

Weakness and Encouragement: 2 Corinthians

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[0 : 00] We are going to do Bible study this morning. Let us pray. Almighty Father, send the Holy Spirit now into our hearts and minds, that we may understand at deep level the things which long ago the Spirit prompted your servants to put on paper, we thank you for the truth and the wisdom of your word, and we thank you for the strength that comes to us when your Spirit enables us to understand it.

And so show us the glory of Christ our Savior, through whom, indeed from whom, comes all that grace and mercy and strength that sustains us and leads us closer to yourself.

Hear us as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I should tell you right at the outset, I am pinch-hitting this morning.

That isn't, of course, what's done in the world of cricket, but I think it's a phrase that you are likely to understand. There was a cancellation, and Bill, at fairly short notice, asked me if I would stand in, and I said, yes, but what I have for you reflects work that I've been doing under other auspices for another purpose, and it's part of my title, actually, that I should present this study of weakness and encouragement to you as an introduction to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, which is where I have been digging for some time for, as I said, another purpose.

We haven't all got Bibles, all right, but I shall plan to read.

[2 : 32] Oh, well, if, okay, well, if they can be passed around, that will help a lot. But even so, I don't think there's enough for everybody. So, I shall still reckon to read each text that I refer to, and what I hope will happen is that having heard what I have to say about these themes of weakness and encouragement that run right the way through 2 Corinthians from beginning to end, you will yourself go back to that letter when my talk is over and find in it both the things that I've been talking about and more besides.

I find it a wonderful letter. It speaks to my heart at a very deep level. Possibly, of course, because I am getting older, and that's a form of weakness, you will agree.

Some of you are getting sort of matching me on that. I had my sense of growing weakness focused about a year ago when I had my new hip.

I'm thankful to say that that experience, which became an experience of not being able to write, which was burdensome.

But that's gone. I can write again. Nonetheless, I had some weeks in which I couldn't write. Medical people assure me that it's something of a shock to the system to have a new hip fitted, and you mustn't be surprised if your system thereafter, for a few weeks anyway, shows signs of shock.

[4 : 45] But they didn't tell me that until afterwards. And I was just surprised that for some weeks after the surgery had been done, I couldn't muster up the concentration necessary to write.

Okay, that's how it was. And that turned my thoughts very directly to the reality of weakness, and had me brooding on the fact that weakness is, and when I say weakness, I mean both the weakness of which we are conscious, and that's a whole range of limitations, plus the weakness that is real, which is a whole series of further limitations of which we're not conscious.

My sense of the reality of weakness in both those senses became pretty strong, and I have been brooding on the fact that, after all, weakness is one of life's commonest experiences.

In place of weakness, substitute the word inadequacy, which explains the reality both of conscious weakness and of real weakness.

Inadequacy means that one is confronted by realities that one isn't really up to handling. Personal realities, relational realities, situational realities, intellectual realities, as well as physical realities, like having to adjust to receiving a new hip and discovering that the process has inflicted a pretty radical shock on one's system.

[6 : 57] There's an old cartoon in Peanuts that I must confess has given me pleasure over the years.

Lucy says to Charlie Brown, who is looking glum, what's the matter, Charlie? Charlie says, I feel inferior.

Lucy says, oh, you shouldn't worry about that. Lots of people have that feeling. Charlie says, what, that they're inferior? Lucy says, no, that you're inferior.

LAUGHTER Well, there you are.

Charlie Brown is suffering from weakness, and Lucy is rubbing it in. But, well, so much of that is reality.

[7 : 56] And then, I'm bracketing weakness with encouragement. If weakness is one of life's commonest experiences, encouragement is one of life's commonest needs.

And that, as a matter of fact, is a big theme running all the way through 2 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians is an extraordinarily upbeat letter.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians, is in a situation of weakness at all levels. You say, what's the problem? Well, to start with, he is very conscious of the weakness that he comes through with at the end of the letter, the weakness of living with a thorn in the flesh.

But there's more to it than that, of course. Relations between himself and the Corinthians have become strained.

[9 : 07] What's the problem? Well, I have to tell you the story for you properly to appreciate it. His first visit to Corinth was tumultuous but fruitful.

It's described in Acts chapter 18. A vigorous church came out of it. There were ups and downs in the course of Paul's ministry, but the bottom line was the emergence of a lively church.

And when, after nearly two years' ministry, he left Corinth, well, the lively church was still there.

But now, the, well, first of all, let's say, the place itself, Corinth, was a port and a commercial centre. I have sometimes described Vancouver as Corinth on the Fraser. And think of it now the other way round.

[10 : 23] Corinth was Vancouver on the Aegean. And, as you know, there is in this city a great deal of happy-go-lucky and rather wild stuff that just happens.

And in Corinth, it was just the same. So, carrying on with the story, a few years, three years, it seems, after Paul's initial ministry there, he had to go back because there was, in the church itself, some serious trouble.

Somebody, we don't know who, was leading them astray. And the leading involved, rubbishing some aspects of Paul's own ministry.

Paul had to go back and try to restore order, try to explain to them what was wrong with the lead that one of their own members was giving.

And after he'd paid that visit, laid down the law in that way, he wrote them what he describes as a stern letter.

[11 : 40] That's the real 2 Corinthians. A stern letter to them, reviewing the situation, and telling them explicitly what sort of discipline they need to impose on the wanderer in the fellowship who was causing all the trouble.

Paul sent the letter off, and then he found himself very anxious, losing sleep, I guess, so he doesn't tell us in those terms that that's what the anxiety did for him.

But he's very anxious to know whether the Corinthians have accepted what he says in his letter or not. And so he sends Titus to Corinth to find out the state of play, if I may talk cricket, just for one phrase.

And that involves a change of a plan that he had earlier made, which was to call in at Corinth and have some further ministry there before he went up to Macedonia, which is, how do I put it?

It's northern Greece. And he is coming from Asia Minor, departing from Troas, which means that it's a natural route, actually, for him to sail from Troas to Corinth and then travel by land or sea.

[13 : 12] He could do either up from Corinth into Macedonia, where the Thessalonians and the Philippians are. Well, he changed his plan and went to the Philippians and Thessalonians first and sent Titus to Corinth to see what they'd done about his stern letter.

And he planned to call in and minister at Corinth on his way back, back, ultimately, en route for Jerusalem.

Why en route for Jerusalem? Well, because one of the things that he had talked about in Greece from the time his ministry in Greece began was the desirability of the Greek churches, which were tolerably affluent, to take up a collection and send a substantial sum of money to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Christians there, the original Jewish Christians, who, for whatever reason, are short of money now. This will be an act of generosity on the part of the Greek Christians.

This will also be an act of fellowship, showing that they accept their fellowship with the Christians of Jerusalem and are asking the Christians in Jerusalem to accept, in the same way, the reality of fellowship with them.

[15:03] So, from Paul's standpoint, this is a plan which will bond Jewish and non-Jewish Christians together.

And Paul has, as I say, been talking about the collection and a year before 2 Corinthians opens, he has been asking the churches of Greece, who have all started to put money into the collection for this purpose, to continue and complete their offering, so that he can take it to Jerusalem.

See what he's going to do? He's going to move from Philippi and Thessalonica down the Greek coast to Corinth, picking up, as I say, money in each of these churches, and then take the whole lot to Jerusalem, which, in fact, he does at the end of the day.

To prepare for his visit, his third visit, as it's going to be, to Corinth, he writes 2 Corinthians, which is really 3 Corinthians, as you can see, and the heart of 2 Corinthians is chapters 8 and 9, in which he is begging the Corinthians to complete what they promised to put into the collection.

They gave him the promise earlier. Now, Paul says, please have the money ready when I arrive, so that I can pick it up and take it straight on to Jerusalem.

[17:03] And because of the tension that there's been between the Corinthians and himself, he is very anxious, quite specifically, not only to restore good relations with the Corinthian congregation, good relations between himself and them, I mean, but also to make sure that they won't renege on their promise to contribute generously to the collection.

They've given the promise a year before, it might have been earlier than that. And Paul is afraid that now that there's been the occasion of tension and he's had to lay down the law for church discipline on the unruly brother, the Corinthians will, at a deep level, resent the way that he, this Jewish evangelist, has been ordering them around and will show their resentment by not completing the collection after all.

So he writes 2 Corinthians with these chapters in the middle to try and make, try and ensure that that isn't going to happen, that the Corinthians will finish contributing to the collection as they have been doing in the past.

In 1 Corinthians 16, he told them how he wanted them to do it. He wants them to put money aside each Lord's Day until the goal that they've set themselves, the goal, I mean, in terms of the size of their contribution to the collection is made up.

All right, that's the human situation and Paul is a bit tense about it and he's writing 2 Corinthians to ensure that when he does come to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem, things will be good between him and the Corinthian congregation rather than strained and that the collection will be ready rather than abandoned halfway.

[19:38] And to complicate things further, Titus, who, remember, visited Corinth to see if they were fulfilling the church discipline that Paul's stern letter had required of them, Titus has told him of people whom, towards the end of the letter, Paul calls false apostles, Judaizers, they would be for sure.

They have come to Corinth from Jerusalem making a great song and dance about their arrival.

They are critiquing Paul as, well, they're offering themselves as theological specialists who are able to correct the errors in Paul's theology.

They are encouraging the Corinthians as, well, how shall I say it, they encourage the Corinthians to maintain that mood of looking down their nose at Paul, which had arisen after Paul started laying down the law about discipline in their midst.

They are encouraging the Corinthians not to take Paul too seriously. And one thing, one further thing that Paul aims to do when he writes 2 Corinthians, our 2 Corinthians, is to speak appropriately to the presence and ministry of these, as he calls them, false apostles.

And so 2 Corinthians grows as a letter designed to handle this situation, and it falls into three parts.

[21 : 43] Chapters 1 through 7 are from Paul as the man that he is, the apostle that he is, talking about his ministry, talking about the way that God has blessed him and has tasked him as an apostle, hoping that by doing so, he will re-establish love and acceptance towards him on the part of the Corinthians, who at the moment seem to be out of love with him and disinclined to accept his ministry any further.

Get it? And then comes part 2 of the letter, which in a real sense is the center of the letter, you can see from what I've already said, chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians are focused on the collection, and there are two chapters of exhortation, carefully angled, to make the Corinthians feel, yes, this is something that we ought to do, something that we ought to do out of love, not simply love to Paul, now restored, but out of love to our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, whose need is as great as it was when Paul introduced the idea of the collection to them in the first place.

And then, quite suddenly, Paul swings into a third part of the letter, in which he gives his initial response to the false apostles.

response, and the substance of the initial response, is, I have credentials before the Lord, which outstrip their credentials in every way.

I have endured more to spread the gospel than they have, and I have been made a sharer in the suffering of Christ in the way that they haven't.

[24 : 12] And there he talks about his thorn in the flesh, and the way in which three times over, we're in chapter 12, three times over he has prayed solemnly and at length, asking the Lord Jesus, the healer, to stretch out his hand from his throne and heal the thorn, whatever it is.

He doesn't tell us what it is, by the way, and all we can do at this point is guess and then say, well, it doesn't really matter what it was.

If Paul called it a thorn, that means it was painful. If he called it a thorn in the flesh, that means it was physical, and that's all we need to know about it.

Paul suffered from a physical disability which he asked the Lord to heal, and the Lord said no. But the Lord didn't finish by saying no.

The Lord ministered encouragement. Now, encouragement, I told you, is a theme that runs all through 2 Corinthians.

[25 : 38] In the first section, first seven chapters, Paul is talking very freely about the encouragements that he's had from the Lord in his ministry.

And in chapters 8 and 9, he has been trying to encourage the Corinthians to fulfill their promise to complete the collection.

And now, in the last section, chapters 10 through 13, he is testifying once again to the encouragement that he has had from the Lord, which they ought to recognize as giving him an authority in his ministry, which the false apostles from Jerusalem just don't have.

So, back to chapter 12, verses 9 through 12, where Paul is talking about his thorn in the flesh, and the way in which the Lord, from his throne, replied to Paul's prayers, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Then Paul says, verse 9 of chapter 12, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[27 : 16] 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.

And thus Paul testifies to encouragement from the throne, as he has experienced it. and he hopes that by sharing his experience of encouragement from Christ, as he has been sharing the sufferings of Christ, he will encourage the Corinthians to realize, hey, Paul is after all on the right track, the real track.

this is the way that the Lord Jesus deals with his servants, this is the way that we must go to, and we should stop grossing at Paul, much as we are tempted to go on grossing at Paul, and we should acknowledge that God is with Paul, encouraging him in his weaknesses, and we should once more recognize that Paul, as an apostolic pastor, speaks authoritatively when he gives us directions, when he teaches, and when he directs for action, and we should go with what he says.

So the final line, the bottom line, for 2nd Corinthians, is that Paul is seeking at every point to reestablish his authority as an apostolic pastor, apostle, and that involves him in doing all these three things that the three sections of the letter have focused on, sharing his privilege and blessings as an apostle, and doing it in love to the Corinthians in hope that there'll be acknowledgement of the

authenticity and love in return from them towards him and his ministry, and then exhorting the Corinthians to finish the collection, and then exhorting the Corinthians not to take the false apostles seriously in a way which means that they would cease to take him seriously.

[30 : 18] So that's how the theme of encouragement runs through 2 Corinthians, and as a matter of fact, brothers and sisters, it is an amazingly upbeat letter, as I indicated before, amazingly upbeat as a letter from a pastor who's, shall I say, in a corner.

Everything seems to be against him when he starts dictating the letter. The Corinthians don't like him, the Corinthians don't trust him, the Corinthians aren't willing, he fears, to do what he's asked them to do.

How do I write to them? This is how Paul writes. Well, what I'm suggesting to you, brothers and sisters, in general terms, let me say it again, is that as weakness, conscious and real, though unconscious, is a constant part of your life and mine, if only because we are aging and becoming physically and mentally weaker as those who age do, but in other ways as well, as we acknowledge then, the commonness of the experience of weakness, the universality of it for Christian people at some stage in the pilgrimage, so, may we learn the reality of

God's encouragement, encouragement specifically to us, drawn from the example of a pastor, an apostolic pastor like Paul, drawn from the teaching of this same apostolic pastor, drawn from the reality of Christian fellowship as we've already experienced it, and hope to experience it more deeply as life goes on.

Encouragement is what the Lord means us to have, and encouragement is what Paul, the pastoral strategist, hopes will come across to every reader of 2nd Corinthians.

[32 : 51] Let me introduce you to something which biblical scholars are rather big on these days.

They have discovered that in the books of scripture, and in particular paragraphs within the books of scripture, scripture, the same pattern is followed as we, I think, I may fairly say, instinctively follow when we are trying to put something across to somebody else.

What's that pattern? Well, it's been put this way as advice to pastors and teachers.

Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell it to them, and then tell them what you've told them.

And scholars like to talk these days about bookending.

You see what they mean? You know what bookends are for keeping together a shelf full of books.

One bookend is telling them what you're going to tell them.

[34 : 18] The other bookend, at the other end of the shelf, corresponds to telling you what you've told them. And the shelf of books corresponds to telling them what it is that you're telling them.

Well, it sounds comic when I put it that way, I think. It's meant to, anyway, even though you weren't laughing very much. But, quite seriously, well, let me put it to you as a question.

Isn't this something which we instinctively do or try to do when we're trying to tell something of importance to someone or to a group of people?

We start by introducing in a very introductory way what it is that we've got to tell them. Then we tell them. And then we like to pull the threads together in a sentence which, if all of this was written down, would be the last sentence of the paragraph.

You understand what I'm saying? I have been writing stuff for the press for the last half century and I am very conscious that this is the wise way to present material.

[35 : 48] And you do it in paragraphs. And the first sentence of the paragraph introduces what you're going to say in the paragraph. And the last sentence of the paragraph sums it up.

And so there's a discipline which people in the academic trade develop called skim reading. Any of you ever been drilled in skim reading?

You read the first and the last sentences of the paragraph. And as you do this, you can see what lies between the first and the last sentence.

That is, the full telling of the story which the first and last sentences are both pointing to. Are you with me on this?

Do you understand what I'm talking about? Well, the point of saying all this is that Paul does it in 2 Corinthians. Weakness and encouragement are themes which we find in the letter.

[37 : 00] Paul begins the letter by introducing both. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 3 through 6.

pause. This is the one book end. I want you to listen to it and you'll see the themes of weakness and encouragement jumping out of it.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, writes Paul, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. Pause. comfort.

That word comfort is a strong word from the past history of the English language which has become a weak word in common usage.

Say comfort nowadays and people think of cushions and stretching out your legs in relaxation in an armchair or on a sofa.

[38 : 09] The older, stronger meaning of the word comfort which it had when the King James was translated is restoring strength, giving hope by what you say, what you do.

You bring comfort to people by giving them the energy to carry, renewing in them the energy to carry on. Now, Paul introduces God, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort and says, who, God, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any afflictions with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Yes, and it's the same basic word in the Greek as it is in English. Comfort, comfort, comfort, new strength for the weak. And then he goes on to say, for as we, and we is himself and Timothy, the two authors of the letter, though he says they're the two guys who sign the letter, though Paul is obviously composing and dictating it, as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

If we're afflicted, as we are, it's for your comfort and salvation. And if we are comforted, we are strength, ourselves, are given strength by our God, well, it's for your comfort which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Our hope for you is unshaken, says Paul, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

[40 : 22] See? Well, you couldn't hammer the theme of encouragement much harder, could you, then Paul hammers it in those four verses.

Well, that's the one bookend, establishing the theme and the subject matter of the letter that's going to follow. And then, when you get to chapter 12, when Paul is pulling the threads together in order shortly to sign off, he highlights what we've already glanced at, his thorn in the flesh.

Now, let me read it again. Verse 8, sorry, verse 9, he, this is Christ, said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me, and that will be comfort, you see, in the good old sense.

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

[41 : 44] So, here we are, with the same triumphant theme. As I said, it's a very upbeat letter. Paul is celebrating the strengthening power of Christ, which brings the renewal of strength in us, whose us?

Us is the believers, the faithful disciples, who follow in the steps of Paul as a pioneer believer and faithful disciple and apostolic preacher and pastor.

Well, those are the bookends. things, and everything in between the bookends is intended to be fitted into the theme of God giving strength in weakness, the theme that is the real substantive theme of 2 Corinthians.

Get that? bookends. That's the really big thing that I wanted to say to you this morning, and I hope that it's come across clearly and straightforwardly.

If not, you must ask me, please, when I stop talking, because I do want to make these things as clear as I can. Now, in this letter, in the body of the letter between the two bookends, you have Paul dealing with a whole string of things, and now I'm going to give you, from a bird's eye standpoint, an overview of what those many things are.

[43 : 38] From chapter 1, verse 7, verse 8, through to the end of chapter 7, you've got Paul confessing the following commitments.

And this is the way that I'd like you to think of Paul, the apostolic pastor, whose experience of weakness and encouragement I've been trying to describe.

Think of Paul, the apostolic pastor, as seeking to sustain this seven-fold commitment all the way through his ministry. First, he is committed to God, who shapes and preserves his life with constant encouragements as he goes along.

And that's his thought from, well, really from verse 3, I suppose, and certainly from verse 8 down to verse 11.

And then second, he wants to make it clear that he has a commitment to the Corinthians, whom he loves and serves, if they will let him, and wants to help every way he can.

[45 : 06] And Paul moves to that commitment in chapter 1, verse 12, explains that his change of plan about when he's going to visit them, the change, I mean, from visiting them before he went to Thessalonica and Philippi, to planning to visit them after he's been to Thessalonica and Philippi.

The Corinthians are being picky, they are complaining about him, that he's a, he's a, what would you call it, a weathercock, he's saying one thing, then changing his mind so that you never know where you are with him, that sort of thing.

Well, we can't go into that in detail, but that's what he addresses in chapters, second half of chapter 1 and then chapter 2.

It wasn't like that, he says. I thought that my visit would be better every way, better as an experience and better as a spiritual benefit to you if I came later rather than sooner.

And I made that change of plan because of my concern for you. Not, precisely not, because I am not concerned for you.

[46 : 43] So there's a second commitment, commitment to God, the source of comfort, commitment to the Corinthians, the needy, gifted, undisciplined church.

And then in chapter 3, through 3, verse 4, through to chapter 4, verse 6, Paul reveals a commitment to the new covenant message of Christ and the Spirit, the message of the new order of spiritual life that the Savior has brought in.

And he contrasts in chapter 3, this new order of things with the inadequacies of the old order, that is, the order of condemnation, as he calls it, ministry of condemnation, which was all that Old Testament folk new.

God has taken us beyond that, says Paul, into the new covenant order of things where there's life from above in a way that exceeds anything that he was giving then.

So, he's committed to his message, as well as to God and to the Corinthians. and he gets, he drifts a bit from one topic to another.

[48 : 16] He gets to talking about his ministry of this message. You've got that in chapter 4. And then in chapter 4, verse 7, he gets onto this theme.

But we, we, again, it's himself and Timothy and I suppose other members of the apostolic fellowship with them. We have this treasure in jars of clay.

Nothing very exciting there. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

And now he begins to open up a commitment commitment to a hope. Commitment to the hope of a new body and a new home.

And this takes him through the first, through chapter 4 and the first half of chapter 5. New body, well, it's like a new house which God has already prepared for us and it's there in heaven waiting for us.

[49 : 36] And when we leave this body behind, in due course, we shall be installed in the new body which has everything right that was limiting and in that sense wrong and unhappy about this present physical body in and through which we live.

and he really goes to town about that in the first half of chapter 5. And I want to make the point quite simply, this man you see lives by hope.

His faith in Christ leads him to hope for glory. The hope is guaranteed. You've got him using that very word actually in chapter 5 verse 5.

He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, he writes, God who has given us the spirit as a guarantee, the spirit within us, the spirit of new life in Christ, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of faith, the spirit of joy, and the spirit of hope.

Yes, the hope is given us, it's guaranteed, need, and so we are always of good courage, however tough life may be in the present.

[51 : 05] And here, Paul wants them to understand, though he's too tactful to say it, it's you chaps at Corinth who are making life particularly tough for me just at the moment. I hope you'll see that without my needing to say it, but that's the way it is.

Nonetheless, the Lord keeps me hoping and keeps me in joy and good courage as I look forward to that hope of glory.

Well, that brings him to the fifth commitment which was implied in all the four that we've mentioned so far a commitment directly to the Lord Jesus Christ who has loved him and has saved him and has claimed him and commissioned him.

He is Christ's man in the most direct sense. And this section of the passage, well, you could say it begins in verse 11 of chapter 5 and runs to chapter 6 verse 2, but the focal statement is in verse 14 of chapter 5 where Paul simply says, it's breathtaking that he does, but here it comes, the love of Christ controls us.

the word for control could be rendered constrains, compels, drives, urges on.

[52 : 49] The Greek word carries all those overtones. Is Paul a driven man? Yes. Yes. Is it good and healthy that Paul is a driven man?

Yes. Because of what's driving him. We are used to drivenness as a pathological condition where our lives are being motivated and animated by the wrong things.

but Paul is driven by the right thing, the love of Christ, which thrills him and moves him and motivates him, animates him and before he's finished elaborating this thought, he is talking in a passage that we just are not able to look at as we ideally would.

namely the essential truth of the gospel of redemption that's summed up in verse 21, for our sake, God, the Father, made him, God, the Son, to be sin, who knew no sin, but to be sin, it's a short, it's a sort of shorthand for being treated as a sinner, being put, as it were, in the sinner's place, and being subjected to the penalty that sinners, and that means us, sinners deserve.

He made him to be sin, our substitutionary sin bearer, him who knew no sin, all of this is vicarious action on Christ's part, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God, that is to say, so that in him we might be right with God, in a right relationship with God, for time and for eternity.

[55 : 09] this is the substance of Paul's commitment to Christ, and he basks in it, because it's simply a reception and a reflection of Christ's commitment to him.

And out of that comes the next commitment, chapter 6, verse 3 down to 13, Paul as Christ's ambassador, calls himself that in verse 20 of chapter 5, as Christ's ambassador, Paul is committed to everyone, commending himself on the gospel to everyone who will allow him to do that, everyone who will stop and listen to what he has to say, everyone who will allow him to give his testimony to redemption, his witness to redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The world is his parish, that's what John Wesley said, that's what George Whitefield said before John Wesley got round to it, and that's what Paul is thinking before either of them.

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us, we implore you and everybody else on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God, accept the new life that Christ has won for us, and now brings to us.

And the final commitment is a commitment to holiness as required by God, by Christ, according to the gospel, and that's chapter 6, verse 14.

[57 : 04] As I said, we don't know the details of the disorder at Corinth which had led to Paul's second visit and the stern letter, but clearly it was something that, by absolute standards, counted as unrighteousness rather than righteousness.

And so Paul quite suddenly introduces the thought, there it is in chapter 6, verse 14, do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers, for what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness, what fellowship has light with darkness.

this passage runs from chapter 6, verse 14, down to chapter 7, verse 1, where Paul says, since we have these promises that he's been unfolding, let's cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

this actually is bookends within bookends, as perhaps you can see. Verse 14, is Paul telling them what he's going to tell them, do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.

Chapter 7, verse 1, is Paul telling them what he's told them, beloved, let's cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

[58 : 42] And verses 15 through 18, is Paul telling them what it is that he has to tell them. God calls us all to holiness.

Well, those are Paul's commitments to God, to the Corinthians, to the gospel, the new covenant message of Christ and the spirit, to the hope of glory, to Christ himself, to everyone to whom he is

able to witness, and to holiness as the Lord's basic requirement.

Now, we'll have to stop there, and I'm sorry, I was hoping that when I got to this point in the presentation, I'd still have five minutes in which to talk about what Paul says about giving money, where really, in chapters 8 and 9, you've got a mini-treatise on giving money, and I would like to go through that, but the time has gone, I can't do it any more than I can spend time on chapters 10 through 13, the details of Paul countering his critics.

Let me simply pull the threads together now with the final bookend among the bookends. This letter is a wonderful demonstration of the reality of life in Christ, and I hope you've felt this is marvellous, as I have tried to express it in a way which expresses my sense that it's marvellous.

This is what I wanted to share with you today. It is marvellous, and it is very comforting in the old strong sense, don't you agree?

[60 : 53] With these commitments that Paul had, with these truths that Paul is celebrating, well, if I may speak colloquially, come hell or high water, we will trust, we will hope, we will rejoice, we will be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might, for living the Christian lives that we're called to live.

We haven't been promised that we shall have it easy, and not a single one of us in this room could say, and I guarantee this, could say, since I became a Christian, I've had it easy.

No, we haven't, and God never means us to have it easy, but I hope that every single one of us can say, since becoming Christian, despite all the pressures that I've been under, different sorts of pressure, different sorts of discouragement, different sorts of weaknesses, real and felt, I have begun to discover that through Christ, when I am weak, then I am strong.

And I hope, brothers and sisters, that each of us will go on discovering this to the end of our days.

That's it, friends, and now we can discuss and reflect and perhaps fill in some of the gaps.

It's over to you. Comments? Yes, sir. It's been said in the Bible that God learned a humble Paul who is a collection that he couldn't shake off.

[63 : 01] And it's only through humility that grace is given that is the ability and desire to do his will. And it's very easy for us to want to be independent, self-sufficient, and not have a proper sense of dependence on God or on other people for that matter.

We need both. Yeah. Well, Paul says, when I'm weak, then I'm strong. And you are, as I hear you, you are underlining the truth and the wisdom of what he's saying.

If we're not prepared to acknowledge weakness, well, we disqualify ourselves from the richest experience of divine strength.

Not acknowledging weakness is playing, well, it's playing one of the versions of life's game of let's pretend. It isn't true. It isn't fact.

We are weak, whether we acknowledge it or not. But as long as we pretend that we're strong by nature and in the flesh, shall I say, we shan't know the experience of being strengthened by the Lord in a situation of admitted weakness, which is what Paul gives us here.

[64 : 28] So thank you for that. Bill. the comment in chapter 13, where he says, examine yourself to see whether you're in the face, test yourselves, or do you not realise this about yourselves, if you're described within you, seems to belong in chapter 3 to me, because it's in a position which looks like an afterthought that really should have come earlier.

I'm not criticising, but I'm criticising. That particular idea that you have a mixed community, possibly a mixed community, that's causing some of the trouble, should have come up a bit earlier, I think.

Well, I see why you're saying that, Bill. It is, I think, in chapter 13, because Paul has just said, if you start chapter 13, verse 1, you see it, this is the third time I'm coming to you, and I give warning as I did when present on my second visit, I jump towards the end of verse 2 now, that if I come again, I will not spare them, spare who?

Those who sinned before, beginning of verse 2. I warned them, now, while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I won't spare them, since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me, you'll have it, I shall be severe again, if there's necessary, if that's necessary.

Now, having heard me say that, examine yourselves to see if you are real in your faith, if you are, one of the tests will be that you're prepared to take this from me, if you were not real in the faith, well, I hope that this assurance, this word of mine that I'm prepared to be severe when I come to you, will make you realise I've been playing with Christianity thus far, but I've not been seriously committed to Christ, this is the moment when I must make my commitment serious.

[67 : 21] That, I think, is the pastoral logic in Paul's mind. I like your explanation so I'm convinced. But your point, that if he'd said this in chapter 3, it wouldn't have been inappropriate, that's true too.

all one can say is he didn't because he's going to say it here. He knows what he's up to, but it would be quite appropriate as a comment on what he's saying about chapter 3, the ministry of condemnation, the Old Testament type of ministry, is a thing of the past and it's part of his thought, I guess, that the Judaizers from Jerusalem are trying to bring you back to it so that you'll miss gospel blessings that I want to bring you into.

In a situation like that, he could very well have said, examine yourselves whether you're in the faith, that is, whether you have a living faith in Christ and a new order of things that Christ has brought with him, or whether you're a hanger-on or a backslider who hasn't actually moved into that yet, but you've moved back into the Judaizing gospel which is no gospel at all.

Yes, he could have said it in chapter 3 and it would have been a word that was very much in season for that bit of the argument. Yes, thanks.

Yeah? Jim, I hope it's the case. Do you think it is my generation? Yours fell in love with the Lord of the Rings. It's not stated enough that the great theme of that great book is that when I'm weak, then I'm strong.

[69 : 24] The hobbits can overcome evil, but when you try to fight evil with strength, you falter badly, but weakness for some years, there's a divine mystery here.

I'd love you to write more about it for us. Why does weakness overcome evil? Why, why, why? Why is that in the mystery of God's heart that it should be that way?

Well, I think that a sufficient answer to the question lies in the endless stream of grateful praise that ascends to God when people in conscious weakness have experiences to celebrate of being strengthened by the Lord Jesus as Paul was, you see, with his thorn in the flesh.

There are one or two places in Corinthians where Paul does say that it's the giving of maximum thanksgiving to God that the whole economy of the gospel grace is in aid of.

He says that with regard to his ministry, to his evangelistic and pastoral ministry, to the Corinthians, it's there in chapter four.

[70 : 58] He says it again when he's talking about the collection. What's the ultimate purpose that I have in asking you folk and all the other Christian folk in the Greek churches to contribute to the collection?

Well, it's to maximise praise and glory to God. God's word. He puts it that way and this, I think, demonstrates that it's a very basic thought in his mind.

So, well, you mentioned the Lord of the Rings. It is true that the triumph of weakness is a theme that runs right the way through the Lord of the Rings.

and it is true, is it not, I expect you've all read the Lord of the Rings and so I can say this, it is true that as we follow the story through to the final triumph of weakness as the ring is finally consigned to the flames, we have, we readers have a very deep sense of the rightness of the shape of this story.

Yes, that's how it ought to be. It's finished rightly. Tolkien strung it out through three complete volumes, but now at last the story is completed and the feeling is it's completed in the right way.

[72 : 39] This is what you're feeling after and speaking about, isn't it? Well, it's one of the truths about the Lord of the Rings that it's full of patterns, patterns of action, behavior, event, which have a Christian shape and this is one of them, weakness triumphs in the end.

Tolkien knew what he was doing and and it's a wonderful story, partly at least, because it comes to this wonderful climax, weakness triumphing in the end, and it wouldn't be so wonderful a story if it didn't.

Bill is standing and looking serious. I think I know what that means. Over to you, Bill. thank you very much. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you very much, John.

Well, thank you. Thank you.