

The Power of the Cross

This is the third, and final, study on 1 Corinthians 1. During December 2020, *Common Grace* is distributing a series of daily Advent devotions, titled 'For the Weary'. 2020 has been a year when we have all felt the strain of dealing with one catastrophe after another - and that only accounts for the 'big picture' things like bushfires and pandemics, let alone other events that have affected us individually. On Sunday, the devotion was written by local Presbyterian pastor, Kirk Patston, reflecting on Is 40:1-11. He lingers on v5.

"Isaiah 40 has a haunting, elusive quality about it. Voices speak and we don't really know who they are. I wonder if we are beginning to hear the voice of the faithful servant? I also wonder if we are beginning to hear the voices of remnant people? Remnant people are servant-like. They live among brokenness and still choose the way of faith and obedience.

Sitting in this insistent imagery of hope, Isa 40:5 raises an honest, intriguing question. If we realise that the English punctuation is not in the original, we can read it in two ways.

A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry? All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field." In this reading, the messenger is expressing uncertainty. "I don't know what to say. I'm just like grass. I'm fleeting. I'm faltering."

I get it. Our family has been working on a project around community formation for people living with disability. Navigating the system of NDIS can be discouraging. And then the COVID disruption stirred for me patterns of anxiety and sleeplessness that made life tough. How can I speak a word of comfort to anyone when I am so frail and finite?

But there's another way of reading. Cry out this: "All people are like grass. They won't last." The armies and empires who have invaded and deported will, one day, just disappear. The powerful forces that stand in the way of comfort and a world put right will not endure."¹

GETTING STARTED: Isaiah highlights that life is short and, in the midst of changing circumstances, we feel quite frail and vulnerable. Think back over the last 12 months. What events and experiences have left you feeling powerless, frail, exhausted, demoralised, diminished, depleted and/ or lacking resources?

READ: JEREMIAH 9:19,23-24 (Below)

¹⁹ For a sound of wailing is heard from Zion: "How we are ruined! We are utterly shamed, because we have left the land, because they have cast down our dwellings."

²³ Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; ²⁴ but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

① Phil highlighted that Jer 9:23-24 is cited in today's passage. The context of Jeremiah's words is a lament about the fall of Jerusalem, the devastation of Judah by invading armies and the people of Judah being taken into exile. It speaks directly both to the arrogance of the people of God, who had blatantly engaged in idolatry, plus the ruthlessness of invading armies. Dearman comments: "There is a valid form of boasting, which comes with the realization of correct priorities. True wisdom is not only the recognition that God has sent judgment on Judah; it is above all knowledge of the Lord and his character. God reveals himself as One who practices and takes delight in kindness (*hesed*), justice (*mišpaṭ*), and righteousness (*šedaqa*). As verses 25-26 make clear, those nations who spurn the moral integrity of God - whether Egypt or Israel, circumcised or not - will see his judgement."²

☞ The people of Judah had thought they were 'safe', despite engaging in idolatry, because they had the temple and God dwelling amongst them. Think of some ways in which people use the following four things as an excuse for arrogance: knowledge, power / influence, status, wealth. When we become arrogant – how does that change the way we treat people and how we respond to God?

☞ These verses talk about the lovingkindness / covenant faithfulness, justice and righteousness of God: ie God is both loving and just. Why do we need to hold onto both of these ideas?

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31

☞ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

☞ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

¹ https://www.commongrace.org.au/advent_for_the_weary_day6

² Dearman, J. A. (2002). *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (p. 115). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p115.

☞ Paul writes: “*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*” (1 Cor 1:26) ie not many of you were wise, powerful or rich. How old were you when you became a follower of Jesus? What job did you have? What education did you have? Would you have categorised yourself as ‘wise’? ‘powerful’? ‘rich’?

☞ On the last page of this study is a mock up human resources analysis of Jesus’ disciples. Phil commented that the disciples, as a group, were apparently uneducated and, in today’s market, would likely be unemployable. Why do you think that Jesus chose disciples from among people who were predominantly either working class or social outcasts? Why not choose people who were rich and who had high social status? Why does God continue to choose “what is foolish in the world ... what is weak in the world ... what is low and despised in the world”? (1 Cor 1:27-28)

ⓘ Ben Witherington sees that arrogance on the part of the ‘elite’ in the Corinthian church, was a crucial problem in their church dynamics and is a key reason for this letter from the apostle Paul. It was a key reason behind the issue of disunity. It may have been the reason why some people were getting away with blatant sin (1 Cor 5) and for discriminatory conduct during the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11). The rich vs poor dynamic may have even been behind the ‘meat’ issue in 1 Cor 8 (if the pre-loved meat was the cheapest option).

“Not many of the Corinthian Christians were “wise” by human standards, nor powerful, nor of noble birth. This triad has been endlessly scrutinized and has been used to argue both for and against the idea that Christians were of low social status in the Greco-Roman world. Probably it means that there were some Corinthian Christians who were in one or more of these high status categories. I disagree with those commentators who think this phrase as used here is merely conventional. Paul is addressing a socially diverse congregation, though he focuses especially on the socially pretentious and privileged at several points in the letter, as they especially seem to have been causing problems.”³

☞ Phil commented that, in the Corinthian church, the rich disdained the poor. How do we, as individuals and as a church, act in ways that disdain, not just the poor, but those who are socially marginalized and discriminated against?

ⓘ In 1 Cor 1:30, we read: *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* Phil highlighted that these three words bring to mind three pictures:

1. The courtroom – where we are declared righteous, free from the guilt and shame of sin.
2. The temple – where we are declared holy, set apart for God’s service, cleansed, clothed in white and sharing in the righteousness of God; and
3. The slave market – where God has openly acted to redeem us, by buying our freedom from bondage and slavery, by paying our debt.

☞ In his book, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott provides four reasons why Jesus died: 1/ Christ died for us; 2/ Christ died for us that he might bring us to God; 3/ Christ died for our sins; and 4/ Christ died our death.⁴ There was a lot happening, when Jesus died and rose again. Which of Phil’s pictures do you most strongly relate to? Why?

ⓘ The apostle Paul reiterated that we can’t take any credit for our salvation. It is Christ who has done it all for us. ²⁹ *so that no one may boast before him.* ³¹ *Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”* In 1 Cor 1:21, Paul wrote: ²¹ *For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.* And in Eph 2:8-9, he repeated this to the church in Ephesus: ⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God -* ⁹ *not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* ¹⁰ *For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

REFLECTION: Stewart Townsend has captured these thoughts in the song “*How Deep the Father’s Love for Us*”. Reflect on these words and thank God for his gift of salvation.

*I will not boast in anything, No gifts, no power, no wisdom; But I will boast in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection. Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer; But this I know with all my heart – His wounds have paid my ransom.*⁵

³ Witherington, B., III. (1995). *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (pp. 113–114). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. p113-114.

⁴ Stott, J. (1986) *The Cross of Christ*. Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, P63-64.

⁵ <https://www.stuartownend.co.uk/song/how-deep-the-fathers-love-for-us/>

Resumes of Apostles

To: Jesus, Son of Joseph

Woodcrafter's Carpenter Shop

Nazareth 25922

From: Jordan Management Consultants

Dear Sir:

Thank you for submitting the resumes of the twelve men you have picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken our battery of tests; and we have not only run the results through our computer, but also arranged personal interviews for each of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant.

The profiles of all tests are included, and you will want to study each of them carefully.

As part of our service, we make some general comments for your guidance, much as an auditor will include some general statements. This is given as a result of staff consultation, and comes without any additional fee.

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. We would recommend that you continue your search for persons of experience in managerial ability and proven capability.

Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a questioning attitude that would tend to undermine morale. We feel that it is our duty to tell you that Matthew had been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Better Business Bureau; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale.

One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He is a man of ability and resourcefulness, meets people well, has a keen business mind, and has contacts in high places. He is highly motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man. All of the other profiles are self-explanatory.

We wish you every success in your new venture.

Sincerely,

Jordan Management Consultants⁶

⁶ <https://bible.org/illustration/resumes-apostles>