

II Corinthians 4:1-15 What am I here for?

Introduction

The profound question addressed in this sermon today is simply this: What am I here for? What is the point of my life here on earth? Is there a purpose at all? If there is, what is the central focus of my life? The answer is abundantly clear: **I am here to become like Jesus.** One day beyond this life you and I as followers of Jesus will still genuinely be you and me, but will be perfect versions of us – in essence we will be like Jesus in all our attitudes, speech and conduct. This is why I am here. This is why you are here. There are people on earth like each other – one of the most extraordinary examples were two Scotsmen who met for the first time in 2010 [**picture on screen**]; Graham Comrie (left) and Graham Cormie were amazed when they realised they had double lives. A stunned photographer recently told how he met his exact double on Facebook - and discovered they lived only about 10 miles apart. Graham Comrie feared someone was impersonating him online when a friend emailed to say a man was pretending to be him on the social networking site. His "impersonator" was even said to be using his photos. The more Graham looked into it, the stranger it got - until he realised this person wasn't trying to imitate him but appeared to be his doppelganger. Amazed by what he saw, he contacted his lookalike, Graham Cormie, and discovered they were leading parallel lives. The Grahams soon realised they were both professional photographers. And as the two men chatted online, they found out they both had red-headed wives and were both set to celebrate their silver wedding anniversaries next year. Other striking similarities included that they both had two daughters and both owned Lhasa Apso dogs. When they saw each other's pictures, they realised they were the absolute spitting image of each other, too. The men met face-to-face for the first time six years ago. Graham Comrie, 45, from Aberdeen, said: "A friend got in touch a few months ago to say that I had someone impersonating me on Facebook." "But when I looked into it, it got even more interesting." "It was quite amusing at first. We realised we were virtually the same age, with almost the same name and were both photographers." "But the freaky part was when we saw each other's profile pictures. I did a double take." "We've checked and we are definitely not related." He added: "We keep on getting messages from each other's friends on Facebook so we've had to change our pictures so people don't get us mixed up." "We've joked that one of us would have to change our name - but neither of us is backing down." Graham Cormie, 47, of Ellon, Aberdeenshire, said: "It's all very confusing. I too thought someone was impersonating me." "We were both getting emails from the wrong people." "I've had people emailing me asking, 'When are you coming in to take my photo?' or 'When are we doing this shoot?', and I'd never heard of them before." "When I saw Graham's picture, I was completely gobsmacked." "We could've been separated at birth. I call him my nemesis." Graham Comrie's wife Heather added: "It's quite spooky. It's just weird. There are too many coincidences." After realising how much they have in common, the men now hope to become good friends. [Daily Record 30 Dec.2010 www.dailyrecord.co.uk] This could be put down to an extraordinary coincidence, like two Brian Talbots being Baptist ministers in neighbouring churches in Central Scotland some years ago, but the passage before us, like a number of others in the Bible points us to be a reflection of the greatest person who has ever lived, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Acts 4, at a time when Peter and John were being persecuted for the faith and falsely accused of misrepresenting the Jewish faith, there was something that no-one could deny. Acts 4:13-14 contain some extraordinary words: *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.* ¹⁴ *But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.* Their accusers did not accept what they were saying, sadly, but neither could they deny the power of the transforming influence of Jesus Christ on these two ordinary working men. Paul in II Corinthians 3:18 expressed it this way: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed [metamorphosis: like a caterpillar to a butterfly –see pictures] into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* This is what should happen with God's people as His

Spirit works in our lives. Yet as the Church at Corinth revealed, there are Christians whose lives appear to be the very opposite of all that Jesus taught and modelled in His relationships with other people. The way they treated Paul was poor –shocking even, when we remember how much he had done for them. How then, in a flawed and damaged world, so marred by sin, can we as imperfect Christians even begin to progress into what we should become for Jesus’ sake? II Corinthians 4 is a helpful guide in answering this question. Paul addresses three things that deserve our attention.

1. Our Privilege and His Mercy (II Corinthians 4:1-6)

Paul has been describing the wonderful gospel we have to proclaim in chapter three and describes how liberating it is compared with the rule-obsessed version of Judaism with which he grew up. Rules that condemned and cried ‘hopeless’, ‘hopeless’ is your situation, you can never be good enough to please God; yet the ‘veil’/ cover that appeared to prevent men and women understanding the truth of the Gospel is taken away in Jesus Christ. When a person comes to put their faith and trust in Him and sees the grace of God at the heart of the gospel they gain an entirely new perspective on the wonderful and glorious grace of our Lord and Saviour. Chapter three concludes with these thrilling words: *But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.* ¹⁷ *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.* ¹⁸ *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit* (II Corinthians 3:16-18). Christian liberty is not a freedom to do what we like, but an opportunity to serve wholeheartedly the God who has done so much for us in Christ. This is why Paul begins chapter four with the word ‘*therefore*’. On the basis of such a wonderful blessing it will be natural that we want to please Him in the way we live. But what does Paul have in mind? It requires that: (a) **We Persevere** (4:1) ¹*Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.* The ‘super-apostles’ who boasted about their spiritual greatness, and whom Paul will address in II Corinthians 10-12, by contrast, criticised Paul for his inadequacy. He’s a boring speaker. He’s not a charismatic personality. His ministries are too short. He moves on because he quickly becomes demoralised and cannot continue in ministry at a particular church for too long. This is why he left Corinth. Nonsense, says Paul, when we recognise how great is our God and how wonderful is the message we proclaim we will never quit. We will not surrender our calling, not today, not tomorrow, and not ever! Nothing will make me cease to do the work God has entrusted to me. In II Corinthians 11 the apostle compares his battle scars for the sake of Christ with theirs and shows how much more he has endured than they. His list included these items: *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.* ²⁷ *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches* (II Corinthians 11:23b-28). There are many Christians who can offer magnificent service for God over a year or two, but He desires men and women who will keep on year after year living for Jesus and using their gifts in His service; touching the lives of others around them with a passionate and prayerful desire that they also will come to know and love Jesus too. I trust this is your desire this year. God while I have breath in my body and strength in my limbs I’m available to live for you. When we are wholly available to the Lord don’t be surprised if He wants to use you to influence the people with whom you come into contact in the coming weeks. God’s work

is like running a marathon and He calls each one of us to finish well the race we have begun. In his letter to the Churches in the region of Galatia (part of modern day Turkey), Paul wrote: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*¹⁰ *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers* (Galatians 6:9-10).

(b) **We maintain our integrity** (character) (4:2a) ²*Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways;* In our secular society one of the few ‘unforgivable’ sins is hypocrisy, saying we will do something, while all the time intending to engage in another course of action. Our character is the most important thing we have and its maintenance of the utmost importance. In Britain today personal integrity seems increasingly to be absent in so many social contexts. In business how many people could be trusted to deliver on a promise sealed with a handshake, even if it turned out to their financial disadvantage, without the signed paperwork to accompany it? How many sportspeople are there who would rather lose a game or competition rather than win by engaging in some form of cheating? We could go on across the whole of society asking these questions. The bottom line is this: you and I ultimately are responsible before God for one person – ourselves- for whom we will give an account to God one day (II Corinthians 5:10). No other person on earth may know what is going on in your heart and mind, but He does, and that is what is important. May He help us to live in a manner that allows us to maintain a clear conscience before Him and in the sight of other people. Some people may say we are stupid to our face sometimes for being so honest, but deep down they will envy the kind of courage we possess to be willing to do the right thing, even if it is to our short-term disadvantage.

(c) **We serve with integrity** (conduct) (4:2b) *we do not use deception* It is not just words but actions. The battle in the mind and heart is the hardest and if we win there inappropriate words and actions will be avoided. However, all of us know that there are times when wrong thoughts get through the barrier –in fact, we may secretly welcome them and take pleasure in them. The danger then is that we might actually engage in actions which bring dishonour on the name of Jesus. Paul had been accused of declining financial support from the wealthy Corinthians in order to have some kind of moral bargaining power over them (see II Corinthians 12:11-18). This was nonsense. He had asked them to make collections for mission work in other places (I Corinthians 16:1-4), but he was concerned that this might not happen in his absence, because they were possibly the least generous of the churches he had founded, despite their wealth. How we need people of integrity at all levels of society and in every area of public service, for their good and for God’s glory. May God help us in our work careers; in our family relationships and in our church ministries and roles to be people of integrity who live in a way that honours Him.

(d) **We proclaim the gospel accurately** (4:2c-6) *nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*³ *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.*⁴ *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*⁵ *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*⁶ *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 the glory of God in the face of Christ.* The Gospel Paul proclaimed told the truth about heaven and hell; included the unpalatable truths about sin, righteousness and judgement. He was fearless about proclaiming the truth, albeit doing so with gentleness and respect (I Peter 3:15). When on trial before Roman Governor Festus and Jewish king Agrippa (Acts 26) Paul could have said ingratiating words in the hope of securing his release. Instead he reminded them that God had commissioned him to go to Gentiles, like Festus, *to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place*

among those who are sanctified by faith in Me [Jesus]' (Acts 26:18). These words would have been as welcome to Festus, as to secular sceptical people in your laboratory, office or staffroom today! The Gospel is good news to those that receive it, but by implication are the very opposite to the people who refuse to accept it. The offence of the Gospel has not changed. Listen to these words from I Corinthians and recognise from first century Corinth, a similar scepticism to that of many people in Britain today. ¹⁸*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* ¹⁹*For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.* ²⁰*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* ²¹*For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.* ²²*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,* ²³*but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,* ²⁴*but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* ²⁵*For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength* (I Corinthians 1:18-25). Can you sense the mocking of scoffers as Paul preached about Jesus' death on the cross in the open air. Jews and non-Jews alike were scoffing at it. In both religious and social contexts the Christian gospel was diametrically opposed to where they were coming from –intellectually speaking. This has been going on in Corinth as a backdrop to the difficulties of planting and establishing a church in that city. However, the arrival of the Jewish 'super-apostles' with their works-gospel contradicted the very heart of the message that Paul and his companions had worked so hard to communicate. However, they may also have stressed the need for Gentiles to live like Jews and keep the whole law of Moses in order to be saved. This was certainly the problem amongst the Galatian Churches that Paul dealt with in his earliest letter (Galatians 1:6-10 revealed the seriousness with which Paul responded to that false view of the gospel. *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.* ⁸*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!* ⁹*As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!* ¹⁰*Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.*) What is more, there are hints of the proclamation of a prosperity gospel and materialistic motives on the part of Paul's opponents. II Corinthians 2:17 states: *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.* These Jewish opponents of Paul were preaching a message their hearers wanted to hear and had gained some financial benefit from doing so. The question that rings down the ages is this: 'Has God said...?' If the Bible is The Word of God then when God speaks on an issue His verdict is final. This was the problem in earlier centuries and the problem today when people prefer novelties of belief or new religious ideas rather than standing firm on what God has said in His inspired and inerrant Word. In Britain there was a threefold attack on the Christian faith in the second half of the 19th century. One came from outside when sceptics claimed that the new understanding of origins popularised by Charles Darwin did away with the need for any notion of God as creator of the world- a view currently popularised by Stephen Hawking in his book *The Grand Design*. However, as John Lennox has shown in his recent response to that work, *God and Stephen Hawking Whose Design is it anyway?* Hawking's logic is incredibly poor and his core argument indefensible. The Bible will never give us a detailed treatise in scientific language how He brought the world into being; it simply records that *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (Genesis 1:1). The second two challenges

came from within the Christian community. The foundational one came from Germany. Liberal theological faculties, that were robustly anti-Semitic, like the Tübingen faculty, denied the supernatural events in the Bible and tried to turn what remained into a nice social gospel. This message was propagated by the majority of theological colleges around a hundred years ago and soon found its way into the pulpits. No wonder the massive church growth of the 19th century was reversed and rapid decline set in. The third challenge was the decline in belief in hell and eternal punishment. If there are no eternal consequences to dying without Christ why should I sacrifice my money, time and abilities in witnessing for the Lord if everyone is going to heaven regardless of what they believed or however they may have lived? What God has said, I must proclaim, because, as Paul expressed it in his letter to the Romans: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile* (Romans 1:16). This is the gospel that I too believe and will proclaim to my dying day. *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord* (II Corinthians 4:5). God will grant a spiritual harvest to His faithful people who honour Him. However, we have a problem:

2. Our Predicament and His Solution (II Corinthians 4:7-15)

Paul has responded forcefully to the critics of his gospel whose simplistic creed has nothing to say about suffering, death and judgement; whose goals and ambitions concern this life not focussed on the eternal priorities of King Jesus. A gospel that does not meet people in their hours of deepest need is no gospel at all. However, the glorious message that Paul has given his life to proclaim does address these fundamental concerns and issues of daily life.

(a) **Our weakness and His power** (II Corinthians 4:7) ⁷ *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* The finest diamonds kept in a ceramic pot from the value range of a local supermarket! The Holy Spirit at work in human bodies subject to decay, disease, injury and certain death; why? To show that the victory of the gospel and its ultimate triumph is of God not of us; or as Paul puts it in II Corinthians 1:9: *that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* You and I are the messengers proclaiming good news in a world that so desperately needs it. We are the means *God has chosen to make known the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27). On my way home from the Grammar School I attended in England, age sixteen, I was met one day by a small boy of seven or eight who challenged me to a fight. He was only half my height and I played rugby for the second team in my year. No contest! However, near to our school was a rough area where the boy lived, I knew that he would have an older brother, and a whole gang of mates, who would appear in minutes, or at least the next day, should I lay a finger on him! His boldness (or foolishness!) was not about him, but the resources that he believed was available to him should he need them. What point is Paul making here? There is a call for humility and self awareness. Yet it is equally a request to look up and see the divine resources available to us. When we grasp the truth of this point we will be able to say with Paul: *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength* (Philippians 4:13). Praise the Lord!

(b) **Our problems and His grace** (II Corinthians 4:8-9) ⁸ *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* Advocates of cheap grace and the prosperity gospel proclaim: ‘have faith’ ‘come to Jesus and your problems will be over –you can rise above them’. As we read the New Testament and follow the path that leads through Church history it is the very opposite that is true. It has been among the poor and marginalised of the world that the gospel has spread, only rarely has it appeared to triumph amongst the rich and powerful. Following a crucified Messiah appears to be foolish to the powerbrokers of the world. Yet we have a gospel that

can meet every need. Abraham Kuyper, the great Christian thinker and Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1905, believed that God continually influenced the life of believers, and daily events could show his workings. Kuyper famously said, "Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: 'Mine!'" [James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper, A Centennial Reader*, p. 488]. The final triumph of Jesus and His imminent return keeps us focussed on living for Him. Paul expresses so clearly the wonderful paradox of our calling in Philippians 2:12-13 *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence— continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.*

(c) **Our dying and His life** (II Corinthians 4:10-12) ¹⁰ *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* ¹¹ *For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.* ¹² *So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.* There is a cost to Christian living. In much of the world physical violence even martyrdom can be the lot of followers of Jesus. In secular countries like our own –discrimination in an increasing number of workplaces as a result of hostile legislation put in place by recent governments of different political persuasions has resulted in a loss of careers for a small number of people and a loss of promotion for others. We may be fortunate and never face this kind of issue, but there will always be some cost or challenge if we are being faithful servants of Jesus. However, there are certainly other Christians who have made significant choices which have resulted in them experiencing difficult circumstances as a result of their faithfulness to their calling. Some serving as missionaries overseas, for example, have lost pension rights and the resources to provide for anything other than a spartan lifestyle in retirement. We have to be ready and willing to pay whatever price is the cost of faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Our testimony should be in line with that of Paul who declared in Galatians 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*

(d) **Our faith and His plan** (II Corinthians 4:13-15) ¹³*It is written: I believed; therefore I have spoken. With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak* ¹⁴ *because we know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in His presence.* 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.* This is our hope and vindication. The God who raised Jesus bodily from the dead will one day raise His people in like manner at the end of the age. No wonder Paul could say in Romans 1:18: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.* May God help us to see the present in the light of the future prepared for us, for the glory of His precious name, Amen.

II Corinthians 4:1-15 What am I here for? Discussion Questions

Q1. What am I here for? Have you ever asked that question- maybe in a variety of contexts?

Q2. How did Paul answer the question in II Corinthians 3:18?

How do you understand this statement in the light of your faith journey?

Q3. How should we share our faith and what should we avoid? (II Corinthians 4:2)

Q4. Why at times do we get little response to our witness? (II Corinthians 4:3-6)

Can you think of any personal examples of good responses?

Q5. How does Paul describe the challenges of ministry? (II Corinthians 4:6-12)

How would you describe it in your experience today?

Q6. What encouragement does Paul give us for sharing our faith? (II Corinthians 4:13-15)