

The Big Picture

Part 4 – Power

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

⁵ For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;

⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,

¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.

¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

As we travelled around Australia we became more and more aware that in many places the church was doing it tough. While we had the joy of visiting some churches full of life and vitality we also drove past a lot of churches that were once the centre of thriving communities and are now empty. Country churches have particularly been hit by a double whammy of people moving away from their farms while at the same time people have been walking away from their faith.

We were visiting a Uniting Church one Sunday and a very lovely lady was telling me about a few of the things they were doing and she finished her story with a comment and a lovely smiley face, "I suppose we'll keep doing that until we have to close". I nodded and smiled with this lovely lady, but I was shocked. How has it come to this? That Christians feel so utterly powerless that the end of the mission of the church seems somehow inevitable? What Bible have they been reading all these years? Because my Bible tells me that we are far from a powerless people, and that's really the final message God put on my heart. We may be facing a lot of challenges, but we are not a powerless people. Our God is more powerful than our challenges as Paul says:

⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:4-5)

There is no better person to teach us that truth than Paul the apostle, who had a kitchen sink of trouble thrown at him throughout his life but who never lost heart.

(What we sometimes forget is that the Bible was not originally written in numbered chapters and verses. That chapter divisions were not included until the 13th century and verses in the 15th century. Which meant that while people tried to divide the Bible into natural sections, occasionally we find chapter endings and beginnings interrupting the flow of a writer's thoughts. Which is what happens at the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians, where we should really read the last verse of one chapter and the first verse of the following chapter together :)

¹⁸ And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. ¹ Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:1)

All through 2 Corinthians 4, Paul affirms both how tough life can be and how powerful Jesus is. That the way to fight against losing heart, or losing hope, or losing confidence in difficult times is to focus on Jesus, on the transforming power of Jesus. Because in times of crises, focus is so, so important.

Research into maritime disasters teach us that a whole lot of people lose their lives needlessly because they focus on the reason the ship is sinking instead of getting into a life boat. This is a human thing, this is an anxious controlling thing, we think that if only we understood what's going on we can fix it, when what we really need

to do is save our life. In these days of crises, we need more than ever before to put our lives in a safe place and the safest place is a clear and strong faith focus, something that Jesus emphasised in the training of his disciples. On countless occasions Jesus would place his disciples in challenging situations and then ask them the critical question; where is your faith in all of this? Let me give you an example.

³⁷ *A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.*

³⁸ *Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"*

³⁹ *He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.*

⁴⁰ *He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"*

⁴¹ *They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:37-41)*



In these days of change we can be tempted to feel as if Jesus is asleep on the job. That he is snoring his head off on a nice comfy pillow while we are going through difficult stuff. Except that can't possibly be true:

¹ *I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from?*

² *My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

³ *He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber;*

⁴ *indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. (Psalms 121:3-4)*

Jesus is not asleep, it may feel like that at times but God's counter challenge to us is ""Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Don't you know says Jesus if you only have a tiny bit of faith, like a tiny mustard seed you have access to power, you can say to a whole mountain of trouble just move out of the way and it will? (Matthew 17:20). Jesus question to His disciples was; is your focus in your faith or is your focus in your fear? Do we trust that Jesus is in our boat or are we focussing on the storm around about us? Are we focussing on the power of the lion and the Lamb of heaven or are we focussing on a storm of bad news, negative messages and disrespectful attitudes? Paul acknowledges that sometimes we do feel fragile and look fragile, he calls us Jars of clay, fragile ordinary looking containers, but Paul knew that appearances are totally deceptive. Paul knew he looked fragile and ordinary but he also knew he was a son of God and he had access to almost unlimited power.

⁷ *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Corinthians 4:7-9)*

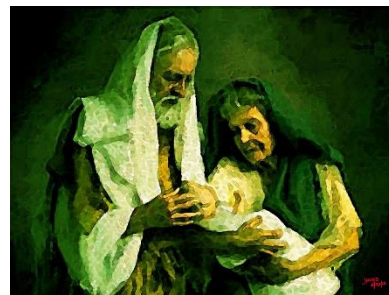
¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:16)

God has placed his awesome power in our clay pot lives and this truth is continuously emphasised throughout the story of God and his people, that God gives power to the powerless.

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. (Isaiah 40:29)

This needs to be strong in our heart because the feelings of powerlessness, the perception of powerlessness, is like a river of fear. It arises out of an atavistic fear, which means a deep and ancient fear within us. A fear of being destroyed, annihilated, of losing control, extinguished, overcome and overwhelmed. In the case of church I see people struggle with the secret fear that they are caught in a tsunami of social change that will dismantle their faith and sweep their church away but remember we have *this treasure in jars of clay to show this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. (2 Corinthians 4:7).*

We have to remember our heritage of power. We have to remember that our faith has its roots in a single fragile couple, a husband and wife, Abraham and Sarah, who were very old when they were told that they would be the founders of a great nation, which seemed so absurd to them that they laughed and laughed (Genesis 18, 19), but there was a treasure in their old clay pots, there was a power available to them and they became the parents of the nation of Israel.



Our faith has its roots in a nation of slaves, who had no power or possibility for a different life except that they were God's people and God heard their cry and all God needed to defeat the greatest and most powerful empire of the time was one person with the treasure of faith in his clay pot life (Exodus 1-12).



Our faith has its roots in the life of one young man who heard a giant mock his people and witnessed a whole army of Israelites living out of their fear and he decided that he would much prefer to live out of his faith than out of his fear so he challenged that giant and he prevailed (1 Samuel 17).

Our faith has its roots in the brutality of a cross and the silence of a grave, where the most powerful empire of all time attempted to exercise power over Jesus only to discover they had no idea about the power they were dealing with, a power that conquered even death itself and would conquer the Roman Empire three centuries later.



¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

A few months ago as I was praying over the struggles of the church in Australia, and I could hear God's Spirit, repeatedly and lovingly telling me not to be afraid, not to be worried and not to be anxious. That He who is with us is greater than anything that can come against us (1 John 3:20, 4:4). That although it appears as if our power is rapidly diminishing this has always been the sweet spot for Christians. We have always been at our best when the only power we have to call upon is the power of God and throughout our history we have discovered that very power in and through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9.) Today God is calling us to focus and simplify, not to become distracted by the world, by politics because that's the way the world does business, we do business through the power of God and face tomorrow with faith and not with fear.

If you have any doubts that God is not up to the challenge then have a very close look at the church in China. We think it's getting a little hard to do church in Australia, but from 1966 to 1979, the communist party in China closed down all churches, temples, and mosques and embarked on a rigorous campaign of imprisonment, torture and at times death for church leaders and members. The only other country to attempt a complete eradication of all religion was Albania. Even the Soviet Union kept at least a few hundred churches open. Not so China.



Yet today Christians are the largest single group in China outside of the communist party, growing in numbers from around half a million believers when the communists took over in 1949 to over 60 million today. At this rate, by 2030, Christians in China will exceed 200 million believers, surpassing the United States with the largest Christian population in the world. All this in a country which attempted to completely and utterly suppress and stifle Christianity.

So what can we learn from our Chinese brothers and sisters as we go through our own unique set of challenges? How in their incredible weakness and vulnerability before the onslaught of Communist persecution did they find the power to overcome? Over the years I have come to recognise three striking characteristics of Chinese believers, which are their:

1. Courageous faithfulness
2. Steadfast trust and love of the word of God
3. Prayer

These three things have released amazing power in China and they will release amazing power in Pittwater because it is not a Chinese power that has been released it is God's power, but if we want that power we also have to walk that walk.

1. Courageous faithfulness

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23)

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. (Ephesians 6:16)

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10)

Live in your faith, whatever you are doing in thought word or deed, let your faith rise up. When you watch TV, movies, listen to the news, deal with family, love friends, meet the challenge of work, whatever you are doing, live in your faith. When we live in our faith we open our spirit to God. When we live in our flesh we close our spirit to God. When we open our Spirit to God the power of God is available to you and to the church. To be faithful is to discover in the core of our being an utter trust for God, what is in the core of your being?

2. Steadfast trust and love of the word of God

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (Psalms 119:105)

...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, (Ephesians 5:25b-26)

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:3)

Live in the word, read the word, fill your mind and heart with scriptures. The book of Hebrews teaches us that the word of God is powerful and sustaining. Paul taught that the word of God washes us and changes us. The psalmist taught that the word is a light that will guide us no matter how confusing the world becomes or how difficult the challenges we face. Do you love the word of God? Do you go to God's word before anything else or is it your last resort? Do you give priority to reading and studying God's word?

3. Prayer

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. (Psalms 107:28-29)

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

When God talks about prayer He is not talking about a religious ritual, God is talking about a way of life, a way of seeing the world and a way of power in dealing with the world. Powerful Prayer comes out of a personal spiritual attitude in which every word we speak declares our complete and utter dependence on God. That is the heart of prayer. So come to prayer, whenever you can, wherever you are, come to prayer, because when you draw near to God he will draw near to you (James 4:8).

To conclude, the Big Picture is that our heritage and our destiny is not powerlessness but the power of God so let us not be afraid. When John the evangelist was in prison in Patmos I suppose he had every right to wonder where God's power was, in answer God sent John a vision of power, a vision of Jesus, the son of man, the lion and lamb of heaven:

¹³ and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. (Revelation 1:13-17)