

We Do Not Lose Heart

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[0 : 0 0] All smiles. I know what it takes to fool this town. I'll do it till the sun goes down and all through the nighttime. Oh yeah, I tell you what you want to hear. Keep my sunglasses on while I shed a tear. It's never the right time. I'll put my armor on, show you how strong I am. I'll put my armor on and show you what I am. I am unstoppable. I'm a Porsche with no brakes.

I'm invincible. I win every single game. I'm so powerful. I don't need batteries to play. I'm so confident. I am unstoppable today.

If you're not sure where those words come from, I'm sure you're not alone. They are the opening words of a song called Unstoppable by Sia before Christmas. That was the number one most listened to track of hers on Spotify. Okay, I'm catching up slowly.

It wasn't until the second or third time of listening to that though that I actually picked up what the point of the song is. Because given the title and the chorus, you would think that the point was that this woman is unstoppable. But the point is actually the opposite of that.

In fact, the song is on an album called This Is Acting. Because unstoppable is only what she wants you to think she is. Behind the armor of a powerful, invincible, unstoppable person is somebody who is breaking down and on the verge of tears. It is weakness hiding behind the appearance of strength. And in some ways, that is what that whole letter, this whole letter of 2 Corinthians is getting at. The backstory to this letter is fascinating. But what we need to know for now is that this church in Corinth was a church that Paul had started, but had since attracted teachers that he calls super apostles. And the super apostles had pitched themselves to the church as teachers with all the right qualifications. They looked and sounded like the business. They said they were worth paying to listen to. They were like the apple of the church world, okay, sleek, elegant, high-end, expensive. The problem was they had not only changed the look and feel of the church, but they had changed in doing that the message of the gospel. And so, Paul's writing to the church now how to defend his ministry so as to defend the gospel that he first brought to them.

[3 : 1 4] And he does that all through the letter by turning their ideas and our ideas about weakness and strength on its head. These super apostles look unstoppable, he says, but behind their armor, their ministry is frail and temporary compared with the all-surpassing power and eternal glory of the gospel, which God has chosen to put not in armor, but in jars of clay.

And I wanted to bring us here at the end of another year because you and me are clay jars.

I would be shocked if you told me that you were ready for another year. And if you feel ready for another year, perhaps we need to hear this even more tonight, because Paul's expectation of what being a Christian in a gospel church will feel like is not strength, but weakness.

But his purpose in this chapter is to show us that in our utter weakness, there is reason, verse 1, why we do not lose heart.

He brings that back around in verse 16, we do not lose heart. We do not lose heart. We go into a new year on our knees.

[4 : 58] But this is why we do not give up. Firstly, because of the glory of the gospel. Just read to me again from verse 1.

Therefore, he says, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, 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 everyone's conscience in the sight of God. So he's having a dig at the so-called super apostles.

They've come with a way of doing things that deceives, that distorts God's word. Instead, he says, we have given up on that, given up the latest techniques, the new strategies, the fancy ways of doing it, and instead we set forth the word plainly.

However, the comeback to that is, well, that's well and good, Paul, but look at the results. People are not buying what you are selling.

[6 : 06] So he says, verse 3, even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers.

So he's saying there's a spiritual reason why that's the case. It's not down to the human technique, the strategies that we use.

And that will happen. A veiling of the gospel, a blindness of the heart, when you're setting out the truth plainly, in a way that it won't when you're disguising it.

Because what is it that the so-called God of this age so desperately wants people not to see? The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that shows what?

That displays the glory of Christ. The glory of Christ, who is the image of God. He's saying Satan is not bothered what people believe if it is not that.

[7 : 17] Secular, mystical, religious, he does not care if it's not a gospel that displays the glory of Christ. Anyone can believe it. One reason why the gospel doesn't get a fair hearing or isn't more widely believed, says Paul, is because it is the gospel of Christ's glory.

For what we preach, he says, is not ourselves. There's another dig at the super apostles, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

Gospels of human glory get a long way, don't they? If you want to get far in this world, preach a gospel of human glory.

You need to open up Instagram or TikTok to see that. The Corinthians would have loved the 21st century. They'd have been all over it. The super apostles, they would have been global influencers. Preach a gospel of Christ's glory, he says, and you will find that it is veiled and it is opposed.

The other week, we had Sinclair Ferguson teach for a day at the Ministry Training Academy on union with Christ. The recordings, by the way, are all up on the MTA YouTube channel.

[8 : 33] If you've got a couple of days off still, you could do no better than to listen to them. It is absolute gold. Listening to him teach is absolutely amazing. People will still be listening to him, I reckon, in 200 years' time.

But when Sinclair Ferguson walks down the street or gets on a bus, how many people do you think recognize him? How many private jets do you think he owns?

How many book signings do you think he does in a month or a year? The glory of the gospel is a real glory, but it is the glory that is of Christ.

And at the very, very, very best, we are still only servants of that glory. So why bother when you're up against the super apostles, an unstoppable world of human glory and power?

Well, we do it, says Paul, because, verse 6, 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 God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

[9 : 49] We keep going with the gospel because it is a gospel of real glory. When God turns the lights on, we see a face. And in that face, we see a far, far, infinitely greater glory than we have ever seen or known.

It is the glory of God. And it is not in my face or your face, but the face of Jesus.

The glory of the gospel is veiled, says Paul, but when God tears off that veil, every other gospel or glory is shadow and darkness in the presence of the glory of Christ.

You see, if God only does that once, one time for one person, it is more glorious than 8 billion people preaching themselves.

Paul says, get this, every single time that somebody believes the good news of Jesus, what is it? It is the first day of creation all over again. What would you give to have been there when God said, let there be light and light exploded into the darkness of the universe?

[11 : 09] What would you not give to have been there to hear that or to see that and witness that? Paul says, that is what happens every time a person sees the glory of God in the face of Jesus.

It is a new creation. God has done it again. Let there be light. You know, I don't know about you, but in the light of that, I don't know why anyone would bother with anything else.

Why would you do anything to obscure or distort or get in the way of that view of Christ if it meant even one person could see his glory?

Because every time is no less of a miracle than the creation of the universe. That is the glory of the gospel.

And brothers and sisters, what an amazing thing. Just take this in. What an amazing thing has happened in your heart. What an amazing thing that God has done for you.

[12 : 11] Shining the light of his glory into your heart so that you can see the face of Jesus for who he is. New creation. Day one again.

What an amazing thing that happens here when people put their trust in Jesus. Does it happen in millions and billions of people at a time? No, it doesn't.

Does that make it any less glorious? No, it doesn't. The gospel is a treasure worth selling everything you have to have it. It is a pearl of greatest price.

But if the gospel is so glorious, then why does your life, my life as a Christian, feel so weak? That's the next pushback from the church that Paul answers in our next point.

We've seen the glory of the gospel now, the weakness of its carriers. The gospel is an invaluable treasure. But, says Paul, we have this treasure in jars of clay.

[13 : 12] Jars of clay. Clay jars. They were the carrier bag of the ancient world. Not the fancy ones that cost a pound. The old ones that you got them and you feared that your milk would break out the bottom on your way home.

These were the sorts of things people used day in, day out. They got smashed. You got a new one. It wasn't a big deal. They were fragile. They were weak. They were easily smashed. And, friends, in this analogy, he is talking about you and me.

He's talking about himself. If you feel like a used coffee cup, what an amazing thing to find that recognized and validated in the Bible.

But Paul felt like that. The coffee cups that we will throw in the bin later, that's what he is, he says. That's what we are. Look at the words he uses to describe his experience of life.

Hard pressed. Perplexed. Persecuted. Struck down. How often do you find people advertising that that is their life?

[14 : 21] Boasting in their weakness, but Paul says that is him and that is us. And it's into that weakness, your life, my life, that God has put his infinite treasure.

It's another way of saying what he said in verse 6. He shone his light into human hearts. He's put his treasure in jars of clay. That is the opposite of the super apostles.

The opposite of our world, isn't it? Not brokenness hiding under shiny gleaming armor. Weakness disguised as strength, but strength hidden inside of weakness.

Treasure inside a broken carrier bag. So why does God do that? Weak people.

His treasure. Why? Paul says to show something, to show off verse 7 that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

[15 : 27] In other words, God wants to show that the glory of the gospel only works because of him and not because of me and ye.

You know, I know what kind of year some of you have had. I don't know what kind of year all of you have had. but I know that this is a room of clay jars, that this is a room of used coffee cups.

And it is so important that we understand that in God's purposes that is not by accident. We sometimes talk about the gospel turning the world upside down, God bringing down the powerful and the proud and lifting up the weak.

But we're much less open to God doing that in our lives personally, aren't we? Deliberately weakening us so that we are better carriers of the treasure of his gospel.

Humbling us so that our lives show off that the power behind our lives belongs to him and not to us. Overshadowing our lives so that the light of Christ's glory shines through us and not the light of our own glory.

[16 : 53] Sinclair Ferguson taught that day on the truth that at the point that you put your faith in Jesus, your life becomes bound up with his forever, our union with Christ.

What a glorious thing. But what does that feel like? Paul says it feels like this verse 10, we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that 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. In short, he says it feels like dying and rising again.

And we are shocked, aren't we, when things happen to us that strip us of our natural gifts and energy and strength and resources, but we are united to a Christ who is stripped of his life, only then to rise again to new life in power.

So when God wants to show off Christ to the world, what does he do? He gives us over to death. He gives us over to death so that Jesus' life would be seen in us and not our own, so that the world would see this miracle, that we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.

[18 : 31] What happens when you knock a vase off your mantelpiece? What happens when you drop a dish in your kitchen? It smashes, doesn't it? Well, here is a clay jar that falls on the floor and does not smash.

So where does that unstoppable, that all-surpassing power come from, if not from us? It comes from God in the gospel. And so if you find yourself on your knees at the end of this year, you need to know that that is not because God has left you.

God is holding you up because on your knees is exactly where he wants you. When you say to him and mean it when you say he must become greater, I must become less, his reply will always be this, my grace is sufficient for you.

My grace is sufficient for you because my power is made perfect in weakness. Before I went away down south, Dondon and I were chatting about the last few months, reflecting on things.

I think fair to say that we've both felt pretty weak. between us we said we just about make one functioning minister. And that was actually before I got tonsillitis, the weekend of the carol service.

[20 : 11] But you know, there's huge comfort in knowing that that is how it's meant to feel. people. And not because things are going badly, but because in the mystery of God's infinite wisdom, bringing us to the end of ourselves is how God chooses to show the glory of Christ.

And I say that so that you know that these words are not out here for me or for us or for us as a church family, but this is actually what's happening in our lives, in your life, in our families, in our church family.

We are united together in an experience of weakness because we are united together with Christ. And that should give us such confidence and such courage for this coming year, brothers and sisters, because our weakness tells us what?

That God is at work in us. If you are a clay jar, then God has put his treasure in ye.

Our weakness tells us that God is at work in us and through us in the lives of others. That's where Paul takes us in our third point. What's this all for? The glory of the gospel, the weakness of its carriers.

[21 : 34] Thirdly, and more briefly, the faith of its communicators. As Christians, we embody the gospel, says Paul, and we communicate the gospel.

The gospel is a news story. It's a statement about what's happened, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and by faith we speak that, says Paul.

It's written, I believed and therefore I've spoken. Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak. Now what does he mean by faith there?

A spirit of faith. That's not just believing really hard or wishing something to be true. In verse 18, he's going to contrast what is seen and what is unseen, and say that we fix our eyes on unseen things.

So in other words, we don't base our lives and our decisions on what's in front of us, we base our lives and our decisions on God's promises of what he is going to do for us that we can't actually see yet.

[22 : 46] So the faith he's talking about in verse 13 is trusting in what God has promised that we can't yet see. And the promise is there in verse 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.

And notice that he doesn't say there, that he hopes that God will raise us with Jesus or he wishes that God would raise us with Jesus.

He says we know, we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us with Jesus. He knows that. For Paul, that promise is more real, more real than the way that things seem to him at a ground level.

And so because he knows by faith in God's promise that a resurrection day is coming, he speaks. He speaks, his life speaks, his words speak, he shares, he communicates.

You think this nails one of the big reasons that we are sometimes so reluctant to speak about Jesus with people. You think for a minute, what would change if Paul had based his decisions just on what he saw on the ground?

[24 : 12] Super apostles, hostile world, difficult church, Paul. What if the weakness and the brokenness that he felt as a Christian was more real to him than the resurrection?

Brothers and sisters, when you're weighing up whether or not to say something, and we've all been there, haven't we? Should I say something? What is it that holds you back in that moment? It could be a lot of things, but I reckon a good part of it is if I say something about Jesus, I'm going to sound absolutely pathetic.

Now, whether that is what the person will think or not is a different story, but our fear of that is a big part of what holds us back from communicating, isn't it? Because the sense of our own weakness or people seeing our weakness in a powerful world is more real to us in that moment than the sure and certain promise of Christ's return to raise us and everyone from the dead.

You know, I wonder, can we as a church, can we say with Paul, since we have that same spirit of faith, trust in that promise, we also believe and therefore speak, because all of this, the gospel, the weakness, the speaking, the lot of it, all this, he says, is for your benefit so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

You know, what he's saying here about our weakness, it is very comforting. It is very comforting. comforting, but it does not end with me and you feeling better about our own lives.

[26 : 10] It is very comforting, and it should give us the strength and courage then to see God's work in the lives of others. The point is that God works through our weakness to reach others with his grace, to shine the light of the gospel through you for others to see.

And so, friends, in this coming year, do not think that your weakness can get in the way of the gospel.

Do not think that your weakness can get in the way of the gospel. Put your faith in God's precious and very great promises in Christ over and above the powerlessness that you feel because that is the faith that will give us confidence to speak, to share, to communicate when we would otherwise choose not to.

The glory of the gospel, the weakness of its carriers, the faith of its communicators. And finally, as we finish, Paul brings us full circle to the confidence of the gospel's glory because he ends where he started, doesn't he, in verse 16, therefore, we do not lose hearts.

He's shown us that the glory of the gospel is real, it is Christ's glory. He's shown us our weakness is part of God's deliberate design for Christ's glory. He's shown us why that is, so the message of Christ's glory might reach more people.

[27 : 43] And as he brings us home, it's as if he just lifts our heads and says, look, look, look what Christ is doing in you and for you, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. The promise of the resurrection, he says, is a now and not yet.

It is a now inside you, Christian, that Christ daily renews your heart. A resurrection happens every single day in your life.

Did you know that? And it is a not yet, because our troubles are storing up for us what an eternal glory that is coming when Christ returns to raise our bodies physically from the dead.

Notice, he calls those troubles light and momentary. That is not to belittle what we go through. Paul went through much worse than many of us are likely to in his life, but that is the perspective the gospel gives on what is lasting and ultimate.

[29 : 04] Weakness, fragility, frailty, emptiness, trouble, pain, persecution, these things are real. They are things that we see and we feel, but they are things that will not last.

But the thing that those things are achieving for us, storing up for us, does. The glory of Christ, an eternal glory that we will share if we are united with him, that is what goes on forever and ever and ever.

Paul in Romans 8 reflects on the same thought and says, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.

Not worth comparing. Friends, that is not immediately obvious to us, is it? But that doesn't make it any less true.

so we do not lose hearts. I don't know what this year will bring for me or for you or for us together.

[30 : 19] The last Sunday of next year, we might be sitting here feeling even weaker than we do now. But take hearts, because whatever happens, whatever happens, in the gospel, God has put his treasure on display in you to showcase his glory in your weakness.

And however weak you become, he will sustain you with his all-surpassing power until our troubles give way to an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

before I lead us in prayer, I just want us to take a minute in silence, for each of us to commit the year ahead to God, to reflect on what we've heard, to pray for ourselves, to pray for our church, and then I'll lead us in a word of prayer.

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Therefore, we do not lose hearts, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

[32 : 56] Our Father, we thank you so much for the truth of those words. we thank you so much for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ that you have shone into our hearts.

Our Father, we thank you for the miracle that you have done for each of us who knows Christ personally, that you have given us a new birth, that we are a new creation.

We thank you because that power is not from us, but from you. And our Father, how we pray that this coming year, Lord, we each, each of us and together as a family would know that all surpassing power at work in our lives.

Our Father, we do long for the glory of Christ to be known. Lord, we do long for his glory to be put on display and we confess, Lord, that there is a part of us that recoils from what it would take for that to happen.

Lord, our weakness is not what we desire, but we pray, our Father, that in our weakness we would know your strength. We pray, Lord, that we would know your comfort and we pray that Christ would be known in deeper and realer and clearer ways, Lord, to us, to our families, to our church, to our community, to our friends, to our world.

[34 : 28] This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.