

Text: 1 Cor 2.1-5
St Stephen's

9/20/2008
Sat/Sun

The Ministry of Weakness

Well, I finally got back to visit my grandson a couple of weeks ago.



He's two months old, and he's added 6 lbs! Here I am giving him some good advice on how to grow a double chin.

We want to get an early start on helping Ian grow up, and as there was a big game last week between the Steelers and the Browns, so we got Ian ready...



You can see he is a little bummed in the 4th quarter here, as the Steelers were winning...

1 Corinthians 2

The Corinthians are infected with pride, spiritual pride... The **headline** for their pride was the word '**wisdom**', which in ancient Greek culture

was shorthand for an **exalted and secret knowledge** of God and the mysteries of spiritual life.

When Paul brought the gospel it seemed to many of them that this gospel was exactly the **secret knowledge** that they were looking for. Then they did something very destructive with it. They thought that because they had this secret knowledge, they were **better than everyone else**. Say "Better than..." Better than the unbelievers around them. Better than their leaders. Better than each other. Better than their Apostle. Better than the Bible. And so they fought and quarreled, and ripped up the church.

There is a problem with thinking you are smarter than everyone else.

There is a great **story about a boy scout and a molecular biologist and a pastor who were taking a small plane ride**. Half way through the flight the **pilot** got out of his seat and said, "the engine has died, we are going to crash, there are only three parachutes and I'm taking one!" He opened the door and jumped out! The **molecular biologist** looked at the scout and the pastor and said, 'You probably don't know this, but I am the smartest man in the world and I know all about the secrets of life and the world really needs me.' And he grabs another parachute and jumps out. The **pastor and the scout** look at each other. The **pastor** says, 'Son, I've lived a long life, God has been very good to me, and I know I will be with him when I die. You take the last chute and go.' The **boy scout** replies, "No need to do that, pastor." "Why not?", said the pastor. "Well," the boy scout said, "The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack and jumped out with it. We still have two chutes left."

Sometimes you think you are so smart and then find yourself freefalling through space on a collision course with life – and you realize you are not so smart after all! Part of the task of the gospel is to **free us from our pride**.

So God deliberately shapes **a three part strategy for his gospel** that will heal our pride.

Part 1: God's Crucified Savior

Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles

1 Corinthians 1:22-23

There is no doubt about **what kind of savior that Israel** was looking for – a king like David, a liberator, a leader who could rally the people and throw off the Roman yoke. A charismatic kind of guy who could rally the people against the Roman oppressors and restore Israel to her ancient glory.

There is no doubt about **what kind of savior the Greeks** were looking for- someone who was eloquent, elite, articulate, smooth – who could speak persuasively about high and lofty things, who could move crowds with secret knowledge and superior truth.

But what did they get?



A crucified Messiah! You have to take a moment and lock into this and recapture **how offensive** the idea of **a crucified messiah** was to the Jews – and to the surrounding gentile culture.

- The **Jews were looking for power**. And the cross is not power. It is weakness. Where is the power in a Jew who can't keep himself off a Roman cross?
- The **Gentiles were looking for wisdom**, but a crucified

savior doesn't calculate. Where is the wisdom in that?

This becomes what Paul would call, *'the offense of the cross'*. The offense is an **intentional contradiction**. It is designed to **deliberately offend something offensive** in us – the idea that we are smart enough or strong enough to deal with life on our own.

So what God does is to **take something that appears to us weak and foolish and absurd**, the **crucifixion**, and make it the place where he pours out his mercy and his strength. The result is that...

the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:25

Part 2: God's Ordinary People

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 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;

1 Corinthians 1:26-27 (ESV)

His second attack on their pride is the Corinthians themselves. Paul says that God picked most of the believers from what we would call the **under-privileged culture**. They hadn't had the best educations, the best advantages, the most opportunity.

And Paul is saying that **this is an intentional thing**. God is using the kind of people that we are **to end human boasting**.

Have you **ever been to a club** where you can't get in unless you know the **best people** and make the **most money** and have the **right connections**? The waiters just kind of stand around with their noses up in the air. I've known a lot of clubs like that over the years. It's **the 'we're better' club**. Lots of clubs are formed like that.

But **not the church!** He is saying that God has a preference for **normal**

people, **ordinary** people, **broken** people, **suffering** people. It's the place where you lay your pride down at the door. There is no other way in!

Part 3: God's Weak Ministry

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

God's third attack on their pride is Paul himself. "*When I came to you...*" The Greeks valued sophisticated, eloquent speakers who were wise and spoke of high mysteries of God. Paul planted this church, but others who came in after him were eloquent, gifted, charming speakers. Paul didn't match up. **They criticized the Apostle for this.**

For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

2 Corinthians 10:10

Paul confirms that he really did come to them in weakness:

I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom...

2 Corinthians 2.3-4

Paul's weakness:

- Perhaps it was **his worry about the young churches**. They were having a tough time; it was persecution and hardship. Some had been arrested, some had been ostracized. The Apostle was worried for them.
- Perhaps because of his **physical frailty**. It was back on his first mission journey that bodily weakness had become an issue. "**A thorn in the flesh**" was his phrase for it. That was years ago – years of hard work and hard travel and deprivation and disease ridden regions – and on top of that he had been frequently arrested, beaten, whipped, stoned, and jailed.

- Perhaps because of his **loneliness**. Silas and Timothy and Luke had stayed behind in Macedonia when Paul traveled south to Athens. And now winter had set in, preventing them from rejoining Paul in Corinth. He was on his own in Corinth, and he felt it.
- Certainly it was his **message**: *For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.* 1 Corinthians 2:2 (NLT)

The whole picture was one of **weakness**. Paul is worried, overwhelmed, frail and lonely – and he is speaking a message about a crucified Jesus. To them this was **a sure sign that God was not with him**.

What he finds – and he is reminding the Corinthians of this – is that in a surprising way, an astounding way, **God mapped it out just like this** as he first preached to these proud Corinthians and as he later pastored them.

What he found was that the weakness of the **cross** would **clear out their pride**. And the weakness of his **ministry** would **make room for God's strength**.

That had become a **principle of ministry** for him. **A principle of life** for him. He had learned it earlier in his missionary journeys when he was sick, and when God didn't answer his prayers for healing. Three times he had prayed and gotten no answer. And then the Lord spoke to him:

he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Do you know what qualifies you for ministry?

Being ordinary. Normal. Weak. Broken. You've just stepped out of an airplane 15,000 feet above the earth with a backpack in your hands.

Just tell me, *"I can't do it. I don't know what to say. I trip over my words. I'm inadequate for the job."* Exactly! It's evidence that God has got room to work.