

How not to lose heart - Part 2

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[0 : 00] Great, well let's turn back to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 together, and before I read the second half of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 7 to 18, I've just got a question that's written down here, it's an excellent question.

Thinking about the 19th century and what was going on in there, the question is basically, because of verse 3 where it says, even if our gospel is veiled, it's veiled only to those who are perishing, if it's down to God to open blind eyes, then surely we should leave God to do the work, rather than feel the burden and potentially guilt being upon ourselves.

Was it the fault of Christians losing heart at the end of the Victorian period which has emptied the churches today? Well, I think as we think about verse 3, if our gospel is veiled, well it's true the God of this world, Satan, has blinded people, so they cannot see, but earlier on in, if you look back to chapter 3, how is the veil removed?

Chapter 3 verse 16, when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. So when people hear about the Lord Jesus Christ, that is the way that God lifts that veil so people can see Christ as he is. So it's both, isn't it? So it is the Lord doing his sovereign work of opening blind eyes, but he does it through means, which is through ordinary people going and preaching Christ.

[1 : 41] And I, you remember William Carey, who's said to be the father of the modern missionary movement, a missionary in India. If I've understood the details correctly, there he was wanting, as a tinker, to go to India, and he was kind of, he was taken aside by some ministers in Northampton, saying, you know, sit down young man, if God is going to convert the heathen, he will do it himself.

He doesn't need you. And it sounds good, doesn't it? But actually, God uses people carrying seed to sow for there to be a harvest of souls.

I love Psalm 126, and I go back to it frequently, where it says, Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. Well, it's lovely, isn't it, walking past those fruitful apple trees. It doesn't just happen, does it? You don't have a harvest like that without the hard work of the farmer doing all that sowing. The nurseryman, you know, growing those things from, those trees from seed, and then planting them and watering them.

[2 : 55] And it's the same with us. And often the tears, the setbacks and disappointments cause us to stop. But actually, we should be like that farmer in just keeping on sowing, trusting that it's only God who can open blind eyes, but he will use the means of us preaching Christ and openly stating the truth towards that end.

2 Corinthians chapter 4, verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

We're afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken.

Struck down, but not destroyed. 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. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

[4 : 07] 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, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

For it's all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people, it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away,

our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory, beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Well, living in the centre of Canterbury means that if you do any building, by law you have to get an archaeologist round first, to see if they can find some treasure.

Well, we had a garden room put on the back of our house, and we had to call in an archaeologist from the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, and the archaeologist was appropriate name Kirstie Bone, which we found very amusing, and she had the difficult job of scraping away in some trenches underneath the bucket of a mini digger with a builder, who didn't want his time being wasted, dangling over her head, and she was scraping away to try and find some treasure.

[5 : 35] Well, she found some treasure, and we were so excited when she found this, and she said it's very, very old, you know, from Roman times, and it's a pot.

And we got really excited as a family, and the children got into archaeology for about five minutes, and then we said, well, you know, thank you so much for, you know, what you found. Would you like us to donate it to one of Canterbury's museums?

And she said, well, it's just a bit of old pottery. No, thanks. You just keep it to yourselves. Because clay pots were just, you know, plastic cups in their day.

They stored stuff, and they were thrown by the roadside when they were out of use. And what we have here in verse 7 is where the treasure of the gospel is stored.

It's stored in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. How different was the crown jewels?

[6 : 38] Two years ago, I remember the family had crown jewels, and I was on the lookout for the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond. I don't think it's quite as big as that. That's not to scale. Well, it took me two goes to find it, because this great diamond was almost hidden by the gold and the other jewels of the setting around it, because the setting of this diamond in its crown is almost as dazzling as the diamond itself.

Now, in God's providence, he could have done it that way. The jewel of the gospel set in a wonderful crown who is the Christian.

But that's not how he's done it, for a very good purpose. Instead, it's verse 7, we have this treasure in jars of clay, throwaway, plastic cups, so to speak, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

And we've been thinking, haven't we, about losing heart. Thinking about losing heart this morning, the spiritual blindness that we see. Losing heart in preaching Christ.

But as we think about verse 7 onwards, we're thinking maybe more personally about ourselves. Losing heart about our own weakness in this ministry that God has given us all.

[8 : 02] Well, how do you understand your own weakness? Is it an obstacle? Or is it part of God's purpose for your good and for the good of others?

Well, what we're going to see is the three things that are in the handout here. And they're great paradoxes which we need to understand if we're not to lose heart and give up.

Through weakness, God's power is displayed. If we turn the page, through suffering, Jesus' life is revealed. And then through affliction, eternal salvation is achieved.

So firstly, through weakness, God's power is displayed. There is a purpose in our weakness which is to show the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

God has designed it that way so that his power, the power of the Holy Spirit, is seen in all its glory. And there are those three not-bots in verse 8.

[9 : 11] We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken.

Struck down, but not destroyed. And it's as we get to the but not that we really see the power of God at work. When we're in the boxing ring of life and we keep getting punched to the floor, it's when we keep getting up again and we keep going, that's when the power of God is seen, is it not? Afflicted, but not crushed. We don't walk away from Christ at that point because the power of the Spirit is at work in us. Perplexed, but not driven to despair to that point of stopping.

Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. I don't know what kind of Christian you think most fondly of as you think of the power of God at work.

So easily we get distracted by the Superman or the Superwoman Christian as a tower of strength and a great example to follow. But if we give ourselves a moment to think about it, the people that we admire most are those who are outwardly weakest.

[10:39] They might be hobbling into church on their own, having lost everything. Perhaps that older lady whose life is a trial every single day. But they just keep going.

And there we see the power of God at work in sustaining the Christian. The jar of clay on the outside, but the inward renewal that is going on.

That is God's design for weakness to be on display that his power might be seen by others. God has turned the world upside down by sending his Son in weakness and using weak messengers and he's not about to change his mind in our generation.

You'll remember these super apostles looked so strong. They didn't seem to have much of a theology of suffering. Outwardly it looked so good and in contrast to Paul it was like chalk and cheese.

But the Apostle Paul reminds the Corinthians that this is God's purpose. And that little phrase there borrowed from an elderly man in our church who remembered this from a talk 50 years ago from somebody who couldn't remember.

[11:55] It's not my own. My weakness is my passport to God's power. The man who passed this on has got MS. He hobbles into church when he can.

But as I think of him now, will he be at church tomorrow? Perhaps not. He can't always get to church. But this is true for him as it is true for all of us. My weakness is my passport to God's power. When we get to that but not moment then we really see the power of God at work. So that's the first point. Through weakness God's power is displayed.

Secondly, through suffering Jesus' life is revealed. So verse 10. 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. So death is at work in us but life is at work in you.

[13:04] So the death and resurrection of Christ is not just the gospel message but it's the gospel mould into which our lives are to be pressed. And this is something that we can easily forget.

Because actually suffering and death is at work in us day by day and this is God's plan and purpose. And if we see it for what it is it is a glorious thing because the life of Jesus is manifested in this way.

Have a listen to how Paul suffered for the gospel in chapter 11 verse 22 following. Let me read it to you. Chapter 11 verse 24.

Five times I received at the hand of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked.

For a night and day I was adrift at sea on frequent journeys in danger from rivers danger from robbers danger from my own people danger from Gentiles danger in the city danger in the wilderness danger at sea danger from false brothers in toil and hardship through many a sleepless night in hunger and thirst often without food in cold and exposure and apart from other things there is the daily pressure of me on my of my anxiety for all the churches who is not weak and I'm not weak who is made to fall and I'm not indignant.

[14:29] But if I must boast I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus he who is blessed forever knows that I'm not lying. At Damascus the governor under King Aratas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Hardly a glorious exit from that missionary endeavour. But then he goes on in chapter 12 to boast about this thorn in his flesh. Chapter 12 verse 7 So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations a thorn was given me in the flesh a messenger of Satan to harass me to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me but he said to me my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses insults, hardships persecutions and calamities for when I am weak then I am strong. Weakness suffering is God's plan and purpose for our lives that mould for our lives to be shaped into that Jesus' life is seen by others.

It's so easy to think isn't it that great missionary endeavours. The progress of churches being planted or that ministry in church going ahead is some victorious parade but really it isn't and it never is.

[16:07] It's a progress of weakness and suffering of not having enough people of struggling every point along the way and yet and yet Jesus' life is revealed and life comes to other people.

It's extraordinary isn't it reading missionary biographies and Don Cormac's story of the church in Cambodia when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took over in the 1970s.

Two million of its seven million population were executed. Ninety percent of all Christians were killed. Nearly all its leaders were put to death.

yet in the weakness of mere human beings the life of Jesus was revealed even to the Khmer Rouge in extraordinary ways. There was a man called Haim a Christian teacher who with his family were brought to the grave and were to be executed there by these teenage Khmer Rouge soldiers. they had to dig a large grave for themselves and the father and the mother and the children hands linked together knelt together around this gaping pit.

[17:25] With loud cries to God Haim began exhorting both the Khmer Rouge and all those looking on from afar to repent and believe the gospel. the life of Jesus at work through incredible weakness and his boy chased off to try and escape but he called his boy back to kneel beside that grave with him and he asked his boy the question what comparison my son stealing a few more days of life in the wilderness a fugitive wretched and alone to joining your family here momentarily around this grave but soon around the throne of God free forever in paradise.

The family was reunited and Haim told the Khmer Rouge now we are ready to go but by that point when the life of Jesus was on display through extreme weakness none of those child soldiers could do the dirty deed they had to go back to their chief somewhere else to execute these people instead and that is how the gospel has advanced in every age and every generation it's not some great victory parade it's through suffering that Jesus life has been revealed and how we need to remember that in our generation now the little pinpricks of suffering we get here and there are not to cause us to shrink back and lose heart we need to understand that this is part of God's plan through suffering Jesus life is revealed we've been going 10 years as a church now and I was emailing a friend this week he was asking how is it going and I said

I've never felt weaker and as time goes on we all just feel our weakness don't we it might just be in body when our body is just not quite what it used to be it might be in mind when we've just got battles in our minds in one way or another it might be in our spirits we feel utterly weak but actually this is the opportunity for the life of Jesus to be displayed as I emailed this friend I said I've never felt weaker but I see so much life around me in the church and it's that great paradox isn't it through suffering Jesus life is revealed and it seems that these super apostles by this sharp way that the apostle Paul boasts about his weakness throughout this letter they just didn't get it and it seems so attractive to these Corinthians to go after some super apostle of strength instead of sticking with this cruciform pattern of ministry preaching Christ and him crucified was the message and living Christ and him crucified was the ministry given to him and to the Corinthians so through weakness God's power is displayed through suffering Jesus life is revealed and through trouble eternal salvation is achieved verse 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 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence there is something about trouble is there not where everything else kind of falls away and what is of central and most importance in our life comes right to the forefront the Puritans used to say famously grace grows best in winter and it does doesn't it there is something about trouble and suffering that sorts out our life and reorders it to be in the place where it should be I remember my father-in-law who was a very busy businessman he got cancer and died six months later in his busy working life sometimes it was too hard for him to stay focused as a Christian but when the cancer came and his body outwardly was wasting away that inward renewal of his faith by the spirit of God was obvious for everyone to see and it's so easy for us just to be scared of trouble and suffering isn't it like Woody Allen saying

I'm not afraid of death I just don't want to be there when it happens and for many of us when we think about trouble I don't mind trouble I just I just don't want to be there when it happens I just don't want this and I must say I've wrestled with 2 Corinthians for the past couple of years this form of ministry which is you know suffering trouble weakness this is our manual for ministry is it not if the

book of Romans is our manual for what the gospel is the book of 2 Corinthians comes second for our manual for what ministry is and it's a ministry of weakness and suffering and trouble because when trouble comes we believe and therefore speak what really matters to us comes to the forefront and our confidence in our hope is placed in the right place knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence and all this is for the sake of not just the person who believes and speaks but for the benefit of others as well so we do not lose heart though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed day by day this is an extraordinary paradox isn't it that as we go on in life outwardly we waste away now I don't mirrors are terrible things aren't they you keep looking at it and it gets more discouraging as the years go on well it's painfully obvious what the outer wasting away is about but there is an inner renewal by God the Holy Spirit day by day which is extraordinary if we pause to think about it [23 : 58] I mean a similar thing is said in chapter 3 verse 18 we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another by the Spirit of God at work in us to be more like Christ he is doing this work of transformation in us from that moment the Holy Spirit enters our hearts that moment we believe as Paul writes of in chapter 1 and chapter 4 verse 18 to verse 17 this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison if you wanted a paragraph that summarizes the whole of 2 Corinthians it would surely be verses 16 to 18 it's full of these contrasts and he's having a dig at these super apostles and their form of ministry outwardly we don't look very impressive these super apostles made a good show but no outwardly we're wasting away but what is happening on the inside is this renewal day by day this life well slight momentary afflictions but actually eternally there is glory to come this is an extraordinary ministry of glory that we have been given but it's a it's one that we need to get our heads around in the culture that we're in and the world that we live because it's counter-cultural it's a paradox isn't it that actually through affliction eternal salvation is achieved so as we think about ministry perhaps we're in some form of leadership it's very easy with our you know just growing up from being child to adult being independent and being strong is what we're trained and brought up to be isn't it and so often in a position where we have some kind of influence or responsibility we feel

I've got to be strong for people but we need to challenge that thought from what we see in this chapter in 2 Corinthians and elsewhere in the whole letter I must be weak for people I must let people see my weakness so that Christ's power may be seen for what it is so easily we want to be the superman or superwoman and actually when people get a bit too close to us they are bitterly disappointed and instead we must be like the apostle Paul who yeah we don't want to put our dirty washing on the line but Paul is very keen to show right from chapter 1 here to share trouble and weakness and setback and failure that the glory of God his power and Christ might be seen through him so we need to be weak for people and there's nothing more discouraging isn't there in a conversation with another person how are you doing

I'm fine and where does that conversation go we've been looking at 2 Corinthians chapter 1 recently as a church 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 8 we do not want you to be ignorant brothers of the affliction we experienced in Asia so Paul wanted to share affliction with people and trouble and he wanted to teach them a lesson that we were utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself we felt we received the sentence of death but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead and the effect of relying of sharing affliction and trouble was that people prayed for Paul and prayer was answered and then he says many give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many so let's not be shy of sharing weakness and trouble and suffering because actually that draws us together in community and drives us to prayer and then who gets the glory it's God isn't it rather than the superman or superwoman that we so often want to be there's so much more isn't there in these verses that we could ponder on but we could at the very least consider this that my weakness is my passport to God's power and me being useful to God it's so easy isn't it to think well I can't do this I haven't you know I'm not strong enough or successful enough or super enough but actually the very passport you have to usefulness to God is your weakness and turn it round the other way so this weakness is not something to shrink back and lose heart over that difficult situation we're in might be the very opportunity that God is giving us to be fruitful for him we've got a bit of time just to think about questions comments and then it would be good to be praying in groups as well any

questions or comments just from there's so much to think about here isn't there we've only scratched the surface I'm sure people have got useful comments as well in our culture of being competent and strong and excellent at things how do you helpfully talk about weakness and struggles without grumbling and moaning and kind of beginning to sound woe as me yeah I mean a grumble stops at a grumble doesn't it whereas if it's a I'm weak will you pray for me I don't feel like I could ever have that conversation with that person I'm seeing tomorrow but will you pray and then if that prayer is answered there's great glory that goes to God rather than oh they're always going to make the most of that opportunity aren't they brilliant and I'm not like them and yeah there's not yeah so a grumble usually just stops there doesn't it but if it's a sharing of trouble or weakness that drives us to God and calling upon him for his power and strength that's a great step forward we're not very good at doing it are we I think the ladies are much better at doing it than the men there's a readiness to kind of share about weakness and trouble that kind of binds you together in wonderful ways in the life of the church and as men we're often kind of doing that together and talking about the cricket or something but actually when there is that opportunity for us to show that life isn't all it looks like on the outside then it's really possible for us to join together and pray for each other and really depend upon

[31 : 07] God and see wonderful deliverance and answer the prayer just thinking about Paul's comment the thorn in the flesh my grace is sufficient for you do you think that that was him able to look back and say actually I can see that God was working or do you think he had the experience of it at the time that helped him to deal with it well yeah I mean in chapter one he talks about being under great pressure feeling the sentence of death and he was delivered at that point so he's alive to tell the tale so that was a deliverance but it seems that the with the thorn you know we don't really know what it is but it it seemed to be something that didn't go away you know what was it some health concern we don't know but it you know we get both don't we in the Christian life we get a wonderful deliverance and we can praise God and rejoice that he has heard our prayer we get the thorns in the flesh that don't go away but the focus of

Paul in both those is upon God and his grace and a bit like even with chapter one and the deliverance there you know this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead and on him we've set our hope that he will deliver us again so there's a great focus on God and the resurrection day to come yeah other questions or thoughts good just to chew it over a bit isn't it well that's the that's the great paradox isn't it because the world around us wants us to be super supermen and superwomen because they love that I mean that's in the culture everywhere it was in Corinth you know you go back to one Corinthians I follow Paul I follow Christ I follow Christ and there was that kind of superman culture but we have it today don't we but actually you know my brother-in-law twice divorced you know life not easy at all that's given him so many opportunities in the playground and at the swimming pool and the school gate to share his faith through brokenness which none of us in the family could ever imagine because that's the world out there isn't it and when people kind of watch in to the goldfish bowl of the church they think we're all super sorted people and how could I be part of you because that's sometimes the impression that we can give so it's just great just to share our weakness and brokenness with people other questions or comments it takes a lot of chewing over this chapter doesn't it about weakness but the bottom line is not to lose heart when we face weakness or suffering or affliction this is God's pattern for our lives you know it's the Christ in him crucified is the gospel message and Christ in him crucified is the gospel mold that our lives are to be pressed into and shaped by and you know we want to wriggle out of it we don't want this to be the case but actually when we accept it for what it is then we're really useful to God to his glory alone well should we pray maybe in groups of two or three that we'd be able to maybe just find a verse chew it over come before the Lord and pray there's plenty to think about isn't there well if you make that your last prayer well dear friends before we sing I'll just close by reading again Paul's concluding comments in chapter 4 verse 16 so we do not lose heart though our outer nature is wasting away our inner nature is being renewed day by day for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal