

# THE PARADOX OF SUCCESS OUT OF FAILURE

## *SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE*

By Doug Goins

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Our worship services at PBC mirror our diversity as a church family. There are different kinds of leadership, different settings, and different forms of expression. We are not a niche market church by any stretch of the imagination. As a body of believers, we represent great diversity. There is a wide cross section of ages and careers represented at PBC--retired folks, folks who earn their living by doing blue collar or white collar jobs, people in school. In terms of health, some are in good health, but others struggle with serious health problems. We differ in terms of our temperamental makeup. Even our theological or spiritual sensitivities vary broadly. There is also a wide range of church backgrounds. Some have no church experience previous to coming to PBC, but we also come from many different church settings. There are ethnic differences and cultural differences. The list goes on and on.

Despite the diversity, there are some things we share in common. If we are honest and reflective, we can admit that we all struggle with issues of personal adequacy, competency, and sufficiency in life. We struggle with expectations that others place on us, or the expectations we place on ourselves. The fact that we are here today suggests that we have some concern for God. We care what he thinks about us, we want to live a life of significance, of spiritual fulfillment. When we take stock of ourselves sometimes we are hopeful and optimistic. Other times we are discouraged and pessimistic about how we are doing.

I took stock this week personally in terms of my own struggles with adequacy. I realized the older I get the more aware I am of my own sinful failure and my inconsistencies in living out my Christian faith. I am a husband who wants to be my wife's best friend and confidant. Right now, probably the biggest struggle for Candy is that her mother has Alzheimer's disease and is deteriorating quickly. I want to be there to support her as she cares and serves her mother.

I am a father of four children, and I am concerned about their future. We are almost empty-nesters, but I don't ever want my kids to outgrow my spiritual contribution to their lives. I want to be able to speak into their life on behalf of the Lord Jesus.

I am the son of aging parents who have health problems, and I am concerned about how they are doing. I also have one sibling who is not in fellowship, and another who is a single parent. I keenly feel the responsibility of being an older brother in the family.

God has called me to be a pastor at PBC. I have been here a long time, but I recently said to someone, "You think it would get easier after a lot of years." Issues don't change, spiritual principles don't change, but it seems like there is more complexity in the problems people struggle with vocationally and relationally. The elders have asked me to shepherd the pastoral staff, and that is daunting. We have a great staff of people, but again, the complexity and diversity of our staff can trigger a sense of insecurity in me. As an elder, I am burdened for our direction as a church and what God wants from us uniquely as a congregation. So taking stock this week was a bit unsettling.

### **The new covenant as a lifestyle**

The section of scripture we will study over the next few months will encourage all of us in these specific areas of life. We will move through a section of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, beginning with chapter two, verse twelve and continuing through the first verse of chapter seven. The five chapters we will survey offer a clear

explanation of the secret to the Apostle Paul's effective life and ministry.

Paul was an attractive person because of his authenticity. He had great humility and credibility. In 2 Corinthians 3:4-6a, Paul writes "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant,..." This section of scripture summarizes and describes genuine Christian living.

I have a personal sense of responsibility as I approach this series. I heard Ray Stedman teach this material thirty years ago when I was a young man. At that time I was struggling with a new marriage, with priorities as a young father of my first child, and with a job that made it difficult to balance ministry and vocation. This biblical material turned my life upside-down. God used it powerfully, and ever since I have been trying to understand how to live out the new covenant lifestyle Paul describes. So although it is a tremendous privilege to open this text to you, I feel a great burden of responsibility to be as clear as I can. I want to be as clear as I heard Ray to be, by the power of the Holy Spirit, thirty years ago. I want to bring clarity from the scriptures, and I also want to model transparency from my own life. I would ask you as my brothers and sisters to pray for me in both of those areas throughout this study. Pray that I would be clear, honest and open before you as to how this affects me directly.

### **An apostolic digression**

Second Corinthians 2:12-7:1 is actually a digression for the apostle, a parenthetical clarification of Paul's motives for life and ministry. For him, the lines were blurred because all of life was ministry. Paul did not try to slice and dice things. From 1 Corinthians, we know that Paul's relationship with the church was difficult, and this 2 Corinthians letter comes at the culmination of a seven-year history marked by continual challenges to his apostolic authority, his personal spirituality, and his pastoral credentials. There was even criticism of his personal appearance, his speaking style, and his ability. Although he was the spiritual father of the Corinthian church and invested more time and energy there than any other that he served, these people gave him more grief than any other church. There were ongoing problems of disunity in the body, competition among the different leaders, sexual immorality and idolatry, and struggles over spiritual gifts and how they ought to be exercised. It required the apostle Paul to write two other letters to them, which have been lost to us, and also the 1 Corinthian letter which precedes this one in our New Testament. In addition, Paul met with a group of leaders from Corinth who traveled from Greece to visit him in Turkey. He also made a hurried trip to Corinth after hearing that a faction in the church had rejected the first Corinthian letter. It was not an easy relationship.

The letter is poignant. It is the most personal of Paul's correspondence, and has been referred to as "theology wrapped in autobiography." Paul explains and defends his lifestyle in ministry, and finally answers accusations that have swirled around him for seven years. Paul calls his most recent visit to Corinth and his most recent letter which was written in response to that visit both painful and sorrowful. He had strongly challenged the church leadership and called them to responsibility. Chapter one and the first half of chapter two of 2 Corinthians is an explanation of both the painful letter and the painful visit.

### **Paul's pressure point**

As we pick up the narrative, we are confronted with what I would call paradoxical Christian living. It describes Paul's personal experience and also his understanding of what is true biblically. He trusts that spiritual victory will come even out of personal failure. It sounds contradictory, but it is paradoxical.

Second Corinthians 2:12, 13 is the pressure point for Paul personally:

**Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.**

These verses summarize apostolic uncertainty. Paul feels a sense of failure and despair about the Corinthian relationships. He acknowledges that he went to Troas with pure motives, and hoped for two things as he went to that city in the northern part of Greece. First, he desired an opportunity to preach the gospel and to encourage Christians in the city. Paul loved to talk about Jesus wherever he went, whether it was in casual conversation or a more formal setting. The second thing he hoped for was to meet Titus. Titus had carried the challenging apostolic letter to the church in Corinth, and Paul was anxious to hear how they had responded. He wanted to know if God had used his letter to convict them of their sin, if they had responded in brokenness before the Lord, and if they had softened in their resentment towards Paul in their resistance to his spiritual influence.

For Paul, Troas represented a God-given opportunity to minister. Acts 21 tells the story of Paul's seven days of ministry in Troas. We know that Paul loved to walk through open doors to serve the Lord, and Acts 20 tells of one incident that happened while he was there. While Paul preached through the night to a group of people, a young boy sitting in an open window dozed off, fell to the ground, and died. Paul then had to raise him back to life.

In verse 13, Paul talks about having a troubled mind. Titus was supposed to bring a word from Corinth, and Paul waits an entire week without making contact. The language is strong and graphic, "I had no rest for my spirit." *Today's English* version says, "...I was deeply troubled..." and in *The Message*, 1 "...I couldn't relax...." Through that week Paul's anxiety increases. There is restlessness in him driven by loneliness, frustration, discouragement, and even depression. Yet he does what he knows God wants him to do in terms of teaching and preaching. The phrase at the end of verse 13 that says, "I went on to Macedonia," means that he turns his back on ministry. He walks away from the good work God has him doing in Troas, and travels east into Macedonia to look for Titus. Paul never did anything to avoid serving the Lord, so it is amazing that he felt compelled to leave Troas. The phrase at the end of verse 13--"but taking my leave of them..."--suggests an awkward or reluctant departure, and it further emphasizes how difficult the decision was for him. If you think I am exaggerating about how deeply troubled Paul was, see 2 Corinthians 7:5: "For even when we came into Macedonia [from Troas] our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within."

Let me ask you to reflect for a moment. Does this cameo of the great apostle Paul shock you? Do you find yourself a little disillusioned with his struggle? When I taught this material to college students a number of years ago, one girl said honestly, "I thought they called him Saint Paul because he was perfect!" She wasn't trying to be funny. That was the assumption she brought to the scriptures. Hopefully, as we study this letter together we will be disabused of that perspective.

On the other hand, perhaps you found yourself breathing a sigh of relief. Were you thinking, "You know what? I'm not that much different than Paul." Can you identify with Paul in his uncertainty? Think about your own relationships, vocation, and ministry involvement. Think about how much you want to be God's person in each one of those settings, but how often you are distracted by anxiety, perhaps over difficult relationships, an unresolved conflict with one person or a group of people. Those things undermine our ability to serve the Lord in ministry.

In thinking about my years at PBC, my vocational responsibilities are clear. I am to study, teach, offer pastoral counsel, and to preach on occasion. But there have been times when it was difficult to do those things, perhaps because of unresolved conflict in my relationship with Candy, struggles that seemed as though the tension would never break. Or there were struggles with my children, especially in adolescence when they struggled with rebellion against God, or me, or their mother. Those kinds of things are debilitating. I can recall times when God opened doors for ministry here at PBC, but I was functioning out of anxious distraction. Like Paul, I had no rest in my spirit. There have been times when I walked away from legitimate ministry opportunities, things I was being paid to do. I am describing pastoral failure just as Paul briefly summarizes apostolic failure. Have you had that experience?

## **The assurance of victory**

That is why verse 14 is such a shock. It stands in sharp contrast, like a spontaneous outburst. In spite of the apostolic uncertainty, there is a great assurance of victory in life. In the rest of the section, Paul unfolds three characteristics of genuine Christian living. He says we can live with a continually grateful heart, we can be realistic about our resources, and we can be certain about our approach to life and ministry.

### **A continually grateful heart**

Verses 14-16 deal with the issue of gratitude, that we can have a grateful heart continually.

**But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.**

What triggered Paul's gratitude? For one thing, he finally found Titus. Secondly, Titus brought him great news from Corinth. Looking ahead to 2 Corinthians 7:6-7, he says, "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." So in 2:14, Paul explodes, "But thanks be to God..." God is so much bigger than Paul's own struggles and failures. While he is dithering, God is at work in a much greater way than Paul could ever imagine.

Paul is grateful for two things in verses 14-16. One is an unending victory in everything that he does. He has an incredible optimism. Look carefully at the phrase in verse 14 because this is about all of us. Paul is thankful to God "...who always leads us in his triumph in Christ..." Paul is convinced that we who surrender our lives to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord are always led along by God in his triumphant victory procession in Christ. And this is not describing an occasional expression of super-spirituality, or a sporadic flirtation with spiritual victory. "Always" means what it says - continual, all encompassing, victorious Christian living.

But how does this optimism fit with Paul's depressive failure in Troas? Paul was convinced that his adequacy in life and ministry did not rest on his effort and activity, whether it was dismal, as we just saw in Troas; or whether it was effective, as it was in many other places where he ministered. Either way, the triumph is Christ's, not Paul's. His lifestyle of ministry did not rest on his feeble efforts to do something for God, but on his confidence that God would do something through him. So even in difficult or discouraging circumstances Paul says we are all led in triumph. And even if Paul feels like he may be on top of his game, he is still being led in triumph. It is the same either way. He writes to the Christians in Rome, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). Have you been around Christians who believe that, who live out that kind of hopeful optimism for life and assume that triumph can come out of tragedy? Those kinds of people are mysteriously attractive, and their lives defy explanation.

I recently enjoyed the movie *Shakespeare In Love*. My favorite character is the theater owner played by Jeffrey Rush. He is always in debt, never has money to pay the actors. The Queen of England threatens to close the theater, and he faces torture and imprisonment. Things always go badly for him. Yet he has amazing optimism and faith in the power of the theater. The recurring theme is that when the theater is on the brink of being shut down people get hysterical, and the owner says, "It's going to be all right!" And they say, "No, no, it can't be all right." And he says, "Yes, it will be all right!" And they say, "But how?" And he says, "I don't know. It's a mystery." And it would be true! Mysteriously, the theater would remain open. Unlike the character in the movie, we who place our faith in Jesus Christ know what the mystery is. It is Christ in us. From a spiritual perspective, Paul is thankful to God for being able to live with that kind of optimistic confidence.

### **An unforgettable influence**

Secondly, Paul is grateful for the unforgettable influence we can have as Christians. Verses 14-16:

**...and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place. For we**

**are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.**

Paul uses the image of a Roman triumph, the victory parade given to a conquering general returning to the city of Rome. The general led his entire army through the streets of Rome along with the captured prisoners--the soldiers of the defeated army, the generals, the heads of the nation that had been vanquished. It was a huge event, something like what the Super Bowl is today. The image is that Jesus is the conquering general and we are led along as soldiers in the victorious army. It is interesting to note that in the military campaign there would have been battles that were lost, defeats, and casualties in battles. But the outcome is determined, the campaign is won. So we as Christians are symbolized as victorious soldiers marching along, participating in Jesus' triumph.

We are also symbolized as an aromatic fragrance. In the parades the Roman priests led worship, swinging sensor pots of incense as a fragrant offering to the pagan gods. To the conquering army finally coming home from battle, it was a sweet smell, a smell of life. But to the prisoners, it was a smell of death because they were marching to their public execution that very day. The same smell had different meanings to the two groups in the parade.

Paul applies that image to us as Christians. He says we are the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ. The fragrance of Jesus in our lives is attractively aromatic. Because we know Jesus Christ and voluntarily surrender to him, our presence in any circumstance can make a difference, without us even thinking about it. At the end of verse 14 it says that every place we go, "in every place," we have this effect. Think about aroma, the subtlety of your favorite fragrance. Whether it is a woman's perfume or a man's cologne, its essence has an effect with very little effort on the part of the one wearing it. When we enter a room, the attractive smell permeates the environment. Paul applies this image to us as Christians. As we go about loving people for Jesus' sake, the fact that he is alive inside us and has freed us from the inner torment of sin makes an impression. Without self-consciously trying to be religious, the authenticity and integrity of our lives is powerfully attractive in every setting we enter. The little phrase in verse 15 says that "we are a fragrance of Christ to God," meaning that God is able to smell us everywhere we go, and it is pleasing to him. Romans 12:1 says that we are "...a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God..." That in itself is encouraging to know. Even if no one else is paying attention, our delighted heavenly Father rejoices in who we are by the fragrance of our lives.

We are offered to men and women as well, and there are two kinds of responses. Among those who are being saved it is life to life. To the conquering army in the triumph the incense was the smell of victory. If we are living out the new covenant lifestyle, some people respond positively to how we smell because the Holy Spirit of God is leading them toward faith in Jesus Christ. Our lives are attractive to them, they like how we smell. But among those who are perishing Paul writes it is death to death, just as the incense was the smell of death to the defeated army in the parade. In the same way, some people will respond negatively to us in terms of how we live and speak. In them the life of Christ in us is strengthening resistance and opposition to the gospel, so our lives to them are repulsive. They don't like who we are. Regardless of the immediate response to our lifestyle--whether it is acceptance or rejection of who we are in Christ, or whether it is agreement or disagreement with what we believe about Jesus--we can still say from a grateful heart with the Apostle Paul, "...thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ..."

### **Being realistic about our resources**

I am grateful for Paul's parenthetical questions at the end of verse 16. He asks, "And who is adequate for these things?" Another way to say it would be "Who can handle that kind of pressure and responsibility? Who can really live like that?" You may have been asking the same question as we have worked through this material. Paul is honest. He does not write out of a naive Christian "triumphalism." What he describes is not a bold, religious self-confidence or self-sufficiency. We will discover a detailed answer to Paul's question in the chapters that follow. For us to live like this seems difficult because it is solely dependent on spiritual resources outside of ourselves. It is God's transcendent power, not our adequacy, not our competency, or sufficiency that we rely on for authentic Christian living.

I was reading an article from *Atlantic Monthly* a few weeks ago written by the daughter of Erik Erickson, the famous child psychologist who died recently. In the article, she wrote about her difficulty in growing up with a world famous father who was little help to her in her own childhood struggles. She found that he was helpful to everyone else in his teaching and writing, but never connected with his own daughter through adolescence or young adulthood. One of my own children has struggled with faith in Jesus Christ since adolescence. After reading the article and working on Paul's message of authentic Christian living, the voices of accusation in my own head kept saying, "What right do you have to get up and talk about this? Your own child is resisting the love of Jesus Christ. Who are you to talk about this stuff?" Part of me wants to run. I don't want to talk about these things. I am burdened for my child. So with the apostle Paul, I ask, "And who is adequate for these things?" We will see the answers in the weeks ahead.

### **Certain about our approach to life and ministry**

In verse 17, Paul summarizes the third thing for which he is grateful. We can be certain about how we live life, how we relate to people, and how we approach ministry. He writes,

**For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.**

This is another helpful explanation of what it means to live for the gospel of Christ, and Paul states the first negatively. He says he is not selling a product like a peddler. Here Paul indicts hypocrisy--phony Christianity, phony religiosity, superficiality, salesmanship, gimmicks, shallowness. Paul is angry about religious racketeers, and he warns the Corinthian believers against either embracing it themselves or being sucked into phony or bad religion from other leaders.

I found an example of that kind of bad religion in the paper several weeks ago in the context of church life. A local church ran a big advertisement in the entertainment section of the newspaper (that in itself is interesting). The bold heading was "SINGLE, UNDER 40, LOOKING FOR SPIRITUAL HELP, FRESH BUSINESS IDEAS, NEW FRIENDS, ENCOURAGEMENT, EMOTIONAL SUPPORT? THEN COME TO \_\_\_\_\_ TONIGHT AND HEAR PEOPLE SHARE HOW TO GO TO YOUR NEXT LEVEL." If this church were really preaching the gospel, I would call that advertising "bait and switch." That sort of manipulation is not how Paul lived.

The second half of verse 17 states positively what it means to live for the gospel of Christ. The image Paul creates is people who are ambassadors, officially representing a sovereign God of the universe. The four phrases that close the verse are hallmarks of authentic Christian living.

The first phrase has to do with our integrity as men and women of sincerity. It was always Paul's concern for himself. Second Corinthians 1:12 says, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." Honesty is the most basic commitment. We desire to be people who practice what we preach, people who walk our talk.

Secondly, we are purposeful. We are commissioned by God, or called by God. We have been saved to live purposefully, not just to drift through life on the path of least spiritual resistance. We are privileged to live and share the great news of reconciliation between God and lost humanity that is all around us. If you want a vision statement or a summary of a purpose-driven life, that's it.

The third hallmark is transparency. Paul says that we live "...in the sight of God." He knew that everything he said and did was in full view of the God whom he loved and served. Paul wanted to live openly, not only before God but before his brothers and sisters in Corinth. With authentic Christianity, what you see is what you get. There are no facades, our lives are open to investigation. If we live that way it is risky, because obviously our weaknesses and our failures will be seen. But if we are willing to live with the motives of spiritual integrity, of purposefulness,

of transparency, then we can be certain that our lives will have spiritual authority. A little phrase that Paul uses "...we speak in Christ...", means we speak in the power of Christ, the authority of Christ. He is convinced that Christ within us, Christ expressing his life through us, will give authority to whatever we say in casual or formal communication. Authentic Christian living validates whatever we say.

Paul is grateful for three things that are characteristic of Christian living. We can live with a continually grateful heart, we can be realistic about our resources, and we can be certain about our approach to life and ministry. If you are still struggling with comparison to the apostle Paul, and are still hung up on the "Saint Paul" thing, consider this: Paul spent much of his adult life in prison. He never made enough money to own a home. He never built a church building. As a matter of fact, none of the churches that he planted survived very far into the next century. He frequently had to moonlight to support himself. He had no permanent address. He never spoke on radio or television, and he even admitted that he was a poor public speaker. And he wasn't very impressive physically. This is not a popular profile of a successful Christian. I was wondering if he could even get hired as a pastor at PBC! But remember where we started out together this morning in this consideration. We need to think about our own personal struggles with insecurity and adequacy in a variety of relationships, circumstances, and in different settings.

In closing, I want to quote from Ray Stedman's book, *Power Out Of Weakness - Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians*:

The victorious Christian life is not one of continual victory, in the sense of overcoming all obstacles and feeling triumphant everywhere we go. No! It is one of anguish of heart at times, of deep inner doubts, of fighting with frustrations without and fears within, of being opposed oftentimes. But it is also a life which is confident that the God who is within us is able to work his work and do his will, that out of the fear, the frustration, and the failure, is coming triumph and victory and the fragrance of Jesus Christ. (3)

Do you want to live like that? That is what will turn our lives upside-down. If we surrender ourselves to this wonderful biblical picture of the new covenant as a lifestyle, this authentic Christian living will change the world around us.

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#### NOTES:

1. *The Message: New Testament*. © 1993 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 439 (paperback edition).
2. Bloland, Sue Erikson. *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1999.
3. Stedman, Ray C. *Expository Studies in 2 Corinthians: Power Out of Weakness*. © 1982. Word Books, Waco, TX. P. 53.

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