**2 CORINTHIANS – ‘HIS STORY 5’ - WHY I DON’T GIVE UP!**

The new testament is a compilation of books each with a story or message, and we are asking what is the essential message of each book. The gospels provide four eyewitness accounts of Jesus life and teaching on living in the Kingdom. Acts tells the story of the early believers as they take this message out; confront, communicate, experience powerful community and God confirms this with signs and wonders by the Holy Spirit. Romans confronts me with my desperate need for being saved. It tells me the basis upon which God can relate to me in our broken condition saving me by the cross. I’ve learned that I don’t have to commit some of the biggest sins to be at odds with God, I break God’s moral law every day and deserve judgement. But God’s plan is to forgive me because of Jesus, something I don’t deserve and can never earn. By faith, 1 Corinthians grounds the gospel message in an actual city where new Christians struggle to live out their faith among godless paganism, loose morality and eloquent false teachings. The letter said; Keep Christ and his powerful gospel central, a gospel which sounds foolish to the rational mind. Practice serving and using the gifts God has given you and remember the greatest gift is the gift of love…. it’s what makes your community attractive to the onlooker. 1 Corinthians is a record of a bloody battle to be fought inside us, where the Holy Spirit controls weakness – where our strengths are harnessed with God’s Holy Spirit.

So this morning we come to 2 Corinthians, where Paul opens his heart to us and shares what I think is one of life’s greatest lessons. Paul was under attack by those who wanted to discredit him, accusing him of changing his mind, of writing confrontational letters from a safe distance and then being weak in person. His apostleship was questioned and he was a hunted man. To each of these unjust accusations, Paul answers in this amazing book of the Bible. You know it’s a wonder he doesn’t just go – I give up! I have so many people trying to cut me down. I’m not going to put up with this. So I’ve entitled the message today – Why I don’t give up! There is a danger of two extreme opposites for those who teach on the Bible. Those who parade their internal struggles and failings, and tell you about their journey on a weekly basis. You sit week by week hearing how their week has gone. And sometimes you say….. don’t tell me about yourself – teach the Word! And the other extreme is where all you get is Bible verses and teaching that is never apparently located inside the experience of the one speaking. Both extremes are not helpful. The messenger can get in the way of the message. What is required is a life that backs up the teaching and transparency that conveys humanity and realism. I think Paul tells it about right. We get a rare insight into how he managed to keep going even in the face of incredible opposition, heartache, physical weakness and character assassination, Paul had every reason to give up – but he kept serving God and living out the faith. The essential message of 2 Corinthians, Paul knew that whatever wounds he experienced from people during his life – they were not his worst problem. His greatest challenge would come in something common to both he and you and me. Your worst problem is not what people do to you, what happens to you or what people say about you….it’s what is inside you! Understand this, people can do whatever to you….and you can keep going.

Today people want solutions and answers to their problems. We can treat the gospel in the same way, a quick fix, ‘job done’ kind of experience. When what is required – is more like a deep diagnosis of the soul that needs constant treatment, daily restoration and rebuilding from the ground up, now that’s a lifetime gospel message. Not a quickie prayer behind the bike sheds! Paul was told - no matter what happens in your life remember this – I’ve called you in your waywardness and hatred of these Jesus people to a new life. No matter what people do to you…..you’re serving me! No matter what hardships you will face… it’s me you’re to keep your eyes on! You are never to forget where you came from and what you were…. that’s why Paul says on another occasion – I’m the greatest sinner of all! Why I never give up serving is because God never gives up on me!

OK, let's go quickly through the book and pick out some of the highlights. I’m going to mention five of them quickly.

1. **We are comfort receivers and givers when trouble and trials come**

The reason why you face issues in life is so you can be changed and then used to be a blessing. What you receive from God you then pass on to others. We were crushed and overwhelmed – but we didn’t give up, and then we became a blessing to others – even in our pain and trials. Yes, while your trials may shape and change you they are not only for you, they are for you to be able to help someone else through. But we learn to rely on God, not ourselves. We learn to rely on God’s wisdom. We learn to look up to the unseen world and keep going.

1. **We are captives to God in his procession of triumph**

The picture here is a Roman victory march and all the soldiers walk up the main parade. And at the end of the soldier’s procession and parade comes the enemy captives who have been defeated. They are walking to their death – there is the smell of death because it’s the end for them. Pauls is saying here – when we become followers of Jesus we are like those who walk at the end of the death parade – because we have been captivated by God for his purposes. The smell he says is not death but a fragrance of life. Because we no longer live for ourselves but for Him! It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me!!!

1. **We are carriers of a glorious treasure**

Even though we are weak containers like jars. So how does it feel to carry inside you the very life of God? Yes, we are weak, our jars are not strong but God has put inside us the gift of his life. And we carry it carefully. We carry it respectfully. We carry it wanting not to disappoint the Father who has entrusted this to us. More and more this shining of God wants to shine out of us, but we cover it up too much. We hide it inside us and wrap around us all kind of covers so we don’t look different. But friends we are different. And yes our jars are fragile, so Paul goes on with another picture, he says you are not just a container but you’re a living tent which one day will become a permanent house.

1. **We are canvas dwellers looking forward to real houses** **– new bodies**

This should encourage us. Living here is like living in a tent, it’s just temporary – I’m just passing through. My home is not here. The tent was a reminder to Abram of the need to be mobile and ready to move when God said to. The *tent was not home*. Home is where the house is truly being built. This body is just for now but a better one is coming. Get used to living in a temporary tent. Some of us have tried to dress up our tents….but friends they are just temporary housing!

1. **We are copies of Jesus and a new way to do life**

Paul is trying to get across to these believers with these wonderful pictures and here is another. You are God’s exhibit. What does Jesus look like today? Well, he looks like you! The Father wants *to put Jesus on display in your life* for others to see. He is making you something to show off to the world what his glory looks like. He wants people to be living examples of his life inside them. Remember it was when the early Church reflected Jesus even in the face of martyrdom – people wanted to join up.

That’s why you don’t live a life of immorality, go to court, get caught up in gossip, slander, arrogance, hate and all that kind of thing. Because God is saying to people who don’t know Him…. see my family. That’s what grace looks like. That’s what forgiveness looks like. That’s what healing looks like. That’s what community and caring looks like. That’s what unconditional love looks like. That’s what mercy looks like. That’s what generosity looks like. That’s what never giving up looks like. That’s what being faithful looks like.

So the book now turns to something more personal where Paul opens his heart and life story to us. “We are misunderstood, mistreated and misrepresented.” OK, now we come to the second part of 2 Corinthians and the content changes….and Paul has to speak to some specific issues and accusations made against him. When you are a ministry leader you become a target. If Satan can take out leaders he can do much damage. Here, in summary, Paul teaches about this spiritual battle…

FIVE principles(s) for leadership:

We try not to be a stumbling block to anyone….by our daily choices

We try to patiently endure suffering….as an example

We don’t seek recognition and honour for what we do

We are careful with money and finance…be seen to be doing what is right

We immerse our strengths in spirit controlled weakness

You see, some were accusing Paul of being in the ministry for personal gain. Others accused Paul of being timid in person but bold, forceful and demanding when writing from a distance. You read this and you wonder why Paul just didn’t go…. look I've had enough of this. People discrediting me, disrespecting me, purposely seeking to undermine me. Teaching false gospel with ‘live as you like now’. But no, he shares his heart for the Church in its waywardness, as God does, He writes to them as a Father would – longing for them to turn back to him.

These false leaders speak eloquently, a gospel of free loose living and cheap grace and undermine Paul’s teaching. Paul finishes his letter by saying - ‘My credentials are not my learning or my suffering but the people who have come to faith through my proclaiming Jesus. When it comes to pedigree study and degrees – I have more. When it comes to suffering hardship and pain I have faced more. When it comes to visions, dreams and revelations – I have had some that I cannot even put into words. But none of these qualifies me to share the message of Jesus. It is only the call and commissioning of God on my life….it’s what I am, it’s who I am, it’s my commission from God. Can you say that too?

Inside what you’re thinking this is laughable that I would compare you to the great Apostle, but wait a moment – is not the same principle at work in you and me? Haven’t you received a commission from God? **Matthew 28.19-20**

And to keep me grounded and very human – God has reminded me - A thorn in my flesh, probably some kind of physical ailment. Every day I need God’s help to live with this that is never taken away…. because it reminds me about needing God’s grace. So, I boast in my weakness that His power may rest on me. My tent is imperfect and it's wearing out, but it’s working OK for what I need.

Paul finishes with a question. What will I find when I come to you? Will I find that you doubt my sincerity, that I have not lived a life of transparency and openness, that I have taken advantage of you in any way? Will I find that you have believed a lie about me that has side-tracked you? Will I find jealousy, anger, selfishness, quarrelling, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder? Have you really heard and changed from your Corinthian ways?

Examine yourselves and see if your faith is real. I want to come and encourage and strengthen you – but if you refuse to change from your old ways of living – I will need to come and rebuke you. The real kind of Jesus followers – will not have easy lives.

They might be misrepresented, misunderstood and maligned. They might be oppressed, beaten, imprisoned and rejected. But it's what you do when this happens to you that is the most telling. Will you be offended and give up? Or will you say to yourself, ‘Thank you Jesus that I am considered worthy of suffering in this way’? Are you truly born into this heavenly family of God or do you just have a form of religion by no power?

Because the real thing bleeds! Because the real thing gives! Because the real thing shines!

We are recipients of suffering for a purpose. We are captives on a death march for Jesus.

We are carriers of God’s power and glory. We are canvas dwellers but the house is coming.

We are copies of a new way of living. Because the real thing doesn’t give up when trial, trouble or difficulty comes – it has set its heart on another unseen world and is taking shape slowly as the Church here is changing from what we are now to what we will become.