

A church that embraces weakness

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[0 : 00] It's 2 Corinthians 11, verse 30, and we go on to 12, chapter 12 and verse 10.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.

In Damascus, the governor under King Arthas had the city of Damascus gathered in order to arrest me, but I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know.

[1 : 08] God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body or part from the body, I do not know, but God knows, was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself except about my weaknesses.

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth.

But I refrain so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[2 : 27] 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. Thanks, Lucia. That's great.

I don't know whether you saw in the news this week the Lionesses returning to the UK after losing the Women's World Cup final.

Did you see that? They came back to the airport, and a small group of people were there to greet them, but they didn't get to see any of them because they skulked out of a back exit of the airport, so that they didn't have to meet the crowds.

It's not really hard, I suppose, to see why they did it, is it? If they'd won, of course, they would have walked through the airport holding the trophy high, and everyone would have been cheering and celebrating.

[3 : 34] But they didn't win. They lost. And while we love success, we hate weakness, don't we, and failure. We're embarrassed for losers.

And it's not just the England women's football team, either, is it? It works for us personally, too, doesn't it? You know, I am very proud of the A that I got in A-level general studies.

I'm happy to talk to you about it, that general studies is a proper A-level, even if you don't think so.

And I am slightly embarrassed of the grade that I got in my geography, and I will avoid talking to you about that.

Or I will happily tell you that I passed my driving test on the very first attempt, but I won't tell you that I've never passed a single music exam. I'll tell you that I played cricket for the school and be very proud about that, but I will not tell you that on one trial for another sport, I was told, Palferman, you'll be never good enough to play for us.

I'm happy to post beautiful photos of my family on social media, but I won't share that we don't always get on, and that sometimes voices are raised, doors slam, tempers frayed, and that's not

everybody else in the family, that's just me.

[4 : 48] You see, the point is, isn't it, we love strength and we hate weakness. And in church life, it's just exactly the same as that.

So in Corinth, they loved a group called the Super Apostles. These guys were the impressive public speakers. These were the ones who would have had a blue tick on their Instagram account and monetized YouTube channels.

They had nice clothes, they had funny stories, they had big crowds every time they preached. They were always talking about how impressive their Christian lives were, how amazing their spiritual experiences were.

They were talking about the blessings that had come their way, the good life that was theirs because Christ loves a winner, and they despised Paul. They pitied him, really.

Paul was apparently unimpressive physically. He was probably short. He didn't wear fine clothes. He never took money. They loved speakers who took money from them, which I know is weird to us, but it was a sign then that the speaker was important if he took your money, and Paul always refused to take money.

[5 : 56] He didn't speak in the rhetoric that the Greeks loved so much, and while he wrote impressive letters, the word was that in person he was a lot more disappointing than his letters. But here's our point for this morning.

What we'll find in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 is that the Corinthians were wrong to think in that way about Paul. They were wrong because the big truth of the universe is not that God loves success in the way that we do, but it's this, that weakness, not strength, is the qualification for Christ's power. Weakness, not strength, is the qualification for Christ's power. In other words, our thinking on this is completely upside down. It's back to front. Amazing stories about spiritual experiences, huge followings, World Cup trophies, lots of money, even an A grade in general studies, are neither essential signs of God's blessing nor qualifications for God's blessing.

Instead, what we find is that it's an awareness of our weakness, our unworthiness, our failures, that is a sign of God's blessing and a qualification for it. Now, let me try and show you that from the passage if I can.

So look down in your Bibles, chapter 11, verse 30. What does Paul start with? He says, if I must boast, he says, listen, if I'm going to engage in the kind of language that the super apostles are so engaged with, if I'm going to join in with the boasting, I will boast, he says, of things that show my weakness.

[7 : 26] He says, turning it on its head, boasting not in strength but in weaknesses. And he immediately gives us an example. Look down at verse 32. In Damascus, the governor under King Aratas had the city of the Damascians guarded in order to arrest me, but I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

Here he goes, I'm going to boast for you. Let me tell you of a great spiritual experience I've had. I ran away, he said. I was so scared, I ran away. It's a sign of weakness, isn't it? I was hidden in a basket, dropped from the wall and legged it.

That doesn't sound impressive, does it? But that's my point, says Paul. Let me tell you about my weakness, he says. Then in chapter 12, he carries on. But now he talks as if he's talking about somebody else, doesn't he?

He is really talking about himself here, but he talks in the third person about himself to make this same point about boasting. See, it's not that Paul hasn't had great spiritual experiences.

He has had them, he's just not talking about them. See, he says that he knows a man who was, which was him, caught up into the third heaven, verse 2.

[8 : 32] The third heaven being where God is. The first heaven being the atmosphere, the second being space, and the third where God dwells. Not that Paul's teaching science, it's just a turn of phrase.

But the point is, says Paul, I've had some incredible spiritual experiences, but I'm not going to boast about them. In fact, I won't even speak about them. I may not tell them, verse 4. Instead, when I tell them, I'm going to tell you them in the third person, just to make this point.

Because if I'm going to talk in the first person, verse 5, I'm going to boast about my weakness. And why does he do that? Well, because, verse 6, even though these stories of great experiences are true, still, verse 6, what do you say?

I refrain so that no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. It's just worth pausing on that, isn't it?

Just to make sure we know what Paul is saying. I refrain so that no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. Paul is really concerned here, isn't he?

[9 : 34] That his reputation amongst the Corinthians is based on his words and his actions. Not an impression of him that they've had from the stories that he tells about experiences that he's had, whether they have no idea whether those are true or not.

If Paul were writing today, he'd say, listen, I want you to know the real me. I want you to know the real me. Not the Instagram me, but the real me. I want you to know me not by a projection that I've put out there of what I'd like you to think about me, not by a bunch of edited photos of a tidy flat or a sunset holiday or a zen moment in a caravan by a Swiss mountain.

No, I want you to know me by what I actually say and do. My life is not the fake life of an influencer, the half million followers, L'Oreal sponsored super apostle.

That's not me. I'm real, says Paul, not fake. Look at what I've done. Listen to what I say. I'm not interested in projecting an impression outside of my words and actions.

Now, let me just say here in passing, our world is crying out for that kind of honesty, isn't it? We are, I think, becoming more and more fed up with the fake and the pretend. You know, the celebrity who pretends to be happily married whilst it turns out paying to have sex with somebody else.

[10 : 54] It makes us all the more cynical all the time. And Paul says, listen, that's not me. You know, if you want to know my weaknesses, says Paul, you want to know about my weaknesses? Just listen to me because I'll tell you them. You want to know what I'm like?

I'll tell you. You want to know what I do? Watch me. You'll see it. If you look down again at the passage, you'll see that this realness of Paul, if you like, is not something that he's just arrived at himself.

It has, in a sense, been imposed on him by God. Probably better to say taught to him by God. Look at verse seven. Let me read verses seven and eight to you again.

Paul writes this, therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, conceited, literally, I guess, it would be kind of boasting in the way the super apostles boast. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. Now, we have no idea, really, what this thorn in the flesh was for Paul. It could have been a physical illness. It might even have been a difficult relationship, perhaps even a difficult relationship with the Corinthian church themselves.

[12 : 05] But what we do know is that it is something wicked and difficult, a thorn that's a messenger of Satan, tormenting him, he says. So much so that he's longed to get rid of it and has prayed, and not just prayed, but pleaded with the Lord to take it away.

But God says no. God says no. Which means, and I think this blows the categories of lots of people's understanding of the Christian life. It means, doesn't it, that Paul has been deliberately made weak by God.

God intends Paul to be weak, allowing Satan to torment him with a thorn. And why? Why would God do such a thing to his servant?

Is God cruel? Does he love hurting people? Well, no. Instead, it's so that Paul might understand and know the truth of Jesus' words in verse nine, when Jesus says, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

In other words, known, felt, expressed, even tormenting weakness, is the canvas for God's power, for Christ's power.

[13 : 16] It's the foundation of Christ's work in Paul's life. So much so that Paul concludes in verse nine, 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, literally, I delight in, I think the ESV puts, I'm content with. It's not just I put up with. It's actually I am happy with. I am delighting in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

See, here's our point for this morning. Weakness, not strength, is the qualification for Christ's power. And because that's true, God will even allow Satan to attack his servants, to weaken them, so that he can teach it to them, and they can experience this power.

This is how one commentary summarizes this passage. It says this, some people tell us that as Christians, we have a right to be healed, and that if we're sick and not healed, there must be something spiritually wrong with us.

It is not so. There is an expectation of suffering in the Christian life. Of course, we pray for relief, but if our prayers are persistently declined, then we must eventually conclude that God is saying to us, you are more useful to me with suffering than without it.

[14:42] Now, I want to come on and say some things about how this applies to us as a church, but before I do that, I want to try and be a good pastor this morning to you if you're suffering. I know that for a number of you here, and especially for those, I guess, following on Zoom who are stuck at home this morning, life is particularly tough.

I was talking to one church member this week who was just telling me of persistent, unexplained, physical pain, a real thorn in the flesh. Now, listen, nothing in this passage this morning is trying to minimize the reality of that pain.

This isn't victory Christianity, you know, where we pretend that nothing hurts. You know, oh, I've lost an arm. Praise the Lord, I've got another one. Oh, I've lost that too. Praise the Lord, I've got two legs. No, it's not that, is it?

No, thorns here are satanic tormentors, right? They are painful and hard and difficult, and the pain is real, and it's to be expressed.

Rather, here, I think, is the point that as well as looking for relief from the suffering, we do look for relief, don't we, from our suffering. That's natural, and we should do it. We look for relief from our suffering, but God may or may not grant us the relief that we look for.

[15:58] What we should also look for at the same time is for grace in the suffering and power to face the suffering. And we know, don't we, that God will provide us with that.

In other words, it's often in our moments of greatest pain that we know most clearly the love and power of Christ. It's when others betray us and let us down that we know most clearly the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus.

It's at moments of great weakness when we rely most heavily on God's grace, which makes us stronger than we ever were without the suffering. You know, you might be suffering this morning in whatever way that might be.

It might be physically, it might be emotionally, it might just be a circumstance in your life. Listen, don't be afraid to join Paul in crying out to God and pleading with him, please take this away from me.

But know that God's purpose is not always to bring relief from suffering, but it is always to provide grace and power in suffering. Because, why?

[17:03] Weakness, not strength, is the qualification for Christ's power. Now, if that's something that you're particularly struggling with, please come and talk to me at the end. I'd love to talk with you and pray with you more about that.

But let's think about some ways that this might apply to our church corporately. I've got three brief points as we finish off this morning. First one is this, when God is at work, we should expect to be more, not less, more, not less, conscious of our weakness.

I wonder if it's maybe just me that thinks like this, but I think it's been my assumption for most of my Christian life that the more you grow as a Christian, the stronger you will feel.

Right? I think I've assumed in my Christian life that the mature Christian must spend most of their time feeling sorted. You know, they might have a battle with sin, but it's a very low-level battle that they win every day and every moment.

They're successful all the time. You know, they're not fighting for godly thoughts because their brain somehow has become hardwired to think in a godly way. You know, they don't doubt, they don't worry, they don't feel anxious in the face of death.

[18:11] They're victorious all the time. But then you read passages like this one and you think, well, wait a minute, that's perhaps not right. Maybe the truth is if Paul is expressing Christian growth here that as I grow as a Christian, I won't begin to feel stronger, but I'll begin to feel weaker even as I grow as a Christian.

The more I grow, the more I'll recognize the limitations on my understanding. The more I grow as a Christian, the more I'll know I don't know. The more I grow as a Christian, the more I'll know I can't be trusted in myself.

The more I grow as a Christian, the more I know that my desires and my longings given half the chance would kill my Christian life and destroy my witness. That's certainly Paul's experience, isn't it?

It will be ours too, individually and corporately. So individually, I really hope and pray that church revitalization means a personal revitalization for all of us in our Christian lives.

But we mustn't expect that to come by making us more self-reliant and more impressive to those around us. The opposite will be true. And for us as a church, if our church grows in strength and maturity, we can expect that it will be marked by a collective appreciation of our weakness, not our strength.

[19 : 32] Are you ready for that? In fact, so essential is that partnership that we can expect God to put things in our way as a church that will make us know our weakness and feel it more acutely.

Whether that be financial hardship, illness, trouble, a leaking roof, false accusations, whatever it might be. Because the road up is the road down, isn't it?

And so like Paul, we're to learn to delight in those things. I don't like telling too many stories about Egberth, which is where we were before. I think sometimes pastors who bang on where they were before can give a wrong impression.

But if you'll forgive me for one story, let me tell you one now. I think it makes this point really well. Two years before COVID, we moved our church into a local school. The local school had a big car park and some outdoor space for the kids to run around in, more rooms for Sunday school. So it seemed to make a lot of sense for us to move from the smaller building that we're in to this bigger school building. What became very clear as we started meeting there was that the neighbours hated us.

[20 : 39] They were cross with the school for allowing people to use the building on a Sunday because it made extra traffic on their street and people walking down their road and they didn't like that. The fact that we were a church made it even more difficult because they hated the idea of a church meeting in the local school.

So on a Sunday morning, we would be greeted coming to church by protesters, people with placards, some of them with my name on them, telling people on their way into church, your pastor's a liar, don't trust him.

They parked their cars so that we couldn't quite get down the street. You had to go really, really slowly. On a particularly bad week, the local police had to escort me off the premises because they were waiting outside to hassle me on my way out.

And all of a sudden, our church, which we thought everybody loved, we realized that we were hated. We weren't strong. We're weak.

We're not loved. We're disliked. We're not influential. We're disregarded. And what was the effect of that? What do you think the effect of that was on our local church?

[21 : 46] Well, let me tell you this. Amazingly, more people were converted in the two years that we were meeting in that school than any other time in my pastorate there. A bunch of students turned up from one of the local universities and two of them were just converted just by sitting and listening to the preaching week in, week out.

Another guy came to me in tears after I preached a not very good sermon, I don't think, on Matthew 26. He came to me after the sermon, tears flowing down his face. He'd just become a Christian. It's weird, isn't it?

It turns out that it's not the strength of the church but the weakness of the church. as we see our corporate reliance on Christ and leaning on him so this reversal happens.

Are you ready for that? Secondly, success won't be measured on a graph. This, of course, is how all success is normally measured. You have a graph of growth, don't you?

Growth in money, growth in customers, growth in profit. But in church life it's not quite the same. Of course, we do long, don't we, for this building to become that rammed full of people who've just come to know the Lord Jesus.

[22 : 55] I'm praying for that. I'm praying that we have to open the balcony soon, that Jeff has to move his ladders, right? I long for that. That's what we're praying for. But it might not happen.

We might be successful and that not happen because success in 2 Corinthians 12, success for us as a church is not so much growth in numbers as it is growth in reliance and confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me try and explain why that's the case. Let me ask you a question. Why do you think it is that Paul thinks human weakness experiences Christ's power? Think about that.

Why does Paul think human weakness experiences Christ's power? Now, there might be a lot of reasons, mightn't there? Perhaps he thinks that weakness in some sense is a key that unlocks Christ's power.

I don't think that's quite right. I mean, the Bible does say that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble but it's not that their humility itself is the key that unlocks the door, is it? I don't think it's that at all.

[23 : 59] It might be that human weakness makes us especially reliant on Christ's strength, you know, that we know we can't do so we rely on Christ. And I think that's true to a sense, isn't it? But there's something more to it than that.

Why is it that human weakness is the key to experiencing Christ's power? What is it? Well, I think it's this. It's because it is in human weakness that Christ saves his people.

This is the story of the Bible, right? It is God the Father, Son and Spirit sending the Son into the world that they made in order to save a people for himself. How does the Son say as he comes into the world in which he's made?

He doesn't come in a blaze of glory, does he? on a great chariot without riders. No, he comes as a baby into a manger, life hanging in the balance.

And how does he save? Well, faces terrible opposition before dying on a cross as a sacrifice for our sins so that we can be forgiven. there hanging naked on the cross, the power of God takes the weakness of humanity and conquers humanity's greatest opponents, death, sin, the devil.

[25 : 18] Of course, Paul rejoices in weakness. Of course, we can't measure success on a graph because weakness is essentially Christ-likeness, isn't it? And weakness where we really appreciate the power of God because when we come to the point that we can't do anything, when we come to the point of knowing, I'm so weak, I can't do anything, we've arrived at the point at which Christ has done everything.

Do you understand? Christ takes human weakness at which point we are right at the very end of ourselves and unable to do anything to save ourselves or help ourselves.

Christ is at that very same point and is able to conquer everything that stands in our way. Isn't that incredible? And so, of course, human weakness is the key to experiencing the power of Christ because that's where the power of Christ is met.

Listen, this morning, if you've never thought about that, if you've never understood Christ's work in that way, if you thought that being a Christian is about taking out a spiritual insurance policy that you cash in when you die, or maybe if you thought being a Christian is about having lots of answers to the big questions in life so that you're kind of smart, well, let me invite you to meet Jesus for the first time off the pages of the Bible.

He comes to you in the weakness of human flesh, in the frailty of a human body, blood stained and sacrificed for our sin, and he says, listen, in my weakness darkness.

[26 : 49] I have the power to rescue and save you for all eternity. Turn to me. Come to me. Finally then, and more briefly, we will avoid being over-spiritual.

Now, I want to be careful how I put this, but I think there's an important sense in which we must follow Paul's example in the way that we speak. Paul is very conscious that he doesn't want people to think of him in a certain way because of what he says about his own personal spiritual experiences.

He's very, very careful not to market himself. He really doesn't want to appear as someone who he's not. He doesn't want people thinking that he is more than he really is.

He wants his words and his actions to speak for themselves, not to build up an impression of him, not spiritually talking himself up, but being real and honest.

And so for us, I think it's possible, isn't it, for us in church life, I'm sure you've met people like this who talk a really good game. This is certainly the thing, I think in church youth groups it can be the case, can't it?

[27 : 58] You know, young people are having their hands in the air while they're singing, having an awesome spiritual experience. They have all the answers, the right answers in the Bible study, but then really as they walk out there they know that's not really the Christian life that they're living.

Gives the impression of looking like a serious Christian, but not really. It's not just young people, is it? Leaders will tell you when they, oh, this is what I was reading in my devotions this morning for a couple of hours.

What they won't tell you is that they struggle to have them. People will tell you that they're praying for you, but they won't never tell you is that they forgot to pray for you. People will give you spiritual sounding advice that they blatantly ignore for themselves.

so much so that our spiritual lives can take on a sort of unreality that we step through those doors at the back of church and we pretend to be someone we're not really the rest of the week. We mustn't be like that because actually it's our weakness and our struggles where we meet Christ.

I worked for a few years for a church which was in a city centre with lots of students. We had a visit from an American pastor who had got to know one of the other pastors of the church at a conference and said come to visit.

[29 : 11] I spoke to him after the morning service and said oh what did you think to that? And he looked at me a bit puzzled and he goes well the church isn't as big as I thought it was. What turned out to be the case is that the other pastor had been talking up the church so much this guy thought it was quite an amazing place and then came and the reality was quite a lot more disappointing.

Now that's a shame isn't it? Because the truth is we don't want to give an impression that's better than the reality do we? We want to be real and honest and honest about our weaknesses because we just don't need to be like that.

It's not just that we should not be like that we don't need to be like that do we? It's not just that we should not create a false impression it's that we don't need to. Why? Because the gospel has liberated you from all of that nonsense.

The gospel of Christ's power and human weakness has liberated us from the need to always give a good impression. Okay you've found another way that we're weak as a church. Praise the Lord. Christ works in weak churches. The gospel is great news for weak people. We don't need to desire to appear more holy than we really are because Christ's power in my weakness means that perhaps for the very first time you and I can be real people really honest with one another.

[30 : 27] This is not a performance this morning. We're not putting on a show. This is us with all of our weakness not banging on about how great we are but instead knowing with the apostle Paul that it's not strength but weakness that qualifies us for the power of Christ.

That is why for Christ's sake we delight in weakness in insults in hardships in persecutions in difficulties for when we are weak then we are strong.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father we want to ask for your forgiveness for where we've pretended to be stronger than we really are.

We acknowledge Lord that we've never fooled you for a moment. We might have tricked others but we've never fooled you. So Lord we come to you this morning in all of our weakness whether that's because of physical suffering that we're facing or difficulties or hardships.

We come to you in all of that weakness saying that we find it very hard to say that we delight in it but we want to know the power of Christ resting on us.

[31 : 40] We want to know that when we are weak we are strong because Christ meets us in our weakness because in great human weakness he died on the cross with the power to save us from all of our sin and liberate us for a world remade by your power and your glory for all eternity.

So we say together come Lord Jesus and pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.