

Weak and weary

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- [0 : 00] I'd like to leave your Bibles open there and bow your heads and we'll pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for the privilege of being able to meet together now.
- And as we look at the global task that you've given your church, we pray that in our weakness and our weariness, we might be filled with hope and expectation of what you might do with us for one or two or hundreds or many more.
- And so Father, fill us with the hope of your spirit and your purpose to bring light in amongst the darkness.
- And we ask it for your sake. Amen. So how does it make you feel when you hear of things like 2.8 billion people in the world have never heard of Jesus?
- The modern missionary movement has done a lot and achieved much, and yet there is still so much more to do. How does it make you feel that 50 million people a year slip into a Christless eternity?
- [1 : 17] That's it. 50 million people a year. Is that enough to make you lose heart that the task just seems so big?
- 2.8 million, 50 million a year. What can you do about that? Forget about that. Let's just look at something a bit smaller. Look at the corporate vision of our church.
- We are hoping under God to grow to 500 in attendance by the end of next year. That is people coming to know Jesus through the ministry of the church.
- Not 500 people coming from another church, but people who have come to know Jesus in our area and ministries of influence. It's not 2.8 billion people, but maybe it's still enough to make you lose heart.
- We're talking a couple hundred people here, something like that. Maybe you've seen these church vision things and they seem never achieve what we hope. We always see maybe a bit of growth, but nothing really spectacular.
- [2 : 20] And at the end of the day, we walk away and say, we didn't really get there. Seen it again and again and again. Forget that. Forget 2.8 billion. Forget a couple of hundred.
- What about your neighbour and your family member or your friend and your colleague who you've been representing Jesus to? And it appears that they are no clearer on Christ now than what they were 12 months ago, 10 years ago, 25 years ago, for some people, 50 years ago.
- Is that enough to make you feel weary and weak, wondering what God is doing in this world? Why bother keep speaking about Jesus and his lordship and the need to repent and to follow him why bother praying because I've done that and it doesn't seem to work and why bother giving to global mission because there's still 2.8 million people out there who need to know Christ?
- It doesn't make you feel weary and weak when you think of the global task that God's given us. Now let me tell you, it does for me.
- I think of the task of just seeing us as a church grow so that there are pews that are filled or soon-to-be seats filled with people just coming to know Christ.

[3 : 44] The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote a lecture to his ministry students titled The Minister's Fainting Fits and in it he describes the pressures upon the Christian minister to lose heart and he says this, a bit of old language, our work when earnestly undertaken lays us open to attacks in the direction of depression.

Who can bear the weight of souls without sometimes sinking to the dust? Passionate longings after people's conversion, if not fully satisfied and when are they fully satisfied, consume the soul with anxiety and disappointment.

The kingdom comes not as we would. The reverent name of Jesus is not hallowed as we desire and for this we must weep. How can we be otherwise than sorrowful while men believe not our report and the divine arm is not revealed?

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.

The labour of our inmost soul, such soul travail as that of a faithful minister will bring on occasion seasons of exhaustion when heart and flesh will fail.

[5 : 07] I think Spurgeon's words there will find sympathetic agreement with any heart acquainted with Christian ministry and mission.

I'm not just talking about those involved in vocational ministry, which is what Spurgeon was talking about there. I'm talking about anyone involved in Christian ministry and ministry mission in any form.

The community group leader who has taught and pastored and exhorted people to follow Christ for months and for years without any apparent fruit that comes from that. The disciple who has represented the Lord Jesus to their friends and their family members and their colleagues at McDonald's and without any apparent response whatsoever.

Weak, weary, sceptical, tired, loss of confidence. They're the feelings which bubble away there at the depths of the heart, even if there is an exterior which is triumphant at times.

And I think that no one has ever experienced more of what Spurgeon describes there than the Apostle Paul. As you look into 2 Corinthians, you see it in 6 and you see it in chapter 11, 1 Corinthians 1 primarily, a list of what you might call deadly ministerial pressures that were upon the Apostle Paul.

[6 : 24] And it's astounding what he suffered in the midst of this ministry that he's involved in. And the list is capped off there in chapter 11, verses 28 to 29, with his concluding comment, which is, apart from the other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall? And I am not indignant. And the question that I ask when I look at the Apostle Paul, when you look at his life, you look at what he suffered, what he gave up, and the hardships and the attacks, did he grow faint?

Did he lose heart in the midst of all that difficulty? And the answer that chapter 4 gives us is no, he did not. We do not lose heart, is what he says.

He says it twice in chapter 4. And so when the task of 2.8 million people are in front of us, when the task of Chatswood and our friends and our family are in front of us, and it seems so huge, and I am tempted to lose heart in the face of that, I need to listen to a bloke like Paul who suffered more and did not lose heart.

And we need to do that too. And he says here in chapter 4, verse 1, therefore since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

[7 : 53] And I want to know why he didn't lose heart. And not more why he didn't lose heart, but what continued to propel him forward again and again for God's global kingdom cause.

The first reason I think he doesn't lose heart is in those two words in verse 1, this ministry. It says there, therefore since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

And the ministry that he's talking about there is the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit, which he spent most of chapter 3 talking about. And especially what he does there in chapter 3, he compares the old covenant ministry with the new covenant ministry of the Spirit.

And in the old covenant ministry he particularly hones in on Moses and Moses' ministry. And the surprise of chapter 3 is that this impressive old covenant ministry that Moses had, and it was impressive, you know, you see Moses and God talking face to face as a man talks to his friend, that's impressive.

The mountain shakes, the cloud descends, there's fire and there's lightning and stuff like that when God gives the Ten Commandments to his people through Moses, parting of the waters.

[9 : 08] It's all pretty impressive stuff that Moses involved in with his old covenant ministry. And the surprise of chapter 3 is Paul says it ain't a patch on what new covenant ministry is.

It doesn't even compare. It's like getting a torch and shining at the sun and saying, take that, son. The brightness is incomparable. See what he says there?

Chapter 3, verse 9, if you've got your Bibles open, have a look at it. If you don't, open your Bibles and have a look at it. If this ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness?

For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with this surpassing glory. And then down in verse 18, and we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

There's the comparison. Notice the difference. Old covenant ministry, death, new covenant life. Old covenant ministry, Exodus 33, when Moses talked with God, he had to put a veil over his face because his face was just beaming with brightness.

[10 : 20] Had to put a veil over it because it freaked out all his mates. And here it says in new covenant ministry, we all with unveiled faces reflect the full glory of God.

That's the difference. Veiled glory, full glory. So that's the first reason I think that Paul doesn't lose heart. In spite of how things look on the outside, and it looked like Paul was pretty unimpressive, and the ministry he had was pretty unimpressive, that's the whole argument of Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians.

We're impressive, super apostles, Paul's false because he gets rejected, he gets beaten, his speaking doesn't amount to much, he's not the real deal.

And what Paul says is that regardless of how it looks, the ministry that he's involved in, new covenant ministry of the Spirit is a ministry about life, and it's so much more impressive than anything that even Moses did in the Old Testament.

There's another reason in verse 1. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. And so the second reason he doesn't lose heart is that this ordinary looking, but glorious ministry has been given to him through God's mercy.

[11 : 36] And so what is happening here in 2 Corinthians 4, particularly in these early verses of chapter 4, is it's Paul's own story being traced out.

You see, he was an unbeliever, he was blinded to the glory of Christ, he persecuted Christ, and then on the Damascus road Paul had seen the glory of God in the face of Christ.

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

His salvation and his apostleship were solely due to God's mercy. And so the combination of this mercy at his own conversion and the astonishing glory of this ministry kept him from losing heart.

And not only did it not cause him not to lose heart, but in fact he was propelled forward in this ministry. So see it there in verse 2. We have renounced secret and shameful ways.

[12 : 45] We do not use distortion, nor do we, we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by sending forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

And so what it says here is that in the face of temptation, Paul rejected all cunning, all manipulation, trickery, nor did he tamper with the word of God, nor did he falsify it, distort it, confuse it, water it down.

Instead, what he does here, he embraces openness and candor and forthrightness and clarity about the glory of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no vague meaning. There is no confusing language coming out of Paul's mouth.

There is no ambivalence about where he stood or what he meant. He imparted the truth without deviation. That's what it means. Without distortion means he went straight with the truth.

Undiluted. He wanted the news about Jesus Christ to be absolutely crystal clear. not vague and clouded views about Jesus.

[14 : 00] Why? I think the first reason is at the end of verse 2 where he says he sets forth the truth plainly in the sight of God.

That is, the first reason he did it was because God was his audience. He didn't give a rip about what people thought of him. God was his primary audience and he would ultimately answer to him and no one else and he wanted to make sure that that was a good day.

Another reason is given to us in chapter 4 verses 4 to 6. This is why he sets forth the truth plainly. This is why he didn't deviate.

This is what propelled him forward. And let's start with 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.

You see what he's saying there? The weight of what he's saying there? This is why it is so essential for Paul that Jesus be crystal clear that the word of God be not distorted that he speak the truth wherever he could.

[15 : 11] He says people who don't believe in Christ are blind. They can't see the supreme value of Christ.

And so they won't receive him as their treasure and they will not be saved. They're blind. The work of God is needed in our lives to open our eyes and give us life so that we can see and receive and savor the Lord Jesus Christ so that he might be our greatest treasure.

But without that we're blind. And that's not the state of some people. It's not just the state of two people. It's the state of everyone without Christ. Blinded. It was my condition for 23 years.

Blinded to glory of Christ. I can read the Bible and I cannot see Christ in it for 23 years or for as long as I can read. 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 is the gospel. And this is what we are blinded to. The gospel is what Paul came to see and believe.

- [16 : 37] The gospel is what he wants others to come and see and believe. But it's this gospel that they're blinded to. The gospel is the good news that God sent his son into the world to live a perfect life, to die as a substitute for sinners, to absorb the anger of God, to take away our guilt, to provide the gift of right standing before God and to give eternal joy through faith in the Lord Jesus alone apart from any works of obedience on our behalf.

That is what we are blinded to. All of us. We are all blind to the glory of those facts unless verse 6 happens.

For God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Christ. What Paul describes there in verse 6 is the new birth, even though he doesn't use the term.

The God who created light in the beginning does the same thing in the heart of every human being that comes to Christ. Only the light this time is not a physical light, but the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ, or as verse 4 puts it, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

God causes the human heart and the mind to see the truth and the beauty and the worth of Christ, the glory of Christ. Not just to see the facts, but to see the glory of the facts.

- [18 : 18] Darkness remains in our hearts and in our minds until God illumines the heart and the mind. And when he does, darkness cannot stop it.

This light that he shines in pushes all darkness and blindness out and the darkness and the blindness cannot resist it, cannot prevail against it.

So then we see Christ for who he is. We receive him for who he is and that's what we want. Is it not for our children, whether they be 6 or 16 or 26 or 66, and for our parents and our spouses and our neighbours and our colleagues and our friends at school and for all the chastardly 2.8 billion people in the world, the darkness might be removed in the heart.

We want the light to shine in their hearts so that they see and receive and savour Christ. We want them to be born again. It is a mighty act of God and we cannot do it.

But that does not mean passivity on our behalf.

- [19 : 34] Just because it's a work of God that we can't do doesn't mean we sit still and just kind of twiddle our thumbs and wait for God to work. There is a human means that God uses to make this great work happen.

In verse 4 we have the dreadful plight of the human condition of the heart, blinded, dead if you like. Verse 6 we have the sovereign work of God causing sight and light to break in with clarity so that Christ is revealed and he's embraced and received and new life comes.

And bang in the middle of those two verses is verse 5 which says we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake.

Paul's role, our role is to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Remember I said that the gospel is the good news that God sent his son into the world to live a perfect life, to die a substitutionary death for sinners, to absorb the anger of God, to take away our guilt, to provide the gift of right standing before God and give eternal joy through faith in the Lord Jesus alone apart from any works of obedience on our behalf.

But let me say that the gospel is not just about us or even primarily about us, about the good news for us, about God's love for us. It primarily says something very significant about the Lord Jesus.

- [21 : 13] Philippians 2 describes this great work of the gospel in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus to take away the sins of the world. And it goes on to say this about Jesus, therefore this is the consequence of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

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, Master, King, Boss, Ruler, over all things for the glory of his Father.

The crucified Jesus Christ has been exalted through resurrection as the heavenly Lord. God's suffering servant is now the ruler of the universe. The man Jesus Christ, he exalts a God over all of people, over all nations, over all of history.

And Paul says you make that clear. Do not distort that truth by shying away from the exclusive claim that Jesus Lord and King and Master and Ruler over all that is, has been and will be and call people to confess with their tongue and surrender their lives to his loving rule.

He said you make that clear. And proclaim it all this from a heart of love and a life of service.

[22 : 41] That I think is what it means when he says that we don't preach ourselves. It's to make that message clear of the Lordship of Christ from a heart of love and a life of service.

All self-interest is laid aside. My friends, verse 5 is why Christ is to be clear and the word of God is not to be distorted. The means that God uses to affect the great and eternal transformation that we long to see across this world in the hearts of every man, woman and child and even teenagers is bold, clear, plain proclamation of the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Lord, from a heart of love and a life of service, that is the impressive ministry of the new covenant that causes the blind to see for dark to be distinguished, extinguished, for death to be defeated and eternal life granted.

That's the impressive ministry. Let me tell you that that impressive ministry is a ministry that is not well received in a world where exclusive claims are not tolerated.

And one of the great challenges, not just for the preacher but for every single Christian, as you are a witness for Christ, is to dumb down the exclusive claims of Christ.

[24 : 17] Great temptation when you're speaking with a friend or a family member or Lord or a neighbour is to not push hard on the Lordship of Christ over all that is. But just to say Jesus died on the cross to save you from your sins and you get to go to heaven.

And so for those who are struggling with it, and I think we do struggle with it, maybe even losing heart, let's just keep reading.

Verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, this impressive ministry of God's recreating power bringing people from death to life.

We have it in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. The great encouragement of that verse there is that God uses weak and weary and ordinary people, ordinary jars of clay, to bring about his great eternal purposes in the lives of people.

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

[25 : 37] We're not the treasure. And when we think we are the treasure, or even rely upon ourselves because we've got some clever argumentation, we're articulate, passionate, humorous, bubbly, successful, stylish, beautiful, then we will very quickly lose heart in mission and ministry.

When we think we are the treasure, our programs are the treasure, my ability to beat that person's argument is the treasure, we will very quickly discover that we are powerless.

This, I think, is what we need to get. I made this box about 30 years ago. Can't believe I can even say that.

This box was made to hold cassettes. For those of you who don't know what a cassette is, it's one of these things. And so 30 years ago, these were popular cassettes were because nothing else existed.

And so now, although I've been given another alternative for it, so I wanted to use this box, cassettes have long disappeared into obsolescence. And in fact, I didn't even have one of these in my house, and so where do you look for something that's obsolete and no further in use?

[27 : 04] You look in church cupboards. And you will find things like this in existence still, still being held onto. And so I found one, there it is. It used to hold it. These are long gone.

The box is not. It hasn't had anything in it for ages. Why? Because the box is more precious to me than what was in it.

That's anti-gospel. That's anti-Christian ministry. The box isn't the impressive thing. This is closer to the truth.

This is a takeaway container. It's a 21st century version of the 1st century clay pot. Its purpose is to hold the spectacular treasure of salt and pepper calamari that I enjoyed on Friday night.

And once the treasure is consumed, it's meant to be discarded, although my wife seems to hang onto them for some reason. I thought that's why Tupperware was invented, but that's another whole story.

[28 : 11] Don't get me started on Tupperware. I cannot understand why you would sit around for two hours discussing plastic containers. I really... Shoot me dead, for goodness sake, before I do that.

Anyway, I've had my piece. I've said my piece. Friends, we've got to understand that we are the takeaway containers.

The treasure is on the inside. It's not the box. We're not the treasure. And sometimes I think we act and we behave as if we are the treasure. Anything eternal, anything good, lasting that God will ever work out, it's because of the treasure that's inside.

It's not because of how impressive that we are. God's concept of ministry is so different from what this world thinks. Our world stresses the classy, the top shelf, the polished containers, not the glory of God working through human weakness.

The impressive nature of the new covenant ministry is the great treasure of the power of God revealing the glory of the gospel through takeaway containers like you and me.

[29 : 22] Sinful, broken, fallen, inept, takeaway containers like you and me. And because we are takeaway containers, what that means is you're meant to feel unimpressive and weak and weary, but not ultimately defeated.

Verse 8, we are hard pressed on every side, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but we are not in despair. Persecuted, but we are not abandoned. We are struck down, but we are not destroyed.

We always carry around our body the death of Jesus so the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Hardship and struggle are the normal lot of any sort of takeaway container. It's normal. The temptation is to lose heart and always to think it doesn't, it's not meant to be like this.

And so if you're feeling weak and weary and out of ideas, helpless in the face of lost people, unable to affect real change in someone's life, then you are feeling probably what you ought to be feeling.

[30 : 31] Pretty normal. But know this, such a clay pot is not a liability to God. Your weakness and your weariness is normal, expected, and not a hindrance.

Our ordinary lives is not a liability. It is in fact an asset to God's global purposes. That is, if you truly want God to be glorified.

On the other hand, the proud, the self-assured, the confident person in their own abilities is in fact a hindrance to God's global mission. Because they will not act out of a heart of love or a life of service.

God deliberately chooses to use weak and humble people, but he never abandons them to go it alone. He puts the treasure of his gospel and gifts in clay pots like you and me.

And so friends, if you're sitting on the sideline when you think of God's global mission, and you wonder, what can I possibly ever say to my neighbor? What can I ever possibly say to my friends? What can I possibly do to make a contribution to 2.8 billion people who don't know Jesus?

[31 : 37] The 50 million people I can convey about of corpses disappearing into eternity. What can I possibly do for that? I want to say to you that no one is too common, too weak, too shy, too unarticulate, too old, too disabled, too young to be involved in this spectacular ministry of God's global purposes going out into the world.

And therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, I want to implore you not to lose heart. And for us as a church, not to lose heart. Let us press on in the task of proclaiming Christ as Lord out of hearts of love and lives of service while looking to God to push out darkness with the light of the glory of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.