

## **Certainties that Drive an Enduring Ministry, Part 2**

2 Corinthians 4:2-18

90-343

I mentioned to you last week that I had been asked by John Piper to come to a conference at the end of this week and to speak on the subject of an enduring ministry. It's a little bit unusual to be in one church for all of your ministry, into the fourth decade, and he asked if I would speak to the issue of how does one maintain, survive an enduring ministry?

I can honestly say that immediately I looked to the Scripture. There's nothing inside of me to define it. There's nothing I could say about, "Well, I did this...and I did that...and I did the other thing. And this is how I kind of tweaked my life and disciplined my life and ordered my priorities and this is how you have to do it if you want to have an enduring ministry, whether you're a pastor or just a faithful believer." I did what I do instinctively and that is, I went immediately to the Word of God and I asked the question...Who is the model of an enduring ministry? And it was easy for me to answer because he's my hero, the Apostle Paul. He is my spiritual hero. And I have tried to draw out of his life everything that I could squeeze, believe me, to understand the nature of the spiritual life, my life with Christ, to follow him as he follows Christ, that's what he told us to do. And also, to draw out of his life and ministry everything I could about ministry and ministry that is blessed.

And going to the Apostle Paul is the right place to go because it is he who said at the end of his life, "I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." He also said, "I have fought the good fight." It is a battle. It is a struggle. It can be won. You can triumph. You can finish the course. You can keep the integrity of your life to the very end, even through immense struggle.

So, if you look at Paul at the end, there he is standing on his own summit of his own ministry, Everest, having climbed to the very top, as I said last week, to breathe the rare air that not too many breathe, faithfulness through the most relentless difficulties and triumphant at the end. Even though from a human viewpoint, no body was celebrating anything, they were about to chop off his head, that was the world's view of Paul at the end, and even the church had abandoned him. He says, "Everybody in Asia Minor, where he had ministered, mostly had forsaken him." But still, he reached the pinnacle where he said, "Lord, I've been faithful to the end, through all the obstacles. I'm now ready...he said...to be offered. Take me home, I'm done." That was how he ended his life. And, of course, you have to ask the question immediately, how did he get there in that triumphant fashion without the accolades of the world, without winning any popularity contests, without even the celebration and affirmation of his own churches, how did he get there? And the text that I think opens it up for us best is 2 Corinthians chapter 4. I think this is Paul's Opus Magnus on ministry, the second epistle that he wrote to the Corinthians. And I'm so glad that I didn't try to teach this letter early in my ministry, I never would have understood it. I'm so glad the Lord in His providence kept it for the latter part of my life. It wasn't too long ago, you'll remember, that we went through 2 Corinthians.

But I think in this fourth chapter, he lets us in on the certainties that drove him to a ministry that

persevered and endured triumphantly to the very end. We're sort of beginning with a phrase that he uses twice, once in verse 1, end of the verse, "We do not lose heart," repeated again in verse 16, "We do not lose heart." And I told you last week that the Greek actually says, "We do not act badly." We do not act badly. What he is saying is, in the middle of all the disappointments, in the middle of all the persecution, in the middle of all the struggles that he has gone through, he has never defected spiritually. He has never abandoned the ministry to which the Lord had called him. He never became cowardly with regard to the gospel. He never became self-protective. In no way did he act badly, in no way did he defect from doing good, that is doing what God wanted him to do. And so he says, in spite of it all we do not act badly. We do not sin. We do not defect. We do not defect doctrinally. We do not defect morally. We do not defect in any fashion. He's talking about being faithful to the end.

There's an underlying paradigm that I talked to you about a few weeks ago that I think we need to just take a quick look at. If you will notice in verse 5, you have the way Paul viewed himself. "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as Your doulos." Do you remember what I told you about that word a few weeks ago? That means...what?...slave, nothing but slave, and only slave and always slaves.

I received an e-mail this week telling me that there's another translation, a relatively new one that is faithful to the word doulos and translates it slave every time it is used. I want to verify that but I think it came from a trustworthy source, that is good, that is affirming, that's as it should be. He saw himself as a slave. And that fits wonderfully in verse 5 with preaching Christ Jesus as...what?...as Lord. If there is a slave, there is a master. If there is a master, there is a slave. The dominating paradigm that Paul lived within and operated within was that of a slave obeying his master.

Now within that framework, Paul eagerly submitted himself to the will of his master in every way. Whatever it was that came into his life, he knew came from his Lord and Master for his own good and for the advance of the gospel and ultimately the glory of the Lord. What brought him to a triumphant end? You say the power of the Holy Spirit brought him to the triumphant end. The Holy Spirit is the sanctifier. And you're absolutely right. It is the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the Holy Spirit alone, but not and never apart from some divine certainties that he fully embraced. The Spirit does His work but not apart from us. There were some divine certainties that he fully embraced as a slave of Jesus Christ. I told you last week, the first one was he was certain about the glory of the New Covenant. Verse 1, "Since we have this ministry," and that drives us right back into the entire third chapter where he defines for us the glory of the New Covenant gospel. The gospel of salvation, the New Covenant is the only saving covenant. It is the glory of the gospel. The glory of salvation. There is no glory like this glory. The glory of the Old Covenant was a fading glory. This is an everlasting glory. And he was always overwhelmed with the privilege of being a part of this New Covenant by grace and the privilege of proclaiming this New Covenant. He never lost his sense of wonder. He never lost his sense of thrill. He never lost the exhilaration over the New Covenant. And rarely in writing his epistles can he write very long about it without bursting into some kind of doxology, which he does periodically. He can hardly contain his joy over the significance of knowing and proclaiming this glorious New Covenant.

Secondly, he was not only certain about the glory of the New Covenant, he was certain about the mercy of his calling. He was certain that the ministry he had we received by mercy, that he hadn't earned it and he didn't deserve it. It is a mercy. It is always undeserved. We are never worthy. None of us are worthy to be called into this gospel ministry, to preach or to evangelize, to witness, whatever it is, we are not chosen because we are worthy. It is a mercy. And it is a mercy that has

immense implications. God uses us to bring the message of salvation and transform people. He uses us as instruments by which the Spirit of God produces sanctification. He uses us to bring people to glory so that we will enter into the joy of seeing them there, friends, literally, purchased for heaven, Jesus called them. We have this mercy given to us who don't deserve it, Paul says, "I'm the chief of sinners. I'm unworthy." It is a mercy to have this ministry at all. He never lost sight of that fact. He didn't deserve anything and he always knew he didn't deserve anything, so when he didn't get much, he wasn't surprised. This is a mercy ministry.

Thirdly, he was certain not only about the glory of the New Covenant, and the mercy of his calling, but he was certain about the need for a pure heart. He knew God is holy and he knew God expected his children to be holy, "Be ye holy for I am holy," is all through Leviticus in the Old Testament, as the foundational principle of any of those who identify with God. And so he says in verse 2, "We have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness." We have renounced all hidden, secret, shameful sin.

And I'll tell you, folks, if you want to have an enduring ministry, you can have hidden corruption because your sins will find you out. Given enough time, truth will be known...especially if you're in the same place for a long, long time. Paul knew that. He knew that he could not cultivate a second life under the surface of sin. And so he pursued holiness.

Fourthly, and this is where we pick it up, he was certain of the duty to preach accurately the Word of God. I love this, he was certain of the duty to preach accurately the Word of God. Verse 2 he says, "Not walking in craftiness or adulterating the Word of God, but by the manifestation of truth, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

This is really an amazing statement. He understood that if you want to last a long, long time in the ministry, if you want to have enduring impact for Christ, you must understand the priority of a ministry that is truthful with the Word of God. I would say particularly if you're going to be an expositor of the Bible, if you twist the Scripture at all for your own ends, you're going to get caught because you're going to run in to a passage that puts you in an impossible dilemma, that betrays the way you twisted Scripture on a prior, or many prior occasions. You cannot walk in any kind of craftiness. That's a great word, panourgia in the Greek, pan meaning all, we say Pan American meaning all American. It's the word in the Greek that means all. And the other word is ergon, from which we get the word work. What did this word mean? All work. But it means more than just the sum of its parts. Panourgia defines someone who is capable of doing anything to get what he wanted. This is the shrewd, unscrupulous deceptive person who will do anything to get his own ends. It is a synonym for another word, kakourgia, and kak, we know, is that little root that means bad, or evil, which is in the verb to lose heart, to act badly. This word means an evil doer, or criminal. The New Testament always uses this word, panourgia in a negative way, always in a negative way.

In fact, in this very epistle, if you look over to the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians, "I am afraid, verse 3, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and the purity of devotion to Christ." There it is an evil thing, it is Satan deceiving. He even uses it in chapter 12 verse 16 in a sarcastic way as if in their minds he is some kind of crafty deceitful person. Here he says this, "We've never walked in craftiness." What he means by that is we have never tried to manipulate you and deceive you for our own ends by some twisting of Scripture. Folks, this is an art form in our world today. Some pull it off better than others. But the twisting of Scripture is everywhere...everywhere. But not among people who have a long, long lasting ministry.

On the other hand, we have no interest in walking as a pattern of life, conducting our life in a way that manipulates Scripture or adulterating the Word of God...adulterating. This is dolontes(??) and the root noun means fishhook. It is...it's deceptive but it's more than that, the verb form means to tamper with, and it's used in extrabiblical literature for, interestingly enough, diluting wine and diluting wine was a popular scam in the ancient world, still a popular scam in parts of the world. They would sell wine on the open streets of the cities, professing that it was the full wine and it was, in fact, greatly diluted. Paul says, "We do not twist the Scripture. We do not come to you deceiving you for our own ends. We don't come with unscrupulous goals in mind. We don't come watering down the Scripture."

In chapter 2, look back at chapter 2 verse 17, "For we are not like many, peddling the Word of God," kapelos(?), we are not kapelos, kapeleuo, hucksters, con-men, street hawkers, cheaters, charlatans, frauds, phonies. Not operating like that. I don't do anything to reach my goal. I don't water down the Word of God in order to deceive you.

But, on the other hand, go back to verse 2, "But by the manifestation of truth, by the manifestation of truth," phaneroo, the unveiling, the revelation of truth. The open, clear exposition of Scripture and sound doctrine and by that, notice he says, "And by that, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." That is just a great statement. Paul was relentlessly faithful to the truth. And even though there were many who hated him, and many who wanted him dead, and many who betrayed him and defected from him, no matter what trials he had, no matter what hardships, no matter what difficulties, no matter what discouragements, no matter what the assaults were, no matter how he might have been unjustly attacked and criticized, he never watered down the Scripture or twisted it to gain some personal end. And as a consequence, faithfulness to the truth over the long haul commended him to the consciences of people, even his enemies. He knew that the truth had such a self-evidencing power that even where the truth was rejected, and even where it was resisted, and even where it was hated, it still commended itself to the conscience as true. How did he know that? Because he knew that every man has the law of God written...where?...in his heart and he has a conscience, accusing or excusing. Those ministers who are sincere and faithful and declare the true Word of God will always commend themselves to the consciences of men, even their enemies over the long haul.

And more importantly, he says, "Commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." Paul was ever and always aware of his ultimate accountability. And if you are a Christian, that's your ultimate accountability, as well. If you're a preacher or a teacher, that's your ultimate accountability also. Paul knew he had a responsibility to manifest the truth from the Word of God without watering it down, or without manipulating it and using it to his own ends, and he knew that in doing that over the long haul, the ring of truth would come through to men's consciences, even those who were his enemies.

On the other hand, if you twist and manipulate Scripture, you can't keep that up over the long haul. You've got to take your show on the road. You've got to go from town to town, place to place, and you've got to live in a world where no one sees your real life and your real relationships. And you're not about to go through the Word of God doing that. Long ministry is biblical ministry, and there's an integrity in that biblical ministry that lasts years and years and years and years and years and years because it's a true representation of Scripture.

Paul was certain then of his responsibility to preach the true interpretation of the Word of God without deception, without alteration, without selection. That is to give the whole Council of God and to rightly divide it all. And he kept doing it and kept doing it and kept doing it. And his integrity was unassailable and the truthfulness of what he said commended him even to his enemies, many of whom were converted.

Number five, he was also certain that the results didn't depend on him. He was also certain that the results didn't depend on him. Verse 3, look at this, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing in whose case the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the glory of the gospel...the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus' sake, for God who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness' is the one who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." That is one of the most powerful passages of Scripture on divine sovereignty in salvation.

I used to be involved in athletics, as a young man, consumed would be a better word with athletics...competition. And I learned...I learned fairly early in it was reinforced all through my athletic career that no matter how much I wanted our team and I was always involved in team sports, no matter how much I wanted our team to win, I could not guarantee that. I could not determine that. I couldn't. When I played football, I wanted our team to win and I wanted to win very badly. That was the point, right? Who plays without wanting to win? I wanted to win but I learned that I wasn't alone on the field. There were eleven people on the other side of the ball who did not want me to win and there were ten other people on my team who, for the most part, didn't always cooperate either. The combination of which put the thing way out of my control. And footballs aren't round, and who knows where they're going to go.

In other words, the factors were numerable and out of my control. It was a new day for me when I began to focus on the effort and not the outcome. And therein lies the integrity in ministry. If you think you can somehow manipulate the outcome, then you're going to take the truth that you're to proclaim and you're going to set it aside and figure out somehow how to get the response you want to get. But if you're concerned only about the effort because you know you have nothing to do with the outcome, that changes everything. Paul understood that in gospel ministry he faced an impossible task. He couldn't save anybody. He couldn't save anybody. He on his own couldn't convince anybody to be saved. He couldn't reason them into salvation by the sheer force of his mental powers. He couldn't scare them in to salvation by the threat of hell. He couldn't suck them in by the offer of comfort. Why? Because if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, they're in a state of death. And he says in verse 4, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving." They're in a perishing condition, Paul in Ephesians 2 said, "They're dead in trespasses and sins," that's the same thing in Colossians 3. Later in Ephesians he says, "They're alienated from the life of God," which is another way to say they're dead. Here he says they're blind and they're blinded by Satan who is the god of this world who blinds the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

So, we are not in control of the outcome. We are not in control of the results. He was certain of that. On the other hand, he says this, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord." Why? Because we're told to preach Christ Jesus as Lord. As Master, we are calling people to become slaves of Jesus Christ, not to fulfill their own personal dreams and whims and ambitions, and desires.

We're calling them to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, we're preaching the message of repentance, self-denial, brokenness, submission, not a popular message.

Well why do you preach that message? We preach that message because that's the message we're told to preach. And then I love verse 6, "And God who said light shall shine out of darkness," when did He say that? At creation. At creation, God said, "Let there be...what?...light." And there was light. God spoke light into existence as the Creator. It is the same God, the Creator, who spoke light into existence who is the one who has turned on the light in our hearts...that is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. If God doesn't turn on the light, there never will be any light. That's the point.

Paul says, "All I'm mandated to do is preach not myself, not my own ideas, not my great insights, but to preach Jesus as Lord and God who creates...who created light will light the dark heart with the glory of Christ who is the image of God." Such an important point.

Jesus made this point also in the parable of the sower, you remember that parable? A man went out and sowed seed, Jesus said.

Some fell on a hard path. Some fell in stony ground. Some fell in weedy ground. And some fell on good ground. The first three produced no fruit and the last three, in the good ground, produced thirty-fold, sixty-fold, hundred fold.

Notice how he structured the story. How many sowers? One and four different kinds of soil. The sowing of the seed reveals the issue of the receptivity of the soil. Now if we had a modern-day church growth expert make up a parable, it would go like this, there was soil and there were four sowers. Sower number one, no response. Sower number two, somewhat of a response, not lasting. Sower number three, another sort of response, short-lived. But sower number four, great response. Sower number one tried his method. Sower number two tried his method. Sower number three tried his method. And they had different evangelistic approaches, unfortunately with very little effect.

Ah, sower number four, he had the right communication technique and he got results. Is that the way he told the story? It's not a story about sowing technique, it's a story about...what?...soil. You only have one seed, that's the gospel. There's only one way to sow it, that's to tell it. A preacher, *kerux*, in the Greek is a herald. And a herald is a one-way communicator...a one-way communicator. I know, the popular thing now in preaching is dialogue, conversation. We're heralds, the New Testament calls us that. We announce the message. But the communication experts say you can't have that, you can't just stand up and talk to people and make announcements. It's not going to change anybody. You need to have a more interesting, entertaining, motivating dialogue. You have your consumers, you've got your product, you've got to figure out how to be a good salesman and manipulate the consumer to buy the product. The problem with that is this, the preacher's job is not to overcome consumer resistance. It can't. Cannot be done. As soon as you think it can, your theology is bad. Some preachers actually think organ music does it. Really? Mood music. We cannot reduce consumer resistance. It is so deep and so profound and so inherent in the total inability of the sinner that all we can do is preach the gospel of Christ Jesus as Lord, call men to be slaves of Jesus Christ realizing that Satan has blinded their perishing minds and until God speaks light into the darkness, there will be no change.

You know, in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 Paul admits. You can look at it for a moment, back to 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, that preaching the cross is foolishness...foolishness, stumbling block. The Jews aren't going to buy it. The Gentiles think it's ridiculous. So why are we doing it? Why are we doing it? How are we going to overcome it? How are we going to overcome consumer resistance? First we've got dead people who are also blind. That's a tough group. No technique is going to overcome that difficulty. What are we going to do? If we preach the gospel, they're going to think it's stupid, they're going to think it's folly, they're going to see it as a stumbling block. But at the end of chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians, Paul says this, "Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise, according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." Here we get in to the right kind of language. "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God has chosen the weak of the world to shame the things that are strong. And God has chosen the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen the things that are not that He might nullify the things that are." And he's talking about us. So you've got even that compounding factor. You've got people who are dead and blind. You've got a message that is folly. And it's being propagated by nobodies...by nobodies.

How is anybody going to respond? Look at verse 30, "But by His doing, you are in Christ Jesus." So that verse 29 says, "No man should boast before God." Verse 31 says, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." I think for me, that's the most encouraging doctrine in the Bible. If I thought I was responsible for the salvation of sinners, I think I'd be in a mental institution. That's just way too much responsibility. I'm responsible before God for being faithful to the message. That's all I can do. But I rejoice in the fact that through that message, faith comes by hearing the message concerning Christ, right? Romans 10:17. So we preach the message concerning Christ.

Enduring ministry never gets discouraged. Enduring ministry never bears an unnecessary burden as if God isn't doing His part, or I'm not doing my part. Enduring ministry is faithful to the truth of the gospel and rests in divine sovereign grace. So Paul says we just preach not ourselves, not our own insights, not our own ideas, but Jesus Christ as Lord because it is by the preaching of that message that God in His sovereign power turns on the light.

Back to 2 Corinthians. There is a sixth principle here. He was certain that spiritual results do not rest with him and so he never lost heart when he didn't get the kind of results that perhaps in the flesh he might have wanted. He knew that wasn't his role. And that prompted him to say what he says in verse 7, "He was certain about his own insignificance." He was certain about his own insignificance. I look at the Apostle Paul and I think...Wow, he's my hero, I have a lot of such heroes through the history of the church, men that have and continually impact my life as I expose myself to what they wrote, many of them. And you've heard me refer to many of them.

But there's a common thread that runs through the hearts of all these men that are legendary in the life of the church and that is that they never saw themselves as significant. And you can see this in verse 7...in verse 7. He says, "We have this treasure." What treasure? This ministry, this gospel ministry, this New Covenant, this glorious message of Christ Jesus as Lord, this glorious truth of salvation, we have this treasure, this wonderful, glorious gospel of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Christ, that is that God is incarnate in Christ...the heart of the gospel. We have this treasure in earthen vessels. Startling contrast, really, really dramatic. The language here is really stunning. Verse 4 talks about the glory of Christ who is the image of God. Verse 6 talks about light shining in the heart, dispensed there by God to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. It's all about glory and light. And it's all contained, he says, in earthen vessels, clay

pot...clay pot.

There's a startling contrast, folks, between the shining glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and the feeble, frail, fragile, ugly container in which this glory is held. And they attacked Paul. They said terrible things about him, the false teachers in Corinth did. His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech is contemptible. They even said he was unskilled in speech. He was really a lousy speaker and he was ugly. No, you could be ugly if you're really a good speaker, or you could be handsome and stand there even if you had nothing to say. But if you're both ugly and can't communicate, that's a problem. So they assault...just blasted Paul's person and speech. They attacked him.

And you know what? They didn't really argue. They said he was lowly, unskilled, no human wisdom, nothing about him was attractive. He didn't come with flowery speech. He didn't come with all kinds of insights and intellectual labyrinths to dazzle them. He was unattractive, he was weak. And he agrees...he agrees. If God couldn't use these kinds of instruments, He wouldn't have anybody to use. A.T. Robertson said, "If God can't use poor instruments, He can't make music cause all He's got is poor instruments." Fully aware that this unequalled glory of the New Covenant, fully aware of this unsurpassed glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ was contained in him and he was nothing but a clay pot, a priceless treasure in a cheap pot. Clay pots, ostrakinos in the Greek, cheap, common, breakable, replaceable, valueless and ugly. And they served the most ugly uses.

Second Timothy 2:20 says they were vessels unto dishonor. That in a house there were vessels unto honor and vessels unto dishonor. And the vessels unto dishonor were wood and clay...clay pots and wooden pails, no intrinsic value. What does it mean, vessels unto dishonor? Well if you compare it with vessels unto honor, it goes like this. They served the food to the people on vessels of honor and they took the family refuse out in the vessels used for dishonorable purposes. Paul was saying this glorious gospel is in a garbage bucket, that's what he's saying. It was Sir Thomas Moore who just hated Tyndale, he hated Luther, he was so staunch in his Catholicism, he said the worst things about Luther that I can't even read...just foul, vile, filthy things about Luther. He really called him a toilet. That's what he called Luther. And that's the nice way to say it. And Luther would have said, "Yeah." And Paul would have said, "Yeah, just clay pots, dishonorable, chief of sinners, lowest of the low." First Corinthians 4:13 he says, "We have become as the scum of the world in the dregs of all things." At the bottom of the garbage pail, the words scum and dregs are synonyms for the filth left at the bottom of the garbage after its been emptied. It was a term used figuratively for the most degraded criminals, often sacrificed in pagan tows to appease the gods of an illness or a plague came along. That's how the world viewed Paul and he wouldn't have argued, in a sense. He would have said, "I know I'm the chief of sinners. I'm the lowest of the low."

I think that's such an important perspective for one who has an enduring ministry. Peter puts it this way, 1 Peter 5:5, "Clothe yourselves with humility, for God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you at the proper time." If you want to have an enduring ministry, you can't be a constant effort at self-promotion. Just can't be. The power of the glorious gospel is not the produce of human genius, or human technique. It's not the container, it's never the container. It's the glory of the gospel itself. All of us are weak and common and plain and fragile and breakable and dishonorable garbage buckets. But such weakness does not prove fatal to the gospel because the power is not from ourselves, Paul says. Not from ourselves. In fact, the weaker the pot, the more the power, right? Paul says that in chapter 12, doesn't he? He says, he prayed three times for the Lord to remove a terrible wound

that was placed upon him by a messenger from Satan. He says, "I prayed three times to the Lord that it might depart from me." And in verse 9, "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" Power is perfected in weakness? Yeah, the weaker you know you are, the more dependent you are on the power of the truth. I know that I can't do anything to save anybody. I know that no insight of mine, no clever appeal of mine, no twisting and manipulating of people's emotions is going to get anybody into the Kingdom. It is a recognition of our weakness that thrusts us to proclaiming the truth and trusting in the sovereignty of God to use that truth. It's never the messenger, it's always the power of the message.

So, Paul was certain of the glory of the New Covenant, certain of the mercy of his call, certain of the need for purity, certain of the mandate to preach the true Word of God, certain that the results depended on God, and certain about his own insignificance. Another certainty that carried him to a triumphant end is this, he was certain about the benefits of suffering...he was certain about the benefits of suffering. And if you look at verse 8, and we don't have time to develop all of this, you'll see this. "We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed." Four contrasts appear there...afflicted, put under tremendous intense pressure, but not crushed. The verb means to be confined into a space from which you can't escape. Secondly, we are not perplexed, despondent but not despairing in the final sense. We are persecuted, the word *dioko* means to be hunted like an animal to be killed, but not abandoned. God is always there protecting us. We are struck down, literally *kataballo* means to throw down with force, but not destroyed.

These are all severe terms. These words are all very, very strong words. And through it all he endures and endures, and endures and, in fact, let's go back to what I just read you in chapter 12, he says in the middle of verse 9, "Most gladly therefore I will boast about my weaknesses, am a clay pot, that the power of Christ may dwell in me, therefore I am well content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake for when I'm weak then I'm strong." He embraces suffering because suffering tears down his self-confidence and makes him dependent.

He says in verse 10, "I'm always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." What did he mean by that? What do you mean you're carrying in your body the dying of Jesus? He means that they can't kill Jesus, He's already gone, so they're trying to kill me in His place. All his suffering was expression of hatred of Jesus. He took the blows meant for Jesus. "I bear in my body," he said to the Galatians, "the marks of Christ." Hate for Jesus was directed at him and he took it all. "Always carrying perpetually surrounded by this relentless hostility toward Christ that wanted to take his life. And for what reason? "That the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body for the cause of the gospel." In order to demonstrate the transforming power of Christ, he endured it all. He was stalked by his enemies. Jesus was stalked by His enemies. Paul was hunted by his enemies. Jesus was hunted. Jesus was killed by his enemies and so was Paul. It was all a necessary sacrifice, however, for the proclamation of the gospel.

Verse 11 he says, "We who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake." There are all kinds of plots among the Jews and the Gentiles to kill Him. All of this again that the life of Jesus also may be manifest in our mortal flesh so death works in us, but the result is life works in you. He risked death to display the transforming power of Christ. He saw sacrificial suffering of all kinds as a way to weakness. And the way to weakness was the way to power.

Paul would never ever be the explanation for the impact of his ministry. You can't explain how God

used him by looking at him, there's nothing about his personality, there's nothing about his style, his technique that explains any of it. He was battered and bruised and beaten and weak and powerless and persecuted. He was barely hanging on to life. He is not the explanation for the effect.

And that leads us to number eight. He was a man of unwavering commitment. He was certain...he was certain of his convictions. I wish we had a little more time with this, but why do you do this, Paul? Why do you embrace suffering? Why do you accept the way you accept it? Why do you live in that way?

And I already have taken you through 1 Corinthians and shown you all the texts in which he talks about his suffering. You can note chapter 6 in particular, the opening ten verses, and chapter 11 verses 23 and following. Why do you allow this? Why don't you avoid all of this?

Here's the answer, verse 13, "Having the same spirit of faith according to what is written, I believed therefore I speak, therefore we also speak." What is it saying?

Well, he's never bitter about his suffering. He accepts it. It's God's way of humbling him, making him weak so that he can become powerful. No matter what hostility comes his way, he will never change his message because he is certain of the need to be faithful to his convictions. He has the spirit of faith, a faith attitude consistent with what is written and he quotes here from Psalm 116 verse 10, "I believed therefore I speak."

That's so simple. That's been a mandate for me...it really has. People will sometimes say to me, "Do you...do you think about how people are going to react to what you say?" No. I think about is what I'm going to say true. If I believe it's true, I say it. I hope I say it in a gracious way, most of the time. I hope I say it in a way that's not in itself by its inflection offensive. But if I believe it, I say it. An enduring ministry, I think, belongs to people who have long-term, unwavering convictions. So he quotes from Psalm 116, "I believe, therefore I speak." And he says so we speak. This is integrity and integrity belongs to long-term Christian ministry. What he believed is exactly what he said. And I'll tell you, if on the private side you say you believe something but on the public side you're unwilling to say it, then people will not trust your integrity and you're not going to survive over the long hall. Silence might mean comfort, it might mean acceptance, it might mean popularity, it might even mean life. But like Luther, he says, "I am bound to speak and I can do no less. Here I stand." What he believed is what he said. This is conviction, this is a staple of long-term ministry. A person with deep conviction will not be hunting for the right thing to say, he'll just be hunting for the people to say it to, that's all.

And then men of conviction are often unwelcome in churches today. Christians with conviction are often unwelcome. Some of you are here at Grace Church because you bounced yourself right out of several other churches. Why? Because you had convictions. You believed something was true, you stood for what you knew the Word of God affirmed and taught, and they wouldn't tolerate it. Paul says, "I believe it so I say it. The worst that can happen is I die, and that's okay...verse 14...because He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with You." That's okay if I die, I'm coming right back from the grave.

And anyway, in verse 15, "All things are for your sakes that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." All that means is it's

producing gospel effect. People are being saved and more voices are being added to the hallelujah chorus. That's what it means. More and more people are giving thanks that abounds to the glory of God. I say what I think is true. I say what I know is true. I say what I believe. I live it, I say it, I have integrity. What I believe is what I say. There's no duplicity. There's no difference between what you say you believe and what you're willing to proclaim. This is ministry that has lasting impact.

And finally, number nine, one final certainty and I'll just mention it. He was certain that future glory was more important than anything in this world...that future glory was more important than anything in this world. "We do not lose heart," he repeats it, "We do not lose heart..." Why? "Though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day for momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison." There's nothing in this world that I want. My desire is all connected to the next world. I say what I say, I live the way I live because I live with an eternal perspective.

Verse 18, "We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen for the things which are seen are temporal, the things which are not seen are eternal." The spiritual is more important than the physical. The eternal is more important than the temporal. The heavenly is more important than the earthly. I look for the real weighty things, the eternal weight of glory, baros, heavy, beyond all comparison, exceeding all limits. I have my sights set on what is eternal. I don't lose heart because I'm fixed on future glory. "Far better to depart and be with Christ." So he says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is...what?...is gain."

Lord, we thank You for the testimony of the beloved Apostle. Thank You for inspiring him to open his heart and enrich us all with a glimpse of what drove him in the direction of an enduring, relentless, persevering faithfulness. Lord, make us like that. Make us like that. Give us those certainties. We know that you can't have an enduring ministry unless you understand these things, believe them with all your heart, embrace them, hold them, cherish them, make them your priorities, as Paul did. I would pray for all of us, Lord, to some day reach the final summit, stand in that rarified air at the pinnacle at the very end when we've climbed the mountain You've laid out for us and be able to say, "I fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." Henceforth there's laid up for me the crown of life which the Lord shall give to me and not to me only but to all those who love His appearing. We want to be faithful to the end for Your glory. Help us, strengthen us to that end, we pray, in Christ's name. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2017 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).