

Great Foundations

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of July 2004. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

His sermon is entitled Great Foundations and is based on 2 Corinthians 2.12-3.18.

Changing jobs is always a stressful time. It's a time where you have to get your resume ready. It's a time where you've got to get it all sorted out.

I have my resume here. Don't panic, wardens, I'm not leaving yet. This is one of my old resumes in applying for a job. And as you set up your resume, you often have your name and put a curriculum vitae together where you put all your little details, the things of your background, and so you put your positions of responsibility and your interests and other activities and then after that you might put in your resume some letters of recommendation, those letters that talk about how nice you are, those letters where you ask your good friends and people of higher position to write something very nice about you.

So you have a few of those there and then you start getting into your certificates. So those qualifications that just qualify you for that job, first aid certificate, macrame making, you start pulling out all these little certificates that you've got there that just might qualify you for the job.

[1 : 38] And so you get together your resume, ready to hand over so that people might know your qualifications. We're looking at two Corinthians at the moment and Paul is spending a great deal of time trying to clarify his qualifications of being an apostolic minister.

He's writing to a church, the Corinthian church, a church that is wavering in their commitment to Paul. And so Paul is spending a great deal of time defending his ministry and today is a great passage.

It's a passage where Paul puts the foundations for his ministry, where he does the groundwork, so to speak, in setting up the ministry that he has.

And so like any great building that lasts the tests of time, you need to have great foundations and this is a great foundational passage. It's a passage where Paul gives the reasons for his church to boast in him as we saw last week, a reason why they should boast in him as his apostolic leadership that he has.

And so it's a great passage for us to consider. In many ways this is the heart of the book of 2 Corinthians. It's the platform in which Paul builds out from in terms of his ministry.

[2 : 59] So as we come to this great passage, which is quite complex and quite detailed at points, let us pray that God's Spirit will enable us to understand it more clearly.

So let me pray. Father, we do indeed thank you for this passage that we have before us. We pray that your Spirit will help us to understand it clearly, that you help me to preach it clearly.

And we pray this because of your Spirit and we pray that we'll indeed have open hearts and minds that we may live lives that bring you honour and glory.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. It would be good for you to have your Bibles open at the passage 2 Corinthians 2, verse 12 and following.

And you can find that on page 938. It's quite a large passage. So it would be good as I work through this just to have it open before you as we read it. Paul starts our passage by again talking about his grief that he has and the anxiety that he feels for his church.

[4 : 06] Last week we saw that, his concern that he has for the church. But again in verses 12 and 13 we see this very clearly. We see that he is profoundly disturbed about them, like a father who is anxious for his child to find out just that information, where they are, what are they doing.

He wants to know whether they have repented of their sins and how they view Paul's ministry. We see there in verse 12, When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was

opened for me in the Lord.

He heads off after writing a letter we saw last week and he heads off to Troas to start a ministry there. As we see the door is open and he has a great ministry there.

But, as we see in verse 13, My mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So, I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia.

Such is Paul's grief and such is Paul's being disturbed about not knowing whether this church actually accepts him or not. He could not continue his ministry.

[5 : 17] He's anxious about what is happening and so even though there are great doors that are opening, he has to move on because he has to know what is happening in Corinth. So, he moves up to Macedonia so that he can find the person, Titus, and find out this information.

Well, in verse 14, Paul then breaks off into a cry of thanksgiving. It's this sudden burst of thanksgiving, almost like a victory shout. Now, many commentators, when they see this, they can't understand how Paul can be in the depths of despair.

And then in the next moment, he's a man who's giving great thanks to God and shouting out in victory. It appears as though he's weak but he's actually crying out great victory.

Look there in verse 14, But thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him.

Paul gives in this verse two metaphors, two little examples of imagery that help them to understand why he can shout out in victory.

[6 : 29] The first metaphor is this picture of a triumphal procession. Now, back in the Roman Empire, a general would go out and go conquer lands and people.

And when he came back into the city of Rome, what he would do is he'd put out in front of him all the things that he'd captured, all the slaves, all the kings and all the armies and all those things that he'd captured, the gold possessions, they'd all go in the front of this long triumphal procession.

Following this long procession would be the general himself. And I guess the point is is as this procession comes in, people look at all that he's done and go, wow, that's a great general.

Paul says he is someone who is in this triumphal procession of God. As God comes marching in to the land, Paul is a part of this triumphal procession.

Now, commentators have argued, where is Paul standing in this? Is he in front of the generals, one of the slaves that have been caught? Or is he one of the ones that is in the back, a part of God's victory army, marching through with God?

[7 : 43] As we look through 2 Corinthians, it appears fairly clear that Paul is the one who has been caught by God. He is a slave of God, someone who is marching in front of God, a prisoner, someone who has been caught to be God's ambassador.

The difference though is rather than being someone who has been caught up as a prisoner, who has been taken prisoner, Paul willingly and rejoices in the fact that he has been caught by God, that God has brought him in.

Paul rejoices in this fact, even though the world may not see this. The second metaphor is a very clever metaphor. Paul changes it from this triumphal procession to the imagery of sacrifice.

He talks about this aroma, the aroma of the knowledge of God and the aroma of Christ. In the mornings, there is nothing sweeter to me than the aroma of freshly ground coffee.

It is just fantastic. You grind the coffee beans and the smell just permeates all the house. This morning, I ground my coffee and you could just smell the coffee beans, you know, and the smell, this sweet smell that is just so nice.

[9 : 04] But as I snorted this morning, I had to walk out because I didn't have enough time to have my coffee. And I tell you, it was a terrible thing as I was preaching this morning, just not being able to have that coffee. But for me, it's a very sweet smelling odour.

But for Paul, Paul is the fragrance of the knowledge of God, the aroma of Christ.

That is, when he preaches, this sweet smelling fragrance spreads out the knowledge of God. He preaches the knowledge of God that people may come to understand what this God is like.

Secondly, we see there that he is the fragrance of Christ. This picks up this Old Testament imagery when they brought a sacrifice into the temple.

They would burn the sacrifice and the smell would go up to God and be a pleasing aroma to God.

But Paul is the aroma of Christ, Christ's sacrifice that he offered on the cross, a sacrifice, sacrificial death.

[10:06] And Paul preaches this in the Gospel. It's seen in his Gospel, it's seen in his ministry. And so Paul says that he is this fragrance that goes out and spreads out through the world.

Here we see that in verses 15 and 16 that although there is this fragrant aroma to God and to Christ, it is perceived in different ways.

So for some it is a sweet smell of life but others it is that foul stench, a foul stench of death. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

To one the fragrance from death to death to the other the fragrance from life to life. Paul says here that for some it is that sweet smelling, it is that lovely sweet smell of coffee in the morning but for others that sweet smell of coffee, that smell of death, that smell of life is actually a foul stench of death.

During pregnancy my wife could not stand the smell of coffee. This was a very hard time for me. She could not smell the, could not stand it.

[11:27] It would bring on a wave of nauseous and so there was no coffee smells for me in the morning. Such is this aroma. For some it is the stench of death.

For others the sweet smell of life. And Paul reflects on this ministry. Who is capable of such a ministry? Who can conduct such a ministry?

A ministry that divides people into either life or death. There's no middle ground here. Paul's ministry is one that either brings life to some or death to others. What a weighty ministry this is.

To have, to carry around such a fragrance. Paul is overwhelmed. In verse 17, we see this in verse 16. Who is sufficient for these things?

Who can do such a ministry? Who is qualified? Who has the credentials in their resume to be able to do this ministry? In verse 17, Paul says, it's not those who peddle God's word but as those who have been sent from God.

[12:36] For we are not peddles of God's word like so many but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his midst. Paul has in his mind here those false teachers who are going around with a false ministry.

A ministry like that of a petty merchant hawking or trading their goods. Paul is saying, no, no, no. My ministry is not like that.

Mine is a ministry that has been sent by God. Well, it would be very easy at this point. You can hear the Corinthians going, listen to Paul. So self-sure of himself.

So, he just thinks that he's got all the right answers that, you know, he boasts in himself. Paul's probably aware of these questions going in the background and so what he does is he asks a rhetorical question.

He asks about the letters of recommendation that the false teachers walking around have with them. But look there in verse 1 of chapter 3, are we beginning to commend ourselves again?

[13:45] Surely we do not need as some letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter written on our hearts to be known and read by all and you show you are a letter of Christ prepared by us written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Part of this culture it was important to have letters of recommendation I guess a bit like your resume those letters that would commend to the churches that you would arrive at saying, yeah, this guy's alright, this guy's a legitimate preacher, he's okay and Paul's saying look, you keep on asking me whether I've got these letters of recommendation do I need to produce them again, do I need to have them and Paul's saying in these three verses I don't have these letters such that these false teachers do, I have something far more impressive for I am your father, the one who has set up, who is the ambassador, the one who has come in, into your midst and started this church, I don't have these bits of paper but Paul says you, you as a church are a letter that is written on my heart and so he says to them look, look in my heart, look in here and you will see that you are written on my heart when people look at me and the way that I speak and act they see that you are a letter of recommendation, you are the one that legitimises the ministry, you are the letter that shows his qualifications.

Paul then changes it in verse 2 slightly, he says, now seeing this letter that is written on my heart, understand that this letter is a letter that Christ has brought about, Christ is the one that has brought you into existence, look there verse 2, written on our hearts to be known and read by all and show

that you are a letter of Christ prepared by us, written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human heart.

Paul says, you are, been written on by God's spirit, God has worked in your life and brought you into a relationship with him. As we read through these verses, there are a few words that are meant to pick up in our mind some of the Old Testament allusions.

We've got there tablets of stone, obviously picking up the picture of the Ten Commandments.

We've got there the written on heart, human hearts, picking up Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

[16:27] We've got these beautiful little pictures that are just starting to come clear for us. When we move into verses 4 and 5, Paul opens them up a little bit more. He says, this qualification is a qualification that has come from God.

God has given me this ministry such as the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as God, as coming from us, our competence is from God who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letters, not of letter, but of spirit, for the letter kills.

But the spirit gives life. Paul says here, again picking up these allusions in the Old Testament, that his ministry is a ministry that gives life.

Why? Because his ministry is a ministry of the spirit. The Old Testament, as we'll see in this next section, the Old Testament and the law that was written was something that could not give life.

It pointed out the areas of people going wrong but in itself it could not give life. Life was found in the spirit. So, Paul says there in that cryptic little saying right at the end of verse 6, the letter kills but the spirit gives life.

[17:54] Well, Paul moves on in verses 7 through to 11 of chapter 3 and then to, again using these allusions that he's got going in the background to help us understand that his ministry is a glorious ministry.

It is more glorious than Moses' ministry. You see, Moses had a ministry that was glorious. It was a good ministry. We see this as in Exodus chapter 34 where Moses goes up into Mount Sinai and he's there for 40 days and it's there that God gives him the stone tablets, the Ten Commandments but when he comes down he comes down with his face shining with the glory of God.

This is a glory showing to the world the presence and character of God. It was seen in the fiery cloud that went before Israel in the wilderness. It was seen at the top of Mount Sinai and as Moses comes down from Sinai we see this glory on his face.

Paul says, yes, Moses did have a glorious ministry. It was seen by the shining of his face but Paul points out that this ministry was a ministry that was fading.

It's a ministry that actually wasn't a ministry in the end that would give life. You see, as Paul points out this is a ministry that was written on stone tablets. It was the law and for God this was no solution to the human plight of humanity.

[19:31] It did not save. The Ten Commandments didn't save anyone. In fact, it made them more vulnerable to judgment. Paul points out in Galatians and Romans. The Old Testament was not a permanent answer.

It did not, it was not intended to last forever but it was something that would point forward to something that would happen, something that was new and in the future. The law was something that prescribed what people ought to do but did not have the moral power to bring about those things.

It's like a judge who declares that you're bankrupt and jails you. That's what the law does. It declares you bankrupt but then that judge has no way of being able to help you get the finances to pay back the penalty, to pay back the money that you owe.

This judge doesn't have that ability to be able to give you that advice. So to the law. It was very successful in exposing people's sin but it was no good at cleansing them. The law was written on stone but Paul's ministry, the ministry of the Spirit is one that writes on the hearts, gets to the heart of people not on the outside.

So in verses 7 through to 11 Paul picks up these pictures that I've just described here and he helps them to understand it by pointing out three comparisons.

[20:54] In verse 7 he says that Moses' ministry was a ministry of death, that is it couldn't give life itself. We see that it is chiselled on letters of stone tablets.

It came in glory, the people couldn't gaze on Moses' face because of the glory but that has been set aside and Paul says his ministry is not a ministry of death.

You expect him to say at this point it's a ministry of life but what does he say in verse 8? How much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? Moses was a ministry of death, Paul's is a glorious ministry of the Spirit.

In verse 9 and 10 he goes for the second of the comparisons. Moses' ministry was a ministry of condemnation, Paul's is a ministry of justification.

What a glorious ministry this is that Paul has. In verse 10 and 11 he then goes on for the third comparison to say that Moses' ministry was one that wouldn't endure but Paul's would endure.

[21 : 58] Indeed, what was once had glory had lost its glory because of the greater glory for what was set aside came through glory much more has the permanent coming glory.

Paul sets up these two ministries side by side so that we may see that Paul's is a glorious ministry. Well, in verses 12 to 18 this final section he then just drives home the point.

Instead of talking about comparing the two ministries he now looks at the effects of the two ministries. So, he says first of all my ministry in verse 12 is one that brings hope.

We act with great boldness. That is the ministry, the glorious ministry that Paul is involved in but Moses' ministry, it's a ministry that was veiled. Ask the question, well, what's the veil got to do with Moses' ministry?

The veil in the Old Testament symbolised a restriction of access. It was a restriction that restricted people being able to see the glory on Moses' face.

[23 : 08] To stare intently at Moses' face at the glory there with stubborn and hard hearts was to bring death.

Moses' ministry was a ministry that was restricted access. You did not have full access to God, to His glory. And Paul says, that's the ministry of Moses.

It was a ministry that veiled off. It restricted access to God's glory. It was because it was a ministry that didn't get to the heart.

It was not a ministry of the Spirit. So, look there in verse 13, not like Moses who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.

He says in verse 14, but their minds were hardened. But this ministry of Moses and their hardening of hearts back then continues in Paul's day. This veil that was over their minds is like a spiritual veil that blinds them.

[24 : 16] It puts them in darkness. They cannot even understand God's word fully. Look in the second part of verse 14, indeed to this very day. When you hear the reading of the Old Covenant, the same veil is still there since only in Christ is it set aside.

Paul says his ministry, his glorious ministry, is a ministry of the Spirit where Christ takes away the veil, where God's glory we are able to look upon because we have changed hearts.

in verse 16 Paul alludes back to Exodus chapter 34 verse 34 that when Paul was in the presence of the people he would have the veil but when he turned to God and walked into the tent of meeting Moses would take the veil away but when he came back out to the people the veil would come up again.

Keep that in mind when we read verse 16 but when one turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Any of us who turn to the Lord us in our day now the veil is removed and we are able to see the glory of God.

Paul then goes on to talk about who is this Lord. For the Old Testament it was Yahweh in the tent of meeting but Paul says for us when we look at the Lord we are looking at the Spirit.

[25 : 50] Now the Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Paul says when we look at the Lord and the glory it is because of the Spirit that is in our lives changing and transforming us and it brings freedom.

We live in a world that wants freedom doesn't it? We want freedom from all the restrictions to do whatever we want whenever we want. Paul says with the Spirit we have true freedom.

Freedom is a big issue for Paul in his writings. In his writings we see that we are free from the law and free from sin and free from death because of this ministry of Spirit. But in this passage Paul is picking up the point that we are free from the veil.

The veil has been removed. Paul brings his argument to a climax in verse 18. All can see the glory of the Lord with unveiled faces.

How very different that is to Moses a day. Moses was the only one, he was a mediator, he was one that had the access but for everyone else it was a restricted access, it was a mediated access to God, not a direct access.

[27 : 09] Paul says in verse 18, and all of us with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another for this comes from the Lord the Spirit.

As the Lord the Spirit works in our life it transforms us into the image of Christ, transforming us from one glory to another. It's not an instantaneous transformation, it's a gradual transformation.

As we hear from God's Word, God's Word primarily, the Spirit takes it and applies it to our life, transforming us into the likeness of Christ.

This is indeed a glorious ministry, a glory that will never fade, a glory that lasts for eternity. That is why when we meet here as a church, the church here is not a private club for people who share the same hobby, it's not a little club that we meet together to do macrame or something like that.

No, the church is a greenhouse for people who are growing in the likeness of Christ, who have been transformed into the image of Christ, changing from one degree of glory to another, a ministry of the Spirit.

[28 : 38] Well, there's Paul's qualification, the ministry of the Spirit. Let's just step back for a moment for us. Are we a people who recognise that our veil has been removed, that we are people of great hope and confidence and freedom?

We are people that can speak directly to God because of the Spirit that is within us. we are no longer mediated, we don't have a mediation of our access to God, it has been removed.

This is a great ministry. No longer do we need priests to mediate blessing to us, no longer do we need someone to pray for us on our behalf, we can pray directly to God.

What a great privilege this is. But as Paul speaks about his qualification, his resume so to speak, it makes us think about our resume, doesn't it?

What are our qualifications for being a Christian? What would God ask as we stepped up to the pearly gates? As we step up there with our resume, what's God going to ask us on that last day?

[29 : 54] Is he going to say, well, God, I've got this resume here, let me just show you a few things here. I've got my baptismal certificate, I've also got a letter of recommendation from the wardens, I've got these things here, that'll help, won't it?

Or what about, I've got some receipts here from the treasury to prove that I've paid my dues, I've paid all my money. Perhaps a secret handshake or a password. No, no, they're not the things that we have in our resume.

On the last day, all that will count is whether we have God's spirit. It'll be evident from our character. It'll be evident in the way that we are transformed from one glory to another.

For me, as I reflect on me being a preacher, am I a preacher of God's word or am I a charlatan? For me, it's very often, very hard in ministry to want to sit down and think, look at all the things that I've done.

All the jobs that I do here in the church, God's going to be so impressed by all these things. This is where it's all at. Look at all that I do. Look at all my letters of recommendation, God.

[31 : 14] But in the end, they're nothing but filthy rags. Sure, we want to be living lives that bring honour and glory to God and that we pray that God's spirit will bring about good works in us and that the things that I do are a result of the spirit but to try and wave them before God as our letter of recommendation, that's not what we can do.

And all of us, with unveiled faces, sing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed in the same image from one degree of glory to another.

For this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. Amen.