

The Paradox of Pastoral Ministry

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Mark, your introduction is always kind and always meaningful. I hope you will not misunderstand, it's not my preference. Here's why, because I want to seize this moment to honor this man.

This isn't just some reciprocal response by me since he said kind things about me, how awkward if I don't say kind things about him. I don't do paid political announcements.

Humanly speaking, Mark bears the burden of this conference, for this conference in a unique way. He has the wonderful support of the leadership team, but he bears the burden preparing for this conference, leading this conference. He bears it well, peacefully and joyfully because his desire is to serve us.

Recently I was sent a manuscript by a particular author of a book that will eventually be published. The individual humbly sent it to me asking for my evaluation of the book and any editing recommendations that I had.

The book is not about leadership, but at one point in the book, the author pivots toward the topic of leadership and communicates concerns about leadership, as well as drawing attention to good leadership. At one point, he talks about two crucial areas for leaders.

"If there is a failure of discernment and a failure of courage, the effects of those failures will be broadly and widely felt among those that particular leader is serving. Good leaders are stable and sober-minded, leaders function as the immune systems of their institutions. Good leaders do not anxiously react to highly reactive people by hurting the whole group to adapt to the least mature members of the group. Good leaders don't let criticism ruin them, but recognize that criticism comes with the territory of good leadership."

There's statement after statement about good leadership. As I read this, I was just very grateful that this man and the leadership team serve and lead us so very well.

There has not been a failure of leadership here, a failure of discernment rather, or a failure of courage, but instead, wonderfully effective leadership.

As a founder, my friend, that is just one sweet gift to this now 70-year-old man. I want to communicate my gratefulness. I would like to invite you to join me in thanking God for Mark Prater.

It would only be appropriate for us to also thank Jill by his side, serving in every way and bearing all this responsibility with Mark. Jill, you are his glory and we are all grateful.

Thanks to you, Mark, Jeff, the leadership team. This is an honor. It's a humbling honor, and you are quite the sweet sight. What a privilege.

By the way, none of that was officially on the clock. There's a clock, and the clock for my sermon hasn't started yet.

Please turn in your Bible to the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, Chapter 4.

If a title would serve you, the title of this message is **"The Paradox of Pastoral Ministry"**.

We all know that the books we read shape our lives. One book that has impacted my life is ***Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson***, written by his son, New Testament scholar, Don Carson. Since its publication in 2008, I have recommended and encouraged other pastors to read this book

In *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*, Dr. Carson affectionately and appreciatively introduces us to his father and candidly describes what pastoral ministry was like for him as a pioneering church planter and pastor in Quebec.

The only critique I would have of the book appears in its preface where after referring to certain well-known pastors as "remarkable gifts to the church with broad influence beyond their church," Dr. Carson writes, "*Most of us, let us be frank, are ordinary pastors, dad was one of them.*"

I would respectfully take issue with Dr. Carson numbering himself among those of us who actually are ordinary pastors.

My friend, Sovereign Grace, founded in 1982, is the headquarters and home of ordinary pastors. We specialize in ordinary pastors. We set the standard for

ordinary pastors. I would argue that we have more pastors who are truly ordinary, beginning with myself, than any other family of churches or denomination in the history of the church. No denomination has more pastors who before their conversion were complete losers, drug addicts, physical education majors in college, then Sovereign Grace.

Let me just say, we know ordinary, Dr. Carson, and you are not one of us. If you're going to be numbered among us as an ordinary pastor, this has to be cleared by us. It has to be approved by us.

We're very grateful that Dr. Carson isn't an ordinary pastor because he is quite obviously unusually gifted, and he has served us so, so well through the years with his teaching and his writings, which actually bear no resemblance to ordinary.

I asked Amanda, my assistant, recently - I just said, "How many books by Dr. Carson do I have in my library?"

Now, my library view, reasonably small, particularly if compared to Jeff's library, but on this particular list, there's some 50-plus books that Dr. Carson has written. By the way, Dr. Carson, the books he writes, many of them, they're this size. Here's what I write. Notice a difference? Yes. That's my life work right there. Let's be clear, ordinary, extraordinary. That's very much the difference here.

There's no misunderstanding. I have no doubt that Dr. Carson's motive is sincere, but it actually doesn't serve us when he identifies himself as an ordinary pastor. I am grateful that Tom Carson, his father was an ordinary pastor, and that his son has written a book about his father's life. Dr. Carson writes about this book,

"This little book is a modest attempt to let the voice and ministry of one ordinary pastor be heard for such servants have much to teach us."

The book is brief. Therefore, each chapter has a particular importance and significance. However, it is the content of Chapter 6 that immediately caught my attention when I first read the book. That chapter is titled:

Discouragement, Despair, and A Vow.

In this chapter, Dr. Carson draws on the journal his father kept and draws the reader's attention to the discouragement his father was familiar with recorded in his journal. Following are just a few examples.

His father writes in reflecting on a particular day serving in pastoral ministry, *"This was a poor day wasted in many respects."* In one journal entry, Tom Carson reflects on his experience after praying 45 minutes one day with these words, *"But the heavens seem brass."* Different journal entries reveal his discouragement as he reflects on and evaluates his preaching. One Sunday evening, he writes about his two sermons that day. He writes of his sermon Sunday morning, *"Preached (poorly) from 2 Corinthians 2."* About his Sunday evening sermon, he writes, *"Preached from Romans 1 verses 1 through 17 (poorly)."* He also makes note that in the morning, there were 24 present, and in the evening 19 were present.

Dr. Carson draws attention to, *"The occasional entries that show Tom sliding into the slough of despond."* At one point his father writes in his journal, *"I am discouraged, but I'm trying to put quitting entirely out of my mind."*

In reflecting on his father's familiarity with discouragement, Dr. Carson writes,

"The longer I have spent getting to know pastors in small and medium-sized churches and some larger ones, the more I have become aware of the chasms of discouragement, through which many of them pass."

My friends, too often, ordinary pastors are discouraged pastors.

You might not keep a journal, but perhaps what Tom Carson wrote in his journal, there's a striking resemblance to what you were thinking in the back alleys of your mind this evening.

When Paul writes in 2 Corinthians Chapter 4 verse 1, "We do not lose heart" and in verse 16 of the same chapter, "So, we do not lose heart", you might read these verses and think Paul isn't speaking for you or about you when he writes, "So we do not lose heart," because losing heart is a common experience for you and discouragement is a frequent companion. These verses that bookend and frame 2 Corinthians 4 seem not only far from your experience, but consistently unattainable as well.

That's why 2 Corinthians and our passage, in particular, this evening is a gift to ordinary pastors.

From Chapter 4 verses 7 through 12, Paul reveals to us why he doesn't lose heart, so that ordinary pastors like you and me might take heart and not lose heart. We will not lose heart in ministry when we remember that our

weakness and suffering are divinely designed to reveal God's power and serve God's people.

This, my friends, this we must remember and not forget: Our weakness and suffering are divinely designed to reveal God's power and serve God's people.

2 Corinthians, Chapter 4, our attention will be devoted to verses 7 through 12, but I'm going to begin reading in verse 1 so that we might take in the context of our passage this evening.

4 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God,[a] we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice[b] cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants[c] for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Treasure in Jars of Clay

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Our outline is a simple one.

- 1. The Divine Design: Verse 7**
- 2. The Daily Experience: Verses 8 and 9**
- 3. The Discernible Effect: Verses 10 through 12.**

First, The Divine Design, verse 7.

Since Chapter 3 verse 7, Paul has been contrasting the experience and ministry of Moses in the Old Testament with the glory revealed to us in the new

covenant. Moses asked to see God's glory, but he could not behold God's face and live. We behold what Moses could not, because in verse 6, *"For God, who said, let light shine out of darkness has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."* My friends, it is stunning to realize that God has granted us a privilege exceeding Moses.

Moses countenance shown with glory, but, through the proclamation of the gospel and the miracle of regeneration, God himself, in a personal act of grace, has shown in our once dark and unregenerate hearts the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Through the gospel, the glory of God has shown, not as it was for Moses temporarily on his face, but instead, permanently in our hearts. We see and we perceive God's glory as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin. We see this glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Then in verse 7, in contrast to this theme of glory Paul had previously developed, he transitions. He transitions to the divine design for the proclamation of the gospel that reveals the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay."* This verse marks a transition, a transition in content, and a change in tone.

The ministry that Paul and we have received by the mercy of God to proclaim this glorious gospel that he references in verse 1, this treasure of the gospel in verse 6 that opens the eyes of sinners blinded by the devil in verse 4 dwells in clay jars by divine design.

Beginning in verse 7, the paradoxical nature of pastoral ministry is present and pronounced in this passage. This really is a paragraph of paradoxes that the treasure of the gospel, the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is contained in common clay jars.

Clay jars were fragile, inexpensive, they had little value or beauty, they were easily replaced. The clay jar was a common metaphor in the ancient world for human weakness. For Paul, a jar of clay was a metaphor for his weakness and suffering, and this is purposeful, not accidental. Paul's weakness and our weakness is by divine design.

Paul explains why, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. God's purpose in placing the treasure of the gospel in clay jars is to display divine power through human weakness. The reason for this design is that there would be no mistaking, no mistaking where the power comes from. God himself, not Paul, not human messengers.

Paul's weakness highlights God's strength and God's power.

For Paul's opponents and for the Corinthians, weakness and strength are incompatible, but for Paul, they are a divine paradox. For Paul, they are the paradigm for pastoral ministry.

One reason that Paul didn't lose heart in the difficult apostolic and pastoral task is because he understood his weakness. He understood his weakness positioned him to receive God's strength, to receive the surpassing power of God.

In an excellent article titled ***"Weakness - Paul's and Ours"***, Richard Bauckham effectively makes this point when he writes,

"To say that Paul's autobiographical reflection in 2 Corinthians is impressive may be a little paradoxical, because Paul's obsession in this letter is with how unimpressive he is, or at least with the fact that the only impressive thing about him is his weakness. Paul's weakness is the recurring theme. The power of God evident in Paul's ministry, not least in the transforming effect of the gospel he preached, could be seen to be no merely human achievement of Paul's, but divine power, which found its opportunity in Paul's weakness."

This metaphor in verse 7, this paradox should inform our approach to pastoral ministry and our expectations in pastoral ministry.

As you're aware, I'm a simple man and I appreciate the simplicity of this. We are unimpressive and that should be obvious. The only thing impressive about us is our weakness, and that should be humbling. But here's the fabulous news, my friend: The fabulous news is divine power finds its opportunity for display in and through our weakness.

By divine design, God delights, he delights in using our weakness to display his surpassing power.

For the pastor and the Christian, divine power is found where we might least expect it: in our weakness. We are not self-sufficient, we are clay jars.

By the way, we never become more than a clay jar. We don't mature beyond feeling weak.

Listen, in every pastoral task, no matter how repetitious the task, our weakness in the pastoral task is perpetual, not occasional. There is no, "I got this," in pastoral ministry. No, you and I got nothing!

We have got nothing in and of ourselves for this task, except the weakness that we contribute that qualifies us for this task.

A perpetual state of weakness - good news - it results in a perpetual experience of divine power.

Paul didn't lose heart because he didn't fear his weakness, but instead anticipated experiencing God's power in and through his weakness.

I can't improve on what Dr. Carson has written in making this very point in his excellent book, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, where he exhorts us,

"Do not fear weakness, illness, or a sense of being overwhelmed."

Now, I'm making, I think, an informed assumption that that would, I think, include all of us in some form. We are weak, some are ill, and all of us, to differing degrees, are familiar with a sense of being overwhelmed.

Dr. Carson exhorts us, *"Do not fear. Do not fear, weakness, illness, or a sense of being overwhelmed."* Here's why.

"The truth of the matter is that such experiences are often the occasions when God most greatly displays his power. As long as people are impressed by your powerful personality and impressive gifts, there is very little room for you to impress them with a crucified savior."

"I came to you," Paul confesses, *"In weakness and fear and with much trembling."* So much so that he needed special encouragement from God himself. Paul knew that God's strength is most greatly displayed in connection with our weakness.

Although he suffered fears, illness, weakness, and a tremendous sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, he did not fear the fear. His weakness was not compounded by focusing on his weakness.

Far from it, he could write, *"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."*

That is the testimony of a man who is learned to minister under the cross.

Oh, my friends, Paul did not lose heart because he did not fear the fear. He did not fear the fear.

His weakness was not compounded by focusing on his weakness.

The purpose of this metaphor is not so that throughout this conference, we're all comparing our weakness with each other and trying to convince each other that we're weaker than they are.

No, this is not about a preoccupation, an exclusive preoccupation with our weakness.

No, Paul does remind us of our weakness, but his purpose is not that we focus on our weakness, but instead focus on the surpassing power of God that is revealed in and through our weakness.

The secret to not losing heart in pastoral ministry is recognizing that by divine design, God's surpassing power is revealed in and through our weakness.

It turns out that our weakness is actually a reason to take heart, not lose heart because divine power finds its opportunity in our weakness.

Paul didn't lose heart. He didn't lose heart because he didn't fear his weakness and he didn't focus on his weakness, but instead on the surpassing power of God that was revealed in and through his weakness.

My friends, when we lose heart, we need to realize we might have lost sight of this metaphor. We might have lost sight of our weakness as the opportunity for the experience and the display of God's surpassing power.

Then Paul transitions, he illustrates how this surpassing power is experienced in his life and ministry in verses 8 and 9: The Daily Experience.

Paul informs us and he prepares us for what men who are clay jars, containing the treasure of the gospel, can anticipate in pastoral ministry.

My friends, when you enter into pastoral ministry, this is what you are signing up for. That this is what you can expect after you pass your ordination exam and the celebration subsides.

In verses 8 and 9, there's a series of four contrasts that illustrate how the surpassing power of the gospel is experienced in Paul's life and ministry, and by implication each of us.

Note, this is not simply a biographical sketch of Paul's life and ministry. No, this is applicable to all pastors.

First, clay jars will suffer for the sake of the gospel and the church. Paul is providing for pastors, in particular, a theology suffering for pastoral ministry.

Here is what clay jars called to pastoral ministry can expect: affliction, bewilderment, persecution, and they will be struck down.

Now, you might be wondering about the wisdom of Paul's approach in identifying these harsh realities. I thought Paul was encouraging us to not lose heart. Seems like these are all reasons to lose heart!

Oh, actually Paul wisely serves us by not ignoring or avoiding the different grievous realities of suffering that we will encounter in pastoral ministry, east of Eden that will indeed tempt us to lose heart.

My fellow pastors, this is what we signed up for.

Ladies, this is what you signed up for when you said to your man, "I do."

Now, several of us (including myself) didn't read the contract carefully.

Oh my, who does?!

Apple was taking me through some contract the other day...

"You agree? Sure, agree, agree." I was just looking at it and thinking, "I could have just signed my whole life away and somebody is going to show up and say, 'Well you agreed, it's all ours now.'"

Who reads the contract?!

Who has time to read the contract?!

This isn't a footnote. This doesn't appear in fine print. Most of us can relate to the experience John Newton described in a letter that he wrote to a newly ordained pastor. Mr. Newton wrote,

"I'm glad to hear that you are ordained, and the Lord is about to fix you in a place where there is a prospect of you being greatly useful. You have doubtless, often anticipated in your mind the nature of service to which you are now called and made it the subject of consideration and prayer, but a distant view of the ministry is generally very different from what is found to be when we are actually engaged in it. If the Lord was to show us the whole beforehand, who that has a due sense of his own insufficiency and weakness would venture to

engage? He first draws us by a constraining sense of His love and by giving us an impression of the worth of souls, and leaves us to acquire a knowledge of what is difficult and disagreeable by a gradual experience. The Ministry of the Gospel, like the book, which the Apostle John ate, is a bitter-sweet, but the sweetness is tasted first. The bitterness is usually known afterwards. When we are so far engaged-there is no going back."

Oh, how good is that? How good is that? Is that not consistent with our experience?

My friends, regardless of whether you read the contract or not, there is no going back. At some point along the way, as the years pass, the catalog of Paul's hardships will be your hardships. Though our experience of suffering, obviously, doesn't compare to Paul's - to differing degrees, this list will be our experience in pastoral Ministry.

Every pastor experiences these hardships, but not every pastor is prepared for these hardships.

One of the reasons that Paul doesn't lose heart is that he didn't have a romantic, unrealistic expectation of the Ministry. Unrealistic expectations of ministry leave us vulnerable to all manner of disappointment and discouragement and weariness of soul, bitterness, resentment, we lose heart by not ignoring these hardships.

In composing this divinely inspired letter, Paul prepares us for these hardships so that we are not blindsided by these hardships. It's not as if affliction and bewilderment, persecution, being struck down - it's not as if they take place in sequence, one at a time, separated from each other by a period of time.

No, these can all be happening simultaneously. Some days, some weeks you can go four for four - but these are how God reveals our weakness and cultivates our dependence upon Him and our trust in Him revealing His surpassing power.

Serving Him will involve suffering, will involve suffering in all these forms to differing degrees, and this will take us to a place of weakness, take us to experiences of weakness. Experiences of weakness, we are not to fear, but instead embrace.

Even though we are tempted to lose heart, there are greater reasons to take heart in our weakness and suffering because of the surpassing sustaining power of God that Paul draws attention to and celebrates.

Actually, if you need permission at this point, if you need permission to respond aloud, this is your moment.

"We are afflicted, but not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are persecuted, but not forsaken. We are struck down, but not destroyed."

Notice, notice that, in each case, the anticipated result is unexpectedly reversed. Unexpectedly reversed to show that the surpassing sustaining power belongs to God and not to us.

Paul makes it clear that the only explanation for why he wasn't crushed, despairing, forsaken, and destroyed by all his suffering and given his weakness as a clay jar, is the only explanation, is the sustaining power of God.

In his commentary, Dane Ortland writes,

"The implication is, that without God's power, we would fold." Emotionally, psychologically, relationally, physically, without God at work, we would go into meltdown and throw in the towel. It would be too much. These are not light trials."

The trials that many of you have endured, the trials that many of you are presently enduring, these are not light trials.

Each of us can locate ourselves presently in one or more of these four categories. Oh, they will tempt us to lose heart. They will tempt us to give up, they will tempt us to throw in the towel, they will tempt us to fold. Paul makes eye contact with each of us this evening through this verse and encourages us to not lose heart and instead take heart.

Take heart because these trials do not have the last word in your life.

Paul encourages us to not lose heart and to instead take heart because God himself has the last word in our lives.

The last word in your life, the last word in my life, whether we are afflicted or perplexed, whether we are persecuted or struck down, or all of the above: the last word is, but not. That's the last word.

The last word is, but not. BUT NOT crushed, but not driven to despair, but not forsaken, but not destroyed.

This will be your experience as well. Not just the category and the catalog of hardships, but the sovereign, surpassing, sustaining grace of God.

Some of the scholars reference these categories as increasing in intensity so that the suffering as you're moving through the list intensifies, resulting in, culminating in, being struck down.

For years, I have not been able to read that phrase in particular, being struck down. I've not been able to read that without thinking about a particular moment in sports history.

There is a particular picture and I'm not showing the particular picture because I'm not interested in humiliating or embarrassing the individual, but there is a particular picture that endures in the history of heavyweight boxing.

Mike Tyson, who was feared and thought invincible, fought against an individual named Buster Douglas. A no-name fighter. No one gave Buster Douglas a chance against undefeated Mike Tyson.

Buster Douglas hit Mike Tyson with such ferocity that at one point, Mike Tyson was not only dropped to the canvas. The famous picture I'm talking about has Mike Tyson on the canvas in a position that, to that time, was foreign to his experience.

He is not only, obviously, completely disoriented. The force of Buster Douglas's punch has dislodged his mouthpiece and he's there on the canvas. He's trying to find his mouthpiece. He's reaching for his mouthpiece. I'm telling you, that bears a striking resemblance to what you can anticipate experiencing at some time - in pastoral Ministry - just unexpectedly struck down. You're looking for your mouthpiece. It's no longer in your mouth. You're looking for your Bible and you're having a hard time finding it.

By the way, when you get in this position, you're not alone. Just look around. There's a number of us there with you as well.

Really, there's just a number of us.

Is this your mouthpiece or mine? I'm not sure. It doesn't matter. Just find you a mouthpiece.

You get up from that experience and you make your way back to your corner and you know what you do? You throw in the towel. That's what you do. That's what I've done different times, just thrown in the towel.

Remember at one point I was at a stoplight and I was in the process of throwing in the towel, and I just stared. There was a crew of about 10 guys working on the road. I just began to look at them. I just started to envy them. It's only three of them working. There's like seven - about seven of them just leaning on shovels and I thought "That just looks so appealing. I got that skill. Give me a shovel. Look at those guys! They're just anonymous. They don't know anything about these categories. They don't know anything about affliction, and bewilderment, and persecution, and being struck down - that's just foreign to them."

It was appealing to me - I threw in the towel.

"I didn't sign up for this Lord."

I tell you I've done that a number of times. Every time the same thing happens, towel gets thrown right back at me by the Lord himself.

You can expect that towel to come right back at your head and just cover your head. The Lord says, *"Yes, you did. Yes, you did sign up for this. This is a but not moment for you. Yes, you have been struck down, C.J, but, no, you will not throw in the towel. You are tempted to lose heart, but written over your life is but not, but not."*

This passage, I think when rightly understood, it can function as smelling salts, smelling salts to the downcast, weary, fainting heart that's in the process of throwing in the towel.

These "but nots" remind us and they assure us of God sustaining grace, not His delivering grace, not His rescuing grace.

By the way, this is a critical distinction because I'd prefer delivering grace. I love rescuing grace. That's what I love. I love the stuff of Exodus. That's how I want to roll and that's how I would like you to roll on my behalf. Let's do the deliverance thing.

That's not what's being referred to here.

Now, we celebrate saving grace the most - and we should. We celebrate delivering grace when God removes some form of suffering from our lives.

Again, that's my preference. But, we must also learn to identify and celebrate sustaining grace as well.

In his commentary, Scott Huffman informs us why. He writes,

"The contrast of four, eight, and nine underscore that during this evil age--The contrast of four, eight, and nine underscore that during this evil age. It is endurance in the midst of adversity, not immediate, miraculous deliverance from it that reveals most profoundly the power of God."

Question.

As a card-carrying continuationist, do you believe that?

You should.

Have you taught your church to discern and celebrate God at work in the form of sustaining grace in their lives?

Have you taught your church that endurance in the midst of adversity, not immediate, miraculous deliverance from it, reveals most profoundly the power of God?

Listen, in each and every one of your churches, there are many living illustrations of this. Living illustrations are present in each and every church that is represented here.

Have you taught them to discern and appreciate the difference? Sustaining grace is made in the midst of their adversity. Do they understand that or are they preoccupied with the removal?

Now, listen, we pray for the removal. Not in any way encouraging you to not pray for the removal, but, brothers, we are very aware, are we not, that, often, He doesn't remove. Instead, He sustains.

Every Sunday, if you have this vantage point of your church, you know that throughout the congregation, hands are being lifted up by individuals who are suffering in severe ways, yet in their suffering, they are not angry at God. They are not charging God, instead, they are trusting in the sovereignty, and the wisdom, and the goodness of God. As pastors, we should be able to look out on those individuals and say, "That is profound power at work in that individual's life."

Profound power!

We should make our way to them. Yes, assure them that we are praying for the removal of whatever form of suffering they are enduring, but it doesn't end there. Inform them that God is not indifferent and God is not absent, but instead, profoundly present in power that can only be explained as the sustaining surpassing power of God.

Given Paul's personal weakness, given the severity of his suffering, the only explanation for his perseverance and his endurance is the sustaining power attributed to God alone.

That's why Paul doesn't lose heart. This is why you and I shouldn't lose heart, because listen, this is the only explanation for you and I not throwing in the towel when we've been tempted to do so.

Paul provides us here with this unexpected reversal. Why? So that we wouldn't lose heart, but instead, perceive the wonder of sustaining grace in our lives.

Then, finally, Paul interprets the experiences of verses 8 and 9, and he describes their discernible pastoral effect in verses 10 through 12.

Paul sums up and explains the purpose for all the paradoxical experiences in verses 8 and 9 with a radically Christ-centered statement in verses 10 through 12.

Mark Twain has famously said,

"Most people are bothered by those passages in scripture which they cannot understand. As for me, I have always noticed that the passages in scripture which trouble me most are those I understand."

I would just say this is one of those passages for me. I'm troubled by these verses. I'm troubled by these verses because they show me that this ministry Paul references in Verse 1, involves not only a call to proclaim the Gospel but also involves applying and embodying the message of the cross and resurrection in my life.

In Paul Barnett's commentary, he titled this passage, "***The Minister Handed over to Death***".

I appreciate the gentle intro...

The minister, this is what you signed up for, Handed over to Death.

"Always carrying in the body, the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies, for we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh."

Paul is using the image of death. It's a reference to his suffering. It's a reference to the catalog of hardship in Verses 8 and 9 to associate his suffering with the death of Jesus.

There is no misunderstanding this evening, Scott Huffman points out,

"Paul's life is not a second atonement, but a mediation of the death and life of Jesus." In his preaching and suffering, Paul stands between the glory of God and the life of the congregation (so do you) as an instrument, in God's hands to bring about new life among his people so that we're not giving our lives in a redemptive or an atoning sense for the flock, but we die to ourselves in our service of the church following the example of the chief shepherd."

Check out, check out the sweet and discernible effect of serving and suffering in Verse 12. The surprise for the Corinthians and perhaps for us this evening is revealed in Verse 12.

"Death is at work in us, but life in you, Corinthians."

Not life in Paul, but life in them, but Paul suffers or dies daily to give life, to give resurrection life to the Corinthians.

David Garland writes in his commentary,

"What helps Paul bear up under his load of suffering is his conviction that it bears fruit in the life of others."

This is what helps Paul bear up under his load of suffering, and my friends, this will help you bear up under your load of suffering: a conviction that it bears fruit in the life of others. This perspective, this reality, it should help us bear up under our load of suffering so that we don't lose heart in our service of God's people.

This is how a Gospel-centered local church is built.

If you look behind every genuinely fruitful church, here's what you'll find: A dying pastor or a dying pastoral team.

This is how it works.

God calls pastors, calls them to proclaim the Gospel, and also hands pastors over to death and suffering and then sustains them through it.

For what?

For the good of God's people.

Their suffering bears fruit in the lives of others.

Oh, D.A. Carson makes this point so well in his book, ***How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*** when he writes,

"Among the people of God, it is frequently the leaders who are called to suffer the most. How could it be otherwise? We serve a crucified Messiah. The more leaders are afflicted with weakness, suffering, perplexity and persecution, the more it is evident that their vitality is nothing other than the life of Jesus.

This has enormously positive spiritual effects on the rest of the church. The leader's death means the church's life. This is why the best Christian leadership cannot simply be appointed. It is forged by God himself in the fires of suffering, taught in the school of tears. There are no shortcuts. The leader's death, the leader's sacrifice, the leader's suffering, what does it mean? It means the church's life."

My friends, those in your church, they aren't just carefully listening to your sermons. They're also carefully studying your lives as well. They're studying you all the time, but particularly when you are suffering. They want to see if the Gospel makes a discernible difference in your life, not just your preaching. They want to see if you trust God. They want to see if you remain cheerful and charitable. They want to see if you endure and don't lose heart.

All pastors should view their suffering as part, a vital part, of their sermon preparation. All pastors should know that their serving and their suffering is not in vain. Listen, it is not in vain, but in ways we often can't perceive is bearing massive fruit in the lives of those we serve.

The leader's death means the church's life.

It is forged by God himself in the fires of suffering. It is taught in the school of tears. There are no shortcuts.

Paul was certain of and this is why Paul didn't lose heart in his suffering. This is why we must take heart in our suffering.

If you're wondering, perhaps wondering, how it all ended for Tom Carson. Well, even though Tom Carson was an ordinary pastor, and even though the man was very familiar with the catalog of suffering in Verses 8 and 9, I'm happy to inform you, Tom Carson did not lose heart. He did not lose heart because 'but not' was written over his life. The death that was at work in Tom Carson, it resulted in life for those he served and those he loved. It has resulted in fresh life for us this evening.

Dr. Carson describes how it ended for his dad when he writes,

"He was buried beside his wife under a joint tombstone. It was a simple design with a cross and a sheaf of wheat meant to evoke Jesus words, 'I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds.'

Tom Carson never rose very far in denominational structures, but hundreds of people testify how much he loved them. He never wrote a book, but he loved "The Book". He was never wealthy or powerful, but he kept growing as a Christian.

Yesterday's grace was never enough. He was not a farsighted visionary, but he looked forward to eternity. He was not a gifted administrator, but there's no text that says, 'By this, shall all men know that you are my disciples - if you are good administrators.'

His journals have many, many entries bathed in tears of contrition, but his children and grandchildren remember his laughter.

Only rarely did he break through his pattern of reserve and speak deeply and intimately with his children, but he modeled Christian virtues to them. He much preferred to avoid controversy than to stir things up, but his own commitments to restore confessionalism were unyielding, and in ethics, he was a man of principle.

His own ecclesiastical circles were rather small and narrow, but his reading was correspondingly large and expansive. He was not very good at putting people down, except on his prayer list. When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on television, no mention in Parliament, no attention paid by the nation.

In his hospital room, there was no one by his bedside.

There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again.

On the other side, all the trumpets sounded.

Dad won entrance to the only throne room that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man, he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor, because he was a forgiven man, and he heard the voice of Him, he longed to hear saying,

'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.'

My fellow pastor, when you make your way home from this conference to serve those for whom Christ died and to serve until the Lord Himself calls you home, we have every reason from this passage to take heart and not lose heart.

Let's pray.

Father, I pray for all those who are familiar with discouragement as a frequent companion, who are presently experiencing some form of affliction, bewilderment, persecution, who have been struck down, I pray that they would perceive the surpassing power of sustaining grace in their hearts and lives this very moment.

I pray they would be freshly strengthened as they realize the, "but not" that has been written over their lives. That the final word is not affliction, and bewilderment, and persecution, and being struck down.

The final word is, "But not" because you have the final word.

May there be fresh hope for each and every pastor here, and fresh wisdom from this passage so that we would all take heart and not lose heart.

In Jesus' name, amen.