

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

In our previous session on v1 we read that when he came to Corinth, the apostle Paul made a point of delivering his gospel message devoid of any glowing, impressive eloquence and human, societal wisdom. For him, the simple and powerful message of Christ crucified came first. Which brought to mind...

Most of us are comfortable referring to ourselves as a “follower” or “disciple” of Christ. Some of us are comfortable with the description of “servant” of Christ, and a few of us may even be comfortable with the more radical, yet accurate term “slave” of Christ. But how many of us who accept those descriptions really *live* that way?

If Paul *had* come to the Corinthians with a message wrapped in “superiority of speech” and human, societal “wisdom” that message would have been all about *him*—or at least a demonstration and exaltation of everything temporal and earthbound.

Acknowledging Christ as Lord means submitting to Him in all things as our Master, and Paul makes the point here and elsewhere that this goes beyond simple obedience to His will, but includes, as well, *always putting Him first*. Paul expands on this in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes,

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

In this passage he refers to the gospel as a glowing thing, a treasure entrusted to the servants of Christ, calling it “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” But by comparison to this glowing, radiating treasure, we carry it around in base, dispensable, earthen jugs:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; (2 Corinthians 4:7)

John the Baptist put it another way—and more succinctly:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30.)

As slaves of Christ, *we* are not the message; *we* are not the treasure. That all belongs to our Master and Lord, Christ Jesus. We are just the ugly, throw-away clay pots that deliver the message. Paul in Corinth—and everywhere he served his Lord—knew this, always putting Christ and His gospel before himself.

v2

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

In v2 he reinforces this. But I have always thought this was an odd way to express the thought. To my ears, “I determined to know nothing...except...” sounds like he is resolved to wipe every bit of knowledge from his brain except the crucified Christ. Gordon Fee helps us with this.

“To know nothing” does not mean that he left all other knowledge aside, but rather that he had the gospel, with its crucified Messiah, as his singular focus and passion while he was among them.

That is, Paul stayed on-point, on-message. And if we broaden this out just a bit, to encompass *all* the messages from God’s word that a local pastor might bring to a congregation, we can gain a valuable lesson from the apostle’s *modus operandi*.

John MacArthur: We should not come to church to hear the pastor’s opinions about politics, psychology, economics, or even religion. We should come to hear a word from the Lord *through* the pastor. God’s word edifies and unifies; human opinions confuse and divide.

To a brand new congregation living in a worldly, cosmopolitan city, the apostle delivered the clear message of Christ crucified, uncluttered by human opinion.

v3

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

In v3 we once again find ourselves in scriptural territory for which there are many interpretations—primarily around what Paul means by such terms as “weakness,” “fear,” and “much trembling.” Even before that, interpreters cannot decide whether Paul *arrived* in that condition (NIV) or was in that condition after he got there (NASB, KJVs, ESV). I would like to focus on just two of the possible interpretations, but let’s first examine the words themselves.

weakness = *asthenia* (as-then’-ee-ah) = from <G772> (asthenes); **feebleness (of body or mind)**; by implication **malady**; moral frailty :- **disease, infirmity**, sickness, weakness.

fear = *phobos* = **from a primary *phobomai* (to be put in fear, or to be put to flight)**; alarm or fright :- be afraid, + exceedingly, fear, **terror**.

much trembling = *polys* (pol-oos’) *tromos* = from <G5141> (tremo); a “trembling”, i.e. **much quaking with fear** :- + tremble (-ing).

Paul could have been using these terms in a figurative, or we might say a “spiritualized” sense, as he does elsewhere. We will look at that interpretation in a moment. But I first want us to consider a more physical, more human and emotional interpretation. For that we need to return to Acts 16.

It had not been an easy journey for the apostle, since landing in Macedonia. In Philippi he, along with his companion Silas, had been beaten and jailed.

Read Acts 16:22-24.

Because of trouble stirred up by local Jews, Paul's stay in Thessalonica was relatively brief; under cover of darkness they left the city and went to Berea, where the citizens welcomed them, but some of those same troublemakers from Thessalonica came down to do the same in Berea.

Read Acts 17:13-15.

We too often think of the apostle Paul in terms of his theology and doctrine, forgetting his humanity. Without forgetting his successes in these cities in sharing the gospel and forming new churches, we also must not forget the effect these trials and persecutions had on mere flesh. There were, of course, the *physical* effects of being beaten and imprisoned, but I believe the spiritual and emotional effects would have also taken their toll.

By this point, Paul had been repeatedly run out of town, and now, placed on a ship that would take him down the coast to Athens, he was separated from his companions. The only thing worse than suffering discouragement is suffering it alone. And once he arrived in Athens, his spirit did not improve.

Read Acts 17:16.

And after delivering one of his finest sermons, response was tepid, at best. Some became believers, but at his mention of the resurrection many sneered at him. Ultimately, to the best of our knowledge, Paul did not found a church in Athens, but subsequently departed for Corinth. And at this point permit me to flesh-out, so to speak, this story with a portion from a devotional I wrote in an issue of *The Journey*, in 2004.

It was an itinerary that would bring anyone to their knees. So it must have been a weary and possibly low-spirited apostle who entered the cosmopolitan, and immoral, city of Corinth. Paul would not have been interested in the flashy distractions of this metropolis, nor the companionship of one of its famous temple prostitutes. He would instead—after months of travel and fleeing for his life—be searching for a place of rest and restoration with people of like mind and spirit.

People like Priscilla and Aquila.

Just imagine, if you will, being so terribly far from home, bereft even of your traveling companions, bone-weary from being constantly challenged, ridiculed, and pursued. You find yourself now in a strange and alien city, where licentiousness is not only permitted, but the official religion. Imagine, evening is approaching and the dying sun is burnishing the streets of bustling Corinth a deep orange. Strangers jostle and bump against your shoulders, eager shopkeepers beckon you closer, hoping to separate you from what little currency you have. The evening air is filled with the disorienting stench of this foreign culture. Nothing is familiar, nothing comfortable.

Out of desperation, you ask a street vendor where you might find a prosperous tent-maker in the city; you tell him you are of that trade and seeking employment. With a dismissive wave of his hand he tells you to go down this street, then that street, until you reach a house that looks like this. With the mumbled directions repeating through your head, you wend your way through the darkening streets and alleyways, until at last you stand before the previously described address.

Timidly you rap against the heavy, wooden door; loud voices and angles of lamplight seep through the cracks that outline the door's timbers. Abruptly the gate swings open, and before you know it you are standing in the midst of friends—brothers and sisters to whom moments before you were unknown. For you have found not only fellow tentmakers, but the open arms of fellow believers.

I suggest that Paul, dictating what in our Bible are the opening verses of Chapter Two, would hearken back to those days in his second missionary journey, traveling from Berea on ship to Athens, then on to Corinth, remembering his physical and emotional weakness, dispirited, alone, and perhaps trembling with fear over what next might be required of him by the Lord.

I think the foregoing, more "human" explanation for Paul's words, is background, subtext to the more substantial literary, contextual purpose for his statement.

weakness

While it is true that *asthenia* can refer to sickness or physical infirmity, Paul uses it in his Corinthian correspondence as an antonym to "power," which would be, as translated in v3, not sickness but weakness.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-44.

Here he contrasts the weakness of the natural body to the power of the spiritual body—the resurrected body, the *glorified* body.

fear and much trembling

If we stay with the same context for Paul's reference to being "in fear and in much trembling," he could be drawing a contrast of himself to the apparent confidence of the cultured orator, of which the Corinthians were becoming enthralled.

Again, we could read the text in 2 Corinthians in this light:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Look back at what he wrote to the church near the end of Chapter One; Paul is explicitly addressing the members of the church: "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble" (v26), but implicitly, we know from the context that he includes himself in what follows.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-29.

And this theme continues in our text, flowing naturally out of v3.

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:3-5)

For Paul it was *God*, it was the gospel of Christ crucified that was strong and powerful. In contrast to it, the rest of us are but weak and trembling clay pots.