

Ambitions...

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[0 : 0 0] Well, lovely to be with you. Here's a question I want you to think about this morning. I wonder what your ambitions are in life. What do you really want out of life? What sort of person do you want to become? It so happens that it's my birthday tomorrow, and I have to be honest, I'm now nearer 50 than I am 40. And in a sense, as I reflect on that, I'm just beginning to wrestle with, what do I want my life to look like with the 20, 30, 40 years I might have left? For some of you, well, you're nearer 20 than 30. A whole range of opportunities lie in front of you. What do you really want? What are you running after? A number of years ago, I was struck by this quote from John Stott, who was a great church leader of the 20th century. And he said this in his 80s. He says, I'm sometimes asked whether at my age I have any ambitions left. I always now reply, yes, my overriding ambition is that I may become a little bit more like Christ. It's quite striking, isn't it? Coming towards the end of his life, he says, the thing I really want is I want to be a little bit more like Jesus. Now, can I say, if we're here this morning and we wouldn't yet call ourselves a Christian, the Christian message isn't try your best to be like Jesus. In some ways, the Christian message is you can't on your own. You all of us will need the Lord Jesus to die for us. But if we are Christians, I hope there's something in you as you read that, maybe it's the spirit within you saying, yes, actually, that is what I want. As I relate to people, as I pursue my life, it would be lovely if I did so more like Jesus. Because let's be honest, that would be really good for us as a church. I'm sure church life is good. But wouldn't church life be even better if as we relate to each other, we're all relating to each other like Jesus would. Wouldn't that be great for the surrounding area, for Edinburgh? If as we live in our communities, as we do our jobs, we relate to people as Jesus does. Actually, wouldn't that be great just for ourselves? I mean, let's be honest, Jesus is the best human being who's ever lived. The one who did life best. So wouldn't it be great even for ourselves if we were more and more like Jesus? Because the Bible at times tells us to live like Jesus. Love one another, Jesus says. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. Or actually, in 1 John, we read this, whoever lives in Jesus must walk as he did.

[3 : 1 1] We're called to be like Jesus. Now, as I say that, I wonder what's going on within you. Because it might be for some of us, we're saying, yeah, I do want that, but I can't.

You know, how on earth can little me be like Jesus? Don't you know the stuff that I wrestle with and struggle with? How can I be like Jesus? Well, in that long passage that was read to us, there are actually two references, two ways in which we are able to become like Jesus.

And so I'm not going to work all the way through the passage, but pick on two verses in particular that we're going to focus on. In chapter 3, verse 18, we read this, In other words, chapter 3, verse 18 is saying we're being made like Jesus as we do something.

Or towards the end of the passage, chapter 4, verse 10 and verse 11, we see that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body. That something of what Jesus is like will be revealed in us.

Again, it's there in verse 11, his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So a lot's going on in the passage, but what's going on twice is, here's how it's possible to be like Jesus.

[4 : 4 3] And firstly, we see that we become like Jesus as we gaze on the glory of Jesus. We become like Jesus as we gaze on the glory of Jesus.

Now, 2 Corinthians 3 is all about the new covenant. And the context of the new covenant is this, about 600 years before Jesus, Jeremiah, the prophet, is speaking to God's people when they're at a low ebb.

They're about to be taken off to exile far from home in Babylon. They're there because of the ways they've failed, because of their various sins. And in that context, Jeremiah makes a promise.

The days are coming, God says, when I will make a new covenant, where I will be their God and they will be my people. Where there'll be a new relationship with God, where they will all know him. Know him from the inside. And that will be possible, because I will forgive their wickedness. I will remember their sins no more.

[5 : 52] And there's a great promise of a new agreement with God's people, where they will be forgiven. Where God will live inside them. Where they will know him. And basically that promise hangs around for 600 years or so.

A promise of a new agreement between God and people. Until one Passover. And there's a man eating a meal with his friends.

And during that meal, he takes some wine. And he says, this cup is the new covenant. In my blood. And as Jesus takes that cup, essentially he's saying to him, Do you remember those promises 600 years ago through Jeremiah?

A new agreement between God and people where he's going to live in them and they'll know him and they'll be completely forgiven. Do you remember that? But it's now. It's now.

And as my blood is shed on the cross, so a whole new agreement between God and people is opened up. Whereby whoever you are, you can say, I know God.

[7 : 01] Because the barrier between you and God is about to be swept away. And in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul says, I have the ministry of the new covenant. I get the privilege of proclaiming all that God has done.

All that Jesus achieved. And as you work your way through 2 Corinthians 3, you find these different privileges we have. We have the privilege of the Spirit.

It's the ministry of the Spirit, verse 8. Which means that in the new covenant, God comes to live inside us. So the Christian life isn't. There are these commands up there and I've got to try really hard to keep them.

No, no. The Christian life is God has put his commands in my heart. And I get to live them out. That's what the Christian life is. It's life by the Spirit. Or Paul says this ministry means we're righteous, not condemned.

You do know that as God looks down, if we're in Jesus, there is a smile on his face, not a frown. Because we're made right with him.

[8 : 11] We're righteous, not condemned. We live under his smile. And actually 2 Corinthians 3 is basically saying, if you're joining, join to Jesus.

Are you enjoying these privileges? Enjoying the fact that God's Spirit lives in you. Enjoying the fact that we're declared in the right with God, whatever this last week has been like.

We have these privileges. I remember a few years ago, traveling up from London, I think it was to Edinburgh actually. And there was a sort of special offer at the time, which meant a first class rail ticket was about £5 more expensive than the second class one.

So I thought, I'm going to treat myself. So I remember getting this first class rail ticket in London to Edinburgh. And that meant at King's Cross, you could have access to the first class lounge. But I sort of peered through the door and there were lovely things like newspapers and free coffee and comfortable seats.

And it looked great. But everybody in there was dressed in a really smart suit, sort of looking impressive. And I wasn't. I remember thinking, am I really allowed in there?

[9 : 20] Am I really allowed these sort of privileges that come with first class travel? Or should I basically go and sit on the platform like everybody else? And we really get these wonderful privileges of feeling righteous, of knowing God, of having God's spirit living within us.

Can I say they are yours if you join to Jesus? We can go in there. We can enjoy them. I think lots of Christians, we just carry around a kind of low-lying sense of guilt all the time.

A low-lying sense of condemnation. And 2 Corinthians 3 is saying you don't need to feel condemned. You can feel forgiven and free and righteous.

It's the privilege that Jesus has won for us. And by the way, my point isn't, oh no, I already felt guilty. Now I feel guilty about feeling guilty. My point is we receive all that the Lord Jesus has won. And we delight to be righteous in his eyes. But Paul says the greatest privilege, the greatest privilege of all, comes in verse 18.

[10 : 35] We all, with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory. We're being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory.

And Paul's picking up a story from the Old Testament where Moses went up to see God. I think it was the second time he's given the Ten Commandments. And as he sees God's glory, sees it, Moses' face begins to shine.

So it kind of reflects God's glory. But as he goes down the mountain, the glory begins to fade. And he has to put a veil over his face because God's people couldn't look on that glory.

But Paul is saying now, the veil is taken away. Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, verse 16, the veil is taken away.

There isn't anything now between us and God's glory. We get to see it in the face of Jesus. And Paul says, as we behold, as we contemplate the Lord's glory, verse 18, we are transformed.

[11 : 45] We are made to be like Jesus. Have you ever noticed that you often become like the person you admire? You know, maybe you admire somebody for their, I don't know, their dress sense.

And you kind of start to buy similar clothes because you want to become like the person you admire. I mentioned John Stodd earlier. He was a great preacher down in All Souls in London for about 20 or 30 years.

And it was often said that the younger preachers ended up imitating him. You know, they used the same language and the same mannerisms. They admired him, so became like him. Funnily enough, none of the young preachers at the church I pastored ended up sounding anything like me. But often you do become like the person you admire. And Paul says, as you behold the glory of Jesus and adore him and admire him, you will be changed to be like him.

Because to look at Jesus is the greatest view in the universe. I don't know where the place you love being is.

[12 : 56] Funnily enough, my favorite place, actually not too far from here, just the wrong side of the border, is Berwick-upon-Tweed. I grew up there. And there's a certain place in Berwick where you just stand on the walls and you get to the highest point of the walls.

And you can look there and there is sort of Lindisfarne and Bamburg all along the coast. And it's a sort of beautiful scene. And there's the lighthouse and there's the North Sea coming in. And then you turn around and you can see the River Tweed and the three bridges.

And you look further and there are Cheviets behind. I just love that view. And to be honest, whenever I'm there, I just don't want to stop looking. It's so stunning and so beautiful. Well, if you're like that, you don't want to take your eyes off, think of looking at the glory of Jesus.

Yeah, we go to Bethlehem and we see the glory of his incarnation. We listen to the Sermon on the Mount and we see the glory of his wisdom.

We see him going to the leper. But I am willing, be cleaned. And we see the glory of his compassion. We see him facing the storm. Calm, be still.

[14 : 09] And it falls flat and we see the glory of his power. We go up the Mount of Transfiguration and we see his shining face and we see the glory of his majesty. We see him weeping at the tomb of Lazarus and we see the glory of his humanity.

We see him washing his disciples' feet and we see the glory of his humility. We see him in the Garden of Gethsemane in agony praying, Father, not my will but yours be done.

And we see the glory of his obedience. We see him hanging on the cross and we see the glory of his love. We see him emerging from the empty tomb and we see the glory of his resurrection.

And there is nobody like him. And the greatest thing we can ever do is gaze on his glory. And Paul says that is the great privilege we have.

We, with unveiled faces, contemplate the Lord's glory. You want to be like Jesus? Can I urge you to gaze on him?

[15 : 09] To do whatever it takes. To read the Gospels. And as you read the Gospels, think, what is there to admire here? To sing of him. To pray to him.

To do whatever you can to go after Jesus. Because Paul says that's the way we are transformed into his image.

And that's why the ministry that Paul has, he goes on to talk in chapter 4. Above all else, the thing that I want to do is to proclaim from the Scriptures that Jesus is Lord.

Because as I proclaim Jesus is Lord, verse 6, that's the way God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge, the knowledge of God's glory.

How are our hearts changed that the lights are turned on? How does that happen? It's displayed in the face of Christ. As you behold Jesus, so God turns the light on in our hearts.

[16:14] And our lives are changed. Remember a conversation with a friend of mine, also a church leader. To be honest, both of us were going through a rough time.

We were just struggling a bit as Christians. And we were talking about the various ways our hearts were just a bit cold and flat. I remember my friend saying to me, Andy, we know the answer to this, don't we?

And I remember thinking, no, we don't. That's why we're having the conversation. But he said, no, no, we know the answer to this. Go hard after Jesus. Go hard after Christ.

Do whatever it takes to get Jesus in front of your gaze. Because that's the way we're changed. As we contemplate the Lord's glory, we're transformed.

Now, one of the reasons I love this is because I guess when you heard we were going to talk about becoming like Jesus, you were imagining something really hard and challenging. And basically, this is an invitation to come and look at the most beautiful view in the universe.

[17:21] There are more challenging things than that. It's an invitation to gaze on that which is beautiful. Oh, yeah, there'll be discipline required. There'll be discipline to actually get Jesus in front of our eyes.

But that's the privilege we have, to gaze on the most excellent of men and to be transformed. How do we become like Jesus?

As we gaze on the glory of Jesus. But as you work your way through the passage, there's a second way in which we become like Jesus. We become like Jesus as we die like Jesus.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus. So that the life of Jesus might be revealed in our body.

You see, in verse 7 onwards, Paul essentially talks about our experience as Christians. He says we have this treasure, and this treasure is the fact that we know God through Jesus.

[18:24] We have this treasure, the great privilege of being a Christian in jars of clay. In other words, to be a Christian is a glorious thing.

But that experience is wrapped up in people who are weak. You imagine a little clay pot. Weak. Small.

Unimpressive. Fragile. Easily broken. And Paul says this great privilege of being a Christian is put within people who get sick.

In people who get tired. In people who struggle with depression. In people who go up and down emotionally. God has put this treasure in jars of clay.

In those who are weak. And he explains sometimes what that's like. Verse 8. We're hard pressed on every side.

[19:28] But not crushed. Perplexed but not in despair. Persecuted but not abandoned. Struck down but not destroyed. This is what life is like. Do you ever feel hard pressed?

As though the sort of walls are closing in on you because of just the different pressures and demands on life. Hard pressed and yet somehow we're just about able to keep going and not be crushed.

Perplexed. There are times when you wonder what God is doing. And why he hasn't answered that prayer. And yet not in despair because somehow we do know that he's good and must be doing what is right.

Persecuted. There are times when we just face opposition. Perhaps we're the only Christian in our families. And the rest of the family just doesn't understand us. But not abandoned because God has promised never to leave us.

Struck down. There are times we're just exhausted. Can we keep going? And yet not destroyed. We're able just to keep our foot going in front of the other. And that's what life is often like.

[20:37] Glory of being a Christian but in those who feel hard pressed at times. And confused at times. And weak at times. Now have you ever wondered why it's like that?

Have you ever wondered why life isn't easier? Paul says there's a purpose to it. Won't you imagine with me super Christian for a moment? You know, super Christian has never had any health issues. Got boundless energy. Knows how to talk to everybody. Is super confident. And super Christian manages to achieve really impressive things. And everybody around says, gosh, super Christian.

Aren't they amazing? And super Christian begins to think, yeah, I am. And Paul says, that's not the way it's ever going to work.

God's not going to use super Christians. He uses jars of clay. Why? To show that the power is from God and not from us. So that actually we end up looking at each other and think, good grief, God can even use them.

[21 : 45] That's the way he's made life. Can I say this passage means the world. So remember my first experience of Christian leadership. It was when I was a student and I was involved in leading one of the Christian groups at university.

And I remember it feeling incredibly hard. It was the sort of pressure of student life, of work that I had to do. There's a pressure of leading the Christian union. And it was around that time that I was wrestling with some of the sexuality questions I was talking about yesterday.

And I remember as I put all those things together, I just got to the stage, I just can't do this anymore. It was the 90s, so email didn't exist. So I actually wrote my letter of resignation from the Christian union leadership and left it on my desk.

Did that on a Saturday night. It happened to be Sunday the next day. And to be honest, I didn't really want to go to church. But, you know, that was my routine. So I went to church. And I heard 2 Corinthians 4 preached.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show the powers from God and not from us. We're hard pressed but not crushed. And I suddenly realized this sense of being overwhelmed was normal. It's actually the way God does it.

[22 : 54] It keeps us weak to show that the power's from him. And so I got back to the letter of resignation. Actually, in the Lord's providence, I suspect that was an incident that changed my life.

I doubt I would have ended up as a pastor had I resigned at that point. This passage means the world to me. And I hope it encourages you, actually.

Because my guess is around the room there are people who are well aware of their jars of clay and yet think, gosh, I should feel stronger. And Paul is saying, no, no, that's normal.

That's the way I've made it. Yes. Because there's a purpose here. Do you notice? We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus.

So the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body. This jar of clay experience. This sickness we often go through. This weakness. This sense of not feeling emotionally on top of things.

[23 : 57] Paul says that kind of weakness we shouldn't be surprised by because we are following a saviour who in weakness went to the cross. Who went through suffering and pain.

Who as he went to the cross would really have looked like a jar of clay. And as we follow that pattern, the death of Jesus, so it works a kind of death in us.

A death to pride. A death to self-sufficiency. A death to the sense we can do it ourselves. It works in us a death, this jar of clay experience.

And as we die, what comes out? The life of Jesus. That as our self is weakened and the edges are rubbed off and we have to depend on him more, so the life of Jesus is seen.

And we become more like him. And notice, actually, as Jesus' life is revealed in our body, verse 10 and verse 11, so actually that brings benefit to others.

[25 : 08] Verse 12, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. In other words, as we get weaker and Jesus is revealed, so actually that ends up having benefit for others.

As they see Jesus in us and are attracted by that. That was Paul's ministry to the Corinthians. That's what he did. And the result was the Corinthians coming to life.

One of the privileges, again, I had as a pastor was kind of seeing this, perhaps particularly in the generation above me. We always used to have a group of ladies who were in their 80s.

They were always sitting around there. And they, by this point, were facing real physical weakness. Many of them had been through bereavement and were widowed.

And yet, there they were singing praise songs to Jesus with faces that were shining. And it was because of a combination of these two things over the years.

[26 : 16] Jars of clay, and yet, they'd spent years and years beholding the glory of Jesus. And so their faces shone with the glory of Jesus.

So how do we do this? Can I encourage us to remember the but?

Do you remember how Paul describes this experience? Hard-pressed but not crushed. Perplexed but not in despair. Persecuted but not abandoned. Struck down but not destroyed.

If you like, giving myself over to death. Or facing a kind of mini-death day by day in my weakness. But the life of Jesus is being revealed.

One of my heroes is the pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor. He was a pioneer missionary in the 19th century to China. Immensely fruitful.

[27 : 14] In many ways, set up missionary endeavor in China for generations to come. And yet, as you read his life story, wracked by weakness. Actually, in what should have been the primate's life, he spends five years flat on his back because of his physical difficulties.

Loses a wife and three children to illness in China. Goes through actually emotional turmoil at times. And yet, listen to some of his early prayer letters.

He arrived in China and faced loneliness and so on. He said this. My need now is great, but God is greater and more near. Pray for us. At times I seem altogether overwhelmed with the internal and external trials connected with our work.

But, but, he has said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. Do you see the but? I'm a jar of clay. I'm hard pressed, but God is still with me.

And he is greater. And he won't let me go. And so, can I encourage us?

[28 : 21] Some of us will feel acutely under pressure at the moment. But can I urge us, don't resent those things. Those things that you wish were so different.

Those times when you wish, I wish I wasn't a jar of clay. Those will often be the things that God is using to make you like Jesus. And for his life to be revealed in your body.

Don't resent them. But remember to say, but. But even in the pain, God is doing something. Even in the pain, I don't need to be crushed.

Even in the pain, I'm being made like Jesus. Jesus. Friends. I'm convinced that actually this will be going on.

Maybe we feel, I'm not really like Jesus yet. But can I encourage us to be confident? He is doing this work. We can be like him.

[29 : 22] Like him as we gaze on him. Like him as we suffer and die like him. And that will be our experience in this life until the day when we will see him.

And do you remember what John says? When we see him, we will be like him. One day we'll be perfectly like Jesus. In the meantime, we have the privilege of becoming more like him.

As we gaze on him and even as we feel weak like him. And because of that, we can say, it is a glorious thing to be a Christian.

Because we have treasure. Even in jars of clay. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we gaze on you.

And as we see you, we praise you that we are seeing the most beautiful view in the universe. The most excellent of men. And so we gaze on you and as we gaze on you, we thank you that we're becoming like you.

[30 : 36] Help us to delight in that privilege. Even in just the weaknesses and the pains and the clay-like experiences of this life. Help us to trust in those times.

You are making us more like your son. We praise you, Lord, for the sheer privilege of belonging to you. Make us more like you, Lord Jesus. Until the day when we see you, we pray.

For your name's sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.