

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6

'The nuts and bolts of gospel ministry'

We're back again this morning in 2 Corinthians - I love this book ... your sermon series is entitled, 'True Strength' ... you'll see in your Bible that the section we're looking at today revolves around the new covenant. Paul focuses in especially on those who are 'ministers of the new covenant.' I have three main points for us to think about:

1. The ups and downs of gospel ministry (12-13)

Paul was just like the rest of us preachers—he had lots of really good days and he had his fair share of bad days. When we preach Christ, it's a fact that the old enemy doesn't like us and one of the ways he intrudes into our lives is through discouragement. Sometimes, it doesn't take that much to get us preachers down!

The closing verses in chapter 2 embrace both ends of the spectrum—in verses 12 and 13 we see Paul on a real downer over all that's going on with the Corinthians, then in verses 14-17 we see Paul's upbeat encouragement because of Jesus Christ.

You know, the Lord never disheartens us—when we focus on him, we never come away feeling a tad despondent or dispirited. Jesus is the great pick-me-up when it comes to serving others.

We read in verse 13 that Paul finally made it to Troas. It was a seaport on the Aegean Sea, it was located near the mouth of the Dardanelles. It was founded in 300 BC, and was about ten miles from the famous city of Troy.

Paul was quite chuffed because the Lord gave him wonderful opportunities to preach the gospel in that city—he refers to the fact that the sovereign Lord 'opened a door' for him. Paul, being Paul, seized that opportunity with both hands and made the most of it. That's true, but it's equally true to say that he struggled the whole time he was there. Paul was in Troas, but his heart was further down the road in Corinth. It seems from verse 13 that Paul got himself in a bit of a whirl because of his overriding concern about events in the church in Corinth. He was worried sick about what was going on down there and why Titus hadn't rendezvoused with him in Troas. I reckon Paul was pressing the panic button at this point—at the same time, it shows us how incredibly human he is!

It's safe to say that this was an unbelievably dark hour in Paul's life and ministry. The guy is really torn in two and the more he is kept in the dark, the more tetchy he becomes. He's desperate for news from Titus. He's on tenterhooks, living on his nerves, running his engine on an empty tank. And that's the way it is sometimes in kingdom ministry—we quickly learn that we have to take the rough with the smooth. We don't always get the info we feel we need when we reckon we need it and, for one reason or another, we can easily feel let down and left out of the circle. That's where Paul finds himself at this point in

his life—until he takes a long hard look at Jesus, it's only then that he feels an adrenaline surge in his spiritual veins. He may be battered, he may be bruised, but he's not beaten!

2. The pros and cons of gospel ministry (14-17)

When Paul focuses his eyes on Jesus, things change. And they change for the better! That's what grace does to a man when he's taken in and taken up - absorbed - with the Lord Jesus. So true for Paul and for you and me!

See what it says ... Paul went from the depths of a pit of inky black despair to the sheer elation and joy of marching in a triumphal parade. The cure for Paul's hangover of discouragement was a heart overflowing with thankfulness, for he writes, 'But thanks be to God ...'

A quick look at these few verses reveals the awesome privilege that is ours when we embrace Jesus as Lord and Saviour. I think there are at least five big plusses, or five privileges, in which we can be spiritually triumphant.

The first one is found in verse 14 where Paul informs us that God 'leads us ...' We are led by a sovereign Lord, 24/7—by a God who makes no mistakes; one who gets it right first time, every time.

If that phrase does nothing else, it's a powerful reminder that the Lord is in full control of all that's happening in our lives—that means, the good, the very good, and the not so good! God rules, and God overrules. Our God is the God of gracious providence.

The second is found in the next phrase where Paul writes that we are led 'in triumphal procession in Christ'—that's a kind of ticker-tape parade - an open top bus through the town - that speaks of promised victory in Jesus Christ. We're on the winning side! We follow the all-conquering Commander in the victory parade sharing in the triumph of his decisive victory over sin, death, and hell.

Sure, we'll have our tough times down here, we'll have some apparent setbacks, it won't all be plain sailing, we'll have our days of rampant discouragement and those seasons when our back is pinned against the wall ...

having said that, at the end of the day, our ultimate triumph is guaranteed. That is a cast-iron certainty. No doubts at all! When we gave our lives to Jesus, I can tell you, we didn't back a loser, we backed a winner!

The third hint of something wonderful is found in the closing phrase in verse 14 where Paul talks about 'through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.' That's the 'sweet aroma' some translations prefer. In other words, we leave a mark on this world, we have an influence on the lives of ordinary people. In that sense, whether we realise it or not, our lives impact the lives of other people.

In the final analysis, being successful isn't what really matters, it's all about influence—you and me giving off a beautiful, refreshing fragrance wherever God has strategically placed us. We're

meant to bloom in God's garden, we're to give forth a delightful hue wherever God has planted us. Talk about privilege, that's what Paul is on about here!

The next few lines take us to a new dimension in verses 15 and 16a. You see, in the march past, the emperor seated on his great throne in the capital city smelled the fragrant aroma of the incense when it reached him at the end of the parade.

Paul has the insight to compare the preacher's ministry to a fragrance of Christ to God, he says: 'for we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.' Wonderful words.

Although a preacher, or any one of us as servants of God, declares the gospel to sinful men, it is in reality God who is his audience. Yes, it touches people around him, but it also rises to waft in the nostrils of God in heaven. In that unique sense, God is involved even in this area of our life and ministry.

Let's bring it nearer home—it's not the size of your church or the popularity of your ministry that matters; all that counts is that we please God when we open our mouth and herald the glad tidings that Jesus saves.

Here's something we're inclined to forget—your ministry and mine has an effect both on the Christian and also on the person who is not yet a Christian. To those who know the Lord, it is a

'fragrance of life'—for those who don't know Jesus Christ, it is 'the smell of death' (verse 16). When we think of the context of Paul's comments, we can see exactly where he's coming from. In the triumphal parade back in the days of the Roman empire, both the victors, who were to be honoured, and the vanquished, who were to be executed, all of them caught a lingering whiff of the fragrance rising from the priest's censers.

The smell would flow equally over those exulting in triumph and those hanging their heads in defeat. For one group, it symbolised victory; for the rest, it was an acrid reminder of defeat and imminent death.

That's the way it is in our day as well—when we witness to others and relate the story of our new life in Christ to them, for some, it's great; for others, it's tragic—to some, it's marvellous news; for others, they just don't want to know.

To round this section off, Paul is posing one of those I-want-to-ask-kind-of questions at the end of verse 16, 'Who is equal to such a task?' Truth be told, there's not much we can do in and of ourselves, but through the Lord, we can do all things. None of us is up to the task in hand—we're out of our depth, it's all too much for us, it's too hot for us to handle. But the Lord is our strength, the Spirit of God is the divine enabler and equipper. We march forward in the train of his triumph!

There's no need for us to be seen as men who peddle our wares when it comes to the Christian gospel, we're not here to short-change men and women. The Lord is looking for you and I to be men and women of sincerity, people who are genuine, folks who have the real McCoy when it comes to faith. Integrity is what counts!

Hey, we have every reason to be joyful—let's not be despondent or disheartened—let's keep our eyes focused on the Lord Jesus, our eyes glued to the sovereign God, seated upon his throne. With Christ in the vessel, we can smile at the storm. At the end of the day, it goes back to us realising that God is bigger than all our problems—we're serving a great, big, wonderful God.

Paul raises a couple of questions in 3:1: 'Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?'

The fact is, it didn't matter what Paul did, if he had stood on his head, there was still a handful of folks in Corinth who definitely did not see Paul as flavour of the month, hence his comments.

Ah, some we win, some we lose—and it looks as though Paul has lost some of them. O yes, there are pros and cons! Well, at the end of the day, it's no great loss. Your church and mine is a better place to be without such folks - they're a distraction ... and are blessed subtractions.

3. The ins and outs of gospel ministry (3:1-6)

That's why in these half-dozen verses, Paul lists five marks of a competent minister of the gospel

of grace. It has to be said that all of them were exemplified in his life. This is no out-of-the-top-of-your-head theology, it's a lifestyle for Paul, a proven track record that even the sceptical Corinthians can't punch a hole through.

Verse 1 intimates that a person with an effective ministry is someone who is marked by a godly life and lifestyle—in other words, he is holy. Paul doesn't need to commend himself, he doesn't need others to do it for him—his life and ministry speak volumes in and of themselves. He need say nothing for they do all the talking for him, they say all that needs to be said.

After all these years, if Paul needed a letter of commendation to affirm him in their eyes, he reckoned something was up the chute, something was radically wrong! His blameless life and his highly effective ministry was the only endorsement he needed. Good enough for him, it should be good enough for them!

The next couple of verses challenge us when we realise that an effective ministry is one that sees lives transformed. No one can deny it; the Lord mightily used Paul in Corinth, there were many converts in that place who came to faith in Christ under his Spirit-anointed ministry.

When Paul preached the gospel, countless lives were fantastically changed, that in itself pays eloquent tribute to the grace of God in the lives of ordinary people. And Paul is more than happy to give God all the glory for the great things he has done.

Paul's ministry among them wasn't just written with ink on a sheet of headed notepaper—it was an intensely powerful role that he played because the Spirit of the living God was working in human hearts.

That's the major difference between those preachers who are heretics and those who are truly the Lord's. The false teacher touches the surface of people's lives, the true servant of God gets to the heart of the matter! He scratches where people are itching, he answers the questions that people are asking.

Paul makes a very important point in verse 4 when he says that an effective minister has confidence in his calling—Paul writes: 'Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.' It seems to me that's what gave Paul the ability to stick to the task in hand, that's what gave him the resolute boldness and courage to keep on going even when the opposition was thumbing at his nose.

It didn't matter who it was or what it was, there's no way that Paul was going to doubt and question his calling. Of that, he was absolutely sure. It gave him a single-minded, this one-thing-I-do mentality; an unswerving devotion to the gospel ministry—he knew in his bones that he was called by God to preach the word of God. Why should he stoop to do anything less?

Verses 5 and 6a underline another hugely important truth—the Lord's servant is dependent on God's power to be the kind of

person God wants him to be. If he's going to do what the Lord wants him to do, he has to do it in the strength of God.

There's nothing about us, there's nothing in us—it doesn't matter what we have on our CV, it doesn't matter who we're accredited with or what college we went to—at the end of the day, as the apostle himself says: 'our competence comes from God.'

We are inadequate in and of ourselves, but God is sufficient for every task. How true it is, when the Lord calls us to serve him, he also equips us and enables us to maximise our full potential in him. Put it simply: I can't, but God can!

It was Scottish pastor, Robert Murray McCheyne who said on one occasion: 'It is not great talents God blesses, so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.' That is, our effectiveness as servants of God is directly linked to our holiness of life and to our being fused with the power of God.

The final factor in all of this is found at the end of verse 6 where Paul informs us of the message we preach and proclaim, it has to do with the new covenant. This is the gospel of grace alone, faith alone, in Christ alone. It's the message that Jesus died, he rose, now he's alive for evermore, and one day he is coming back to rule and reign; this same Jesus wants to touch hearts and transform lives.

Under the old economy of the law, there was no real bubbly life, it was a case of do this, do that,

and let's see what happens at the end of the day —in Christ, and under the new covenant, we have an awesome message that Jesus is the liberator of all those whose lives are shackled by sin and Satan. We have life, real life, abundant life, life with a capital LIFE!

I tell you, my friend, what a responsibility God has entrusted to us; at the same time, what a tremendous sense of privilege is ours—to think that we stand before dying men and share with them the living word of the living God. That's what ministry in the twenty-first century is all about.

No wonder Paul is so keen to defend it, no wonder he's getting so excited about it, no wonder this preacher man is so enthused about God and the ministry he has entrusted to him!

Yes, in spite of all the hassles, hurts, and hiccups in life and in ministry, Paul encourages us to never give up - it's always too soon to quit, to throw in the towel. It reminds me of the story of Eric Liddell - we've heard a lot about him in the last month or two with the centenary of him winning gold back in Paris in 1924 ...

A year before he died in 1945 in a Japanese concentration camp, he was asked the question:

'What keeps you going?' His answer was short and to the point, two words: 'Total surrender!'

For you and me, that's it ... today, and in all our tomorrows, total surrender - come what may, life and ministry with all the ups and downs, the ins and outs, the pros and cons - never give up ...

all of us need to realise afresh, in the words of C T Studd, that there's 'only one life, it'll soon be past, it's only what's done for Christ that'll last.'