

# 17. When I am weak then I am strong

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[ 0 : 00 ] We come now to our reading from Scripture. Always a high point in our gatherings, we hear the pure word of the Lord.

So let's turn together to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, and you'll find that on page 970, 970 in our big church Bibles.

2 Corinthians, chapter 12, and I'm going to read the first ten verses of the chapter. As Paul approaches the end of his letter, he's engaging in what he calls boasting.

It's a kind of ironic boasting, but he's having to present his credentials to the people of Corinth because they are, as it were, putting him down in favor of a group of people whom Paul calls false apostles who have come in to take a lead in the church.

And Paul is having, as it were, to present himself, to represent himself to the Corinthians and say to them, come back to me because only in coming back to me will you come back to Christ. So that's why we begin with his boasting theme being picked up here again at the beginning of chapter 12.

[ 1 : 12 ] So I'll read chapter 12, the first ten verses. I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

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

God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise. Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. God knows.

So, to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh. A messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[ 2 : 47 ] Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then, I am strong. This is the word of the Lord, and may it be a blessing to us this evening.

All right.

Well, let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 12 again, page 970. And I want to start by looking at that final statement at the end of verse 10.

So, chapter 12, verse 10, the last sentence there. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Now, that statement is paradoxical.

[ 3 : 58 ] It appears to be self-contradictory, and on the face of it, it seems almost nonsensical. How can it possibly be true that a person is strong at the moment when he is weak?

However, that is what the Apostle Paul is saying to his Corinthian Christian friends. And what I want to do this evening is to try to worry away at that extraordinary statement, a bit like a dog worrying away at a bone, in the hope that we'll begin to see what Paul is saying.

That it's not nonsense, but rather it's a great truth which lies at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Now, think of power for a moment. Human nature loves power, wants power, and enjoys exercising power in all kinds of ways.

So, we admire powerful people. Think of sportsmen, for example, sportsmen and women. Think of Wimbledon. When the great crowd at Wimbledon see a great tennis player hit a superbly powerful shot across the net, they all go, like that, don't they?

Well, not quite like that, but they let out a kind of collective gasp of admiration. A rugby player, if he's a top rugby player, he wants to become more powerful. That's why he puts himself through all

that agonizing training every week.

[ 5 : 16 ] He craves extra speed and extra knockdown power. We admire powerful singing. Think of Luciano Pavarotti hitting one of those huge high notes.

You know that kind of thing? Makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. We admire it, don't we? Or think of the human power, not muscular power, but the power that we see in the finest writing, or visual art, or architecture, or engineering.

Again, we admire it greatly. I was driving across the fourth road bridge a week or two ago, and as I drove across the big new road bridge, I looked across to the old railway bridge, which is only about 500 yards away across there.

And I was aware that I was looking at something which is still one of the wonders of the engineering world. And we admire powerful and able people who can achieve things.

We admire those who can design and make a powerful car, or a powerful telescope, or a powerful computer. And we ourselves, we would all like to be more competent and able than we actually are.

[ 6 : 21 ] So if you're working, if you have a job, you would love to be able to work faster, and more efficiently, and more productively than you normally do. If you're a student, you'd love to improve your capacity to learn things and to remember things.

At least I hope you would. It seems obvious to us, doesn't it, that power and ability are good things to have. After all, isn't God himself powerful? And are we not made in his image?

What then can Paul be on about when he says that he is strong when he's weak? Well, let's remind ourselves of the situation that Paul was writing his letter to.

He was writing to the Christians at Corinth, who were by and large not powerful people. In fact, he had said to them, back in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, consider your calling brothers.

In other words, consider what you were like at the time when you became Christians. Not many of you were wise, according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth.

[ 7 : 22 ] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being may boast in the presence of God.

So I think we're to understand that most of the members of the Corinthian church were not leading citizens. They were not the movers and shakers of Corinth. Most of them were like most of us, ordinary struggling mortals trying to keep their heads above water.

Many of them would have been slaves. In fact, Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. So most of them were not powerful. They weren't leaders by nature or by training.

So when this group of men, whom Paul calls false apostles, in 2 Corinthians 11, 13, when they came into Corinth and started to throw their weight around in the church, the Corinthian Christians were not well equipped to stand up to them.

They allowed these charlatans to take control of the church. And these false apostles preached a false gospel, as chapter 11, verse 4 tells us, and they treated the Corinthians very badly, almost like dirt.

[ 8 : 36 ] We noticed last week how this is expressed in chapter 11, verse 20. Just look back to that verse, 11, 20. For you bear it, says Paul. You put up with it.

If someone makes slaves of you or devours you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or strikes you in the face. That's the way the false leaders were treating the Corinthians.

Their method of leadership was really a brutal display of dominance and a particularly nasty kind of power. So Paul says, ironically, in the next verse, verse 21, to my shame, I must say we were too weak for that.

We, Timothy and I, we were flabby little softies compared to those brutes. So behind Paul's paradoxical statement, when I'm weak, then I'm strong, there lies this contrast between the weak, in adverted commerce, leadership exercised by him and Timothy, and the strong, overbearing leadership of these false apostles.

And in the later part of 2 Corinthians, Paul is laboring to persuade the Corinthians to cut their ties with these false leaders and to come back to him and to the true gospel lifestyle, which is a lifestyle of gentleness and meekness, not a lifestyle of powerful dominance.

[ 9 : 56 ] But, and this is the tricky thing from Paul's point of view, if he is to persuade the Corinthians that he is a true example of gospel lifestyle and the false leaders are false, he's got to contrast himself with the false leaders.

And because he is a deeply modest and humble man, and indeed he was, he hates drawing attention to himself and his qualities. He feels it's boasting to say, look at me, because he only wants to boast about the Lord and say to the Corinthians, look at the Lord.

But he's having to say, look at me, because it's the only way in which the Corinthians are going to see how rotten and corrupted these false leaders really are. Now, of course, there are crucial lessons for us, for our understanding of Christian leadership and Christian lifestyle.

And I trust that some of these things will emerge as we go along this evening. So let's turn to chapter 12, verse 1. I must go on boasting.

I must. What he means is, I'm not enjoying this look at me talk at all, but I've got to go on with it, because it's the only way in which I can show you that I'm a true apostle, and thus the one for you to follow and imitate.

[ 11 : 10 ] So in our passage, let's see how Paul boasts about three things. His visions, his thorn, and his weaknesses.

First of all, then, his visions, which he records in verses 2, 3, and 4. I won't read them out again, but just run your eye over verses 2, 3, and 4 again. Now, it's clear that Paul is squirmingly embarrassed to mention these visions.

But he does it so as to answer the false apostles, who obviously paraded their visionary experiences before the Corinthians, because they wanted to bring in a major wow factor, which would make the Corinthians admire them, and therefore submit to them.

You know, our leaders, they're such wonderful spiritual people. They're always telling us about the great visions that God gives them. They've got a real hotline to heaven. Now, it is possible that the false apostles were criticizing Paul for his lack of visions.

They might have been saying, Paul, dear, dear, dear, dear, Paul, he's not very spiritual. He does occasionally bang on about his Damascus road vision of Jesus.

[ 12 : 23 ] But that happened 20-something years ago. What a Christian leader needs is fresh, up-to-date visions. Visions on Monday, visions on Wednesday, and on Friday every week. Stale experience is neither use nor ornament.

So in verse 1, Paul says, Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. In fact, he only mentions one, which had happened to him, he says, 14 years previously.

But what he says about it in verses 2, 3, and 4 is very intriguing and rather wonderful. Verse 2 I know a man in Christ. Really?

Well, who might that be? Well, of course, he's talking about himself. But he's so painfully embarrassed to boast in this way that he can't even bring himself to say, It's me I'm talking about. So he speaks of himself in the third person, as though he was somebody else. So what happened then to this man in Christ, a.k.a. Paul? Well, first, he was caught up, taken up, whisked up to the very presence of God.

[ 13 : 29 ] He describes it in verse 2 as the third heaven, meaning the highest heaven, the ultimate place of glory and bliss. And then he describes it in verse 3 as paradise.

Now, paradise, apparently, is a Persian word originally, but the Greeks had borrowed it and incorporated it into their own language. And we do that in English, don't we? In the English language, we tend to borrow and incorporate foreign words and phrases.

For example, we might speak of the zeitgeist. Or we might use a phrase like déjà vu. We might even say, To next, is it not Donald?

If we're English. Sorry, you understand. We borrow things. Now, paradise, this borrowed word, it literally means a park or an extended garden, a place of beauty and peace.

And in Jewish thought, paradise became associated with the Garden of Eden, the garden planted and beautified by God himself, and therefore the place where God dwells.

[ 14 : 34 ] So Paul is saying that he was caught up to the wonderful presence of God himself. Then secondly, he tells the Corinthians that he doesn't know whether he was bodily whisked up into heaven, or whether for a time his body remained on earth and he was taken up in spirit.

In the body or out of the body, he says. I don't know. God knows, but I don't. And in putting it like that, Paul is gently warning his readers not to be too concerned or too inquisitive about whether a person might have in the body or out of the body spiritual experiences.

He's really saying, It doesn't greatly matter. I don't know whether I was in the body or not, and I don't need to know. God knows, and there's no point in breaking sweat in order to probe into things that can't be probed.

So first, he's caught up into heaven. Now secondly, he doesn't know whether he was in the body or out. And thirdly, from verse 4, That means, A, that he could not articulate these things even if he wanted to, and B, that God did not permit him to speak them.

So impossible to articulate and impermissible to articulate. In other words, the things that he heard were private for his ears only, not for the ears of the Corinthians in the first century, nor for the ears of the Glaswegians in the 21st century.

[16:08] We're not allowed to know everything. So why might God have given Paul this special private revelation of things in heaven? Well, Paul doesn't tell us in so many words here.

But the reason may be that because Paul suffered such horrible and frequent persecutions, he needed encouragement and reassurance beyond the needs of most Christians.

Remember, we saw last week from the later part of chapter 11 how dreadfully Paul was treated, and how often he had to endure extreme physical suffering and therefore extreme mental suffering. To have seen what Paul had seen in the third heaven, and to have heard what Paul heard in the presence of God, must have been wonderfully sustaining for him when he was languishing in prison, or when he was being shipwrecked or lashed.

Think of those lashings which I described last week. Imagine yourself in Paul's place while he was being scourged. Can you imagine being in that position? There you are, face down on the ground, with this dreadful scourge, this instrument of torture, coming down upon you again and again onto your lacerated back.

[17:19] Just imagine being in that position. Wouldn't it be precious to you to know at that moment, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the Lord loved you and had a place reserved for you at his side in paradise?

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke mentions a number of times when the Lord did appear to Paul in a vision, and each of those times is a moment when Paul was stressed or perplexed or tempted to give up.

So the greatly suffering Christian was given great encouragement from heaven when he greatly needed it. Now we're bound to ask, should people like us seek or expect this kind of vision or revelation?

Should I perhaps on Monday morning as I go to work, ask the Lord to catch me up for a moment into paradise? Well, the answer surely is no. For one thing, you and I are not having to endure the sufferings of Paul, and therefore we don't need that extra level of reassurance.

But secondly, and this is much more important, we have all the vision and all the revelation we need, and much more, in the 66 books of the Bible.

[18:32] And here it is, you're holding it in your very hands. The vision and revelation of God himself. The very words of God, which come to us through human pens, but are authored in heaven.

So any Christian who becomes a serious, lifelong reader and student of the Bible is given a vision of the truth and glory of God every time we open our Bible and read it thoughtfully.

These are the words of God. They satisfy our desire to know him. We have in our very hands, as we hold the Bible, visions and revelations of the Lord. So if you want to know the truth and the glory of God better, become a more serious Bible student.

You won't be disappointed, and you won't feel that you're missing out in any way, I can assure you. So Paul includes this little section to reassure the Corinthians.

Their false apostles may be often bragging about their wonderful spiritual experiences, but Paul is saying that he has had true visions given him from heaven. And therefore, to go back to chapter 11, verse 5, 11-5, he is not in the least inferior to these super apostles.

[19:44] In fact, he's going to use that phrase almost word for word again in chapter 12, verse 11, not inferior to these super apostles. Now let's look on to chapter 12, verses 5 and 6.

Paul has just boasted about his visions, but he is still hugely uncomfortable about the whole business. And that's why he says in verse 5, on behalf of this man, this man in Christ, who was caught up to paradise, I'll boast about him, because I want you to know that I really do know the Lord.

But on my own behalf, little me, humdrum workaday Paul, I will not boast except of my weaknesses. Though the truth is that if I should wish to boast of myself directly, without resorting to this man in Christ language, I wouldn't be playing games or fooling around.

It would all be true, but I'm not going to do that. Why not? Now friends, look at the last part of verse 6, and prepare to be astonished. J.B. Phillips translates this last part of verse 6 like this, Isn't that astonishing?

I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than he ought. Now isn't it true of us that normally we want people to think more highly of us than we deserve?

[ 21 : 15 ] We like to be praised, even when we know that the praise is far prettier than the reality. But Paul gives us an example to follow here, an example of quite extraordinary humility.

I don't want people to think more of me than my conduct and my speech warrant. It's a bit like Romans 12.3, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.

Well, Paul is applying just that same thought to himself here in 2 Corinthians 12. Well, there's the first thing, his visions, which he relates most unwillingly, but he's having to persuade them that he is not inferior to the false leaders.

Now second, he writes about the thorn in his flesh in verses 7, 8, and 9. And you'll see this thorn is inextricably bound up with the visions and revelations.

Just look at verse 7. So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

[ 22 : 25 ] And he uses that phrase, you'll see, to keep me from being too elated twice, at the beginning and the end of verse 7, so as to emphasize it. Now what can we say for certain about this thorn?

I'm going to mention three things that we can say for certain and one thing that we can't be certain about. So here's the first thing that we can be certain about. It was not something which had troubled Paul all the way through his life.

It was not some illness that he'd had from infancy. He'd been troubled by it for a maximum of 14 years. Because he says here, it was given to him after he'd received the wonderful revelations recorded in verses 2 to 4.

And because of those wonderful revelations. So he might have had it for as long as 14 years, but it wasn't something that dated right back for him. Second, we can be quite certain that it was a very grievous trouble to Paul.

Now we read about his terrible sufferings, his imprisonments and hardships and beatings and shipwrecks as we looked at last week. And he never says about them that he asked the Lord to spare him sufferings of that kind.

[ 23 : 37 ] He regarded them as par for the course, the inevitable entailments of his task as a traveling missionary. But this thing, this was different. Just look at verse 8.

Three times, I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me. That means that on three separate occasions, Paul gave himself to prayer and begged and beseeched the Lord to remove this cause of suffering.

It was something very, very horrible. Now the third thing that we can be certain of, I'll come back to in a moment. But there's one thing we can't be certain of, and that is exactly what this thorn was.

Now you perhaps know that different Bible commentators and preachers over centuries have made all sorts of different suggestions that it was a physical illness, perhaps a mental illness like depression, maybe even a particular malignant individual who always dogged Paul's steps.

Now it may have been one of those things, but if Paul had wanted the Corinthians to know precisely what it was, surely he would have told them. But he didn't tell them, and he hasn't told us either.

[ 24 : 50 ] And surely it's a blessing for us not to know precisely what this thing was. Because if you or I suffer grief from some intractable, hideous, ongoing problem of whatever kind, there are great lessons from this passage to help us to know how to deal with it.

Now Paul tells us that he was given this thorn to keep him from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations that he'd received. Now we might think, but wouldn't it have been rather kind of the Lord to allow Paul a little bit of elation, a little bit of over-the-top joy in the midst of all his trials and difficulties?

But no, the Lord wanted to keep him sober and steady. Paul's life didn't lack joy. In fact, even in this letter, which is the most troubled of all his letters, there are great outbursts of joy and thanksgiving. But it's not just a question of keeping Paul sober and steady. Paul's role was and is still to teach the church how to follow in the pattern set by Jesus, who on earth was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Wasn't it a kind of thorn in Jesus' flesh, an intolerable destiny that he could not escape to have to go to Jerusalem and endure the cross?

[ 26 : 15 ] He simply had to do it. He came into the world for this very purpose. And Paul, in a more limited way, had to bear this thing, this suffering. He begged the Lord to take it from him, just as Jesus, in Gethsemane, begged his father, if it is possible, father, take away this cup of suffering from me.

But the suffering was not taken from Jesus, and the thorn was not taken from Paul. Well, now here's the third thing, and perhaps the most important thing that we can know for certain about Paul's thorn, and that is that his thorn is simultaneously the work of Satan and the work of God. Look at how Paul expresses it in verse 7. It is a messenger of Satan to harass me. Now, harass is a strong word. It means to make life very difficult indeed.

Satan, of course, hates the Lord's servants and seeks to throw them and disable them. Paul's thorn was a powerful tool in the hand of Satan.

But, also in verse 7, Paul says, a thorn was given me. Now, who gave it? Surely, not Satan.

[ 27 : 32 ] And we know it couldn't have been Satan because of the purpose of the thorn. The thorn was given to Paul to keep him from being too elated. Satan would have no interest in keeping Paul from being too elated.

Satan would rejoice if Paul were to become insufferably arrogant. It could only have been the Lord who gave this thorn to Paul. Now, when we see this, it helps us to understand something very important about the sufferings and trials that we have to endure.

and that is that both the Lord and Satan are usually involved in them simultaneously and both Satan and the Lord have their purposes in relation to us.

Satan's aim through our trials and sufferings is to derail us, to get us to turn away from the Lord and from the church, the Lord's people. Nothing would please him more than to see us take offense at God and simply turn back to the world.

But the Lord also has his purposes in our trials because through them he tests us and strengthens us. Through them he hardens our muscles and calls forth our endurance.

[ 28 : 44 ] And there's more as well as we're going to see in verses 9 and 10 in a moment. Now, we see this process of both Satan and the Lord being involved in our trials simultaneously.

We see it again and again in the Bible. Think of the sufferings of Job in the book of Job. They're caused by Satan in his malice but permitted by the Lord in his kindness.

The Lord's hand and Satan's hand are both involved with Job but the Lord's good purposes triumph finally as they always do. And then, think of the way that the Bible describes the crucifixion of Jesus.

Luke tells us in his gospel that the whole process of Jesus being betrayed and arrested and tortured and crucified was, I quote, the hour when darkness reigns.

Darkness is the realm of the devil, isn't it? The hour when darkness reigns. Or think of the apostle Peter in Acts chapter 2 when he's preaching in Jerusalem at Pentecost. He says that Jesus was crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

[ 29 : 51 ] But in the very same verse, Peter also says that Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. So we have wickedness, darkness, and lawlessness but it was all part of God's plan.

God's plan as it were surrounded it and included it. So friends, let me say this. If you have a thorn in your flesh, do learn to see it as Paul learned to see his.

Yes, it is a messenger of Satan and by it Satan harasses you. But it's also given, given by God for a good purpose.

So what are the kinds of troubles that Christians might rightly describe as a thorn in the flesh? Let me list some of them. Chronic physical illness, chronic mental illness, old age.

That doesn't go away, does it? Or reverse itself. My father had a very ancient, ancient aunt and she used to say to him, never get old, Eric, it's not worth it. Let me suggest a few more.

[ 31 : 01 ] I'm not so serious about old age really but let me suggest a few more seriously. Chronic shortage of money, poverty, long-term unemployment, intractable domestic or family problems, a loved one or a close friend who is chronically dreadfully ill, a lifelong frustration, a persistent temptation that you battle with continually year after year and it never seems to go away or perhaps something else, something that doesn't fall into any of those categories, something that is so painful and so difficult that perhaps you've never talked about it to anybody but it's there in your life.

It's a thorn in your flesh. It's a festering wound. Now let's see what happened to Paul and his thorn. Verse 8, three times he pleaded with the Lord that it should leave him but, verse 9, the Lord said to me, my grace, my power to support you and sustain you and help you, my grace, my love, my loving power is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect, is brought to perfection in weakness, in your weakness.

The thorn weakened Paul. In some way, it reduced his ability and strength. To some degree, it disabled him but the Lord said to him, it's all right, Paul, in fact, it's more than all right because it's the only way, it's only through your weakness that my power can be seen and displayed.

It is my grace coming to you from heaven, not your ability that is going to be sufficient for you. Now, we see this principle at work again and again in the Bible.

Think of Gideon and his 300 men who lapped up their drinking water like dogs. Remember how many men Gideon set out with to do battle with the Midianites? Who remembers that?

[ 33 : 09 ] Hands up. Yes, Fiona, no. Does anybody remember? Yes, Matthew.

Yeah? I'll tell you. 32,000 men he set off with. Remember that? 32,000 men and the Lord whittled those 32,000 down to 300.

Why? Well, he said to Gideon, if you defeat the Midianites with this great large army, Israel will boast and say, we've done it ourselves. But with 300, it was obvious that it could only have been the power of the Lord that won the victory.

Now, think of the cross of Jesus. On the cross, the strongest man in the world was reduced, humiliated, and degraded, and degraded.

And yet, the message about the cross is the power of God for our salvation. The death of Jesus achieved what all the concentrated power of the human race could never achieve.

[ 34 : 17 ] it's only through the weakness of man that the power of God is seen and displayed. So, Paul, this man who was naturally so strong and so able, learned a great lesson through the thorn which the Lord refused to take away from him even though he prayed three times.

And the lesson is there in the second half of verse 9. Therefore, he says, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

So, here's our third final point, just briefly. Paul boasts of his weaknesses. And in learning to do that, he had to unlearn something which is fundamental to human nature, which is that we delight in our strengths and boast of our powers and abilities.

So, throughout this section of 2 Corinthians, Paul is contrasting the boastful, bragging, domineering ways of the false apostles with the way of true Christian leadership which is exercised on the principle that the power of Christ is seen through the weaknesses of his servants.

Now, friends, I have to ask this question. How well have you and I learned this lesson? Let me read you some sobering words written by Don Carson in his comments on the closing chapters of 2 Corinthians.

[ 35 : 40 ] There is a great deal of boasting in Western evangelicalism. Some of it is so flagrant that it is repulsive to all serious-minded people.

Much of it, however, is subtle and potentially subversive. And I think the word subversive means that it can get into our systems and damage us without our really realizing it.

And that's a thought-provoking comment and surely Don Carson is right. Some churches and church leaders love, like the false leaders at Corinth, love to blow their own trumpets and speak loudly of their achievements and their powerful ministries.

Paul teaches us to do the exact opposite of that. Look at verse 10. For the sake of Christ then, in other words, to bring glory to his name, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,

persecutions and calamities.

Isn't that extraordinary? For when I'm weak, then I'm strong. Now, Paul is not counseling us to be weak in the sense of being watery or spineless or indecisive or lazy or throwing up our hands and saying, we're pathetic and we wouldn't say boo to a goose.

[ 36 : 58 ] Of course not. Paul himself was always a model of hard work and evangelistic endeavor and real engagement in the task of the gospel. But the question is, how do we go about it?

Do we do our work with bragging and boasting and a sense of superiority over others or do we do it humbly? In this church of ours, the Tron Church, there's much to be thankful for.

In fact, I frequently thank the Lord for the privilege of belonging to a church where the work of the gospel is undertaken with joy and enthusiasm. But we could easily follow in the footsteps of the false apostles if we were to brag and boast.

We could preen our feathers over our decision to leave the Church of Scotland. Now, that was the right thing to do. We could do no other. But we need to be very careful how to think about that and we must lovingly pray for Christ's people who are still members of Church of Scotland congregations.

And then turning from our congregational life to our individual life, how do we think of ourselves as strong Christians who've worked a few things out?

[ 38 : 10 ] That would be a dangerous attitude for any Christian to take. Paul was one of the strongest Christians of his generation or any generation, but that's not the way he thought about himself.

His own view of himself was that he was walking the Calvary road, following in the painful footsteps of his master, the cross beam across his shoulders and the hill of Golgotha before him.

And in his flesh there was a thorn and the wisdom of God decided it must remain there to keep him humble and deeply conscious of his weakness and frailty.

And he learned these things. Paul, the once proud persecutor of Christians, he learned how to follow Christ. He accepted the reality of his situation.

He became reconciled to it. He learned contentment in the midst of his frailty. And that's the way he ends this paragraph in verse 10. And verse 10 is surely a verse that each of us needs to learn and to live by.

[ 39 : 15 ] For the sake of Christ then, I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I'm strong. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

We do deeply thank you, our dear Father, for Paul and all he's taught us here. And we thank you for this grace, sufficient for us, sufficient for our every need, and your power being made perfect, not in our strength, but in our weakness.

And we pray that you will din it into our hearts and help us to understand and to learn this, that we're able to boast of our weaknesses and to be content with them and with insults for the sake of the gospel and hardships and persecutions.

And we pray that you will help us to understand deeply the sufficiency of your grace to sustain us and support us. And may it be to the glory of the name of Christ.

[ 40 : 35 ] Amen.