

Power in Weakness

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[0 : 00] So apparently from what I understand, around 2.8 billion people in the world at the moment have never heard of Jesus. 2.8 billion people in the world.

How does that make you feel? 2.8 billion. And apparently the current rate, something like 50 to 52 million people a year are slipping into a Christless eternity.

52 million people a year. That's a conveyor belt of corpses into eternity.

How does it make you feel? Does it make enough to you? You look at the task of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth that Jesus gives us at the end of Matthews to seem too big.

Well, forget about that. What about, forget about the rest of the world. What about just us here at St. Paul's with our vision to unite our diverse community in the good news of Jesus?

[1 : 04] It's not 2.8 billion people, which we're thankful for on a Saturday afternoon shopping, but maybe it's still enough to make you lose heart.

You've seen plenty of these church vision things before and, you know, there's a bit of progress here and there and a few things change. But you look around, even on today, you see so many empty seats.

It's enough to lose heart. Nothing spectacular. A little bit of growth. Forget 2.8 billion.

Even forget about Chatswood. What about your neighbor, that family member that you've been praying for, that friend or that colleague you've been representing Jesus tubes to sometimes for years, decades even, and there appears to be no response whatsoever.

Is that enough to make you weary and weak? And especially so in a society now where the Christian voice is often getting shouted out and in which, for those of you who have been involved in the church over many decades, certainly feeling its loss of position and power and influence in society.

[2 : 17] So why speak up? Why pray? Why give? Look, we just did a moment ago to see this gospel proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Where is this spectacular power to bring about change in people's lives that we saw last week in 2 Corinthians 3?

Losing heart is a very real possibility. For those in vocational ministry, to be distracted with committees, to be distracted with hobbies, building projects, with a whole range of other things that fill up this void to say that I'm actually achieving something in ministry.

For those who are not in vocational ministry, Christians, the temptation is, you know, you've been running a community group, you've been involved, you just keep plodding along, just to do bare minimum, tick the boxes, to genuinely lose heart.

The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote a lecture to his ministry students titled *The Minister's Fainting Fits*.

And in that, he describes the pressures upon those in Christian ministry to lose heart in the face of what is perceived slow progress, if any progress.

[3 : 54] He says, All mental work tends to weary and to depress, for much study is a weariness of the flesh, but ours is more than mental work.

It is heart work. It is heart work, the labour of our innermost souls. And such soul travail as that of a faithful minister will bring on occasional seasons of exhaustion when the heart and the flesh will fail. So Spurgeon's words there, I think, will find sympathetic agreement in any heart acquainted with Christian ministry and mission.

Not just those involved in vocational ministry, but anyone involved in any form of Christian ministry and mission. The community group leader who has taught and pastored and exhorted for years and struggles to see the fruit of that.

The disciple who has represented the Lord Jesus to their friends and the colleagues and their neighbours without any apparent response. Weak, weary, sceptical, tired, loss of confidence, other feelings in the depths of our heart, even if externally we are triumphant.

[5 : 48] Now, few, if any, have experienced more of what Spurgeon describes there in that lecture than the Apostle Paul.

He must have been tempted to lose heart. Twice, in fact, in chapter 4, beginning and again at the end, he says, We do not lose heart.

Which means he must have been tempted to. Chapter 4, verse 1, he says, Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Now, I want to know, frankly, sitting here in chapter 1 in 2019, why he didn't lose heart and was, in fact, propelled more and more for the cause of the kingdom of Christ in the world.

I want to get that. I want to get into Paul's psyche, if you like. And the first reason he doesn't lose heart, it's there in two words.

In verse 1, this ministry. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

[6 : 55] And the ministry he's talking about is what we looked at last week, the ministry of the Spirit of the New Covenant. He spent a whole chunk of chapter 3 talking about it and especially comparing it with the Old Covenant ministry of Moses.

And the difference between the two is the difference between death and life, veiled and unfailed, obscured glory and full glory. In other words, the difference, they're just not comparable in any way. That's the first reason Paul doesn't lose heart, because we have this spectacular ministry. In spite of how things look on the outside, which he says at the end of chapter 4, we don't look at what external, we look at what's going on in the heart.

He says this is a glorious ministry. And there's another reason in verse 1. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

This ordinary looking glorious ministry has been given to him through God's mercy. And this is really what Paul's saying is, is my own stories trace through all of this.

[8 : 14] He said, I'm one of those people who used to be veiled in darkness, and now I see, and it's God's mercy to me.

He had been an unbeliever, blinded to the light of the gospel, thinking that he was living a life pleasing to God. And then on the Damascus road, without any prompting on his behalf at all, Paul had seen the glory of God in the face of Christ.

So Paul was fully aware of the power of this ministry. And that this ministry was given to him at the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus, where he was knocked to the ground, knocked to the ground by the flash of the light of the glory of Christ.

And so his salvation in that moment and his apostleship is purely by God's mercy. He experienced conversion.

He knows what it is to have the good news of Jesus change him in the way that he's just spoken about in 2 Corinthians 3.

[9 : 30] And so the combination of this mercy at his own conversion and the astonishing glory of this ministry that he has now been given has kept him from losing heart.

Not only that, he was in fact propelled forward. Verse 2. We have renounced secret and shameful ways.

We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

So this Paul, he rejected. In other words, he didn't lose heart and he didn't go running off to other techniques to sort of bolster up his ministry. He's rejected cunning. He's rejected manipulation.

He's rejected trickery. Nor did Paul tamper with the word of God. He did not falsify it, distort it, confuse it, water it down. Instead, he embraces openness and candor and forthrightness and clarity about the glory of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10 : 38] No vague meaning. No confusing language. No ambivalence about what he meant. He imparted the truth without deviation, straight and undiluted.

He wanted the good news about Jesus Christ to be crystal clear. Why? Why? Well, first of all, notice at the end of verse 2, where he says that he sets forth the truth plainly in the sight of God.

That is, God is his audience. That's the first and fundamental reason of all. God is his audience. God was his primary audience. He was ultimately considered his whole ministry in life is answerable to God and to no one else.

Now, another reason is in verses 4 to 6. We're going to unpack this a little bit. So let's start at verse 4. The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

So, did you even just feel the weight of what Paul has just said there? This is what is so essential for Paul.

[12:04] This is the reason why Jesus has to be so crystal clear. That the word of God not be distorted, that he speak the truth wherever he could. He says there, people who don't believe in Jesus are blind.

They can't see Christ as supremely valuable, and so they won't receive him as their treasure, and so they won't be saved.

And the work of God is needed in our lives to open our eyes to give us life, so that we can see and receive Christ as Savior and Lord and treasure of our lives.

And at the heart of this impressive new covenant ministry is the message of the gospel in the word of God, the Bible. The glory of this ministry that he refers to here is the gospel.

The gospel is what Paul came to see and believe. The gospel is what he wants others to come and see and believe. It's the gospel that we want you in this church to come and see and believe and savour and treasure.

[13:16] But it's the gospel, he says, that 2.8 billion people in this world are blind to. And you may be blind to.

The gospel is the good news that God sent his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world to live a perfect life, die as a substitute for sinners, to absorb the anger of God that we deserve for our rebellion against God, to take away our guilt and our shame, provide the gift of right standing before God, and to give eternal joy through faith in Jesus Christ alone, apart from any works of obedience on our behalf.

And in case you didn't catch up on that, it's on the back of your service sheet. This, he says, is what people are blind to. All of us, we're blind to this truth, this glory, unless verse 6 happens.

For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, made this light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

What Paul, he doesn't use the language there, but what he's describing is new birth. The God who created light in the beginning does the same thing in the human heart.

[14:47] Only the light this time is not a physical light repelling darkness, but the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Or as verse 4 calls it, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

God causes the human heart to see the truth and the beauty and the worth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the glory of Christ.

Darkness remains in the human heart until God illumines the heart and the mind to that glory. We cannot see Jesus for who he is until that happens.

And when he does, no amount of darkness can stop it. No amount of darkness can stop it.

This light pushes out the darkness and the blindness and it cannot resist it or prevail against it. So when we see Christ for who he really is, we receive him for who he is.

[15:57] And that's what we want for 2.8 billion people in the world. It's what you want for your neighbours, your friends, for your kids, our parents, our spouses, this community, and maybe for you right now.

You don't need to be able to explain this. You don't need to be able to account for it. You just need to be able to experience it right now.

And maybe that's you. You've been gathering the last few weeks or something and slowly something is just, it feels like the veil is slipping. There's a flicker of light there. And you're starting to see Jesus not as a defeated loser for the first time.

Maybe you're starting to see the magnificence of Jesus for the first time. Don't let this moment pass. Speak to one of us straight after church.

We would love to talk to you more about that. Now, that doesn't mean passivity on our behalf. Well, you know, God's the all-powerful one.

[17 : 06] We'll just sit back, let him do his thing. There is a human means that God uses to make this happen. Verse 4, let's go over it again. Verse 4, we have this dreadful plight of the human condition without God, blinded to glory, and destined for eternity without him.

I've just added that little bit in there. Verse 6, we have God's sovereign work, all-powerful work, in causing sight and light to break in with clarity.

And right in the middle of verses 4 and 6 is verse 5, and the means that God uses to bring about that change. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

Paul's role, our role as disciples of the Lord Jesus, is to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Now, remember I said that the gospel is the good news, that God sent his son, the Lord Jesus, into the world to live a perfect life, to die as a substitute for sinners, absorb the anger of God that we deserve for our rebellion against him, to take away our guilt and our shame, to provide the gift of right standing before God, and to give eternal joy through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone, apart from works of obedience on our behalf.

You got that, okay? It's on the back of your service sheet. The gospel is not about us. It's not just about us, that is, and good news for us, and God loving us.

[18 : 45] It first of all, primarily says something significant about Jesus. Philippians 2 describes the death and resurrection of Jesus for the sins of humanity, and it goes on to say this about him.

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The crucified Jesus Christ, has been exalted through resurrection, as the heavenly Lord. God's suffering servant, is the ruler of the universe.

The man Jesus Christ, is the exalted God, over all history, over all peoples, over all cultures, and Paul says, you make that clear.

Do not distort the truth, by showing away from the exclusive claim, that Jesus is Lord, that he is King, he's master, he's ruler, over all that is, all that has been, all that will be, and you call all people, from all around the globe, to confess with their tongue, and surrender their lives, to his loving rule.

[20 : 08] And you proclaim that, from a heart of love, and a life of service. I think that's what he means, when he says, we don't preach ourself. All self-interest, is laid aside.

There's no room for pride, and personal gain, because the very nature, of the good news, is that it presupposes, our deep sin, and our brokenness, and our need.

And so, my friends, verse 5, is why Christ is to be clear, the word of God, is not to be distorted, the means that God uses, to effect the great, and eternal, transformation, where we long to see, that we long to see, across this world, and in our community, and in our hearts here, with every man, woman, teenager, child, is bold, clear, plain, proclamation, of the good news, of Jesus Christ, as Lord, from a heart of love, and a life of service.

This is the impressive ministry, of the new covenant, that causes the blind to see, for darkness, to be extinguished, to death, to be defeated, and eternal life, to be granted.

This is the spectacular ministry, that changes people's status, with their creator, for eternity.

[21 : 37] And it's the ministry, that saw Paul getting rejected, put in prison, beaten up, run out of town, again, and again, and again. And that's the next point here.

In case we're tempted to think, this is all about our power, or, or, tempted to lose heart, because, you know, well, if it's so great, how come there's, so little fruit?

Let's read on. Verse seven. But we have this treasure, in jars of clay, to show that this, all surpassing power, is from God, and not, from us.

The great encouragement, of these verses, and I kind of want to, just finish in this point, eventually, is that, God uses, weak and weary people, ordinary jars of clay.

God wants to display, to the world, the glory, of the Lord Jesus, and the power, and the beauty, of the gospel, and he does it, with, unimpressive vessels.

[22 : 43] We are not the treasure, and when we think we are, or even rely upon ourselves, because we are clever, articulate, or, or passionate, or humorous, or bubbly, or stylish, or, successful, or beautiful, or whatever, then we, we will very quickly, lose heart.

This, I think, is what we need to get. When I was 14, I made this box, about 10, 15 years, or so ago, or so.

I made this box. Now, this box, if you can read the front of it, was made, to hold cassettes. Now, if you are younger than 30, let me explain something to you.

Before, YouTube, sorry, iTunes, there was, things called, CDs. And before CDs, there was this thing, with cassettes, that you'd listen to music, and other stuff like that on.

You can see them in, you can catch a glimpse of them, in the Powerhouse Museum, and, and most church libraries, nowadays. There we go.

[24 : 05] So, this thing, I made this, right? Cassettes, are totally obsolete, nowadays. I could not even, find an example, to show you, what one looked like, if you needed to show you, what one looked like, couldn't find one.

But I've still got the box. I've still got the box. The, the reason is, the box is the treasure, not the thing it was holding.

It's now holding other things, that I had to take out. But it was, this is the, this is the treasure, not the cassettes. This, however, is, a takeaway container.

And, and, much, this is, I know, not, PC nowadays, but this will be discarded. This thing, it's got recycled on it, just want you to know, it's got recycled on it.

This will be discarded, because it, it, it did hold in it, this is the, this if you like, is the, 21st century version of a clay pot. This is the thing that's discarded.

[25 : 11] The treasure it held, was something like salt and pepper calamari, or pad thai, or something like that. That was the treasure. Our world stresses the classy, the top shelf, the polished containers, not the glory of God in human weakness.

It, it, it stresses the container. The impressive nature of the new covenant ministry, is the great treasure of the power of God, revealing the glory of the gospel, through simple takeaway containers.

That's what we need to get. This, is anti-gospel. This is not, anti-gospel. We are takeaway containers.

We will feel unimpressive. We will feel weak and weary, but not ultimately defeated. See, verse eight, we are hard presses. Paul describing his meaning. We are hard pressed on every side, but we are not crushed.

We are perplexed, but we are not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body, the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

[26 : 31] For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. Hardship, hardship, struggle, are the normal lot of a clay pot life.

I put some food in one of these takeaway containers last night and immediately broke it. Just like that. There is always a temptation to lose heart.

It's always close on our heels. If you feel weak, you feel weary, you feel like you're out of ideas, helpless in the face of lost people, unable to affect real change, then you are, I think, feeling what you ought to feel.

But know this, such a clay pot is not a liability to God. Your weakness and your weariness is normal. It's expected and it's not a hindrance.

Theologian Joe Packer wrote a great little book. He wanted to write it towards the end of his life. He's still alive.

[27 : 43] Towards the end of his life to sum up his life. And he says, well into his 90s, he's saying that weakness is the way. I love the title of the book.

Weakness is the way. Our ordinariness is not a liability. It's an asset. That is, if you truly want God to be glorified.

On the other hand, the proud, the self-assured, the confident person is a hindrance. God deliberately chooses to use weak and humble people, but he never abandons it to go alone.

He puts the treasure of his gospel and gifts in clays and jar pots like you and me. No one is too weak. No one is too common. No one is too shy. No one is too inarticulate, too old, too young, too disabled, to be involved in the spectacular ministry of the new covenant and see people's lives change for eternity.

Therefore, since through God's mercy, we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. In August 1955, Canon H.K.

[28 : 53] Luce of Durham wrote a letter to the Times newspaper, opposing Billy Graham's upcoming mission at Cambridge University.

Billy Graham's approach, he argued in the Times New paper, would be unthinkable before a university audience.

It would be laughed out of court. Now, Billy was 36 at the time and was unusually experienced for a 36-year-old.

However, the thought of conducting his first mission in Cambridge weighed heavily upon him. His biographer, William Martin, noted, Graham, ever insecure about his lack of advanced theological education, dreaded the meetings and feared that a poor showing might do serious harm to his ministry and effect, which way the tide will turn in Britain.

Had he been able to do so without a complete loss of face, he would have cancelled the meetings or persuaded some better qualified man to replace him.

[30 : 07] And indeed, Billy writing in his own biography 40 years later, quotes his own personal letter to John Stott that confirms his trepidation.

I have been deeply concerned and in much thought about our Cambridge mission this autumn. I do not know that I have ever felt more inadequate and totally unprepared for a mission.

As I think over the possibilities for messages, I realise how shallow and weak my presentations are. In fact, I was so overwhelmed in my unpreparedness that I almost decided to cancel my preparation, my appearance, but because plans had gone so far, perhaps it is best to go through with it.

However, it is my prayer that I shall come in the demonstration and power of the Holy Spirit. He highlights in his letter his weakness and his dependency upon the Holy Spirit's power.

Billy's arrival in Cambridge was also unsettling. The opening night of the Cambridge mission was Sunday, the 6th of November, the day after Guy Fawkes Day, the day of fireworks, bonfires and just general revelry.

[31 : 32] And as Billy spoke to his team, in a hall, a firecracker was in fact thrown into the hall, into an open window, despite a very strong police presence around the building.

Now the meetings were held in Great St. Mary's, the University Church at the Centre of Cambridge, and every single part of the church was occupied on the opening night.

Graham preached for three nights, but the results in his own words were modest. His sermons were, by his own estimation, too academic.

He knew that he was not getting through to the hearts of the students. He felt he was preaching to please his audience, rather than God himself, and the way that God had shaped him.

And so Billy sought the Lord, then came the breakthrough. Following his third sermon, the day after his 37th birthday, Billy Graham set aside his university-focused sermons.

[32 : 42] He took off his academic gear that he was wearing, at the time as he preached the previous ones, and he decided to go old-fashioned Billy, and preach to the heart.

Billy Graham's weakness, plus the all-sufficient transforming gospel of the new covenant, plus his dependence upon the Holy Spirit, resulted in a mighty ministry in Cambridge that night.

John Stott wrote to the praying members of his congregation, straight afterwards. He wrote, The great English evangelist, David Watson, was one person who came to Christ that night.

Those whom God uses have always been fully aware of their insufficiency and their weaknesses, be it Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Apostle Paul, Peter, John, and me, you.

And it was their insufficiency that invited the sufficiency of God. God is not looking for gifted people or people who are self-sufficient. He is looking for inadequate people who will give their weakness to him and open themselves to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the transforming grace of the new covenant as it's ministered by Jesus Christ himself.

[34 : 28] So if God is calling you now, do not hide behind your weakness. Maybe he's calling you to himself for the very first time.

Maybe that's what he's doing. Maybe there's a flicker of light in the darkness for the very first time. Come to him. Your sin and your brokenness and your weakness is not a hindrance.

It is the necessary precondition of you coming to him. Come to him. Come to him. But maybe you have already come to him but you're feeling your weakness.

Maybe, I don't know, maybe what he's calling you to do. It may be that he's right now and he's sending you off to worldwide mission. It might be that teaching us one of our kids' church classes. It may be ministering to children. It may be reaching out to your neighborhood. It may be stepping up at work. Whatever it is that he's calling you to, don't hide behind your weakness. Your weakness is the ground of your calling.

[35 : 34] Follow God and use your weakness as an occasion for his power. And if you are feeling terrifying stirrings within your soul as he's nudging you outside of your comfort zone where you'll be out of your depth but you know that he's calling you, give your weakness to him and accept his sufficiency.

Brothers and sisters, do not lose heart. Thank you.