

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

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. 5 For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

## LET THE SUN SHINE

In my generation there was a musical called Hair, and one of the most famous songs in that musical went, "Let the sun shine. Let the sun shine in. It is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius." In other words it was supposed to be a generation filled with new insights, a time of important and groundbreaking change, the so-called Age of Aquarius.

I remember singing along in my youth. I sort of believed that we might be on the threshold of something important.

Many years have passed since the days of my long-haired youth.

And several months ago the movie version of that musical, Hair was on the Turner Classic Movie Channel. (You know that you're getting old when your favorite movies are on that channel.)

I watched just a bit of it.

And you know all those ideas that we thought were so groundbreaking and important? In retrospect they looked in quite silly and self-centered.

I wondered.

How could we have been so blind?

Why couldn't we see that what we thought was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius was really in many ways unrealistic and quite foolish?

We are often blind to our true motives.

We accept without thinking the values of this world and in so doing we separate ourselves from that which has true value.

## A LITTLE BIT MORE

I read about a man in Phoenix who was building a house, 150,000 square feet of house to be precise. It had 380 rooms, 37 bathrooms (you can never have too many bathrooms), an air-conditioned dog kennel, an indoor skating rink, a movie theater and a 14-car garage.

Why was he building such a large house? He said that his first priority was his family. And with the help of 50 TV cameras that scan the place constantly, perhaps he'll even be able to find them from time to time.

The writer of Ecclesiastes said it long ago but it still has a modern ring:

“All man’s efforts are for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.”

A very rich man from the last century was once asked, “How much is enough?” And he smiled and said, “Just a little bit more.

Human beings, rich and poor are often dominated by their appetites. We tend to focus on the moment, and the ideas of the moment. And this often keeps us from seeing what is really important.

## BLINDED BY THE GOD OF THIS WORLD

Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians that the gospel is veiled; the gospel is hidden from many people. The reason the gospel is hidden is because the “god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers.”

What does that mean? It means that we are distracted by the fads and fashions of our day. We are distracted by our desires. We are distracted by what others are saying. To put it another way the prevailing culture can keep us from hearing God’s word of grace and hope.

The Apostle Paul should know. For many years Paul was blind to his own motives. For many years Paul persecuted the church, and he did it in the name of religion.

Why? His cultural perspective blinded him. His religion blinded him. And ironically it wasn’t until God literally blinded Paul on the road to Damascus that he was enabled to truly see. Paul learned that instead of aiding God’s people he was in fact persecuting God’s people.

## CORINTHIAN PROBLEMS

Now Paul is trying to help a church in Corinth that is struggling with the same problem. The god of the world had blinded them to the truth of the gospel. The Christians at Corinth were what we sometimes call cultural Christians.

They claimed the name of Christ but they also wanted to retain some cultural beliefs and practices that were way out of sync with the Christian message. What they believed always went through the filter of popularity.

And so this church was in deep trouble.

Sexual immorality was tolerated. The church was divided based upon class and status. The church was also divided because people wanted to worship their leaders instead of worshipping Christ.

There were also lawsuits between fellow believers. They incorporated elements of pagan religion into Christianity and called it advanced spirituality.

And in their deep spiritual “wisdom” they even questioned the resurrection, the very heart of the faith. Paul told them quite frankly, if you doubt this, why bother?

Looking back at this church we might be tempted to ask, “How could they have been so blind to their problems? Why couldn’t they see that what they were bragging about was in fact going to be their downfall?”

The “god of this world” blinded them. Culture was stronger than the call of Christ in their lives. They worshiped everything but God.

And yet they claimed to be Christian.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR TRUE FAITH

Paul struggled mightily to help this church see the error of its ways. In his second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle mentions a visit in which “false prophets” attacked him. And what really hurt was the fact that none of the Corinthians rallied to Paul’s support.

Most of the Second letter to the Corinthians is in fact Paul’s defense of his actions and of his ministry. Paul was so upset by this conflict that when his journeys took him back in the Corinthian area, in a rare move, the Apostle decided that it might not be helpful to even go for a visit. That shows you that the conflict was at a very high level. (See 2 Corinthians 2:1-4)

In this very passionate letter Paul said that he was not going to lose heart. He was going to preach the truth of the gospel and let the chips fall where they may. He was not going to distort God's Word just to placate his accusers. In fact, he hoped to prick the conscience of those who were behaving so badly. (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

But, before his opponents could see, they would need to be liberated from their self-imposed blindness. The God who first said, "Let there be light" would also have to bring light into their lives. The Spirit of the Holy and Creative God would have to recreate them and make them holy. (2 Corinthians 4:4-6)

#### AFFLICTED BUT NOT CRUSHED

In the midst of all this struggle and conflict Paul did not lose heart. He wrote that he was "afflicted in every way but not crushed." (2 Corinthians 4:8) Somehow Paul was able to stand up to the tremendous pressure from those who sought to destroy the church with heresies from within and those who sought to destroy the church with persecution from without.

Why could Paul stay so strong and hopeful when so many abandoned him and so many persecuted him? It was because he believed the success of the gospel did not depend upon him.

Paul likened himself to a common clay jar that contained a treasure, the good news of God's salvation, the forgiveness and grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

Paul said that his weakness made it plain that the power came from God's Word and not from him (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Paul did not try to accomplish things on his own. Instead, he was a vessel for the message of God.

Putting it another way, Paul was a "slave" for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5), and paradoxically, it was this slavery that made him free.

This is a shocking statement for most of us.

We don't believe in being owned by anyone or anything. We value freedom, and usually define freedom as liberation from any external restraints.

Even the use of the word slave suggests a kind of insensitivity to the freedom and dignity of humanity. But, this is not true when it comes to our relationship with God in Christ. Slavery in this case sets us free.

## HE DID IT HIS WAY

A preacher told of a funeral he did for a man who died in his early 40s. He lived hard, drinking too much, smoking too much, eating too much and dying well before his time.

After the funeral his widow said,

“Tom was like Frank Sinatra. He always did it his way.

He lived life the way he wanted to live it. He was determined to do what he wanted to do, no matter what happened.”

But, the preacher wondered,

“Did this lifestyle really one that set him free? Or was he jerked around all his life by superficial desires?”

If we are slaves to our own desires we submit to the harshest taskmaster of all.

On the other hand, the Lord’s slave does not feel oppressed. The Lord’s slave knows the joy of serving others in His name.

## THE DEEP CURRENTS OF GOD’S GRACE

When we turn our lives over to God, it is a relief. We learn that we are part of a greater purpose, a greater plan. And we are not crushed by the troubles of life. Our minds and our hearts become focused on the greater movement of God’s grace in the world.

In the frigid waters around Greenland, there are countless icebergs. Some are small and some are gigantic.

If you observe them carefully, you’ll notice that sometimes the small ice floes move in one direction while their massive counterparts flow in a different direction.

The explanation is simple. Surface winds drive the little ones, but the deep ocean currents carry the huge masses of ice along.

When we face trials and tragedies, it’s helpful to see our lives as being subject to two forces, surface winds and ocean currents. The winds represent everything changeable, unpredictable and distressing.

But, operating at the same time with these gusts and gales is another force even more powerful, the sure movement of God’s wise and sovereign purposes, the deep flow of God’s unchanging love.

When we attach our lives to something bigger, to God's plan for us, its like getting on-board one of those gigantic icebergs. The winds of affliction will blow, but we will not be blown away.

The deep currents of God's amazing grace will enable us to go in another direction.

In this perplexing world of trials and troubles we will not despair for we will be a part of the inexorable movement of God's gracious purpose and love. We can rest assured in the promise that will not be defeated by the changing winds of fortune.

### THE WORLD ON HIS SHOULDERS

Bruce Larson told how he used to help people who were struggling to surrender their lives to Christ. He worked in New York City and he would take these people down to the RCA building on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

In the entrance to that building is a huge statue of Atlas, a beautifully proportioned man who, with all his muscles straining, is holding the world upon his shoulders. There he is, the most powerfully built man in the world, and he can barely stand up under the burden.

Larson would point to the statue of Atlas and say, "Now that's one way to live. You can try to carry the world on you shoulders. But, come with me to the other side of the street and I'll show you another way."

On the other side of the street is St. Patrick's Cathedral. Behind the altar is a little shrine of the boy Jesus. And with no effort he is holding the world in one hand.

Larson said,

"We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, I give up Lord; here's my life. I give you my world, the whole world. He can easily carry what is too hard for me to bear."

There are many who try to carry the world on their backs. Perhaps you are one of them. Perhaps you think that it's all up to you. As Bruce told his friends, that's one way to live. But, it's not much of a way to live. In the end we will be crushed by it all.

### THE KING'S DONKEY

A devout Christian signs all of his emails, The King's Donkey. Do you get it?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, they weren't cheering for the donkey. They were cheering for Jesus. But, it was the donkey that brought Jesus to the crowds.

That's our job.

We're not called to carry the world. We're merely called to carry Jesus to the people of the world who need him.

We are in essence the King's Donkey.

LET THE SON SHINE

Do you remember how Paul put it?

“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.” (2 Corinthians 4:5)

In a world where TV preachers hawk prosperity theology and parishioners judge success by going to the church with the tallest steeple, the message of Paul is sobering. Maybe, in our self-centered world there is a veil over the gospel for us as well.

Is it possible that we too are blinded by our ambition? Is it possible that we are blinded by a desire for power and prominence?

Is it possible that the god of this world has kept us from seeing the light of truth, that light of God that has shone forth from the very beginning of creation?

Light needs to shine in our darkness. We too need to know God. We too need to see the grace and glory of God shining in the face of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The old musical Hair had one thing right. We need to let the Son shine in. Spell that SON.

Jesus is the way the truth and the life.

Let us be content to be Christ bearers, donkeys for Christ. He will show us the way. His light will give us hope in our dark world.

Amen.