

**‘YES & AMEN’
2 CORINTHIANS 1:12-22**

[St Mark’s Online Services- Sunday, May 3, 2020- 9:30am & 5:00pm]

1. No Guarantees In Life.

There are no guarantees in life. Or so they say. It’s a common expression isn’t it? It’s one we hear often and perhaps it’s a sentiment we sometimes express ourselves. I guess it’s a way of saying that we don’t always know how things are going to pan out. We realise we’re not entirely in control of our circumstances, and we acknowledge that people aren’t always going to be dependable either.

And this admission is one we’re sometimes quite philosophical about. But there are also times when we have to concede this reality with great sadness. You know what I mean. There are trains that run late and mean we miss an appointment, but there are also spouses who leave us and never come back. There’s the game of sport we really should have won but somehow managed to lose, but then there’s also a cancer diagnosis we never saw coming. Sometimes the fact that there are no guarantees in life doesn’t really matter that much. But at other times, it’s a realisation that can be painfully life changing.

There are no guarantees in life because we’re not ultimately in control of our circumstances. And there are no guarantees in life because sometimes people do let us down.

2. The (Probable) Story Behind These Paragraphs.

And as we come today/tonight to this second section of 2 Corinthians 1, we discover that this is something both Paul and the Corinthians are thinking about. And that’s because the story behind these paragraphs involves a couple of visits the apostle Paul planned to make to Corinth. He describes in verses 15-16 how he had intended to visit the Corinthians on the way to Macedonia and again on the way back. And it would seem he’d communicated that plan to the Corinthians. But for some reason he didn’t end up coming back them again after his first visit. This is confirmed for us in 1:23. Paul had planned to visit them twice but only came once. I guess there are no guarantees in life are there?

And we don’t really need reminding at the moment, do we, that this observation about life is true. So many things we expected this year to hold have not come to pass. When we published our church calendar at the end of last year we wrote the words across the top “if the Lord wills”, as we do every year. It reflects what James 4 teaches us about making plans. And we’re now living in a period where the wisdom of the book of James is being confirmed for us very memorably. Some of the things we planned, it turns out,

are not part of the Lord's will for us at the moment. And it seems that was the case when it came to the Apostle Paul's plans too. He had every intention of coming back from Macedonia via Corinth, but in the end he learnt that it was not the Lord's will for him to do so.

And we can't know this for sure, thus the word "probable" in my second heading today/tonight, but it seems likely that the Corinthians were more than a little disappointed by this. They had expected Paul to come back to them, but he didn't. It would seem that their expectation was very reasonable based on what Paul had said. But now he'd let them down. And it seems probable that this had led to some grumbings about Paul amongst the Corinthians. This Paul isn't very dependable is he? He seems quite fickle. He says one thing but does another. He's one of these guys who says "yes" but it turns out he means "no".

We can't be absolutely certain what was in the minds of the Corinthians of course. But this reconstruction seems probably based on what we read here. And it's into this sort of context that the letter from Paul arrived.

3. Paul's Message in These Paragraphs.

So what is it that Paul's trying to say about this? What is at the heart of Paul's message in these paragraphs? Well, I think there are two key things he's trying to get across. He wants to say something about his own conduct and character. But he also wants to say something about the character and the conduct of God.

- his own conduct and character

To begin with he wants to respond to the suggestion that his own conduct leaves a bit to be desired. Whether this criticism from the Corinthians is real or implied, Paul is conscious that some may see him as fickle. But he's at pains here to say that he's not. This is where these paragraphs begin. Verse 12.

[Read 1:12]

Paul claims to have a clear conscience about his conduct. It has been marked, he says, by integrity and godly sincerity. That is, he really does love the Corinthians, he really does mean what he says to them, and he really hasn't done anything that should bring his reputation into question. And, he says, this is not any sort of self-congratulation. This is the work of God's grace in my life¹. And, verses 13-14, he always sought to communicate transparently² and he looks forward to their relationship growing as they get to know and understand one another better³.

¹ It is not from the "flesh" (translated as 'worldly' wisdom here- also in verse 17).

² Integrity usually involves transparency.

³ I think verse 14 is talking more about a "relational" knowledge than a cerebral/intellectual one. I hear echoes of 1 Corinthians 13:12 in this verse.

And then, having claimed that integrity has marked his conduct in general, he goes on to address the specific issue of his aborted visit. In verses 15-17 he acknowledges what his plans had been. But he insists that he didn't make those plans carelessly. He has not been fickle. Even though his plans for a second visit did not come to fruition, it's not, he says, because he's the sort of guy who says "yes" one minute and "no" the next.

Clearly this matters a great deal to Paul. And we should ask ourselves why it does. Because he could've just ignored this issue. If he has a clear conscience about it, why bring it up?

Well, there may be many reasons. But I suspect one of them has to do with trust. If Paul is fickle, then he's not ultimately very trustworthy. He can't be depended upon. And that matters in any relationship. If someone I care about gets the wrong idea about me and it might leave them less likely to trust me, then I ought to be very interested in correcting the false conclusion- for the sake of the relationship. Trust always matters in relationships. But it especially matters when you're a minister of God's word- as Paul was to the Corinthians. Because what Paul wants for the Corinthians more than anything else is that they'll believe the word of God that he brings to them. But if he the messenger can't be trusted, then the Corinthians would have good reason to wonder whether his message could be trusted too. And that, in Paul's mind, would be a disaster far greater than his own reputation taking a hit.

You see Paul knows that at some level, his character and conduct reflect upon the message he speaks. And that's why establishing the integrity of his own conduct and character matter so much to him. At the end of the day he wants the Corinthians to know that his sincere conduct flows from a faithful character. And them knowing he is faithful is desperately important. Because he wants them to know that God is faithful. That's the heart of his message. And he doesn't want in any way for the suggestion of his unfaithfulness to lead people to question the faithfulness of God. And this is what leads Paul into talking about that- God's character and conduct.

- God's character and conduct

This is the second key point he wants to make. Because ultimately Paul isn't making a defence of his own integrity for his own sake. His purpose here is ultimately to underline the faithfulness of God- God's integrity if you like.

Verse 18 couldn't be more explicit. Paul says that he and Silas and Timothy have not been "yes and no" men. They haven't been fickle. They've been faithful. They've been faithful as surely as God is faithful. That first phrase of verse 18 contains the key 7 words in this whole section. 'But as surely as God is faithful . . . ' Paul sees a close relationship between his faithfulness and God's.

So, Paul spells out how God's character is faithful, and how, as a result, God always conducts himself in a faithful way. In verse 19 he points out that the gospel message he and his colleagues have preached is not a confusing "yes and no" message, but a

crystal clear “yes”. It’s a message of affirmation- an affirmation that all of God’s promises have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is what he says in verse 20.

[Read 1:20]

We mustn’t miss the significance of what Paul claims here. It really is an astounding and incredibly important verse. {9:30am: The sort of verse someone should write a song about!} Every promise that God has made in history, every promise you can find on any Old Testament page, Jesus has brought to fulfilment. The promise of the whole world being blessed through one of Abraham’s descendants. The promise of a king from David’s line always being on the throne. The promise of a suffering servant who will bear the sins of his people. The promise of a new covenant, and the dwelling of the Spirit in God’s people. I could go on and on. Every one of those promises is kept because Jesus came- because he lived his faultless life, and died his loving death, and was raised again in majesty. So you can see why Paul says that the message about Jesus, the gospel he preached, is a message about the faithfulness of God.

But there’s more. God not only demonstrates and proves his faithfulness in the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus. He continues to prove his faithfulness by the way he conducts himself in relationship with his people. He causes people to stand firm, verse 21- Paul and the Corinthians together⁴. And he unites, protects, and assures his people through the gift of his Spirit. He says, firstly, that the Spirit anoints God’s people, verse 21- he sets them apart as holy before God. He says secondly, verse 22, that the Spirit establishes that people belong to God. Recently I had to finalise a legal document for the Preschool that required the common seal of the Preschool to be affixed. The seal is like a stamp that verifies the authenticity of those who sign the document. It establishes that we really do represent the entity. And in the same way God’s Spirit is like his stamp on us to show that we are authentically his. And then thirdly, verse 22, he says that the Spirit is also a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. We look forward to a day when we will live in the presence of God forever- it’s the presence of God that makes heaven so wonderful. And the Spirit is the presence of God with us even now- like a down-payment which secures the full gift still to come. But did you notice that staggering word Paul uses in verse 22? Guaranteeing. The Spirit guarantees our future. It turns out there are some guarantees in life after all. But only because God is faithful.

4. Responding to the Faithfulness of God.

And the faithfulness of God is what Paul is all about in these verses. So the question we need to ask ourselves today is this: How will we respond to the faithfulness of God?

- being like God

⁴ This idea builds on the “union with Christ” theme first articulated in 1:5-7.

Well, in the first place, by being like God. That is, we ought to respond to the faithfulness of God by seeking to be faithful as he is. Remember, Paul sees a very tight link here between faithfulness in the lives of his people, and the faithfulness of God himself. And, of course, Paul is also here very conscious of the words of Jesus on this subject from Matthew 5:37, and I quote: ‘All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one’.

Jesus wants us to ask ourselves, as does Paul: Are we fickle? Are we those who can’t be depended upon? Or are we people whose “yes” means “yes” and whose “no” means “no”?

Do you ever tell someone you’ll call them tomorrow but then neglect to ring? Do you say you’ll be somewhere but then fail to turn up? Do you promise to pray for someone but then forget? Do you tell your children that they can’t have something or can’t do something, but then later give in to their pestering? Do you walk away from a meeting with action items to complete but then not get them done by the due date? Do you commit to things but then pull out without a great reason? Do you miss deadlines at work? Do you promise to be there for someone in a difficult time but then you’re not really available to them because life is too busy?

These are all examples of unfaithfulness. Of course this passage also reminds us that there are times when plans have to change and Paul says here that it’s possible for plans to change for reasons other than fickleness. But nevertheless, the examples I’ve just given are examples of unreliability when there doesn’t seem to be a good reason. And they’re the sorts of things that lead people to conclude we’re not really dependable. And this matters in every relationship we’re in, because trust matters, and when we’re not dependable people’s trust in us is eroded.

But unfaithfulness matters even more when you’re a Christian. Because you represent a God who is faithful. And our conduct and character reflect upon him. And, in particular, when we claim to speak for him- when we seek to share a gospel about his faithful “yes” in Christ to every promise he’s ever made- then our faithfulness is vital. We want people to trust the messenger so that they’ll have no reason whatsoever to question the trustworthiness of the message.

- drawing on God’s resources

Now all that can seem a bit overwhelming can’t it? In a Home Group I was a part of this week the leader asked at one point how we all felt about the faithfulness of God. And people shared a range of reactions to that question. But one of my first thoughts was that I felt daunted! This really matters. I regularly stand up and speak on God’s behalf. My faithfulness being like God’s faithfulness seems like a really high bar!

And that’s why my second point here about how we respond to God’s faithfulness is so important. We draw on God’s resources. Because the faithful God who asks us to be faithful like he is- that God is so faithful, in fact, that he supplies us with the help we need

to see our conduct change. Verse 21- he is the one who makes us stand firm, and he anoints us with his Spirit who grows godly character in us. And do you remember verse 12 as well? Paul reminded us there that when we are people of integrity and sincerity it's because God's grace is at work in us.

So the bar is high. But the resources God provides are great. He is at work in us, by his Spirit and through his grace, to make us faithful as surely as he is faithful. What a wonderful comfort that truth is.

- trusting God's promises

But there's a third thing to say about responding to the faithfulness of God too. It's obvious, but crucial. It's about trusting God's promises. If God keeps every promise he makes, then we learn something about him don't we? We learn that he is utterly dependable. We learn that he can always be trusted. And so we learn that we can stake our lives on the promises he's given us. He promises to forgive our sins when we repent and to wash us clean. He promises to be with us every day we're following Jesus. He promises not to test us in a way that's beyond bearing. He promises to always work for our good in every circumstance of life. He promises to hear every prayer we pray. He promises to one day send Jesus to take us to be with him in his heavenly kingdom. Every one of those promises will come true. Because God only ever says "yes" to his promises. So we can bank on them- absolutely.

And can I pause at this point to say that if you're tuning in today/tonight and you're not yet a Christian, then there's something important in these verses for you this morning/evening. Maybe your heart is still unsure about whether you want to give up control of your life to Jesus? Maybe you're uncertain whether the things the Bible says can really be believed? Maybe you've got a lot of concerns you're not sure can really be addressed? Well, these verses in front of us today tell you that God can be trusted. There's nothing to fear in surrendering control of your life to Jesus. The Bible never speaks one false word. There are no concerns you have which God is not able to address. Because he is faithful. And Christian people all over the world today, and all through history, can testify that this has been not only their conviction but also their experience. Certainly that's true for me.

One of the memory verses I learnt as a child was Numbers 23:19. It goes like this. 'God is not a human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?'

I've never forgotten that verse. And its truth has been a refuge for me in all the years since. And it has proven to be true in my life. It's my experience, not just my conviction. And today, whether you're a Christian who needs to keep trusting God's promises, or whether you're someone still trying to work out whether you want to bank everything on Jesus, I add my testimony to the Apostle Paul's. God is faithful. He can be trusted. So trust him.

- glorifying God

And, of course, that leads me to the last implication of God's faithfulness that I want to mention this morning/evening. If God is faithful, then we should respond by glorifying him. Last week we heard Paul say in 2 Corinthians 1:3 that God should be praised because he is a God of compassion and comfort. And today/tonight we hear Paul say that he should be glorified for being faithful. This is what the end of verse 20 is all about. In response to all his promises, God says a resounding "yes". And in response to that, Paul and his brothers say a resounding "Amen". It means- "yes", "I agree", "that's true". And Paul says that he utters his Amen to the glory of God. For God's praise.

That memory verse from Numbers 23 I read a few moments ago reminds us that God is unique in his faithfulness. He's not like humans. We sometimes lie. We sometimes change our minds. We sometimes speak but then don't act. We sometimes make promises we don't fulfil. Even the most faithful of us sometimes fail. But not God! He is always dependable. Totally trustworthy. He never lies. He can always be counted on to do what he says. He keeps all his promises. All of them!

We said at the start today/tonight that there are no guarantees in life because we're not ultimately in control of our circumstances. And there are no guarantees in life because sometimes people let us down. But what if there's a God who is perfectly in control of our circumstances because he's sovereign? And what if there's a God who never lets people down because he is holy, and his love is pure? And there is.

Faithfulness in people is a quality I greatly admire, and I praise people for it. But even the most faithful people I know are outshone by the infallible faithfulness of God. How much more does he deserve my praise? And yours. And so this morning/evening I conclude by inviting you to respond to God's faithfulness in the same way Paul did. I want to invite you to hear God's great "yes" in Christ, and to reply with a resounding "Amen"- to the glory of God.

[Read 1:20]