

The Weak, Suffering Apostle

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[0 : 00] God our Father, we thank you that it is your word that is powerful. So exercise that power in us tonight for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you visit Athens, then let me urge you never to miss visiting the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. It is very impressive. It is full of statues of Greek gods, vast, hulky, hunky, strong, muscly figures, the Greek gods.

They're sort of frozen in stone versions of things like the Oscars or the Brownlow Medal Count in a way. People who look very powerful, very impressive, male and female for that matter, gods.

And the Greco-Roman world, of course, was full of gods and full of heroes. And all of them would boast in their achievements. It was part of the ritual, in effect, of pagan religion and pagan life, in effect.

They were impressive people. And you see that nowhere better than walking through the Archaeological Museum in the centre of Athens. For the ancient Greco-Roman world, strength was a virtue.

[1 : 21] Boasting was a virtue, something that they would carry out in order to impress people. And people were, of course, impressed. And it's a little different today.

We have the same sort of parade, maybe not quite in stone statues, although it's coming that way if you walk around the MCG these days. More and more we're seeing posters and statues and forms of the great sporting heroes of the present and the past.

We are a society like ancient Greece and ancient Rome that marvels, looks up to, admires and is impressed by physical strength, physical beauty, sporting prowess, great achievements and so on.

There is little time, it seems, in our society for weakness and for fallibility other than for the gossip columns of the media. We love to gossip about people's weakness and fallibility, but we don't look up to it.

We don't admire it. Very rarely, it seems, these days. Ours is a culture that is impatient when confronted by failure and fallibility, whether it's in a sports person, a politician, a business leader, a leader of society, a church leader, and so on.

[2 : 38] Ours is a culture of success, a culture of strength, a culture of power. Get with the strength. I realised, as I wrote that down earlier today, that that was actually the old motto of the Commonwealth Bank, which now has a different, much more obscure thing, which bank?

But it used to be, when I grew up, get with the strength. And we were encouraged to go and get our little piggy banks at the Commonwealth Bank, so that we banked with the strength and it had an elephant as a symbol of the strength of the Commonwealth Bank.

Well, church culture, today and in the past, is not immune from these pagan virtues, it seems to me. And church culture still continues to imbibe the aura of power, strength and invincibility.

To some extent, we see that in the majesty of medieval cathedral buildings, for example. But in modern times, we see it in the sort of cult of the professional church musician and the mega churches and ones who strive to be the mega churches.

We see it in the way that song leaders seem to be people who need to have walked out of the pages of a fashion magazine. How pastors are people who need also to be able to advertise shaving cream or Colgate toothpaste or something like that, or hair restorer.

[4:00] That is, we often look for people who are professional, strong, charismatic, confident, glamorous, good-looking, muscular, etc.

Preachers who have silky voices and public school diction. In church culture, sadly, too often today, size matters, numbers count, and reputations are so important.

And there is a depressing boastfulness that goes around the church culture, in the clergy meetings I'm part of, in the stuff that you read, and so on. Which somehow seems to undermine and lead to inferiority complexes for many ministers, pastors, and church leaders.

Let me say there is nothing wrong with striving for excellence. There is nothing wrong with people who are professional and competent and good-looking for that matter either.

But it always comes in church circles with a danger. There is nothing wrong with people who are professional and good-looking for that matter either.

[5:28] There is nothing wrong with people who are professional and good-looking for that matter either. There is nothing wrong with people who are professional and good-looking for that matter either. And you see it in the church leaders of the international circuit who might stay in the best hotels and have limousines and motorcades and so on.

We heard at the church camp yesterday from David Williams, who had been a church leader in Nairobi, how a visiting evangelist had come with his motorcade and all the traffic lights through central Nairobi were synchronized so that he could go from the airport to the hotel without being bothered to stop by the begging lepers at traffic lights.

In the 1980s, when I was a theological student, all the rage was a book by John Wimber, Power Evangelism. Because power and strength is what our society is impressed by.

And therefore our church keeps imbibing that sort of culture. And the big danger is a danger of confusion. Where does the power come from?

2 Corinthians has revealed to us the Corinthian church is impressed by power, is impressed by eloquence, is impressed by a sort of super spirituality and the super apostles, as Paul calls them back in chapter 10, who've infiltrated that church.

[6:49] And through the whole letter, we've seen a sustained defense of Paul's ministry in contrast to that sort of ministry that the Corinthians have been impressed by.

But not a defense for the sake of the reputation of Paul, but a defense for the sake of the gospel of Jesus, because that is in the end what is at stake.

True power comes from the gospel of the cross of Christ. That is what is at stake in this letter.

And in one sense, we come perhaps to a theological climax in tonight's passage, the second half of chapter 11 and the first half of chapter 12.

Boasting, as I've said, was a virtue in ancient Greece. It's become a virtue today as well. A hundred years ago, I doubt that we would have seen the sort of boastfulness of sporting victors, of political leaders and so on, that we do today.

[7:55] Humility was part of the ethos of Victorian England, Victorian Western society into the 20th century, but it's going, if not gone, in our day and age today.

We're much more like the pagan Greco-Roman world, where boastfulness was a thing that we would admire and look up to and be convinced by so often. Well, boastfulness is what the super apostles were practicing in Corinth, and that had won over the Corinthians, by and large, to them, at the expense of following the gospel preached by Paul.

Paul begins this section, in a sense, trying to play their game. In a sense, he says to them, you Corinthians, you've been taken in by people who boast.

Okay then, if that's the way that I win you back to what I say, I'll boast. I'll play your game. I don't like doing it. I'm uncomfortable doing it. It's not particularly godly to do it.

But okay, I'm going to boast. I'm going to play the fool's game. You're fools for following the fools who boast. Well, let me be a fool for a while. I'll answer the fool according to their folly.

[9 : 06] I'll boast. And so he says, I repeat, let no one think that I'm a fool. But if you do, then accept me as a fool. Okay, I'm about to boast.

I'm about to be foolish. So that I too may boast a little. What I'm saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I'm saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool. That is, he's distancing himself.

Not that what he's about to say is untrue, but then in a sense, he's playing a worldly game, not a godly game. It's not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool, since many boast according to human standards, according to the flesh.

That's our culture. It's not Christian, but it's our culture. Our pagan culture, Paul is saying. Okay, I'll indulge and I also will boast. For you gladly put up with fools.

Being wise yourselves. He's mocking them, actually. He's being sarcastic. They boast in their wisdom, but they've been duped by fools. I'll play this game.

[10 : 07] It's the wrong sort of game. He's being fully sarcastic at the end of verse 19. Being wise yourselves. Boasting's folly. You've followed the boasters.

You're not wise, you're fools. Okay, I'll be a fool in order that I may get an audience from you. Before he begins his boast, Paul attacks the foolish listeners as well as the super apostles whom they're listening to.

For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you or prays upon you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or gives you a slap in the face.

What's Paul talking about there? What he's talking about there is the super apostles who've come into Corinth and won over the hearts of the Corinthians.

They boast in their power. The Corinthians say, We like the power. We're impressed by that. How do they exercise their power? They prey on the Corinthians.

[11 : 13] Probably taking their money amongst other things. How do they exercise their power? They take advantage of you. Beguile you, deceive you. How do they exercise their power?

They put on airs. They're arrogant and proud and boastful. How do they exercise their power? They slap you in the face. Maybe even literally. Oh, it's astonishing.

How could anyone follow somebody who might actually physically slap them in the face? These are authoritarian leaders of the church who are brutal in their raw power.

Far from godly, far from loving, and far from selfless, they actually enslave the Corinthians. But they've been blinded by the gods of this world, if you remember back to chapter 4.

And they're taken in by brute power. And they think here in this powerful apostle that's standing before us, who might actually slap me in the face, who might prey on me and deceive me and fleece me of my money, who might control me and manipulate me and enslave me, here's God's power at work.

[12:25] We might think it's bizarre that people could follow such preachers and leaders. But they do. World history is full of that. Of countries who capitulate to raw, brutal, bad power.

We've seen it in the last century and every century preceding that as well. And we see it in the churches. Paul's saying here, open your eyes.

This is power at its worst. But because you're so caught up in the pagan culture that power and strength is right, might is right, you've been won over by these brutes who bash you around and enslave you.

The Corinthians are not the last to be deceived by such power. It happens in churches today. And it's happened ever since. Where leaders of churches become brutal in their power, manipulative, enslaving their congregations.

And sadly, sometimes, people in churches want to be absolved of all responsibility. Let's give it all over to them.

[13:33] They'll just tell us what to do and we'll do it. And it's dangerous because it's so corrupt. Cheekily, Paul says in verse 21, to my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that.

You see, they're mocking Paul because Paul's weak. And Paul says, in this ironic way, yes, when we were in Corinth and preached the gospel, I was weak because I was too weak to slap you in the face.

I was too weak to enslave you to me. I was too weak to pray on you. Yeah, I'm just a weakling by comparison with those super apostles. But of course, it's ironic in what he's saying.

We were too weak for that. But whatever anyone dares to boast of, I'm speaking as a fool. He doesn't like boasting because it's ungodly. But okay, I'm playing a fool's game, he says.

So I don't like it, but I also dare to boast. I match them. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Three things really basically the same.

[14:42] That is, I've got a pure Jewish heritage and pedigree, Paul is saying. They claim that, so do I. I'm no different from them. And Paul's speaking the truth here. Then are they ministers of Christ?

Well, we who heard last week the beginning of chapter 11 might well remember that just before this passage, Paul decided that they, or stated that they were not actually ministers of Christ.

They're ministers of Satan. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So is it not strange if his ministers, or it is not strange that his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness?

But Paul here doesn't want to go back to that debate. They claim to be ministers of Christ. Okay, if that's what they claim, so am I, and I am a better one. He says in verse 23.

I'm talking like a madman because he doesn't like this boasting and this comparison. Okay, how am I, Paul's saying, a better minister of Christ?

[15:42] We might expect him to say, I've got more converts than they have. I've planted bigger churches than they have. Our music team is much better and we have five services on a Sunday. They're the sorts of things that I would expect in this day and age, in sadly this competitive day and age.

But that's not how Paul rates himself. That's not how Paul rates being a minister of Christ. He doesn't say, I've got a better car than they. I fly business class when I trip around the Greco-Roman world, for example.

They're the sorts of things that I hear in this day and age. We have a bigger budget, bigger property. We're building a new building or a new church.

That's the sort of stuff I hear when ministers of Christ speak about their ministries these days. But that's not what Paul's on about. What does he say when he goes on to say, I'm a better, far greater minister of Christ.

Far greater labours, that is, I've worked harder. Far more imprisonments. We know of one in Philippi in Acts 16, but more than that, it seems.

[16:53] Countless floggings and often near death. Five times I've received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. The Old Testament in Deuteronomy precluded lashing somebody for certain sins more than 40 times.

And by Paul's day and Jesus' day, because Jews didn't want to accidentally go more than 40, the limit became 39, which Jesus was flogged and Paul here the same five times, he says.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once we're told of in Acts, but there must have been others. Once I received a stoning. That's probably the case at Lystra, which is mentioned in Acts 14.

Three times I was shipwrecked. Well, once we know of in Acts, but that may well have been after this letter was written anyway, which would have made at least four by the time Paul ended his life.

For a night and a day I was adrift at sea. What a boast. What a strange boast. It doesn't look that impressive.

[18:02] But Paul is saying, yeah, I'm a minister of Christ. I'm a better minister of Christ than they. And the mark of that comparison is not numbers, money, strength or flashy cars.

It's the suffering that I've gone through as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Would you employ a person with this CV?

The ancient Greco-Roman world wouldn't. And sadly, many today wouldn't either. And another thing, Paul seems never to have quite settled.

Something again that might be a point of dismissing him. So he goes on then to speak of his journeys. Frequent journeys, which we read about in Acts, but there's probably a bit more than what's described there.

In danger from rivers. Remember, there were a few bridges in those days. You'd ford rivers much more often. Danger from bandits on the road as he travelled. Danger from my own people. Even Christian people or maybe Jewish people is what he's referring to there because he then says danger from Gentiles.

[19:07] That is danger on all counts. It doesn't matter which people we're talking about. There's always some danger. We read some of that in the Acts of the Apostles. Danger in the city, danger in the wilderness. That is in all places.

Danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters and maybe there a slight barb against the church in Corinth. In toil and hardship through many a sleepless night, hungry, thirsty, often without food, cold, naked.

It's hardly a great success story, is it? It's hardly a glamorous, laminated, gold-plated CV to parade around in front of a bishop for promotion. It's not a particularly impressive list.

And besides, other things, I'm under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Oh, here's a man who's obviously got ulcerative colitis or stomach ulcers or whatever it is.

He needs some medication because of all the stress. I mean, he's so stressed. Why, if you're a minister of the gospel of Jesus, are you not at peace? Are you not suave and sophisticated and everything's under control? Why is this not a great success story?

[20:14] Paul, you can't really be an apostle of Christ. If that's your life, it's a dismal failure because the gospel's about power, about success, about overcoming problems, about victorious Christian living.

That's what the Corinthians are being told. That's what they think the gospel's about. And here we get a CV that, well, most people would just sort of screw up and throw in the bin.

Delete from their email box. Let's find somebody who's got a bit better success story in their ministry. Who is weak, he says in verse 29, and I am not weak.

That is, yes, I am weak and others are weak and I'm concerned for my weaker brothers and sisters. Who is made to stumble and I'm not indignant. Maybe they're referring to the effect of the super apostles back in Corinth.

And he says, I'm indignant, I'm burning inside because they're causing you to stumble. That's why I'm anxious for the churches. And if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

[21:22] And that's what he's just been doing. And that's why he's been prepared to play the fool's game. Paul could easily have said, this is my boast. I've planted churches in Lystra, in Derbe, in Colossae, in Ephesus, in Corinth, in Athens, in Berea, in Thessalonica, in Philippi, in Neapolis, and Trice, and I was the first Christian preacher in Europe, and go on and on and on and on and on.

And there are numbers here and look at all my letters and these are coming into the New Testament and your letters aren't. There's none of that. Completely absent from anything like that at all. Because the only thing Paul is prepared to boast in, and he doesn't like boasting in this either, is weakness.

We'll see why at the end of the passage tonight. But in a sense he's declared there in verse 30 his principle. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

It is a parody of boastfulness. You imagine somebody getting up to win a Brownlow medal or an Oscar award or something like that and saying in their victory speech, I was rubbed out, suspended for a couple of weeks.

I kept dropping the ball on my half-forward flank. I missed 17 goals this year. I mean, people would be laughing. It would be a mockery. We don't expect that. That's the sort of thing that Paul is doing here and he climaxes it with perhaps one of the most humiliating things for him as a Christian and it was right in the first few days.

[22:50] In Damascus, after that blinding vision on the road to Damascus, brought into Damascus to the house of Ananias, the blindness went, baptized.

In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me. This is probably in about 40 AD, thereabouts. Or maybe a bit earlier, sorry, than that.

But I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped from his hands. The heroes of the Greco-Roman wars were the ones who went first over the wall into the city besieged to conquer it.

Paul is led out of the wall through a window in a basket at night undercover, running away, fleeing for his life.

a Greek hero or the Apostle Paul? Poles apart. Who would you be impressed by?

[23:58] One of the things the super apostles boasted in were their visions, their super spirituality, the revelations that they'd received. We get glimpses of that sort of ethos in 1 Corinthians where the Corinthian church in the first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians, or at least what we call 1 Corinthians, they're boasting in speaking in tongues in their super spiritual ecstasies and states and visions and all that sort of stuff.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, Paul quotes them in effect as saying at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 13. Well, that's another thing that they were putting Paul down. He doesn't seem to have had all these sort of visionary experiences.

He seems to be very second rate, not particularly super spiritual at all, not particularly hyper spiritual. Notice how Paul addresses that issue cunningly, cleverly, honestly in these verses.

It is necessary to boast, but nothing's gained by it. But I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. That is, I'm addressing the other issue that they're criticizing me for.

I know a person in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. in the body or out of the body, I don't know.

[25 : 14] God knows. And I know that such a person, whether in the body, out of the body, I don't know, but God knows, was caught up into paradise. That's the third heaven, the highest heaven, the place of the righteous dead, and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

it's primarily what is heard, not seen, in this revelational vision. Well, who's this person? Why is Paul referring to this person?

Without any doubt in my mind, the person's Paul himself. It's his vision or revelation that he had 14 years before. Perhaps he's never spoken of it before to anyone else.

it's something that was specially granted to him. But he doesn't want to boast that he had that privilege. He could have said, 14 years ago, I had this vision.

And I'll tell you what it is. I'm not supposed to tell you, but I'll tell you to impress you. He doesn't do that. In fact, he doesn't even say it was him, though it's clear that it was.

Rather, he boasts of himself in the third person.

[26 : 31] I know a person who had this vision. I don't want to boast in myself, but I'll mention this that happened in effect to me 14 years ago.

In or out of the body, I don't know. It was so vivid, I guess, is the issue, but in the end, it doesn't matter. As I say, the key is what he heard, but he won't disclose that.

Maybe that's for a reason. Paul goes on to say in the verses that follow, for example, in verse 6, if I wish to boast, I'll not be a fool, for I'll be speaking the truth, but I refrain from it so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me.

That is, imagine I've had this vision 14 years ago. I could tell you about it. I could say that I was taken up into heaven. Is it true? You don't know.

If I tell you about it, does it make you get impressed by me? Maybe, maybe not. I can't prove the vision. I can't show you a video clip of it. What matters is what is seen and heard in Paul, of Paul, by the Corinthians.

[27 : 44] That's what verse 6 is saying. That's why he doesn't want to boast in visions because they're unverifiable in effect. And what I think he's doing in saying in verse 6, what you've got to judge is what you see and hear in me is something that's obvious, objective, verifiable.

And I think he's therefore implicitly at least criticising the super apostles who boasted of all sorts of visions but who knows if they were true. They may have been true but no one could actually check them.

They sound very impressive but it's their vision. We don't see it. They can't give us pictures. No cameras in those days. Paul, I think you see is downplaying their boastfulness in a very clever way.

I'm not even boasting of my own vision, Paul said. I'm not going to tell you what it's about. That's not to be disclosed. I'm actually speaking of it in the third person. I know somebody for whom this happened.

It's Paul but he's just distancing himself so that he's not boasting in himself or of his own experience. And notice what he says in verse 5.

[28 : 51] On behalf of such a one I will boast but on my own behalf I'll not boast except of my weakness. There comes that principle again that was mentioned back in verse 30 of chapter 11 that will be resolved in a few verses time.

So I'm speaking the truth but I'm going to refrain from telling you about this vision because I don't want people thinking better of me than I am.

what matters is now not 14 years ago and what matters is what you see and hear in me not what I tell you about what I saw that you can't see even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

notice how he refers to the first person therefore to keep me from being too elated. It's Paul who had that vision not a friend of his 14 years ago and in order to keep me from being too elated too boastful too proud in order for my head not to blow up like a balloon full of ego because of the great privilege of the vision that I had 14 years ago in order to keep me from being too elated a thorn was given me in the flesh a messenger of Satan to torment me to keep me from being too elated.

What is this thorn? It's a huge speculation over 2,000 years to try and diagnose this. Is it stuttering baldness bandy legs hearing problems eye problems sexual temptation?

[30 : 28] We don't know. It could be any one of those. It could be something else for that matter. Why aren't we told? It's interesting the anonymity of the thorn that is we don't know what it was precisely that was inflicted on Paul the very anonymity of it has meant greater blessing today and through the ages to Christians because let's say it was blindness or bad sight then in a sense the identification with the thorn in the flesh applies to those who've got bad sight but because we don't know what the thorn is in a sense we recognise a wider application and so for centuries Christians have received blessing and benefit from Paul's teaching here about God giving a thorn in the flesh it might have been literally some splinter in his flesh although it's hard to see why that wasn't removed or couldn't be removed by somebody then Paul prays three times for its removal in verse eight but the

Lord didn't do it three times I appeal to the Lord about this that it would leave me but he said to me my grace is sufficient for you I think there's a deliberate echo of Jesus in Gethsemane praying three times for the cup to be taken from him the same Jesus who would wear a crown of thorns the next day into whom stakes or thorns the word could be used maybe not for nails but in a sense to pierce his hands and feet on the cross the thorn that Paul received provides an echo of the suffering that Jesus received three times each prayed and they were denied God didn't take away the cup of suffering from Christ and he didn't take away the thorn from Paul what Paul's reference to the thorn here does then is drive us to the heart of the model of Christian living of Christian ministry and of the

Christian message we know the cross is the basis of our salvation it is also the basis of Christian ministry and of Christian living the super apostles have moved from the cross to some other worldview and some other gospel another Jesus and another spirit as we saw last week but the implications of the cross of Christ are profound and they are to shape and influence and motivate Christian ministry and living and that is why this letter is so long and that is why this letter is so much the defence of Paul's ministry not for his sake but for the sake of the cross of Christ you see the linchpin of Christianity is the weakness of the cross a man naked nailed helpless weak defenceless it is hardly a muscular

Greco-Roman god or statue it is the opposite but the power of salvation from god is found in abject weakness humility humiliation and what looks to be defeat the cross is weak in the world's eyes Paul addressed that issue back in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 what the world thinks weak and foolish is the power and wisdom of god that is the cross of christ and god humbles Paul by the thorn because the heart of the gospel is god lifting up the humble and bringing down the proud gospel inversion well the gospel is about inversion of the humble and proud of the powerful and the weak but the cross also points us to how to live in this world you see we still live in this world we belong to the world to come the world up there we're citizens of heaven but we live in this world we live in a world wracked by sin and failure and weakness we live beneath the cross as we've sung in its shadow but also in the growing light and the rising light of the resurrection we live in a bit of a dilemma but unlike the super apostles and unlike the corinthians back in 1 corinthians 4 for example we have not yet made it we are not yet kings and lords in heaven we live on earth our feet in the dust the corinthians were beguiled to think that they spoke already in the tongues of angels and belonged in heaven and lived there the super apostles thought that signs and power and miracles and healings and tongues and strange languages they were the signs of heaven we're in heaven now there's no place for weakness and failure there's no place for suffering and affliction we belong in heaven that was their message but of course the message of the cross and the message of two corinthians is that we still live on earth and the cross is the touchstone of how we live today tomorrow on earth before we arrive in heaven because super spirituality wants too much too soon it claims too much too soon on the other hand liberal christianity claims too little it just wants a better earth but this super spirituality that the corinthians were beguiled by which is a different gospel and a different jesus is not the jesus of the cross and we live in the shadow of the cross on earth so therefore we live not in glimmering glamorous success all the time but we live by grace still the answer to paul's thorn my grace is sufficient for the day for you the way paul is actually quoted god saying that to him in verse nine he said it to me in a perfect tense means he didn't just say it back then and that day my grace was sufficient but the sense of the verb is that my grace is sufficient that day the next day the next day today tomorrow and every day my grace is sufficient for you not that god gives us a vast investment of grace and we begin to whittle it away day by day but that the grace is given to us today for today and tomorrow we will receive grace for tomorrow that will be sufficient and the next day we'll start all over again with sufficient grace given to us by god it's exactly the method that god used in humbling the israelites in the wilderness by giving them manna from heaven to humble you and to test you so that you will live on what proceeds from my mouth alone that is today you get sufficient you don't bank it up for the future and that's how god grace works it exercises our faith we

trust that tomorrow god will give us grace for the things that confront us tomorrow for our suffering our affliction our persecution and paul has already directed our attention to this very thing back in chapter one where he said we do not want you to be unaware brothers and sisters of the affliction which we experienced in asia for we were so utterly unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself indeed we felt that we received a death sentence so that we would rely not on ourselves but on god who raises the dead absolute weakness cast to my knees to rely on god alone not on my strength my skills my abilities my eloquence but to rely on god alone the god who raises from the dead that's how we live in this world we are being forced and humbled and tested by god to rely upon his grace and that's why thorns in the flesh come that's why god sent the thorn through the agency even of satan as verse nine says a bit like the issue of job chapters one and two in order to humble us so that we do not get driven by our ego and too elated to make us rely on god and on his daily sufficient grace notice how paul's prayers not answered how quick we are to complain when our prayers are not answered but notice how paul's prayer is answered even better than he wanted he wanted the thorn removed but he recognized that god didn't answer that prayer but kept the thorn in him whatever it was so that he would become more trusting and reliant on the grace of god what a challenge to us in our prayers for we so often pray for quick answers to our problems a quick ease to our illness a quick return of a job when we're unemployed but how god answers in the big picture to make us ready to stand in the mirror image of christ on that final day as the end of chapter 3 said to us a few weeks ago but thirdly the cross drives us to the real power that is at work in this world not power in the world's eyes not power of physical strength or physical wealth or physical wisdom but power from god my grace is sufficient for you because power is made perfect in weakness that is power is crystallized sharpened into focus in weakness he goes on to say in verse 10 or at the end of verse 9 so i will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses something that he said in chapter 11 verse 30 and earlier in chapter 10 12 why so that the power of christ may dwell in me that's why paul has boasted the way he did with all the failures and sufferings so that the power of christ may dwell in me therefore i'm content with weakness insult hardship persecution calamity for the sake of christ for whenever i am weak then i am strong put up a ministry that looks powerful because a minister is glamorous and and well-dressed and charismatic personally and eloquent in speech and wealthy and persuasive and people will flock to that ministry what's going on in the ministry it's confused we don't know are people flocking there because of the glamour of the person or are they under the actual power of the gospel but when it's somebody who's weak who preaches the gospel of the cross of christ and people are converted that power is made perfect it's clear it's focused it's the power of the gospel at work any boast detracts from the power of god whether we boast in our minister ourselves our ministry our

[41:57] music our facilities our technology our numbers whatever any such boasting confuses and detracts from the power of god god so often consistently works in old and new testaments to make it clear that the only answer is god that it's not somebody else's power but god's that's why he chooses weak things so that his power is made more evident and so that all the glory goes to him it's why he chose to save by the cross there is no other solution to salvation it must be god's power at work and it's why he saves by the power of his gospel and not by the strength and skill of the preacher as david williams reminded us at camp yesterday when he spoke about power how do we explain someone like billy graham he's an ordinary man when he gets up in front of thousands of people i remember him speaking at ranwick race course in sydney in 1979 and i was expressing expecting you know flashing lights and and a great sort of thing and this man gets up and he opens a bible and he speaks it's not particularly impressive it's not particularly brilliant exegesis and yet people go forward and are converted and stay converted how do we explain that it's not his charisma it's not the brilliance of the music it's not the stage show it's the power of the gospel made perfect in weakness it's the power of the cross and that's paul's boast i'll not boast in anything he says no gifts no power no wisdom but i will boast in jesus christ his death and resurrection and finally you see the cross directs us to what the real model of ministry is to be like not relying on our skills our eloquence our abilities our leadership our confidence or charisma but humble a ministry of integrity self-effacing and christ-like and for those who may strive to some christian leadership or ministry don't fear weakness make it rely make it make you rely on god's strength in our prayers before the service tonight someone prayed for me as preacher that god would give me strength it's not a bad prayer to pray and i'm grateful for it but actually it's god's strength not mine as a preacher that is needed back in the 1980s john wimber's book was very influential power evangelism and he argued that we need power more than words it was a terrible travesty of the gospel in my opinion but wildly popular as a book preparing the sermons made me think what we need is a book that's called weak evangelism because power doesn't come from signs and wonders from music and ability and skills paul is an ordinary man he's not extraordinarily weak let me tell you he's just an ordinary man a weak man like you and me and god chose him to be a preacher of the gospel and the influence the power that came was not from paul but from the same gospel that's entrusted to you and me powerful words indeed a powerful cross that we preach and that is impressive he's not even he's not aiamo he's not a chief almost the of the the things y the the