

The Glory and Triumph of Christian Leadership

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let me add my word of welcome. My name is Martin Ayres. I'm the Senior Pastor of St. Silas. It's great you can be with us. As we're looking together at this section of the Bible that Ruth just read for us, it's 2 Corinthians chapter 11, and so it'd be a great help to me if you could have a Bible open wherever you are. If you don't have a Bible, you can look at BibleGateway.com. We're in this section, 2 Corinthians 11, and I'm just going to pray and ask for God's help as we turn to His Word. Let's pray together.

Father, my power is made perfect in weakness. Well, Father, we are conscious of how weak we are this morning, that because of our frailty and this virus, we cannot even gather together in the same room, and so we are weak in our ministry and weak in our Christian lives, and we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would be at work in power, strengthening us, growing us in knowledge and love of you, and drawing others who are watching this morning, who are still thinking through the Christian faith, drawing them to know you. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So we're thinking this morning about weakness, about how we view weakness as a church. We're not talking about moral weakness or sin. We're talking about just being unimpressive. Are there ways that we look at our lives and we think, if only I was a bit better at that, if only I was a bit more the center of things, a bit more popular, a bit more of a leader, a bit better at concentrating, a bit more sporty, a bit more confident? Some of us kind of bury our flaws under bravado, because we don't want to admit weakness to anyone. Others of us kind of have our weaknesses right out there and are used to saying, well, look, I'm just not really much use. I just can't really do this. And if we feel a bit disappointed in ourselves about some weakness, do we ever direct that towards God? And would we ever think that God's view of us might be a view of disappointment? That God might have been better off saving someone else who was a bit more gifted than me, so that they could have done more for him? We're in this series in 2 Corinthians, and the early church leader

Paul here gives the most personal account we can find anywhere of what it cost him to serve Jesus. He's writing to a church that had moved on from Paul to a new set of church leaders, and it's remarkable that he has the patience to keep going with them. These new church leaders in Corinth, they still speak about Jesus and the Spirit and the Gospel, so all the right language is there, but they don't speak about the same Jesus. It's distorted, and the Corinthian church has fallen for it. Now, one of the marks of these false teachers in their ministry was that it was visibly very impressive. So they would have mastered Instagram. They would have run leadership conferences that were streamed out in 4K ultra-high definition. And on the platform, the speakers were deliciously well connected. They had all the right credentials. People spoke well of them everywhere. So that's what they boasted in. How will Paul defend himself against that to win back the Corinthians to the true apostolic gospel? Well, he starts by saying, if you want to play that game,

I could actually play that game. He doesn't want to, but look at verse 18. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. So their Jewish heritage was important to them, being from the right kind of family of ethnically Abraham's descendants. And in verse 21, just that new paragraph break there, Paul says, whatever anyone else dares to boast about, I'm speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites?

[4 : 15] So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Paul is saying, this boasting is ridiculous. But look, even if it wasn't ridiculous, I could actually win at that game. And that shows us that this section could have looked very different. If Paul had wanted to write about his visible impressiveness and his strength, he could have done that. But then he shows them that he's not going to do that. He's not going to keep going. So look at verse 23. And he says, are they servants of Christ? I am out of my mind to talk like this. I am more. And that's the bridge into the big idea of this morning's section, where Paul describes what the Christian life is like that God has called him to, or what it's cost him. And in a sense, Paul's role was unique. He was God's apostle, particularly charged with taking the news about Jesus to the non-Jewish world. But in another sense, the church in every generation takes up this pattern of ministry for ourselves. Jesus has left us with the charge, go and make disciples of all nations. Each one of us has the spirit of God. Each of us is called to a life of ministry, to serving God with the gifts and talents he's given us by making Christ known, spreading the gospel. So what might it look like to press on towards that goal faithfully? Well, our first point is this. Paul boasts in the cost of authentic gospel ministry. So he talks about painful hardship. If you look at verse 23, he says, I have worked much harder. He was at times a tent maker going into places, working, making tents to make money so that he was working night and day to fund his own mission work. In verse 26, if you have a look down, I have been constantly on the move.

I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea. Verse 27, I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep. I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked. This is what it cost Paul the apostle to take the news about Jesus to new places. Picture him arriving in a busy metropolitan city in the Roman world, just with one or two companions with him. There's no church, no Christian has ever been there before. And the emperor is worshipped there. And there are visible temples to Roman gods. And he arrives and bravely, boldly tells people, the God of all this who made you and me, has sent into the world a rescuing king. And he has died on a cross for sins and he's risen to rule. And in the midst of it are the dangers for Paul of, between those visits, travelling around the Roman world where bandits could attack you on the roads.

Just imagine being shipwrecked three times. Would you ever get back in a boat? Paul did. You know, in Acts we hear about a fourth shipwreck. On one of the shipwrecks, he's clinging on to floating debris in the sea, in the open sea, for a whole night and a whole day. Paul knew what it was to be cold and to think, if only I had a blanket. If only I had more clothes to keep warm. It's very sobering, isn't it? It makes me think, what are you prepared to do to make Christ known?

It puts some of our grumbling into perspective, doesn't it? One of the guys on our staff team was saying to me recently how he'd been, someone had said to him that in ministry, or in the Christian life generally, there can be a temptation over time to repent of our sacrifices.

So we can end up looking back and thinking, I wish I hadn't given that money, because I could do with it now. Or if only I hadn't, when I made that big decision in my life to move to a new place, or to change my job, or whatever it was, whenever, when I made that decision to honour Christ in a certain way, I kind of wish I hadn't been so sacrificial. Because if I hadn't been, then my life would be more comfortable now. It would be more pleasurable now. And we have to re-engage with that sacrifice in a new day. And then you look at what Paul did, so that people like you and me could hear the gospel.

[9 : 22] So that churches could be established. The church could be established in that first generation. And people like us could come to know God through Christ today.

Painful hardship. Then he talks about parental concern. Another cost of his ministry is the concern Paul has for the churches under his care. And he does look in the way he writes it as though this is almost the climax. So look at verse 28, where he says, besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for Christians, for all the churches. Who is weak and I do not feel weak? That is Christians who are struggling in their faith. Who is led into sin and I do not inwardly burn? In other words, being in ministry, in any kind, not just full-time paid ministry, being in any form of serving Christ by looking to grow people in their faith, it is a bit like being a parent. And it's said that, you know, once you have children, from the day you have children, you're only ever as happy as your least happy child from that day on. You have this loving concern for them in your life.

And Paul's experience is of anguish when he hears of people in the churches drifting spiritually, the distress of seeing them make foolish choices, the sleepless nights worried that someone seems to be losing their stability and they might give up on running the race of the Christian life.

Many of us feel that kind of thing about the people in the growth group you lead or the roots group, or the youth group you're involved with, or the international student Bible study. Folks, these are the costs of ministry, that when it's focused on other people and their faith in Christ and not just on self-glorification, when you run it for them and not for you.

Then Paul goes on, our second point, Paul boasts in the weakness and shame of authentic gospel ministry. So he talks about disgraceful rejection. Have a look at verse 23. He's talking about the false apostles, and then he says, I've worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was pelted with stones. We mustn't mishear this as like a trophy of things that Paul's hearers would have been impressed by. These are shameful things. The Corinthian church are under leaders now, as Paul writes to them, who play leadership top trumps. You know how top trumps works. You've got your character or your animal or your car or your whatever it is. And in top trumps, they've each got some impressive qualities, each with high scores, and you compare them with your friend's top trumps. So you'll have strength, skill, speed, and so on. Now for the super apostles, when they played church leadership top trumps, it would be rhetorical flair, 95. Visionary experiences, 140. Charisma, 85. Strength, 92. Impressively religious parents, 6. And Paul says, let me give you my top trumps for Christian leadership. Shipwrecked three times. Flogged by

[13:19] Jewish leaders with the 39 lashes five times. Beaten by the Romans with rods three times. Pelted with stones one. So do you see what he's doing? He's saying, do you understand that your whole criteria for assessing authentic Christian leadership is wrong? It's worldly. That's the big idea.

The things you choose for your top trumps of Christian leadership are the wrong things. And we're so in danger of this problem today that we would see a Christian ministry or a Christian leader and we think, what would we think? Charisma, what do they score? Ability as a public speaker, what's their score? Leadership experience in the secular world. Visionary experiences. Have they had any? Do they talk about them? Size of following. Number of sermon downloads. Paul says what he will boast in is that his message was so rejected that the religious leaders in five different places thought the right thing to do with him for God was to take a whip with three strands on it and flog him with it thirteen times. The victim's hands were tied to pillars as they were laid on their back and the flogger took the whip in one hand and brought it down with all their might across their bare chest.

Then they were turned over and their bare back was flogged. In Lystra, we read about it in Acts in more detail, Paul's ministry was so successful that a mob picked up stones and pelted him with them so that when they dragged him out of the city they thought he was already dead. And then Paul talks about opposition even from within the church. At the end of verse 26, in danger from false believers.

He gets deserted by people he led to faith, people like Demas he writes about. And then Paul just goes on to describe another side to his weakness and it's shameful retreat.

So look at verse 32. He says in verse 31, The God and Father of the Lord Jesus who is to be praised forever knows that I'm not lying. Paul's integrity matters to him so much. Verse 32, In Damascus, the governor under King Aratas had the city of the Damaskens guarded in order to arrest me.

[15 : 57] So he couldn't get in or out. He was in there. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. Everyone knew at the time that it was the highest honour bestowed on any Roman soldier. It was called the Corona Moralis, where they gave great honour to one brave warrior that when they besieged a city and it finally surrendered, one brave warrior was allowed to be the first over the wall into the city.

And Paul says here, In trying to win Damascus for King Jesus, I wasn't the first over the wall in, I was the first over the wall out again.

Faced with such opposition to my mission, I had to retreat, humiliated, as they found a basket that was used for fish and got the fish out and put me in and lowered me out in shameful retreat.

Now imagine if we heard that report from one of our mission partners at our monthly prayer meeting. We did a Real Lives events week and that's how it ended.

Maybe we'd be thinking, maybe we need to find a different mission partner who gets better results. And yet folks, here is a true apostle. This is the most detailed, personal description we have of what it looked like to be a first generation gospel worker.

[17 : 20] And if we'd been there, we'd have thought, this is really, really weak. Is this really working? So why did Paul do it? That's our third point. Paul boasts in the Lord of authentic gospel ministry.

And we just jump around a bit. So at the beginning of the passage in verse 17, sorry, back in chapter 10, verse 17, Paul said this, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

That's who he boasts in. Where he gets his confidence from is the one that his whole life points towards, the Lord Jesus. That Jesus has saved him, even though he wasn't worthy.

And Jesus saved him by the brilliant, righteous, magnificent life he lived, the atoning death he died, the powerful resurrection by which he's defeated death, and the triumphant ascension into heaven to be crowned Lord of all.

Why does that message move Paul to boast like this? Verse 30 of chapter 11, he says, That's what Paul is doing.

[18 : 29] He's boasting of things that demonstrate that he is weak. Why? Why do those two things go together? That boasting in the Lord means boasting in one's weakness. Well, the answer comes in verses 9 and 10 of chapter 12.

We're going to look at it again next time, but verse 9 there. Jesus said to me, but he said to me, Jesus said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And then Paul says, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. So first he's saying the Lord's grace is sufficient for him. In other words, as Paul experiences weakness, Jesus graciously gives him the strength to endure, to do all that God calls Paul to do.

Secondly, the Lord's power is made perfect in weakness. In other words, the Lord chooses to work with great power when the servants through whom he works are visibly weak.

[19 : 52] You can see why God would do that, can't we? It's a bit like, it reminded me a bit of Formula One. When people win and you think, was it the driver or was it just the car? When Lewis Hamilton thrashes everyone else week after week, people say he's the best driver ever.

But some people say, well, hang on a minute, he's driving this Mercedes and it's miles faster than any other car. How do we really know that he's actually a good driver? Well, if you put Lewis Hamilton in a car that was the dusty bin Formula One car, like Williams last year, and he wins, well, then you'd see where the power is.

And this is the way the Lord Jesus chooses to work through his servants today. And in Paul's day, he chooses weak people, and it suits him if those weaknesses are obvious to everybody.

So that when Jesus works to save people and to build his church, to fill his people with hope and joy and perseverance and endurance and thanksgiving, and draw many more people to himself, when Jesus does that work through visibly unimpressive people, it's obvious to everyone that the power came from him.

And I guess we could say as well that when we make our ministry a showcase of our own strength and skill, we might see impressive results, but we wouldn't expect that Jesus is actually at work there, because he doesn't want to have to share his glory with anyone else.

[21 : 30] So folks, this is Paul's account of his ministry life. Let me just, for a couple of minutes now, help us think about some of the implications for us. First, in how we view the Apostle Paul.

There's a way of understanding Christianity within churches that is really down on the Apostle Paul. I was on placement when I was at minister school, at minister college, with a minister who stood up after a reading from one of Paul's letters to give his sermon, and he started, I'm not sure what I make of that, and when I meet Paul in heaven, I'm going to have some words to say to him.

We might fall into this trap of starting to think, well, Jesus was full of love, but Paul, he was a bit down. Maybe he had issues. And then we look at the Bible and we think, well, I know Paul says that, but Jesus didn't say it in the Gospels.

Who was Paul really? Well, here Paul tells us what it cost him from the day he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. And we get an insight into a man who was devoted to Christ and devoted to his church.

And he is an authentic Apostle. And just as for the Corinthians, they needed to renew their sense of, we're under Paul's authority here, he's an Apostle. Paul, maybe you and I need to do that in our lives to choose again to be under the authority of the Apostles, including Paul in the New Testament.

[23 : 02] Let's think about how we view weakness in Christian leaders. How do we assess the ministry of a church? If you were moving to a new city and you were finding a church or you're going on a Christian conference or you're reading books by a certain Christian leader, I think sometimes we assess churches like we would assess football clubs.

What matters to us is how big they are, how many people go, how much money do they have, what's the building like, what's the marketing like, are they busy with lots of activity, does the lead pastor have breathtaking communication skills, are they funny, do they tell good jokes?

Now God might well be at work powerfully in a church with any or all of those things going on. We're not to see those things, all of those things as negatives, it's just, they're just not ways that we can use to judge whether God's at work.

We can't use those criteria to make that judgment because God doesn't view his churches like we view football clubs and neither should we. We evaluate a ministry by asking, is this ministry marked by a desire to glorify God, not people?

And is it seeking to bring glory to God through the spread of the gospel that we find in the New Testament so that as Christ is made known, people see him and they see God's glory in him?

[24 : 33] And we remember that it's when a ministry looks weak that the Lord might most typically be displaying his power. Some years ago, there was a conference in London, just a few years ago, and the main speaker was a guy flown over from the US.

He had a church that he'd started from nothing in a secular city in America and it had grown to over 10,000 people. He was the most downloaded preacher in the world at that time and he was a best-selling author.

He was the leader of a massive church planting movement. He was known for his boldness and charisma. At the same conference where he was giving the main talks, they interviewed a guy about his ministry in Nigeria with the Navigators.

Half of his face was missing from the day he was shot there. He looked terribly weak, but he told how he still goes back to Nigeria whenever he can on short-term mission trips because there's still ministry for him to do there and he loves the people there.

He loves the church. A few years on from that conference, tragically, the main platform speaker had crashed out of ministry, sacked by the board of his church and the board of the church planting movement because he was a bully.

[25 : 52] But I heard a Nigerian archbishop two years ago at a conference when he was asked about the growth of the church in Nigeria and the strength of faith in the church in Nigeria.

He said that they owe a great debt to British men like that man we'd heard from at the conference who came to Nigeria with the gospel and suffered to make Christ known.

So in which Christian leaders is Jesus actually at work? Maybe it's harder to tell than we think. Maybe it's just really hard to tell. Let's think about what we want for our own church.

It affects our decision making. A few years ago, we were updating our sound kit at St. Silas. It had been neglected for a number of years and that wasn't a kind thing for our musicians and it got to the point some of our sound quality wasn't really helpful for when we gather.

So we don't want to be silly about that and think, oh well that's good because then we look really weak. We had to make some decisions about what we do about that but one of the proposals we were looking at was to so upgrade our visual system and sound system at the church that we would be one of the best concert venues in quality in the city.

[27 : 14] And I was saying to another church leader, a friend in ministry, how there was a temptation to go for it. It was really expensive but if we'd done it, humanly speaking, you'd think we would have drawn in a lot of people, wouldn't we, into our building.

And my friend said, Martin, anyone can draw in a crowd. Just spend tens of thousands of pounds on your system and anyone can draw in a crowd. But how does God genuinely work?

He saves unimpressive people through an unimpressive message delivered by unimpressive messengers. Of course, we don't want to be silly with that and deliberately slapdash or shoddy but we can also be encouraged by that to invest as a church in the right things so that the priority is always to seek for God to be at work in the way he tells us he'll be at work.

That as we saw his word in weakness in our own lives and in the lives of others, the word about Christ from the Bible, Jesus can be at work in his power.

And lastly, last implication, let's just think about how we view weakness in ourselves. Let me ask, are you down on yourself in some way?

[28 : 36] And do you transfer that disappointment in yourself onto God and think that he's disappointed in you? If we feel that we're too weak to be of any use to God, could we be encouraged from Paul's description here of his ministry life that when we attempt great things for God, things that are clearly beyond our own human qualities to achieve and we pray and we trust the power of his word and we seek his glory, that suits the Lord Jesus Christ very well.

he is pleased to work through weak servants that make little of ourselves and make much of him. And when we live like that, he can sustain us by his grace and work through us to show that all the power has come from him.

Amen. We'll have time to discuss that in fellowship groups if you're in one, but we're going to sing in response to God's word and we're going to sing yet not I, but through Christ in me that our confidence rests in his work.

Let's sing together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.