

The Clown Who Glimpsed Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 26th of September 2004.

The preacher is Paul Dudley. His sermon is entitled The Clown Who Glimpsed Heaven and is based on 2 Corinthians 11, verse 21b through to 12, verse 10.

Father, we do indeed thank you that we can meet here around your word. We pray that you help us to understand it, that you apply it to our lives, that we may live lives that bring you honour and glory. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Well, you may not know, but I am an expert in rock bands.

In fact, I have been quoted in a paper just recently about my expertise about the band regurgitator. It's a bit of a closet hobby that I have, you know.

[1 : 1 3] I'm an expert in bands and how things should be done and the world of punk rock scene. It's just this little skill that I have. And people often come to me and ask me about, you know, what's the world at?

Where is it at? You know, how can I help in this situation? And so I just happen to be passing through Federation Square when they asked me, Oh, Mr. Dudley, we'd like to ask you just a quick question about regurgitator.

The question was asked, what do you make of the rock band regurgitator and their three weeks in the bubble at Federation Square? Now, regurgitator is a punk rock band and they were in this glass house for three weeks in at Federation Square while they put down their new tracks, their new album.

And so they played there, they slept there, they ate there. And I just happened to be walking past, so they asked my expert opinion. Is it art or a publicity stunt?

Well, I thought about this, being the expert that I am. And I came up with something profound. I think it's a bit of both. As you know, I'm no expert in rock bands.

[2 : 3 0] In fact, someone asked me later on after seeing, it's actually got my picture there and everything in the paper. They asked me later on, did I know any of the songs that regurgitator sang? I said no. But I just happened to be in the right spot at the right time.

This reporter was asking me a bit of a question about this whole thing and so I gave my two bob worth and to think that I should be boasting about it is foolishness. But that's what our world does, doesn't it?

We like to boast in the things that make us look good. And we'll take any opportunity to boast in those things. Things that are really things that probably shouldn't be boasted about at all.

Things that build ourselves up, but really in the end aren't things that are worth boasting about at all. Two weeks ago we began the fool's speech.

Paul the Apostle began this speech where he was speaking about foolishness, the foolishness of boasting. There are some false apostles in the Corinthian church and Paul is writing this speech to undermine them.

[3 : 36] These false apostles and false teachers are out there boasting about so many great things. They're letters of recommendation. They're speaking prowess. Their visions and revelations.

Boasting in all sorts of things. Saying that they were the true apostles, not Paul. So Paul, as we saw two weeks ago, has been forced into this situation where he must boast.

He must get involved in this foolish pursuit of trying to boast about himself. But he does it so that they might understand the truth. Not just about himself, but about the gospel.

Paul says at the beginning of this speech, which we see there on page 943, it would be good for you to have those pages open in the Bible, 2 Corinthians 11, verse 21b and following.

Paul begins the speech in earnest. We saw two weeks ago the introduction to the speech. But now he begins in earnest this speech. But what anyone dares to boast of, I am speaking as a fool.

[4 : 44] I also dare to boast of that. So Paul says, righto, if we're going to get into this boasting game, I'm going to do it. I'm going to be a fool, but just put up with me for a little bit. Let's get involved in this game. So what he does is he says, look, this is what the super apostles are saying and let me line myself up beside them.

So the super apostles have obviously talked about their pedigree, their heritage, their cultural background. And they've thought that this is a great way of getting favour from God. This is something to be boasted in, that they were Jews and Hebrews, these false teachers.

And so Paul says there, well, are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

Those false apostles, they're saying, well, excuse me, I'm like that as well. I'm a dinky-dye Jew, you know. I'm 100% born and bred Jew.

And so, you know, I can boast in that as well. But then Paul goes on to say, well, what about preaching Christ? Because obviously these false teachers have come in and they're preaching Jesus. They're ministers.

[5 : 50] They claim to be ministers of Jesus. So Paul says there in verse 23, are they ministers of Christ? He goes, I'm talking like a madman here.

I'm a better one. And you expect to be okay. Paul's going to lay it on the line. He's going to show them how good he is as a preacher of Christ and all the great things that he's done, all these great signs and amazing wonders and all these type of things.

But Paul doesn't. Paul starts and speaks about his weaknesses. With far greater labours.

Far more imprisonments. With countless floggings. And often near death. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. This is an incredible list, isn't it? It's not something that you'd want to put on your resume.

[6 : 52] But Paul keeps on going. Three times I was shipwrecked. For a day and a night I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys. In danger from rivers. Danger from bandits. Danger from my own people.

Danger from the Gentiles. Danger in the city. Danger in the wilderness. Danger of the sea. Danger from false brothers and sisters. In toil and hardship. Through many a sleepless night.

Hungry and thirsty. Often without food. Cold and naked. And besides other things. I'm under daily pressure. Because of my anxiety for all the churches. Well here's Paul's list.

And what an amazing list. Oh they're ministers of Christ are they? Well I'm a better one. Let me give you some of the catalogue of the things that qualifies me to be a better minister.

What a list. Five brushes with death that he notes there. Eight dangers while travelling. Four hardships from the result of toil and labour.

[7 : 53] Anxiety for the churches. Persecution. What a list. Now this would have been a very strange list to have if you were a part of that culture.

See part of the Corinthian culture back then was that of a boasting culture. If you're a public figure. Well then it wasn't unknown to actually write all the things that you've done somewhere.

So that everyone may see all your list of achievements. Some of the great seasons even wrote it on great big rocks. So that everyone can see all the things that the countries they conquered and all those great things.

What public office that you had. The way that you gave money to a temple or built a theatre. The way that you led an army or fought in a certain battle where you had a great celebration of triumph and victory.

The medals that you won. All these things would be listed and noted down. On and on they'd write the list. The more things that you could boast in the more impressive you were.

[8 : 55] It was like a big scrapbook isn't it? You know how when we get our little newspaper articles. Our five minute of fame. You know. We cut it out and we put it in our little scrapbook and there it is.

You know. And then our next certificate we put in our scrapbook. Or we. As in the castle. The movie The Castle. We have the pool room. We're straight to the pool room. This is where this article is going. Straight to the pool room.

And that's where it's going to go there. Very proudly on the shelf. With my little photo. I might even mount it in a little frame or something. That's the list that back then they would do.

They obviously didn't have scrapbooks and pool rooms back there. But they had these great lists of all their achievements. Always talking about themselves.

And all the things that they've done. So this list just doesn't quite match up. Does it? What does Paul's achievements actually amount to here?

[9 : 54] And when we don't see here the great results of his preaching crusades. The number of people that came up to the altar core. The thousands that were converted. We don't see a mention there on that list.

We don't see a prolific output of his theological pen. We don't see the notes there of how many, you know, Corinthian were sold on the open bookshop back then.

You know. Or the other books that he wrote. We don't see the list of names that he influenced or mixed with.

For him, I mean for the Greeks, this list is a very unimpressive list. Very unimpressive indeed. It is a list of weaknesses.

But Paul says, that's what I'm going to boast in. I'm going to boast in the weaknesses. Now, you might be tempted at this point to think, well, perhaps he's boasting in his weaknesses to see how great he is.

[10 : 52] He got through all those things and he's still alive. How great is he? He's the new Hercules. The new improved version. Look how good he is. He got through all those things. But in verse 29, Paul makes it very clear that he's not writing this list to build himself up and say, look how impressive he is.

I got through all these things. Look there in verse 29. Who is weak? And I am not weak. Who is made to stumble? And I am not indignant.

In ancient Rome, one of the highest honours you could have being a part of the military back then was called the Corona Myrlus.

The crown of the wall. It was the highest military honour you could get being a part of Caesar's army. It was a crown that looked very much like a wall that you would wear.

It would have little doors on it and all sorts of things. But it was the equivalent of our Victoria Cross. It was a picture of great bravery. It was the highest honour you could get.

[12 : 04] But when you understand what was involved in getting the crown, you can understand why you would want something impressive like that. You see, as a part of the ancient warfare back then, when an army came to siege a town or a city, they would camp right around the city.

And if it had big walls, they would wait until the enemy basically starved and, you know, hopefully they'd come out. But if they wouldn't surrender, then they would have to siege and lay siege to the city.

And they'd have these very long ladders which they would throw up against the walls. And obviously then you'd start climbing the ladders to get over the wall and try and breach the city. That's a spectacular thing, you know.

You can imagine being the first people going up the ladder, you know. There's these arrows whistling past you. Oh, that was close. Oh, here comes a rock. I think I should just get out of the road of that one. And boiling oil and all sorts of things.

But this is what the crown was for. For the first person who managed to get up on top of the wall would be given this crown. The highest honour. I mean, that was the only way you'd get people silly enough to get up the ladder, would you?

[13 : 09] I wouldn't want to be the first one going up the ladder knowing that they're going to be either throwing the ladder off and as soon as you got up the top, someone's going to come at you with a dirty great big sword. That's not the type of thing I'd be wanting to go rushing up a ladder for.

But this crazy bravery, this bravery that they would have in the army of wanting to be the first person up the ladder.

Even if you meant you got the crown that you didn't get to wear it or enjoy it because it'd be given to the family because you're actually thrown off, slaughtered and thrown off the cliff. But you were the first one though and that needs to be remembered in the family.

Well, at this turning point here in Paul's speech, we don't hear any bravery of Paul climbing the walls, conquering great cities.

We hear of Paul being lowered down in a basket from a city like a coward. How very different it is, isn't it, the picture?

[14 : 07] One of being given a crown for going up the wall, being the first, to Paul being led down in a basket. If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, blessed be forever, knows that I do not lie. In Damascus, the governor, the king of Artes, guarded 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 from his hands. For Paul, he will only boast in weakness.

He will not boast in the great moments of his life, but he will boast in weakness. Many look at this list that we've had up to this point and just see it as just a comic parody that Paul puts there to say, look, the Corinthians, they've got their impressive list, these super apostles.

But look at this list, isn't this funny? Doesn't it just make the other list look so silly? Some type of comic parody. But as we read through that list, it's too serious for that.

[15 : 17] It's too sombre. It's not just a parody. Paul is making it very clear here that for him, if he is to boast, he will boast in weaknesses.

The next section talks about why he will only boast in those things that demonstrate his weakness. And he does this as he again starts to boast about revelations and visions, which we see in chapter 12, verses 1 through to 10.

The teachers, undoubtedly those super apostles in Corinth, would have loved speaking about their supernatural experiences, how they were transported to that heavenly place, how they heard this and saw that, and how they met an angel and how it was just so wonderful and the blinding light and all those type of things.

The false apostles would have loved bragging about those things because it would have made them look so super spiritual, so very impressive. Wouldn't you be impressed if I got up here and said, I've had a great vision, I've been taken to heaven, I've been...

You'd be going, wow! Man, he is so spiritual. But Paul doesn't want that. Although, does he?

[16 : 35] Let's have a read there. It is necessary to boast. Nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who, 14 years ago, was caught up to the third heaven.

Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that such a person, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. Was caught up into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that a mortal is permitted to repeat.

On behalf of such a one, I will boast. On my own behalf, I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Paul, there in those five verses, starts talking about this person who was taken up to heaven some 14 years ago.

Later on in verse 7, we see that it's pretty clearly that he's speaking about his own experience. But because of his modesty and because of this whole situation of boasting, Paul speaks in the third person.

He speaks about this person, which is really talking about himself. There are a number of points here that we need to note about this experience that Paul had.

[17 : 44] The first is that it was extremely rare. It happened some 14 years ago. It's not the type of thing that happened in Paul's prayer life every day. It was something that happened 14 years ago.

It was something that was extraordinarily vivid. It was so vivid that the vision, he wasn't quite sure whether it was a vision or something where he was physically taken up into heaven. For him, it was also something that was very special.

Paul says there in verse 5, he'll boast about such a person. If a person was taken up into heaven 14 years ago, I'd boast about that person. You see, Paul's quite, he says that it is a special moment for him.

This picture of the third heaven that we have here was, I guess, a common understanding of Judaism back then, that there were these different levels of heaven.

For Paul, he notes here that it was the third heaven. That is, it was the highest spiritual level. I'm not sure whether there are these different levels or not. But what Paul is trying to pick up in the culture there is that he was taken to the meeting place of God.

[18 : 51] He was taken to the highest level. It was not a normal Christian experience and had the potential to cause great spiritual pride.

For Paul, it was a significant moment for him. But although it was significant for him, it was something that was personal and private also.

It's not something that he was going to share with everyone. Hey everyone, did you, let me tell you about what happened to me last night. It was something that was just between him and the Lord.

It was private. Paul says there in those verses that it was actually impossible for him to share this experience. It was beyond description. But not only that, he had no right to be able to talk about those things.

It was not right for him to try and share it at all. It was not intended for public. It was something for his own benefit. Something for his own encouragement.

[19 : 51] Not something to build himself up and to parade around as some achievement that people might see as impressive. Well, at this point, we might be thinking, well, hang on a moment.

Paul's just spoken about all this. Isn't he just boasting? Isn't he doing something that he said he wouldn't do? Isn't he speaking about things that he said, you know, that are a great encouragement to him and to others?

But shouldn't he be talking about weaknesses here? Well, it's not a contradiction at all. You see, Paul talks about this experience that he's had.

Not to talk about the experience. He's very hesitant to actually talk about that. But he talks about it because of the weakness that came as a result of it. He's been forced to boast in something that he preferred not to disclose or divulge, but so that he might actually boast in a weakness.

Look there in verse 6 and following. But if I wish to boast, I will be a fool, for I am 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, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

[21 : 06] Therefore, 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. For Paul, he was given a thorn.

The picture here of a thorn is something that is annoying, something that gets under the skin and is just an annoyance that you just can't get rid of. Many thought there for a while that the thorn spoke of a great big stake.

The language there could be taken either that way of a stake or a thorn. But it's probably more clearly that the picture he's trying to pick up here is that of an annoyance, something that is annoying him, something that is hindering him all the time.

And so what's his response to this thorn that is in his side? He asked God, please take it from me. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.

But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. We're not clear what the thorn was.

[22 : 13] It might have been a physical ailment. It might have been a speech impediment. It may have been blindness. It may have been depression. It may have been a limb, a physical deformity.

There are all these different speculations about what this thorn is. But in the end, that's not what's important. What is important here is that the effect that this thorn had on Paul, it stopped him being proud.

Imagine having such a great vision, being swept up to heaven as something that would have been so amazing. But it could have been something that would have caused Paul to fall into pride.

And so Paul says here, because of that, I was given this thorn to keep me from being proud. There's an ancient story of Icarus.

I quite like the story. I remember hearing it when I was very little. Icarus and his father, his father was this legendary sculptor, craftsman, clever inventor.

[23 : 26] And they were working on the island of Crete. So the story goes. He wanted to leave the island, but the king wouldn't let him. And so Icarus' father, being a great inventor, thought about this.

And being a great inventor, got some feathers, plucked all these feathers out of some bird, got some wax, and put some wax on his own arms and shoulders, and his son's arms and shoulders, and stuck all the feathers on their arms.

Started flapping away. And the story goes, they started flying. And they started flying away from the island of Crete, Icarus and his son. But as you know, the story goes on.

The son being so elated by the flying experience. It wanted to go higher and higher. It wanted to just keep on going up and up.

But the father warned him, no, don't go up. You go too high to the sun, and the wax will melt, and you'll come down. But being a headstrong son that he was, being young and impetuous, he didn't listen to his father.

[24 : 41] And sure enough, the wax melted, and Icarus comes crashing to the ocean and drowns. And of course, this ancient story is used for many morals.

Don't fly too high, or you'll come to a bad end. Don't be too proud, or presume too much on the strange things that can happen, or it may go horribly wrong.

Don't be too proud. Paul uses this story to say that God has enabled him not to be too proud. He was given a thorn.

He asked for it to be removed, and God's answer was, my grace is sufficient for you. Like Jesus in the garden asking three times, remove this cup, and God's answer saying, no.

Paul will not boast in his strengths. He will not boast in the things of this world, but boast in his weaknesses.

[25 : 49] So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul knows the truth that to put confidence in yourself and your own abilities, your own scrapbook, your own pool room. To put confidence in those things is to take confidence away from God.

Paul knows that when he is strong is when God is strong, when God's grace shines through. We need to be people who trust in God, who recognise our weaknesses, who trust in God's grace.

One of the great preachers was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. But his life, it was an amazing life he led. He preached many great sermons and God worked through him powerfully.

[27 : 08] but he was a person who also suffered great bouts of depression throughout his life. Even though he was, because of his popularity and his unpopular stand against theological liberalism of his day, he had to endure great ridicule from others.

He had to care for his wife, who was invalid for most of their marriage. He spent the last third of his ministry out of the pulpit because of his physical illness.

There was weakness, insult, hardship and difficulty for Spurgeon. Yet he was a man who knew that God would work through that.

Instruments, this is what Spurgeon says, instruments shall be used but their intrinsic weakness shall be clearly manifest. There shall be no division of the glory, no diminishing of the honoured Jew, the great worker.

The man shall be emptied of himself and then filled with the Holy Ghost. My witness is that those who are honoured of their Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening or carry a peculiar cross lest by any means they exalt themselves and fall into the snare of the devil.

[28 : 31] Such humbling but sultry messages our depressions whisper in our ears they tell us in a manner not to be mistaken that we are but men frail, feeble, apt to faint.

Spurgeon knew the truth of weakness. Paul knew it. We need to be people who understand that God works in the midst of our weaknesses and we need to trust in him in the midst of those times.

Amen. Amen.