

truths sandwiched between Paul's two declarations that "we do not lose heart." This paper will briefly introduce seven theological truths that offer encouragement for endurance in gospel ministry along with corresponding opportunities for personal reflection.

1. The new covenant is the context of our service, not the reward.

"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." (v. 1)

Paul recognized that for him to be a minister of the new covenant (3:4-18), and even more, a member of the new covenant, was an incredible gift of God's grace.¹⁰ Neither was something he deserved. This, of course, is true for us as well. None of us deserve to be justified before God. None of us deserve the privilege of serving Jesus and his Church. And yet, we are tempted to forget this. We can easily begin to conflate our standing in Christ with our ministries for Christ. We would never say it out loud, but we begin to act as if the grounds of our acceptance before God is the work we do for him. When that happens our sense of righteousness increases when attendance, budgets, and approval increase. Our sense of righteousness decreases, however, when those things decrease. When this is true of our hearts, it is not difficult to see the toll ministry will take on them. If our core identity is shaped by what we do for God rather than what God has done for us, we will not be able to walk through difficult ministry seasons confident of God's steadfast love.

The first source of encouragement for endurance in gospel ministry, then, comes from the gospel itself. We must not forget to rest in the same message that we are striving to proclaim to

¹⁰ See also Philippians 1:7 where Paul describes the partnering church as "partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel."

others in our ministry: We stand righteous before God because of the righteousness of Christ given to us by grace alone through faith alone, and that righteousness cannot be lost, nor will it ever be taken away. And this is true on our best days of ministry—and our worst. Remember, we are saved by Jesus, not by ministry. And both are gifts. Jared Wilson encourages us, writing,

Herein is the justification for the sin-prone pastor (by which I mean “pastor”): because of Christ’s perfect work on your behalf, your failure, your daily anxiety, your unwillingness, your stress, your sin, your brokenness, your ineptitude, your ignorance, your awfulness, your regrets, your pride, and your arrogance are no match for the deep and abiding grace of God given to you before time began and now and forevermore.¹¹

The circumstances of your ministry will fluctuate, however, because of your faith in the finished work of Christ, your standing before God never will. The overwhelming realization of the grace it is to know the Lord—and to serve him—can provide endurance when our ministries are not what we might want them to be.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be attributed to an underlying belief that your righteousness is based on your ministry performance? Has ministry become your default identity? For example, when you face criticism, are you humble enough to consider it, or do you become overly defensive because your very identity has been questioned? Are you tempted to despair when you compare your ministry with someone else’s? Does the joy of your salvation fluctuate with your sense of that week’s ministry “success?”*

¹¹ Jared C. Wilson, *The Pastor’s Justification: Applying the Work of Christ in Your Life and Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 144.

2. The gospel validates our ministry, not the other way around.

“But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.” (v. 2)

“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.” (v. 5)

Defending himself, Paul maintains the complete integrity of his ministry. He does not practice ministry in ways that can be described as “disgraceful” or “underhanded.” On the contrary, those who accuse him of these things can be described in these ways themselves. They are “peddlers of God’s word” (2:17), “false apostles [and] deceitful workmen” (11:13). Paul, however, will not practice “cunning,” a word that literally means “ready or able to do anything.”¹² Paul uses this word to describe Satan in the way he deceived Eve (11:3), a fitting description of the “super-apostles” (11:5) Paul accuses of being Satan’s “servants” (11:14-15). Rather, Paul refuses to “tamper with God’s word” (4:2), persevering in the proclamation of Jesus and not himself (4:5; cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). “Paul never compromises the truth of the gospel even when the odds against him seem overwhelming.”¹³

The accusation from which Paul needed to defend himself is an accusation we will all face at times, whether from opponents or from our own hearts: the validity of our ministry should be determined by ministry results. For Paul to suffer as he did, then, meant that his message should be questioned. Paul, however, maintains just the opposite. His ministry was

¹² Martin, *2 Corinthians*, eBook.

¹³ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 207.

valid because his message was valid. The temptation to question our ministries by perceived ministry “success” is no different today. This pressure and desire for results regularly tempt ministers to practice and preach a message that might be defended as more “relevant” or “contextual” when in reality should be deemed “disgraceful” and “underhanded.” The “attractional” model of ministry, for example, often employs “everything short of sin to reach people,” driven by the perceived desires and values of potential consumers. We should strive to remove all unnecessary obstacles for people to hear and respond to the gospel, of course. We should not, however, be tempted to distort the plain teachings of Scripture, be deceitful in how we speak of following Christ, or minimize the need for repentance to attract more people, all as a means for validating our ministry. It is the faithful proclamation of the gospel that validates faithful ministry.

As Paul will explain in this passage, those we minister to live in darkness (v. 3-4) and are in desperate need to see the light of Christ (v. 6). What are we to do then? Spurgeon emphasized the necessity of keeping Christ central to our message with two creative illustrations. As one inhabits a dark home, he said, “You cannot pump out the darkness; but if you fill the house with light the darkness will vanish of itself. Preach Christ, and away goes the god of this world. Exalt Christ, and down goes the devil.” As a rider and a horse, he said, “The gospel is glorious in its going when it bears Jesus in the saddle; but if you preach yourself, or human philosophy the gospel will fling you over its head.”¹⁴ Ministry is difficult, but difficulty does not justify distortion and deceit. A ministry celebrated by millions is not worth a ministry rejected by God.

¹⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Gospel of the Glory of Christ,” Metropolitan Tabernacle, March 31, 1889.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be due to a lack of trust in God's work through the gospel? Are you tempted to distort, edit, or tamper with Scripture because you believe that ministry might then become easier?*

3. Ministry is more than an intellectual battle; it is also a spiritual one.

"3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (v. 3-4)

Paul identifies the clear enemy of Christ and his ministry: the "god of this world." Satan, in opposing the advance of the gospel, has "blinded the minds" of unbelievers so that they will not see Christ who is the light of the world (John 8:12). While Paul speaks of a veil over the minds of the Jews in chapter three, we know that the activity of Satan is not restricted to the Jews alone (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:11; 11:3, 14). Jesus specifically commissions Paul as his sent ambassador to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18a).

While Paul's apostolic commissioning was framed as opposing Satan, we too, are commissioned to bring the light of the gospel to a world with "blinded" minds.¹⁵ Barnett offers one explanation of Paul's diagnosis of this intellectual and spiritual battle in ministry, writing, "The Achilles' heel of man is his mind, since he is so prone to intellectual pride, especially in matters to do with religion. It was with unerring judgment about human vulnerability, therefore,

¹⁵ Graham A. Cole, *Against the Darkness: The Doctrine of Angels, Satan, and Demons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 101. See also Payne's connection of Acts 13:47 to this discussion in J. D. Payne, *Theology of Mission: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 103.

that Satan *blinded*, not the emotions, or the will, but the *mind* of man.”¹⁶ We are all aware of the intellectual battle we face in ministering to people who have been discipled far more by our culture than by Christ. This awareness often pushes us to regular cultural analysis, striving to be up to date on the latest philosophical and social trends. And while this is good and right, it can have the nasty side effect of veiling *our* minds to who is the ultimate enemy of our ministry and what is the ultimate obstacle for our ministry. Keller’s advice is helpful here. He writes, “Try to remember that you are at odds with a system of beliefs far more than you are at war with a group of people. Contemporary people are the victims of the late-modern mind far more than they are its perpetrators. Seen in this light the Christian gospel is more of a prison break than a battle.”¹⁷ This is a helpful reminder that our true enemy is Satan, not those to whom we minister. We truly live and minister in “enemy-occupied territory.”¹⁸ This has profound implications for how we should approach our ministries. While much of our work is overcoming intellectual hurdles, the ultimate obstacle for those in our ministry to see the beauty of Christ is a spiritual obstacle. This is not to encourage intellectual laziness but to relieve those who feel undue intellectual burden. While we work hard to study, present logical presentations of truth, and grow in becoming cultural exegetes, we should not forget that our ministries are far more dependent on the power of God than the might of our intellect. We must not only study. We must also pray.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be attributed to a feeling of intellectual inadequacy? Are you keenly aware of the spiritual battle that takes place in your church and*

¹⁶ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, TBST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 82.

¹⁷ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 155-156.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 46.

community? Do you regularly pray, asking God to open the eyes of the spiritually blind in your ministry?

4. We serve the Creator who is the New Creator.

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (v. 6)

Paul understood that though Satan was a real adversary to the ministry, Paul served the One who could easily overcome the obstacle of spiritual blindness. Colin Kruse writes, "it must be remembered that Satan can carry out such a function [4:4] only with divine permission, and the blindness of mind which he is allowed to impose can at any time be penetrated by a blaze of light if God so wills."¹⁹ Expressing confidence that God can not only match but easily overcome the work of Satan, Paul parallels their work in verses four and six, as seen in the following chart:

2 Cor 4:4²⁰	2 Cor 4:6 (lines are numbered and reordered)
the god of this world	¹ God, who said, “Let light shine...”
has blinded	² has shone
the minds of the unbelievers	³ in our hearts
to keep them from seeing	⁵ of the knowledge
the light of the gospel	⁴ to give the light
of the glory of Christ	⁶ of the glory of God
who is the image of God	⁷ in the face of Jesus Christ

¹⁹ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 103.

²⁰ This chart is adapted to the ESV from Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 243.

Paul could persevere in ministry knowing that though he faced the veiled hearts of unbelievers, the One who spoke light into existence speaks light into the darkest of hearts. With allusions to the creation account (Gen. 1:3) and/or Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah who is the light of the world (Is. 9:2; John 8:12), Paul was confident in the Creator who is also the *New* Creator. An enduring ministry will be characterized by this same confidence in God's saving power.

The consequence of forgetting—or *doubting*—God's ability to rescue those in darkness is predictable. J. I. Packer observed, "where we are not consciously relying on God, there we shall inevitably be found relying on ourselves."²¹ Relying on creatures to incite [new] creation is a hopeless endeavor. In our hopelessness, then, we will either turn to new gimmicks for future "success" or old methods that seemingly produced past "success." On the former, Wilson warns, "what you win people *with* is what you win them *to*," and, "If they aren't won *by* the glory of Christ, they aren't won *to* the glory of Christ."²² On the latter, Packer observed that because of a trust in evangelistic methods in the past, we face "disillusionment" when they fail today. For the cure of this evangelistic disillusionment, he writes,

First, we must admit that we were silly ever to think that any evangelistic technique, however skillful, could of itself guarantee conversions; second, we must recognize that, because man's heart is impervious to the Word of God, it is no cause for surprise if at any time our evangelism fails to result in conversions; third, we must remember that the terms of our calling are that we should be faithful, not that we should be successful; fourth, we must learn to rest all our hopes of fruit in evangelism on the omnipotent grace of God.²³

Of course, this is true not only of the unbeliever we desire to see saved but also of the believer trapped in sin we are counseling to repent and to walk in freedom. Gospel ministers, then, are

²¹ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 34.

²² Jared C. Wilson, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Uniting Church-Growth Dreams with the Metrics of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 25, 37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 110.

much like Susan and Lucy who ride on the back of Aslan as he jumps the castle wall. Jesus “doesn’t need to be guided and never grows tired. He rushes on and on, never missing his footing, never hesitating...”²⁴ God can clear the wall of any unregenerate and unrepentant heart with a single leap; we are simply along for the ride.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be attributed to doubt about God’s ability to save sinners? Think of someone in your ministry that seems the least likely to become a follower of Christ. Do you believe God can save him/her? Consider your own testimony and reflect on how God shined in the darkness of your own heart. Reflect on the testimony of someone in your ministry, trusting that he who has saved before, can—and will— save again.*

5. A sense of inadequacy in ministry isn’t wrong; it is true.

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” (v. 7)

The opponents of Paul looked to discredit him by pointing out his weaknesses, and, according to Paul, that wasn’t too hard to do. He was keenly aware of his fear (1 Cor. 2:3), lack of eloquence (1 Cor. 2:4; 2 Cor. 11:6), and physical limitations (2 Cor. 10:10; 12:7). Paul’s answer was not to deny his weaknesses but to embrace them. He describes himself as a “jar of clay,” an “ordinary, everyday utensil” that is “fragile, inferior, and expendable.”²⁵ That God would deposit his “treasure” in such an unworthy vessel was not a mistake, however; it was

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 180-182.

²⁵ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 220.

intentional. God uses weak, inadequate, unimpressive people so that there is no question as to who deserves the glory as lives are changed (1 Cor. 1:26-29; 2:3-5; 2 Cor. 3:4-6; 12:9-10) .

It is easy to sense the weight of our shortcomings under the mounting pressures of ministry. Like Paul, many of us have had our weaknesses pointed out by those in our congregations. Certainly, we should strive to grow in those areas where we need growth, whether that is in preaching, counseling, leadership, or some other area of ministry. We should want to be the best ministers we can possibly be. We must be careful, however, that we aren't leaning too much on our own abilities or that we aren't defeated by our own limitations. Reflection on the situation in Corinth shows that confidence in our own abilities aligns more with the triumphalist "super-apostles" than with Christ and his disciples (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:20-21; 12:1; 11-13; 13:2-4).

Weary ministry leader—apart from disqualifying *sin*—you have no disqualifying *weaknesses*. In fact, if you feel inadequate for gospel ministry, then you are closer to the truth than the minister who feels they have it all together. That you minister in spite of your weakness, sets the stage for God's glory to take its central role. Further, Paul Tripp stresses the importance of embracing weakness in ministry, writing, "it is your admission of weakness that protects your ministry from becoming all about human reputation and kingdom building."²⁶ He goes on to write,

rather than being a perfect portrait that assures people that the gospel is true, you and I are called to be windows through which people look and see the glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is our weakness that demonstrates both the essentiality and power of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only his ever-present and powerful grace could enable a person, who still needs to be transformed himself, to be used as an instrument of his transforming grace in the lives of others.²⁷

²⁶ Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 206.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

Embracing our limitations frees us from pretending to be someone we are not, frees us from boasting in our charisma, intellect, or accomplishment, and frees our people from putting us on a pedestal that should be reserved for Jesus alone.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be due to an overemphasis on your weaknesses? Have your weaknesses become more compelling to you than God's power? Make a mental list of what you would consider your weaknesses. Disqualifying sin aside, do you truly believe that any of them negate God's ability to use you?*

6. Ministry is designed to display *both* death and resurrection.

"8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you." (v. 8-12)

In verses eight through twelve, Paul reminds us that Christian ministry is patterned after Christ, particularly his death and resurrection. We who proclaim the gospel must be prepared to follow in the footsteps of the gospel. As Rob Edwards describes, we are called to be "participants in what we proclaim."²⁸ Ministry, then, consists of both death and resurrection, however, they are not experienced sequentially. Rather, they are experienced *simultaneously*. We can see this in

²⁸ William R. Edwards, "Participants in What We Proclaim: Recovering Paul's Narrative of Pastoral Ministry," *Themelios* 39.3 (2014): 455-469.

verses ten and eleven, where 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. For we who live are *always* being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus *also* may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” In other words, death and resurrection are regularly present in our ministries *at the same time*. They are not separate experiences. Edwards explains, “resurrection moments in ministry only occur when accompanied by experiences that may rightly be characterized as death. But likewise, there is no experience of death that will not also include the life sustaining power of Christ’s resurrection for those who serve him.”²⁹

This simultaneous death and resurrection pattern of ministry is a needed perspective as we strive for faithful ministry in this age. Again, Edwards encourages us,

Suffering must not be seen as an indicator that something is wrong with ministry. In fact, apart from suffering, an altogether different gospel story is told...A subtle danger in ministry is to proclaim the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection, while expecting to live out a story that, though it may include some difficulties and occasional hardship, primarily shares a script with this world, exchanging the theme of death and resurrection for another storyline more appealing to this age.³⁰

Every faithful ministry leader will be, to some extent, “afflicted,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” and “struck down.” It takes a steadfast trust in the gospel, however, to see that we are not “crushed,” “driven to despair,” “forsaken,” or “destroyed.” We are embodying the death *and* resurrection of Jesus; we are embodying the message we proclaim.

²⁹ Ibid., 462.

³⁰ Ibid., 466.

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be attributed to forgetting that you follow in the footsteps of the one who was crucified before entering into glory? It is probably easy to identify evidences of death in your ministry, but can you also identify evidences of life as well?*

7. Remember the end to persevere to the end.

“13 Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, 14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 15 For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” (v. 13-15)

In the final paragraph of our section, Paul points to two encouraging realities that fuel his endurance: the certain, future resurrection of God’s people and God’s glory. His ministry is strengthened, then, by eschatological and doxological motivations. To emphasize the importance of the resurrection to his enduring ministry, Paul quotes Psalm 116:10.³¹ In Psalm 116, the psalmist praises the Lord who rescues his people from death. Verse 10, which Paul quotes, is the psalmist’s declaration that despite the threats of death, he continues to believe in God’s power to raise the dead. Jim Hamilton observes, “even when he was describing his deepest affliction he was nevertheless believing. Set next to 116:11, it appears that the psalmist believed Yahweh was true even when he concluded that every man lies. His affliction was severe. He was near death. He felt he could trust no man. Yet he believed God.”³² He connects this psalm to the apostle in 2

³¹ Psalm 115:1 (LXX).

³² James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Psalms*, vol. 2: Psalms 73-150, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 327.

Corinthians 4, writing, “like the psalmist [Paul] is trusting in the God who delivers from death even in the midst of severe distress.”³³ This confidence in the future resurrection proved to strengthen his ability to endure opposition. This is all the clearer when he writes in the next paragraph, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). The unwavering belief in the resurrection of those in his ministry pushed him as well (*cf.* 2 Cor. 1:14; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 2:19). He knew they, too, would join him in the resurrection, so he persevered.

A confident eschatology leads to another motivation for endurance, the glory of God. The doxological end of ministry (and all things) is summed up in verse 15, when Paul writes, “as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” Paul demonstrates plain theological reasoning here. The more people Paul can influence with the gospel, the more worship will be given to the Lord.

What can be gleaned from these truths for the minister who is enduring the difficulties of gospel ministry? Eschatological hope means looking past the ugliness of life and ministry in this age while fixing our eyes on the beauty of the age to come. Future hope is present help. We are reminded that there is truly a coming day when Christ returns and gathers his people to himself forever. There is a coming day when all relational conflict, the indulgence of sin, and rebellion against God and his word will be a thing of the past. There really will be an end to the struggles we face in our ministries. But not yet. Until then, we persevere knowing that—in comparison to our eternal future—our struggles are only for a moment. And as we influence more and more people, according to the sovereign will and pleasure of God, more and more bring him the praise and honor that he deserves. No runner will run through the pain if they do not believe there is a

³³ Ibid., 328-329.

finish line. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we know there is a glorious end waiting for those united to him. May we be able to say, like Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Reflection: *Could your weariness in ministry be attributed to a weakened eschatology? How can the resurrection fuel your waning resolve? How might viewing ministry as an act of worship change the way you approach difficult seasons and circumstances? Considering the difficult situation you are facing right now, read and meditate on Psalm 116.*

Conclusion

There are many reasons why ministry leaders might be facing or experiencing burnout. Physical, mental, and spiritual causes should all be evaluated. In our weariness though, let’s not ignore the possibility of our unbelief in certain theological truths. Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 4:1-16 are a helpful starting point to address a few of those theological issues that could derail enduring ministry. They also serve as opportunities to reflect on the state of our hearts. After all, the mind and heart are connected. Augustine’s *ordo voluntatis* (order of the will) identified the causes of our activities to be first belief, then love, then action.³⁴ Thomas Goodwin once wrote that “thoughts and affections are *sibi mutuo causae* – the mutual causes of each other... ‘Whilst I mused, the fire burned’ (Psalm 39:2); so that thoughts are the bellows that kindle and inflame affections; and then if they are inflamed, they cause thoughts to boil.”³⁵ More recently, James K.

³⁴ For a helpful summary of this, see Gerald Hiestand and Tood Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 54-56.

³⁵ Thomas Goodwin, “The Vanity of Thoughts,” in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (Eureka, CA: Tanski Publications), 3:526-527.

A. Smith gives preference to the heart over the mind.³⁶ In whatever order we prefer to put them, the mind and the heart are not independent aspects of the human experience. They are connected. Therefore, unwavering faith in the enduring truths of God and his work can enable us to say, along with Paul, “we do not lose heart.”

³⁶ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016).