

## Service Transcript

### Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2021

*Service Leader: Mark Reid*

*Speaker: Beth Powney*

*Reader: Rhiannon Reid*

Good morning and welcome to our Sunday Service for January 24<sup>th</sup> 2021. You've seen our notices for today – don't forget to look in on the United Service this evening at 6-30pm and log on to the gathering afterwards on Zoom.

Today we are going to focus our worship on the incomparable Father we have, our amazing Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit who empowers and strengthens us to be the people of God. Our speaker today is one of our EBA Regional Team, Beth Powney who will bring God's word to us later on.

In Christ, we are God's people, His family. Why did God pour out His blessings on us in this way? Not because of anything we did but because He loves us and shows his grace towards us, which we received by faith. And what can we say of God's grace: maybe this

#### **Amazing Grace (my chains fell off)**

Father, as we come before You this morning, we celebrate Your greatness; not merely Your greatness in creation, but your greatness through the mercy, love and grace You showed us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. What love! What grace!

We thank you that we are here because of Jesus and we exalt Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords  
And come before You in His name,  
Amen.

At the moment we see a world that the human race has made a mess of, but one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Let's proclaim our God this morning in the words of Psalm 86:8-10

#### ***Psalm 86:8-10***

There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,

*nor are there any works like yours.*

All the nations you have made shall come

*and bow down before you, O Lord,*

*and shall glorify your name.*

For you are great and do wondrous things;

*you alone are God.*

#### **There is none like You**

Not only do we proclaim there is none like our God anywhere here on Earth. There is no-one like Him anywhere! And heaven rejoices in that fact too. Let's remind ourselves of that by speaking out these words from Psalm 89 too

#### ***Psalm 89:5-7***

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,

*your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.*

6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?

*Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,  
7 a God feared in the council of the holy ones,  
great and awesome above all that are around him?*

### **No one like You**

#### **OPEN DOORS**

In the meantime we contend against a sinful world, yet we affirm afresh that we have a faithful God, despite our problems and issues, and Beth is going to explore that shortly. It is often in the deepest of suffering that we find that we have a God whose grace is sufficient for us.

#### **MAP**

Last week, Open Doors introduced its World Watch List for 2021 – it's catalogue of countries where persecution of Christians currently occurs. They produced a presentation for MPs and I've put the link for Open Doors' coverage of their World Watch List in the description below, and it's well worth a look. As you can see from their map, it involves the usual suspects: countries that either have oppressive regimes, to countries where law and order has broken down. At the top again, the worst and most systematic persecuting state is North Korea, followed by Afghanistan and Somalia; countries characterised by lawlessness, conflict and violent Islam.

One country that has experienced an upsurge in violence towards Christians in recent years has been in Nigeria. There is an extreme Muslim insurgency in Northern Nigeria and surrounding countries at the hands of Boko Haram. MPs at the launch of the 2021 Watch list were shown a longer version of this video of the harrowing story of persecution. You may find some of this upsetting.

### **Open Doors Video**

Do take a look at the Open Doors presentation on their website – it opens our eyes to the reality of persecution. But whilst we can say God is gracious to us that we do not face it here in Britain, we see in such stories immense bravery, great assurance in personal faith, and a real experience of the presence of God in their lives as they face injustice, discrimination, violence, death. Through organisations like Open Doors we have opportunity to help them materially, put pressure on our politicians to bring change in other lands but most of all, bring the persecuted before God, so let's do that now.

Father, we are left almost speechless by the actions of evil men and women who will inflict such suffering in the name of religion. We lift your suffering Church in Nigeria before you; we thank you for those who have such an assured faith that they are prepared to die rather than bow to another god. We thank you for their faith and trust in you. We pray that the Nigerian Government may have the will and resources to bring justice and peace to that land; right now by assisting others during the pandemic and the distribution of vaccine. We pray too for our MPs and Government that they may engage constructively to bring an end to the conflict and protect all citizens from harm, particularly Your Church. We thank you for the work of Open Doors in bringing issues like this into the light; Lord may you continue to bless this work, particularly the way in which it brings the Good News in word and deed to some of the most persecuted people on Earth. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue in prayer for our nation and the world at such a time as this.

Father, we pray for our nation that numbers who are sick and dying will start to fall now we have a vaccine. Help us as a nation to have patience in Lockdown as we see an end to this pandemic. Be with families who have lost loved ones to Covid we pray and with those who are currently suffering in hospital. Thank you for those in the NHS and care sectors who have shown so much commitment to help those with the disease. We pray that the NHS may still have the resources necessary to continue to help all. We pray too for those under pressure and those who have lost their jobs as a result of coronavirus. Please help us as Your people to bring your hope to those we know who are going through difficulty at this time. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's take a few moments to lift people we know who need help, healing or just a touch from God. Let's pray too for ourselves, that He may shape us into people who the life of Jesus shines through.

Interlude - **Jesus take me as I am**

Let's close this section of the service by saying the Lord's prayer together. LORD'S PRAYER

Beth is going to speak to us in a few moments, and this song will help us focus our minds on what she brings to us from God's word.

### **Strength will rise when we wait upon the Lord**

#### **Digging Deeper – Beth Powney**

*Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10*

Sometimes it takes us coming to the very end of our resources and self-reliance for us to realise our deepest need, our deep need for God.

I gave my life to Jesus as a teenager and I was baptised and I grew in my faith, I would have said I was well grounded and had been taught well by my youth group leaders. I went to Uni and gradually my faith was eroded away and I put God on the shelf or at the back of the cupboard, decided I didn't need him or the faith he represented in my life, frankly to my 18 year old self, life was more fun without him.

Fast forward a few years and I was married to a man who was a Christian, but I still would have said that I was not, but by this time, I knew there was a gap in my life which I didn't think used to be there, but I didn't know how to let go of the prideful self-reliant position I had put myself in.

After a couple of years, I fell pregnant with our first child and about three quarters of the way through the pregnancy I became seriously ill, such that both my life and the life of our baby was threatened. As I went down to the operating theatre I said to God 'you look after my baby and I will talk to you'. A somewhat arrogant and prideful prayer, but at least I was reaching out to God in my place of weakness and recognising that he was there and that I needed him.

He of course kept his side of our bargain and our very tiny, premature baby girl, was completely well, I fully recovered and then began the tricky journey of finding faith again, gradually taking down the barriers I had carefully erected over the years.

Sometimes it takes us coming to the very end of our resources and self-reliance for us to realise our deepest need, our deep need for God.

I wonder if the year of 2020 has been a little like that for you? As the year dragged on, did you find your resources drying up? Did you find the coping mechanisms you thought you had not working? Or did you find that you were able to dig deep with God and that there was strength in that or did you find that actually your faith and trust was more shallow than you had at first thought?

As we enter 2021, in a new year, I wonder are we actually in a new place? In terms of our circumstances in regard to COVID and other life events you are experiencing, I suspect not. Sometimes this thing called a new year, lulls us into a false sense of security, when in reality not very much has changed.

So what about you, how you are able to hear and receive this verse which we read in our reading *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (vs 9) and then For when I am weak, then I am strong (vs 10)*

Is this your reality or do you wish it were your reality?

Let's unpack a little how Paul came to write this. To do that we need to consider the context of the this letter and to look back at the previous chapter. So the context behind this letter is a church in Corinth which had lost its way. They were looking to super-apostles instead of Christ, they were seeking one spiritual high after another instead of digging deeper with Christ. They had forgotten some of the basic teaching of Jesus and were accusing Paul of not being sufficient as an apostle.

He takes the whole letter to unpack this with them and we have arrived at the end of this letter! In these last two chapters he clearly outlines who he is, his credentials and that because of Christ, he knows that he is sufficient.

Take a look at verses 22-27 of chapter 11. We don't have time to read them now, but here Paul outlines his descent as a Jew, his repeated imprisonments for the gospel, his beatings and whippings, being shipwrecked and facing robbers, facing persecution from Jews and Gentiles, not having food or a place to sleep and all of this for the sake of following Jesus and proclaiming the gospel.

Then he moves into chapter twelve where he describes a strange ethereal and spiritual experience, remember the Corinthians desires for these? He almost doesn't want to dwell on this or even say that it is he that has experienced it, but it probably is, but rather he then moves on with the description of his thorn in his flesh. No one knows what this thorn is, and there has been much speculation. Paul writes that in his view this thorn is there to stop him becoming conceited (vs7) and that is probably more important than what it was.

Describing it as a thorn in English is perhaps underplaying the original language, which means a spike or a stake, this therefore is something seriously painful. God never takes it away for Paul, he lives with it and it is out of that that he writes that God says: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

What an amazing place to be, to have experienced all that he has been through and continues to go through and yet say with confidence that God's grace is sufficient, in fact this grace shines out through the very weaknesses which are in Paul. This is and can be the same for any follower of Jesus. How can this be the case?

I think this comes down to where your roots are, what is found at the very depths of you? Perhaps that has been pushed to the limit in 2020, as work life and family life changed, as travel was restricted or even stopped and getting that fix of retail therapy couldn't happen. Just some of the things which play a huge part in our western daily culture.

**Let's consider an example from nature of digging deep.** We have a number of large trees in our garden and when the sun bakes down in the summer, this feels a long way off, I know, we see the other plants shrivelling up for lack of water. These plants have shallow roots and can only take nutrient from the surface, the trees however have both wide spreading roots as well as deep and well established roots, they drink up the water from the deepest level. Therefore they survive and thrive in the harshest conditions.

I think some of what this pandemic has highlighted is that we, you and me are the only people who are responsible for our relationship with Jesus and therefore how deep our roots go down. All the time we could gain our strength from meeting together in person on a Sunday, being up lifted and drawing from others, then we could go from one Sunday to another without necessarily having to look much further for ourselves. But as we have become more isolated from one another, the usual props have been taken away, the truth of the matter is that now it is just us and Jesus?

So have you been digging deeper? That sense of struggle that you have may be experiencing might be because you need to dig deeper and develop those deep sustaining roots that the writer of Psalm 1

describes as being like a *person who is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season*

In other words, those who choose to draw aside in quietness with God, to read his word, to mediate with him daily, will be like those strong trees in my garden when the baking sun comes or the stormy winds, they will remain strong. Our pandemic is like the baking sun or stormy winds.

**Remember what I said at the start: sometimes it takes us coming to the very end of our resources and self-reliance for us to realise our deepest need, our deep need for God.**

You may well be saying to me, but Beth you don't know what it has been like for me and no I don't and I don't belittle anyone's circumstances, only you know what you have experienced or are experiencing. But I do know someone who reaches us in our deepest weakness, who does know what it has been like for you, for as the writer of the Hebrews says, we have one who feels sympathy for our every weakness. (Heb. 4:15), that is Jesus.

Jesus became weak and humble for us, we have just celebrated him coming to earth from heaven in the most humble way, to be born as a baby, a place of absolute dependency and weakness, Then of course Jesus died on the cross the most painful, vulnerable death imaginable, however that very pain brought about the ultimate strength, the power over death itself as he rose from the dead.

When the writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus knows our every weakness, actually Jesus has experienced our every weakness as he was fully human, while still being fully divine. We may struggle to say with Paul *For when I am weak, then I am strong* for we would rather be in control, have no difficult circumstances or pain in our lives, however we as followers of Jesus actually have one in whom we are held. Who brings us the ultimate strength and the ultimate depth as he allows us to tap into the very deep abundant and eternal resources of the grace of God.

Being a follower of Jesus turns weaknesses into strength when we least imagine it. God's sufficient grace comes, not in spite of our thorn, our pain, our weakness, but because of that weakness. If we had not travelled that journey or that pathway we would never have experienced God's power in that unique way. That is certainly true for me with the circumstances of our daughter's birth which I described earlier. If I had not travelled that journey and allowed God into it, I would not know the abundant grace of God through Jesus which I know today.

**It is nearly always through crisis, through failure or through the experience of weakness that we know God best, when we actually choose to dig deep.**

Going back to our passage, Paul had a multitude of reasons to say that life was not fair, that he had been mistreated and I am sure in his quiet, down moments with God, he did cry out to God in the pains and scars that he carried, but the underpinning truth for him was that God said to him *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. Despite everything and perhaps because of everything he chose to live out this truth daily.

To conclude then, as we move into 2021, with hope on the horizon that the vaccine will change things, why not choose this year, regardless of whether anything changes, to dig deeper with God and know with Paul, that God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

For God says over you;

*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* (vs 9) and then *For when I am weak, then I am strong*. There's no lockdown on God's grace

**I see the King of Glory (Hosanna)**

The Lord said to Paul as he prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul then finishes the passage Beth read this morning with these words. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. These are great words of encouragement to take away with us this morning. Let’s close by saying what are familiar words to us, but have more weight in the light of what Beth has brought us:

*20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

That’s is for today. Don’t forget the Service this evening from 6-30pm and the gathering afterwards: details in the weekly sheet. Be blessed this week and stay safe. Bye.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

*Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10*

1. Beth talked about the length of time restrictions have been set and the expectation that they are going to continue? How have you weathered them – with optimism, or are you flagging with having to keep on through difficult times – even in despair? How may prayer help?
2. In verse 9, the Lord answers Paul when He does not take the “thorn in the flesh” in this way “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Have you ever experienced that in Your life? How do you think you may pray it in the present circumstances?
3. Paul finishes the passage by saying “*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (Verses 9b-10). Can you think of examples, either from the Bible, in your life or the lives of others where you have you seen this demonstrated? How is it possible to be strong, yet weak?
4. Thinking of those in persecuted countries, how they may be strong when they are weak? Take time to pray for them and also how you and those you know deal with the pressures of life.