

# HELP WITHIN HOSTILITY

*2 Corinthians 4:7-18*

**S**ome forty years ago we bought a set of English bone china dinnerware. Over the years we have purchased more pieces because we wanted to add to the set, not because the original pieces have gotten broken. Contrary to its fragile image, bone china is tough stuff. If we had bought earthenware dishes years ago, we would have gone through several sets by now.

The clay of earthenware is not very sturdy and is easily chipped or broken. Paul was not ashamed to write that we Christians carry the treasure of the gospel in easily broken clay jars. We are fragile, but Christ is unbreakable.

**Group Discussion.** When you face pressures from the society around you, what good things can result?

**Personal Reflection.** When have you felt most fragile?

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 Paul defends his and his associates' integrity and their aim to promote not themselves but Jesus Christ as Lord. He confidently affirms that God "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (v. 6). Then in a passage of contrast beginning with, "But . . ." Paul's tone changes as he acknowledges the pressure of opposition. *Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18.*

1. In the sharp contrasts Paul draws in this passage, what surprises you most?
2. How can people be likened to earthenware jars (v. 7)?
3. What does God accomplish by placing the treasure of the gospel in fragile human vessels?
4. Think of a time you observed someone (perhaps yourself) “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (vv. 8-9). How do you explain the person’s resilience under the weight of such difficulties?
5. Paul writes that he and his associates carry around in their bodies the death of Jesus and are constantly given over to death for Jesus’ sake (vv. 10-11). He means *living* Christians. How is this possible?

6. What is the result of such constant closeness with the death of Jesus (vv. 10-12)?

7. *Read 2 Corinthians 4:13-18.* In this passage what hopes does Paul affirm?

8. What is the connection between Jesus' resurrection and Paul's courage to speak out (vv. 13-15)?

9. How have you experienced being "renewed day by day" as Paul says in verse 16?

10. In what ways have afflictions altered the focus of Paul and his associates (vv. 17-18)?

11. "What is seen" often distracts us from "what is unseen" (v. 18). Why is this true?

12. In this coming week, what will you do to focus on "what is unseen" and live more fully in the hope that Christ offers you?



*Think of situations in which you long to say, as Paul said of himself and his companions, "I do not lose heart." Bring those situations to Christ. Ask him to renew you day by day and give you hope, which is based not on circumstances but on his unchanging presence and love for you.*

#### NOW OR LATER

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul refers to his "light and momentary troubles." In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and 11:23-29 he enumerates some of those troubles. Study those passages, exploring how Paul could possibly call such difficulties "light and momentary."

Study John 16:31-33. Here Jesus predicts that his disciples will abandon him, yet he will not be alone, and he still offers them peace.