

Death in Us, Life in You

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[0 : 0 0] and to verses 11 through 14. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

So tell me, what is involved in being a minister? That's the question I was recently asked by a group of third-year pupils during an RE class in the local school.

So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? That's the question I was asked a few years ago by a young man who was exploring his calling in life.

So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? That's the question I was asked at the gym recently by someone I do a spin class with and I've got to know quite well.

Well, I'm not sure when asked that question, I'd choose to answer it like Paul does here in 2 Corinthians 4, 11 and 12, where all was being given over to death.

[1 : 1 0] Death is at work in us. Ministry is a hard sell at the best of times. Perhaps, rather, I'd choose to answer it the way Paul does in verses 13 and 14.

We believe and therefore speak. We shall be presented in God's presence. 2 Corinthians 4 is Paul's autobiographical story of ministry.

People often talk of the romance of ministry, but not Paul. There were high times, but also low. There were times of great pleasure, but also times of deep pain.

For him, the ministry was a life of kaleidoscopic experiences, life in the raw with plenty of gear changes. Gospel ministry really isn't romantic, but it's real, and for that reason, it's compellingly exciting.

Gospel ministry has all the ingredients of the merry-go-round, the roller coaster, and the big wheel. But in these verses, the apostle is reaching down into the heart of what it means to be a minister, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and to serve him and his people in the power of the gospel.

[2 : 2 7] By the way, just in case you wondered, Mowgli, there are six ministers in this congregation tonight. So perhaps you could have gone somewhere else if you wanted to get away from ministers.

I didn't know you were going to be here. So according to these verses, gospel ministry is four things. Violent, vicarious, vigorous, and victorious.

So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? This is real gospel ministry, both in its depths and its heights, in its pains and its pleasures.

And as I say, it is compellingly exciting. It is violent, first of all, in verse 11. Violent, for we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

There is, shall we say, a certain violence involved in Christian ministry if we are ministering in the footsteps of our master Christ Jesus, or walking in the bloodied footsteps of the apostle Paul.

[3 : 3 2] His experience of ministry was a million times removed from that of the smooth-talking false teachers of his day. These were men of charisma and substance who cunningly drained the savings of the vulnerable and lived handsomely from the profits of their gifting.

But for Paul, life was somewhat different. Even though it was his right to earn a full income from the preaching of the gospel, he supplemented his income by making tents, by working with his hands, so that he would not be a burden to the people of Corinth.

On account of the radical message of the gospel, he was scorned and savaged. He was mocked and manhandled. He was belittled. He was beaten. Like his master in whose footsteps he walked, Paul was subjected to the death of a thousand cuts.

If we were to exhume his body and give it to a forensic pathologist to study, that pathologist would report back with a catalogue of horrendous injuries.

That's just a body. If a forensic psychiatrist analysed his mind, I don't even know what he'd discover. But all this, Paul was willing to endure for Jesus' sake.

[4 : 49] He was no sadist who enjoyed the physical and mental and emotional pain of gospel ministry in the first century Roman Empire.

But what he did want to be was a mirror of the Jesus he loved and served. He wanted to walk in the footsteps of John the Baptist who pointed at Christ and said, Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.

One of Paul's phrases, which over the years has deeply interested me, is found in 2 Corinthians 11, 28, where having listed all that he had suffered on account of the gospel, he concludes his list by saying, Besides everything else, this is 2 Corinthians 11, 28, Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Now the word which the NIV accurately translates as the pressures of my concern is literally the word anxiety. Besides all this, I daily face anxiety on account of the churches God has called me to serve.

You must never think that Paul was a stoic sufferer of all that he endured, or that the backslidings and immorality of the early church did not cause him mental or emotional pain.

[6 : 18] Rather, he's anxious for the church. He's emotionally invested in them. He feels their pain. He worries for them. Make no mistake, this man suffered violence on account of the ministry of the gospel, physically, emotionally, mentally.

I've met many pastors who are broken men, broken physically, broken mentally, broken emotionally. The ministry's broken them.

So tell me, Paul, what's involved in being a minister? He answers, brokenness and anxiety. I make no attempt to hide the reality because it's what comes next that gives meaning and purpose to the brokenness.

Paul continues, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. That life here, in verse 11, is the resurrection, eternal life of Christ.

The life of our Lord. At this point, to try and explain what Paul is saying here, I want to read a quote from a 19th century free church father called James Denny.

[7 : 33] Denny writes these words, No one who saw the exceeding greatness of the power which the gospel exercised, not only in sustaining its preachers under persecution, but in transforming human nature and making bad men good, no one who saw this and looked at a preacher like Paul could ever dream that the explanation lay in him.

Not in an ugly little man without presence, without eloquence, without the means to bribe or to compel, could the source of such courage be sought.

Not in him at all, but in God. You see, the violence of all Paul endured for the sake of Jesus and his gospel, it left him physically, mentally, and emotionally exposed and vulnerable and fragile.

The only explanation for his continued enthusiasm and vigor in ministry and the only explanation for the prosperity of the gospel he preached was that the life of the exalted heavenly Christ was empowering him and shining through him.

That life which sustains the universe shone through the apostle Paul, especially through the suffering apostle Paul.

[8 : 57] It became plain to everyone that the explanation for Paul's ministry was not Paul at all, but the risen Christ that worked in him and through him.

So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? Yes, brokenness and there's no getting away from that. But higher than the depth of the violence and greater than the extent of one's own brokenness is the eternal life of Christ sustaining and shining.

And if at the end of his life you were to ask Paul, Paul, was it all worth it? But all the anxieties and the pressures, the sufferings and the scourgings, was it all really worth it?

He'd reply, yes, a thousand times yes. For I would never have known how powerfully beautiful and compellingly exciting being filled with the resurrection life of Christ was unless I had first been emptied of myself.

It's violent gospel ministry. Secondly, in verse 12, it's vicarious. It's vicarious.

[10 : 16] Death is at work in us. Life is at work in you. We're getting right into the heart of the man here, his inner motives. What drove Paul to endure so much for Jesus' sake?

Yes, sure, it was his devotion to Christ, but it was also his devotion to the people of Christ. For their sakes, he was willing to endure all that he did so that they would experience for themselves that same resurrection life of Christ.

So he was beaten to within an inch of his life, and yes, it hurt him deeply. But it only happened because Paul was proclaiming the gospel and people were becoming Christians.

He was willing to endure it all just so that the gospel of Christ crucified and risen could be preached over the entirety of the Roman Empire and ordinary people like us could experience for ourselves the exalted heavenly resurrection power of Christ over sin.

And that means at the heart of the Christian gospel lies this wonderful truth. Jesus died for us. It's as simple as that, is it not?

[11 : 33] Jesus endured the punishment of the cross for us. He paid the penalty of our sin. Those nails which pierced his blessed hands and feet, that spear driven into his side, that mental and emotional torture of enduring the righteous judgment of God against our sin, he gave himself for us.

He paid the price we could not pay. He died the death we could not die. At the heart of the gospel is this vicarious substitution of Jesus for us.

He died that we might have life. And for Paul, gospel ministry is a microcosm of the gospel itself.

It is a living demonstration of how Jesus died that we might have life. Jesus' mission, you see, was entirely other-focused.

Death was at work in him so that life could be at work in us. What then shall mark the ministry of his servants if not that same gospel otherness which so characterized his?

[12 : 50] Death shall be at work in them so that life shall be at work in those they serve. They shall be willing to endure physical, mental, and emotional violence just so that the gospel of the eternal life of Christ may be known.

The cost of his people's prosperity may be his own pain, but it's a price he's willing to pay because Christ paid the highest price on the cross for him.

Verse 12 contains what I'm calling the ministry of gospel rhythm. Gospel rhythm. It's ministering like the master in a gospel pattern of vicarious suffering on behalf of one's people.

Gospel ministry is quite unlike any other vocation in the world in that it exists not for the fulfillment, enjoyment, or satisfaction of the minister, but for the fulfillment, benefit, and health of those ministered to.

Every aspect of the minister's life is therefore to be entirely other-focused, true even of his personal time. The ultimate motive for his ministry is not what he gets from others, but what he gives to others.

[14 : 16] The free church ordination vow reads, are not zeal for the honor of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire for saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the function of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs or interest?

So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? minister? It's all about others. But that, you see, is fine, because we can take great pleasure in the way in which the gospel is working itself out in the lives of others.

If we're in it for ourselves, the ministry ain't for us. But if we're in it for others, if we want to minister in a gospel rhythm, then we'll be ministering like our master and like his apostles after him.

The ministry is violent. It's also vicarious. Verse 13, it's also vigorous, vigorous. It is written, I believe, therefore I've spoken.

Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak. I know that up until now perhaps we could accuse Paul of being somewhat, shall we say, downbeat.

[15 : 33] Ministry's not that bad, is it? Well, sometimes it is, sometimes it's not. Given that all Paul has suffered on account of the gospel, perhaps we might expect him to be rather subdued, far more careful about his preaching.

He knows that in the society in which he operates, the personal cost of preaching the gospel is very high and will result in him being mocked and beaten and stoned. And so we might half expect him at least to modulate his tone.

But it's nothing of the sort with him. The more he matures in the faith, the more he suffers for the faith, the more vigorous he becomes in the proclamation of the faith.

Let me say that again. The more he matures in the faith, and the more he suffers for the faith, the more vigorous he becomes in the proclamation of the faith.

The gospel rhythm picks up pace as he becomes more and more convinced of the truths he's called on to proclaim. You will notice from this text, his faith comes before his speech.

[16:43] That before he opens his mouth, he believes in his heart. He believes the gospel, he lives the gospel, therefore he proclaims the gospel. He believes that Jesus Christ is Lord, he lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ, therefore he proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord.

But it's the faith that comes first. No doubt some might have said to him, Paul, if you would only stop speaking and preaching, then you wouldn't get yourself into so much trouble.

But for Paul to stop proclaiming the gospel would be a sign that he no longer believes the gospel, because what he believes he must proclaim. There are undoubtedly times in the ministry when proclaiming Christ as Lord is deeply challenging.

But let it never be because the minister's faith is waning. He himself must believe and live out the gospel, and from the wellspring of his faith and enthusiasm for Christ, he must preach the gospel. And he's preaching not because he's compelled by duty, but because he's compelled by faith and enthusiasm for Christ. And the older he gets, the more he believes, and the more vigorous he becomes.

[18:08] There may be those who do not believe the message the preacher proclaims, but they will never be able to say that the preacher doesn't believe it. Rather, they'll say, well, I don't believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, but I have no doubts you believe it.

What are we watching and listening to during a sermon if not the gospel rhythm of a person who passionately believes all that he says, and believes it more as life goes on, not less?

He believes it more as he grows in the knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ, not less. One of the statements Paul makes, which I never cease to wonder at, is found in 1 Timothy 1 verse 15.

Words written towards the end of his life, where as an impossibly old man, having been a Christian for nearly 40 years, he writes these words, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

It is clear that for Paul, repentance became a more important part of his life the older he got. The grace of Christ became more vital to him the older he got.

[19:28] Obedience to Christ was all the more crucial to him the older he got. My fear for ministry is that we become like those announcers at train stations like Queen Street or Central who instruct people to get on trains going to places that they themselves have never been.

Rather, he is so deeply invested in gospel ministry that he cannot but preach these glorious truths of repentance, faith, grace, and mercy.

He cannot but exalt the glory of the love of Christ because he recognizes that he needs it more than anyone else. So tell me, what's involved in being a minister?

Being a minister should be like being an iceberg. The vast majority is under the surface because what you hear proclaimed by his mouth is only a thin slice of the faith which he believes in his heart. And that's what makes ministry one of the most challenging and exciting things in the world. You are paying me to dig deep roots into Christ and to establish life in him.

[20:55] Wow. And then lastly, victorious. It's violent, it's vicarious, it's vigorous, and lastly it's victorious.

We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. There is at this stage in this chapter a decided change in emphasis. What as previously Paul has concentrated on the past and on the present he now changes focus and concentrates on the future. And what a future he's looking forward to.

It's a future where he shall be raised from the dead and presented in God's presence together with all those who he ministered to and proclaimed the gospel to.

Those who have come to believe in Christ for themselves through his ministry. From Paul's perspective there was no greater motive for enduring the hazards of gospel ministry than that on the day of resurrection he should be raised with and presented to God with all those he had ministered to and who had believed in Christ through his message.

[22:18] Oh death was at work in him now but he would rather endure a thousand deaths just so that those he serves may live eternally. What was it Samuel Rutherford said?

If but one soul from Anath should join me at my right hand then my heaven would be two heavens in Emmanuel's land.

In 3 John 1 verse 4 listening to the inner heart of the apostle John we read John saying I have no greater joy than to hear my children are walking in the truth.

That those Christ brought to himself through John's ministry are thriving as Christians. What joy. And now Paul in similar manner finds even greater joy in thinking of how those God brought to himself through his ministry will be raised along with him and presented to God himself.

I will never forget my graduation from Aberdeen University. It was held in the magnificent Granite Marshall College.

[23 : 29] I've never seen such pomp and ceremony anywhere and I felt such a sense of achievement as I rose to receive my degree. But what will never leave me was the expression on my father's face, my late father's face, when he saw me with my academic gown and that strange, funny, square mortar board hat you wear.

I often saw him smile, sometimes heard him laugh, but I had never seen him looking quite so happy as he did that day. As a parent, I now know what it means to take greater joy in the achievements of my children than in my own achievements.

Paul's vision in verse 14 brings unspeakable joy to the heart of any gospel minister and moves him to strain every muscle in pursuit of the service of those God has called him to serve.

A minister friend of mine, doesn't take you too much intelligence to figure out who this is, is at present off work. He's exhausted. Having expended more energy than any two men have in serving the community God has called him to.

Many have been brought to a saving faith in Christ through his love and tireless service. But he's now worn out and he's now exhausted. And I wonder whether if in his darker moments he ever says to himself, what's the point?

[25 : 05] After all, I'm pretty sure he feels, shall we say, underappreciated by the wider church. Death has been at work in him so that life could be at work among his people.

Where is his joy and hope right now if it's not here in 2 Corinthians 4.14 where as he thinks of those he has loved and brought to faith in Christ, he can say, we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with him and present us with you in his glorious presence. It will only be on the day of resurrection that the true impact of his work will be known. Today, he strikes you as an old man, exhausted by his efforts and broken.

Then, he will be raised with all those he has loved and served. What a day that will be. And the point is that without reference to that day of resurrection, ministry here and now just ain't worth it. Don't think it is because it's not. As a young Christian, I was enthused towards the ministry by the Christians in the Fisherman's Hall in the nearby village of Brora in Sutherland.

[26 : 31] It was set up in the 1950s to cater for the spiritual needs of the fishermen in Lower Brora. Tough men, really tough men, who because of the dangers of what they did, did not know whether today would be their last day.

Many of these tough men had become believers in Christ. They were, if I'm allowed to say these words these days, masculine men, manly men, for whom the gospel was not a lifestyle choice as much as it was a matter of life and death.

When I became a Christian, these men caught me in their nets, and they filled me with an urgency to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to offer salvation to all who would believe.

I'm not the only one they caught. For a time, ten years ago, there were more ministers in the free church who had started by preaching in the Fisherman's Hall in Brora than anywhere else in our denomination.

by song and by scripture, these godly men and their wives filled us with enthusiasm for the gospel, and they were poor men. They were aged prematurely by the efforts of their vocation.

[27 : 45] From working with the nets, their hands were calloused and huge. They were very intelligent men. Academics, they were not. I would watch them as together we sang Robert Money McShane's great hymn, Jehovah said, can you?

And they would have tears in their eyes when they came to that line, when free grace awoke me by light from on high. But it was another one of their songs which confirmed my desire and entrapped me into entering the ministry of the proclamation of the gospel.

Some may call it an Arminian hymn, but it's not. It's just the outworking of Paul's testimony here in 2 Corinthians 4.14. Many of you will know it for yourselves. Will there be any stars, any stars in my crown, when at evening the sun goeth down, when I wake with the blessed in the mansions of rest?

Will there be any stars in my crown? So tell me, what's involved in being a minister? Now you know. It's violent, vicarious, vigorous, and victorious. A kaleidoscope of experiences, life in the raw with plenty of gear changes.

[29 : 12] Gospel ministry isn't romantic, it's real, and for that reason it is compellingly exciting. It has all the ingredients of the merry-go-round, and the big wheel, and the roller coaster.

Does anyone here dare to get onto that ride, and live the compellingly exciting gospel rhythm of Christian ministry?

If you do, speak to me afterwards. Let us pray. Oh Lord, our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the joy of the thought that there may be those we have shared the gospel with, those we have witnessed to, who may in time to come profess faith in Christ, and they will be as stars in our crown. Give us this holy desire that we shall be raised together with all we have loved and served, all that we have ministered to. We remember that minister friend of ours, broken and exhausted by all his efforts.

We ask that even now you would give him this burning vision in his heart of that resurrection day, when all that he's endured and is enduring shall have been worth it, and a million times more.

[30 : 43] And we also pray, oh Lord, for ourselves that there may be some among us today, whether young or middle-aged or even old, who hear the call to the ministry and offer themselves up for this combination of merry-go-round, big wheel, and roller coaster.

father. We thank you for Jesus Christ and for his gospel, in whose name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.