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## how to not lose heart

Twice in 2 Corinthians 4 Paul writes 'we do not lose heart'. In the surrounding chapters, he not only gives us some practical tips about how to do this, he also explains why it is something of a miracle that he remains in good heart. From this second letter to the church in Corinth, there is no doubt that his work of leadership has been very tough indeed. There are lists of his sufferings and pressures but these verses illustrate it most clearly to me.

'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death.' *2 Corinthians 1:8-9.*

No one would argue with Paul's 'right' to be downhearted, yet somehow amid the stonings, beatings, anxiety and sleeplessness he managed to 'not lose heart'. This resonates with the beginning and ending of a prayer letter that I received from Canon Andrew White today.

'Greetings from Baghdad. The tragedy and joy of this place continues. In the last day it seems greater than ever ... We continue to work in this broken but inspiring land and I will not leave it.'

Proverbs 4:23 holds the iconic exhortation 'Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it'. Let's see if we can pick up some tips from Paul in 2 Corinthians that help us do just that as Christian leaders.

### Knowing our dependency

'This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead' (1:9); 'On him we have set our hope' (1:10). This is strong language here – Paul isn't just saying that a product of tough times is the benefit of resilience; he seems to be implying that God allowed the suffering in order to toughen him up. Elsewhere he speaks of suffering leading to endurance and hope, and in these chapters develops the thought stream that unjust, unexpected and uncomfortable times can produce a profound reliance on God if we let them. Christian leaders need this – what use is a leader who believes that he or she can do God's work with their own wisdom and resources alone (and maybe for their own glory)? We could choose to rely on him right now even if life isn't tough: to move in our prayers to expressing utter dependency and relinquishing self-sufficiency. Despite his learning, Paul claims no competency of his own, it is all from God (3:4-6).

### Never walk alone

All of these early chapters are written in the 'we' form. 'We were under pressure ... we speak ... we are very bold ... we do not distort ... we have this treasure ... we do not lose heart.' In



contrast, chapter 2 verse 12 is in the 'I' form. 'The Lord had opened a door for me' to preach the gospel in Troas; but he then goes on to say that as he had lost track of Titus, so he moved on instead to Macedonia to look for him. Can this be right? God gave him an opportunity for ministry and he didn't take it because his partner was missing and didn't want to go it alone? Examples of followers of Jesus being commissioned to solo ministry are fairly rare in the New Testament so why might we think that leadership can be a solitary exercise? Are there areas of leadership where we are solo, separate, independent, lonely even and vulnerable to unhealthy isolation? Might we pause in our leadership long enough to seek out our own Titus, Barnabas, Dave or Eileen?

### Don't look down

Despite being a sinner, he has a healthy sense of his own eternal glory. There is nothing in these chapters that belittles his calling. According to chapter three his ministry is glorious. The ministry of the old Jewish covenant written on stones was pretty glorious, but this one, written on human hearts, is out of this world.

Our humanness can tempt us to see our leadership calling in a much less glorious light. 'My church is rather small ... I am only a very part-time leader ... I'm not as successful as ... people don't really notice what I do ...' These reference points have very little place in Paul's language. He is by grace a competent minister of a life-giving gospel who is gradually being transformed into the likeness of Jesus with an ever increasing capacity to reflect God's unsurpassed and unfading glory! And none of that has to do with his status, success or pride; it is all about God's grace. So when we are tempted to be down on our efforts or minimise our potential let's remind ourselves of just how big our calling is and allow ourselves the encouragement of chapter 3 verse 12: 'Therefore, since we have such a hope we are very bold.'

### More than skin deep

He understands the difference between his inner and outer life. His reference to faces reflecting the Lord's glory has nothing to do with a Hollywood smile or whether we moisturise. His thesis goes more than skin deep. Our bodies are jars of clay (chapter 4) or earthly tents (chapter 5) and both images are subject to the normal laws of decay. But the treasure in the jar is not and neither is the eternal tent that the treasure will one day inhabit.

In our image-obsessed world with its endless quest for the secret of eternal youth, Paul's straight talking is quite refreshing. 'Outwardly we are wasting away YET inward we are being renewed day by day' (4:16). Leaders should attend to their appearance. We communicate more than by words so our body language, demeanour, vitality or weariness, clothes and general health have the potential to help or hinder the message. These things matter, but they are not our defining feature. Paul presumably had scars from his beatings, tendonitis from the manacles, maybe a limp, possibly a speech impediment and most certainly bags under his eyes; but those eyes were fixed on that which is unseen and eternal and that was his ultimate definition (4:18). Of his own hardships he wrote these 'light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all' (4:17).

### In conclusion

Maybe today is a day when you feel like giving up – you've lost heart, or maybe you have been there for some time. As you take that into prayer verbalise your dependency again on God to restore you, search out a trusted friend for support, remind yourself that living for him is still a high and noble calling and allow God to carry you through.

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### For reflection

- Are there any areas of leadership or ministry where you are currently relying on your own resources?
- Who are your partners in leadership? Are there currently aspects of leadership where you are going it alone? What will you do about that?
- How do you feel about your life and your leadership calling? Glorious?! Have a re-read of 3:7-11 if you are tempted to be down on yourself.

