

3. Paul seeks to draw the Corinthians under his wings

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, we come now to our reading from the Bible, and if you'd like to take your Bibles and turn to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, I'm reading from chapter 2, verse 12.

You'll find that on page 965 in our large church Bibles, if you have one, page 965. So 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 12, and I shall read down to the end of chapter 3, verse 6.

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest, because I did not find my brother Titus there.

So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.

For we are the aroma of Christ to God, among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To one, a fragrance from death to death.

[1 : 27] To the other, a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God, we speak in Christ.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all.

And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God. Not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us.

But our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant. Not of the letter, but of the spirit. For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.

[2 : 49] Amen. This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord bless us through it this evening. Amen. Well, friends, let's turn again to this passage, 2 Corinthians 2, verse 12, to chapter 3, verse 6.

That's my portion for tonight. And the title that I want to give to our thoughts tonight, or to my sermon, is this. Paul seeks to draw the Corinthians under his wings.

Now, I've chosen that title because Paul is a little bit like a mother bird, whose fledglings have fallen out of the nest, and they've strayed. And you'll have seen baby birds on a barn floor that have strayed from the nest, and they're in danger.

And throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul is seeking to get these baby birds back under his wings, because that is the only safe place for them to be. Now, what has clearly happened in Corinth is that false leaders have arisen in the church.

Probably these are largely people who've come in from outside, though there may have been people from within the fellowship who got hold of some very unhealthy ideas, and they're distorting the truth and leading people astray.

[4 : 18] So, if you like, they're leading the baby birds out of the nest and putting them in grave danger. In fact, a lot later in the letter, when we reach chapter 11, we're going to find Paul calling these people false apostles, these leaders, deceitful workmen, and servants of Satan.

Servants of Satan. So, these influential people appear to be not Christians who have gone a bit peculiar in certain ways. Paul does not regard them as Christians at all.

He sees them as servants of the enemy. Now, they're certainly claiming to be Christians, and this is one of the difficulties. And I say that because Paul says that they are disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

So, they're claiming to be not merely Christians, but also apostles. But Paul knows that their teaching is not merely skewed. It's anti-gospel. It's of the devil.

So, Paul is very much concerned to bring the Corinthians to a point where they, once again, wholeheartedly recognize him as Christ's true apostle, and his teaching of the gospel, and his teaching of the Christian life, as real Christianity.

[5 : 31] I think you could say that Paul's whole agenda, right the way through this second letter to the Corinthians, is to say to his friends there, come back to me. Because in coming back to me, you will be coming back to Christ.

And therefore, one way in which this letter is going to help people like us today, is to make us aware that there is such a thing as a false Christianity. In fact, I think in truth, there are a whole series of false Christianities.

And there are such people as false leaders and false teachers, who masquerade as true teachers of the gospel, but actually are pursuing a very different agenda.

Now, Paul realized that many of the Corinthians, at least some of the Corinthian Christians, were beginning to get under the spell of these false teachers. And Paul also realized that he, Paul, was being criticized by some of these false leaders, and no doubt by some of the church members as well.

And they were criticizing him as being weak, as lacking authority and forcefulness. Some people seem to have been saying as well that he wasn't much good as a speaker. So there was clearly a movement within the church that wanted to push Paul to one side, and wanted to marginalize him.

[6 : 47] But Paul knew that if that happened, this church would end up in total disaster. And he loved them. It's one of the key things to understanding both Corinthian letters. Paul loved them deeply.

He cared deeply about them. So this whole letter is a persuasive appeal to the Corinthians to come back under his wings, and to stop their nonsense of running after these false so-called apostles.

Now, do let's bear that big theme in mind as we come to our passage here in chapter 2 and chapter 3 this evening. And we do need to bear this big theme in mind. Otherwise, we might very easily get lost in the undergrowth.

Just look with me at the passage, and I'll show you what I mean about the difficulty here. It seems at first sight to jump about all over the place. So in chapter 2, verses 12 and 13, Paul seems to be talking about his travel plans again.

Remember, he was talking about them back in chapter 1. He mentions Troas in verse 12, and then Macedonia in verse 13. And also in verse 13, he speaks about my spirit not being at rest.

[7 : 54] So we're bound to ask, what's it all about? Is this geography? Is it history? Is it psychology? Then we get to verse 14, where Paul seems to take off in an entirely different direction.

His spirit suddenly seems to soar. And he starts talking about the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ, the aroma of Christ, as he puts it. And then he mentions another fragrance in verse 16, a deathly fragrance, more like a stench.

So again, we're going to ask, what is this all about? Is this an outlet for Chanel number 5? Or are we visiting a mortuary? Then we have a further puzzle in verse 17, where Paul says, we are not peddlers of God's word.

Now the we there must refer back to chapter 1, verse 19, where he's talking about himself and Silas and Timothy, we group of evangelists. So he's saying, we people are not peddlers or traveling salesmen of God's word, people who preach for a fat fee.

On the contrary, we speak as men of sincerity. And then having been there, we then tumble breathlessly into chapter 3, and we find Paul talking about letters of recommendation, personal references, such as we might have to produce for would-be employers when we're seeking a new job.

[9 : 16] So the question is, what thread runs through all this? How do we put it all together? Are these the ramblings of a man who is losing his grip? Is he a bit like a butterfly on a buddler bush, just hopping about from one flower to another without any apparent purpose?

Well, the answer is no, he's not at all like that. There is a strong, consistent line of thought that runs right through this section of the letter. And it's all to do with Paul wanting to regather his straying fledglings under his wings.

Now, before we get into the detail of these verses, let me give you a brief paraphrase, or if you like, a kind of overview of the section. First of all, come back with me to chapter 2, verses 12 and 13. He's saying there, On my travels, I was deeply unhappy and I was very upset because I didn't have news of you. I'd sent Titus off to visit you, and I was desperate to hear from him because he would bring news of the church, but I didn't find him at the prearranged spot in Troas.

Then secondly, verses 14 to 17. But, but, that's a very important but there, verse 14. Despite my unhappiness at not hearing from Titus, I'm not cast down and I wasn't cast down to a point of despair because the work of the gospel is quite wonderful.

[10:44] To preach the gospel is to spread the wonderful fragrance of Christ wherever I go. The gospel is like a glorious perfume to those who are becoming Christians.

But it's like the smell of a corpse to those who refuse Christ. What an amazing power, therefore, there is in this gospel. But who is strong enough to do this work?

We're not. And yet, despite our weakness, we're not in this work for the money. We do it because we're commissioned by God to speak with sincerity. And then thirdly, chapter 3, verses 1 to 6.

Other people, he's saying, other people might present themselves to you with elaborate CVs and glowing testimonials and letters of reference from the highest in the land.

But Silas and Timothy and I don't need letters of recommendation because you are our letter of recommendation and you're the only one we need. Just look at your changed lives.

[11:46] And more than that, look at your changed hearts. The fact that your hearts have been deeply changed is powerful testimony to the integrity of our gospel preaching work.

In ourselves, we have no power or competence. We are weak men. But God has given us authority to be effective ministers, not of the old Judaism, which in the end can only bring death, but of the new covenant of the Holy Spirit who brings people to life.

Now, it's Paul's desire to regather the straying Corinthians under his wings. That's the thing that runs through this whole section and gives it its forcefulness.

This is a passionate apostle who loves these people and he is not going to give up on them. This is the letter of the pastor who will not give up. So let's put on our reading glasses and see if we can grapple with the details.

I'd like to take it in three sections. So first of all, we'll look at chapter 2, verses 12 and 13. And we see there the urgent concern or sense of concern that gospel work brings.

[13:03] Verse 12. When I came to Troas. Now, you'll see from these verses that Paul had two reasons for going to Troas, which he probably went to from the south.

Just think of the western seaboard of Turkey. Some of you will have been there for your holidays, won't you? Izmir, Smyrna, all that sort of area. Anyway, imagine yourselves at Ephesus, which is about halfway up the western seaboard of Turkey.

And Paul was going to go north, almost due north, about 150 miles to Troas. And his reason, he says, for going to Troas, puts it here in verse 12, was to preach the gospel of Christ there.

And clearly, he had a great opportunity for doing that. Because he says, a door was opened for me in the Lord. An opportunity given to me by the Lord. But his second reason for going to Troas was even more pressing and even more important for him.

And that was that he'd obviously prearranged to meet Titus there. And it's not hard to piece together these travel arrangements which they had made. Paul, working in Ephesus, knew that things were not going well in Corinth.

[14:15] So imagine yourself going from Ephesus across the sea, the Aegean Sea, westwards to Corinth, about a couple of hundred miles apart across that stretch of water. So news had come through to Paul that things were not going well at Corinth.

So he sent Titus across the sea to Corinth to find out what was going on and then to report back to him. This was typical of the way Paul worked. He would use his envoys.

Titus was one of his most trusted lieutenants. And he was clearly a man of experience and stature. But when Paul proceeded north and reached Troas, there was no sign of Titus.

And Paul was deeply troubled. Not, I think, because he was anxious for Titus' safety, but because he was so anxious to hear how the Corinthians were doing. But Paul had clearly arranged a travel

plan B with Titus.

Now, in those Mediterranean waters, it simply wasn't thought safe to sail during the winter months, from about October to about April, because there were frequent storms there.

[15:17] So Paul must have said to Titus, Now, that's clearly what happened.

It must have been too late for sailing, and Titus never made it by the sea route to Troas. And Paul was so worried about things in Corinth that he didn't stop to hold the mission in Troas that he very much wanted to.

He journeyed on. He said goodbye to the folk in Troas. He went straight up to Macedonia. Did he meet Titus there? Yes, he did. Turn with me to chapter 7. Paul saves it to chapter 7 to tell us about his meeting with Titus.

But have a look with me at chapter 7, verse 5. For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest. He's telling us how tortured he was in his thinking.

Our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn, fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

[16:38] And not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us, here's his report, of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

So you see, Titus did get to Macedonia. And when he came, he brought just the kind of news that Paul was wanting to hear. That the baby birds were beginning to come back under the apostles' wing.

As it's put here in chapter 7, they were longing to see Paul. They were mourning, presumably because they'd caused him all this distress. And they were zealous for him, no doubt for his teaching and his leadership and his company.

And Paul was filled with joy when he heard all this, and no doubt with relief as well. Now, we mustn't think that that was the end of the story, and that everything was happy and resolved after Titus had met Paul.

As the old song puts it, there was still trouble up ahead. But certainly there was an immediate relief of pressure for Paul when Titus finally met him and brought him this news from Corinth.

[17:47] Now, let's turn back to chapter 2. The thing that is so striking about Paul here is that he was so concerned, so concerned for the well-being of the Christian lives of these young Christians.

So concerned that he was deeply troubled at having no news of them. Now, we might want to say, but wouldn't it have been fitting if Paul had been just a little bit calmer?

Did he need to get so upset over them? Didn't he trust in the sovereignty of God? Might he not have stayed in Troas and carried on his mission where there was an open door?

Couldn't he just have said, well, some you win, some you lose, but it's best not to get too upset about it. Now, let's bear this in mind. God gave Paul a very big part to play in the New Testament, not simply to teach us doctrine, but also to set an example for us as to how to live the Christian life, which includes how to love and care for other Christians.

Paul speaks to us, therefore, by example as well as by his words. And the shining example he sets here of his concern for straying Christians is something for us to take to heart.

[19:04] I need to learn from Paul in this respect, and I guess we all do. Let me ask this question. What do we tend to get most upset about? What might have made you gnash your teeth in recent days?

Might it have been not being able to book the summer holiday of your dreams because a travel company went bust? Was it perhaps failing your driving test?

Was it perhaps not finding quite the right jacket to go with your stylish new pair of trousers? Now, of course, the Apostle Paul had worldly concerns, just like anybody else.

He had to clothe himself. He had to eat. No doubt he had health problems from time to time. But the thing that really concerned him was to see this group of straying Christians set once again on the wholesome, stable basis of sound Christian teaching and godly Christian living.

That was his big concern. So let's ask the Lord to help us to develop a similar concern for one another, both within our own fellowship and further afield as well.

[20:11] Let's pray for churches that seem to be taking the wrong road, churches that are opening their doors to godless teaching, which is masquerading as true Christianity.

And then if we know of individuals who are beginning to stray, let's get hold of them and lovingly bring them back into the nest where they can have their lives once again shaped by the Bible. Just to give an example of this, when I was a university student, for a short period, I think it was only about six months, but for a short period, I began to read the books of an influential Anglican writer whose name was Harry Williams.

Now, Harry Williams, I think he was an Anglican monk. He was certainly not a Bible man. But I was 19 and pretty clueless and naive, and I thought that some of the things that Harry Williams was saying were rather attractive and plausible.

And I began to lap up his teaching as a dog laps up its milk. And it happened that one day an older and wiser Christian friend came to see me, and he picked up this book that I was reading, which I guess was just sitting there on the side, and he said, Edward, are you reading this?

[21 : 19] I said, yes, I am. He said, throw these books away. Don't listen to that man. He'll lead you astray. I'm very glad to say that I took my friend's advice, and I threw those books away.

But he was so concerned for me that he was willing even to risk his friendship with me by speaking very strongly to me. Do you see that? He was willing to risk his friendship with me by speaking strongly to me.

Now, in the same way, it was Paul's highest concern that these Christians, these Corinthian Christians whom he loved, should be weaned away from the teaching of these people who were leading them astray.

So there's the first thing. Paul shows us the urgent concern for younger Christians which gospel work brings. Now, second, and we're looking on here to verses 14 to 17, we see the underlying sincerity that marks true gospel workers.

The underlying sincerity that marks true gospel workers. If we ask, how does Paul's train of thought move from verse 13 to verse 14, I think the answer is this.

[22 : 28] He's been expressing his downcast and very unhappy state of mind in verse 13. But his eventual meeting with Titus in Macedonia has helped to restore him to a right sense of perspective about the work of the gospel.

Because Titus, he's found him, he's brought him good news of the Corinthians, as we've seen from chapter 7. And the very figure of the faithful Titus appearing in Macedonia has reminded Paul of the powerful ongoing work of the gospel all over the world.

It's helped him to see things in perspective. So yes, there may be painful temporary setbacks in the work. But the big picture of worldwide gospel work is one which overwhelms Paul with thankfulness to God.

So what Paul does here in these next few verses is that he sets his difficulties with the Corinthian church in the much bigger picture of the advance of the gospel on many fronts and in many places. And his fertile spirit-led mind throws up this wonderful picture, and it really is an illustration of what gospel work is and what it does. So Paul is saying in verse 14, yes, there may be setbacks here and there, but there is at the same time an always and everywhere element in the work of the gospel.

[23 : 55] Do you see those two words in verse 14? Always and everywhere. So Paul is saying there are variables in gospel work, but there are also constants.

And what is the constant everywhere reality of gospel mission? It is this, says Paul, that Christ is at work always and everywhere, and it is Christ who leads us gospel preachers in triumphal procession.

And when Paul speaks there in verse 14 of Christ leading us in triumphal procession, almost certainly the picture he's using there would have been one that was very well understood in the Roman Empire.

The picture of a victorious Roman general who has just returned from a successful campaign and has been given by the Roman Emperor the great honor of being able to lead his triumphant army through the streets of Rome.

It was called a triumphus, a triumph. It was rather, I suppose, like what happens when a group of victorious athletes returns from the Olympic Games and gets given a special parade through London or wherever it should be to show off their medals.

[25 : 04] So Paul is saying the way to understand worldwide evangelization is to think of Christ leading his servants, Christ at the head of a huge procession.

And this procession is marked by smells, odors. Apparently when the Roman general would march through the streets of Rome with his great army, and perhaps his prisoners of war as well, there'd also be plenty of pagan priests there in the procession swinging incense, burning incense.

And as the great procession moved through the cheering crowds, the fragrance of these clouds of incense would spread everywhere. And Paul is saying in verse 14, we gospel preachers are spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.

We, he says in verse 15, we are the aroma of Christ that rises up to God. But that aroma, he goes on to say, is perceived, or smelt, in two entirely different ways.

To those who are being saved, that is those who are Christians and those who are becoming Christians, the scent, the fragrance of the gospel, is lovely and sweet. But to those who are perishing, the smell of the gospel is like the stench of death.

[26 : 22] Now friends, just look at somebody else's nose for a moment. Do you see a nose sitting next to you? Good. Is it a fine nose? Let me just say this about every nose here.

All of us have experienced noses. And we've smelt many a different smell in the course of our lives, haven't we? So for example, if you're out walking on a warm summer's evening, in some very attractive suburb like Milgai or Bear's Den, you will suddenly, if it's a warm evening in late June or July, you'll suddenly catch the smell of roses or Brompton stocks, won't you?

If I'm walking out on an evening like that and I see a rose bush, I like to lean over the wall or the fence and bring a rose up to my nose. I don't mind what people think about me. I don't pinch the rose. I just like to smell it because it's such a lovely thing.

Sweet fragrances are lovely, aren't they? But our noses are also very experienced with other types of smell. And the stench of something dead is horrible, isn't it?

If you ever go to a game park in Africa and you're driving through the game park, you've got your window, you don't wind it right down because something might come in at you, but you just have it wound down a little bit. And if you pass the carcass of something that's been killed by lions and you smell that smell, woof, it's horrible.

[27 : 42] Woof. Now Paul is saying this. When people hear the gospel being preached, they will either say, this is lovely, I just love hearing about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

I love hearing about how much he has cared for us and given himself for us and how deeply he loves his people. And other people will hear exactly the same gospel and they will say, horrible, oh, I don't want to listen to that at all.

John Stott, who was a fine evangelist who died a year or two ago, he writes in one of his books of an incident when he was a young man when he sat down, I think he was at a university mission actually, university events week, and he sat down with a young man, a young undergraduate student to explain to him the gospel.

And he got to the part of explaining the gospel where he talked about the meaning of the cross of Christ. And he described the way in which Jesus on the cross took upon himself the penalty of the sins of all of us.

And as he was explaining this meaning of the cross, this young student suddenly cried out in a loud voice, horrible, horrible, horrible, three times like that.

[28 : 53] He couldn't bear to listen to it. He couldn't bear this assault on his pride which the message of the cross brought. It is an assault on human pride. To him, it was like the stench of death.

Let me ask, do we love to hear the gospel? Or do we find it so deeply disturbing that we want to turn away from it in revulsion?

Now, as Paul thinks about all this, he is suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of the enormity of the responsibility of being a gospel preacher.

And that's why he cries out here in verse 16, who is sufficient for these things? He feels so weak in the face of such a daunting task. And verse 17 helps us to understand what lies behind that question in verse 16.

In verse 17, he says, but we're different from so many who would call themselves gospel preachers. And yet so many who would call themselves gospel preachers are just peddlers.

[29 : 59] Now, a peddler or a hawker was a man who went about selling goods which were usually cheap and substandard. So, for example, if a hawker was selling wine, he would often water the wine down.

And that was his means of getting a fat profit. But he wouldn't be selling a good quality product. Now, Paul is saying there are some preachers and teachers who are like that. They will preach a watered-down message.

They claim that it's the real thing, but it's diluted. And always, the elements which such preachers would filter out of their message are the hard and demanding parts of the Bible's teaching.

So, in our day, today, typically, preachers in some churches will say nothing about the wrath of God because they don't want to frighten people off. Or they will say nothing about the judgment of God or the reality of sin and the need to repent and to turn away from a godless and self-gratifying lifestyle.

Now, preachers like that who refuse to include those essential elements of the gospel are peddlers. Their product is diluted. It's not the real thing at all.

[31 : 15] But, says Paul in verse 17, we, as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, we, in the sight of God, speak in Christ.

In other words, we are not offering you, Corinthians, a substandard or diluted gospel. Our work is done in the sight of God. And that's why this work is so daunting.

We feel so insufficient to such a task. It's easy enough to preach a substandard message that is simply keying in with the way of the world and is making no demands upon people.

But to preach a gospel that brings the fragrance of life to some and the stench of death to others, a divisive gospel that makes some people cry out against it and say, horrible.

Now, that is a daunting task, says Paul. And I, for one, he is saying, feel weak and insufficient in the face of it. Who is sufficient for such a weighty work as this?

[32 : 13] Now, Paul is going to have a lot more to say as the letter develops about his sense of weakness. In fact, this is one of the big themes of 2 Corinthians.

Paul is going to make the point again and again that authentic gospel preachers are not slick, power-packed, confident individuals. One of the marks of true gospel workers is that they're deeply conscious of their weakness.

But just for now, just for this evening, let's notice this, that Paul is showing the Corinthians the underlying sincerity which marks the true gospel worker. And Paul is making this point so as to persuade his wandering Corinthians to trust him afresh and to come back under his wings.

He's saying to them, can't you see that we're sincere? Can't you tell the difference between our sincerity and the charlatan methods of your false apostles? Well, we've seen first the urgent concern that gospel work brings.

Second, the underlying sincerity that marks true gospel workers. Now from thirdly and last, from chapter 3 verses 1 to 6, we see the human transformation that real gospel work produces.

[33 : 33] Just look with me at the second question in verse 1 there. Do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?

Now the pointed issue here continues to be whether or not the Corinthians are willing to trust Paul and therefore to come back to him. That's why we have this business of letters of recommendation which we would probably call them references or testimonials today.

And testimonials or letters of reference can be very useful. For example, if you're running a business and you need to employ some new workers and you advertise for new workers to apply to your staff, you're going to ask people to bring letters of reference with them from people that know them well.

You'll want to hear from somebody else who can assure you that this person is sound and competent. In fact, we do this here. When potential students apply to the Cornhill training course to come and study with us or to be church apprentices here at the Tron, we ask them to supply three references so that we can be quite sure that they're neither gangsters nor anarchists.

Usually, they're not. Now, in Paul's case, we don't need to assume that he was against letters of reference in principle. In fact, there's an interesting moment at the end of Acts chapter 18 that when Apollos, who was a fine preacher, wanted to cross the sea from Ephesus to Corinth, the Christians at Ephesus wrote a letter of recommendation for him, and he was warmly welcomed at Corinth, and he greatly helped the church there by his excellent teaching.

[35 : 12] So, letters of recommendation in themselves are neutral things. They can be very useful. But this first paragraph here in chapter 3 may be telling us that when the false apostles first appeared at Corinth, they brought with them in their back pockets glowing letters of recommendation, and the Corinthians accepted them on the strength of these letters, but didn't

have the discernment to see that their teaching would lead them astray.

Now, the purpose of a letter of recommendation is to validate the quality and trustworthiness of the person about whom it's written. In short, the letter says this is a good person, you can trust him or her, and then it will detail reasons for trusting him.

It will tell you that he has successfully completed this task or that project. Now, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, what evidence, brothers, do you need of the trustworthiness of Silas and Timothy and me?

What evidence is there of the quality of our workmanship? And then he goes on to say, it is under your very noses. It's you, you daft bats.

Just look at yourselves. Verse 2, you yourselves are our letter of recommendation written on your hearts to be known and read by all. Your transformed lives show for everyone to see that you are a letter written by Christ himself, delivered by us, but originating in him.

[36 : 47] We're just the postman. And, verse 3, there's something more that your transformed lives demonstrate. And it's this, that the message from Christ, which brings such change, is not something external to you.

It's not like the Ten Commandments, which were written out on tablets of stone. This is something internal. It's something written on your very hearts, because the gospel transforms a person deep within.

And what Paul means is that this gospel that he teaches is nothing less than the new covenant prophesied long before by the prophets like Jeremiah.

God had said this through Jeremiah 600 years previously. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.

Now, Paul is saying, look at yourselves, Corinthians. This is what has happened to you. And it testifies that our ministry to you has been the real thing. But Paul is now going to make a further very important point in verses 4, 5, and 6.

[37 : 59] In verse 4, he says, we have utter confidence in the Lord that this is the case. Confidence that the gospel has transformed you and that our ministry is therefore trustworthy.

But you must understand, verse 5, that we are not saying, aren't we powerful? Aren't Silas and Timothy and I terrific?

Look at our bulging spiritual biceps, as though the gospel workers have got 30,000 volt charges running through them. No, says Paul, in ourselves, we have no strength at all.

We're not claiming anything as coming from us. That's verse 5. Our sufficiency, our competence, all comes from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of this life-giving new covenant.

Well, the sand is running out of the egg timer, but as I finish, let me just say this. Paul is presenting us in this passage with a paradox, in other words, two things which appear to contradict each other.

[39 : 06] But in this paradox lies the truth about the work of the gospel. Now, here's the paradox.

On the one hand, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, come back to Silas and Timothy and me, to the safety of our wings, to the truth of our teaching.

But on the other hand, he is saying, we are utterly weak, we have no power. The gospel itself is full of power to transform lives, but we who preach it, we have no power in ourselves.

Now, the false teacher, and this applies to the modern world as much as the ancient, the false teacher, the charlatan, will always claim to have some kind of power reserves in himself, as though power comes from within, and his will be a false Christianity.

But true gospel teachers will follow the pattern of Paul, weak in themselves, and quite willing to say so, and yet having an unshakable confidence in Christ and the gospel.

gospel. Some of you younger folk here, in future, you'll have to move away, because your work and your life will take you to different cities, perhaps even to different countries.

[40 : 23] And when you move to new places, you will need to choose which kind of church to get involved in. And when it boils down to it, really there are two types of church.

There are those that trust in the sparkling power and energy of glamorous human leaders. And then there are those that recognize the weakness of human leaders and trust instead in the power of God.

Now, two Corinthians, as we read further through it, will have a great deal to say about Paul's weaknesses. But he is the true apostle, and he calls all his readers, ancient and modern, to come

under his wings.

Let's pray together. Dear God, our Father, because we are by nature naive and easily led astray, we do ask that you will give to us discernment so that we can distinguish the true from the false and understand where the gospel truly is preached and always wish to be part of a church that is like that.

We pray that you'll help us not only to acknowledge but even to rejoice in the weaknesses that characterize our own selves so that we realize more and more that the power to transform lives comes from you and not from humans.

[42 : 05] So please bless us. Give us wise hearts and discerning hearts, we pray. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.