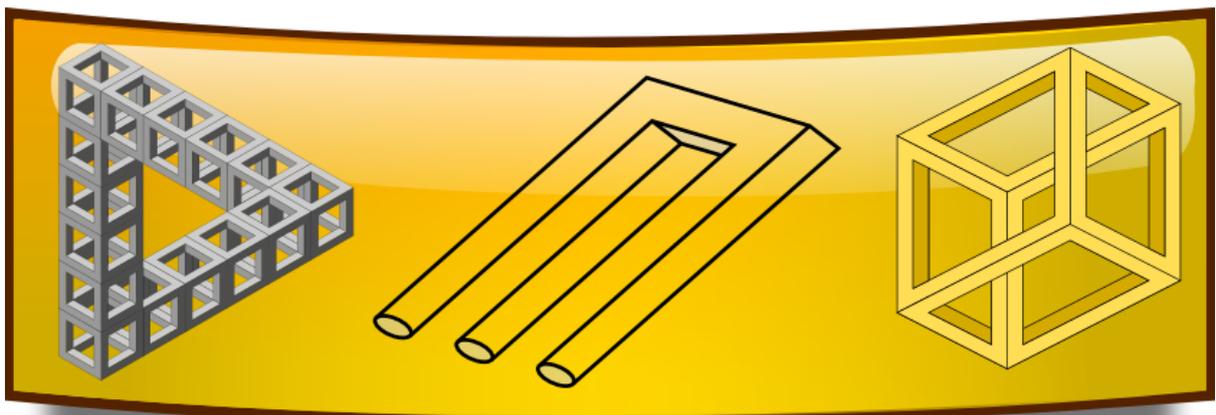


Spiritual Paradoxes

Truths for Christian growth



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Introduction

Before we start our study of the individual paradoxes of Scripture and what they teach, it is necessary to briefly discuss the reason for the paradoxes found in the Bible. A number of questions are considered to help us understand the nature and usefulness of paradoxes.

What is a paradox?

A paradox in everyday language is a statement that seems absurd or contradictory on the surface, but when understood properly may prove to be true and profound. An example of such a paradoxical proverb is reportedly from China:

Work slower to work faster.

While it seems contradictory on the surface, it contains an element of truth that we have all experienced: often when trying to rush to get something finished quickly, we make mistakes and have to redo some elements, so we take much longer. Conversely, if we work more carefully and slowly (minimizing mistakes), this ends up being the fastest way to complete a task.

We also find such paradoxical language in Scripture. For example, chapter one in this booklet examines Matthew 16:25:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.

This verse speaks of finding one's life by losing it, which is, on the surface, contradictory. If you have lost something, how is it that you have found it?

Why does God use paradoxes in His word?

Paradoxes are a way of grabbing our attention, and make us think more deeply about a particular truth. They tend to fascinate us and engage our minds to find out how they can be profoundly true while seemingly contradictory. In other words, they are useful literary devices that have the purpose of causing us to pause and think more deeply about what is being said. Paradoxes therefore promote deeper study and more serious thought.

Paradoxes in the Bible also lend themselves to meditation as they require careful, deep thought to appreciate the truths they are teaching.

Why do spiritual paradoxes exist?

The paradoxes in Scripture are not just a literary device. They do reflect real paradoxes that we must face and understand in the world in which we live. For example, in Matthew 16:25 quoted above, why can we only find our lives by losing them?

As I thought deeply about these paradoxes, the conclusion I came to is that these paradoxes exist because of the sin that is in this world. This impact of sin has done two things.

Firstly, on an individual level, sin has distorted our minds, our thinking and our wisdom. The Bible describes the natural, sinful mind as being darkened and alienated from God (Eph. 4:18). God's wisdom is foreign and foolish to our thinking (1 Cor. 2:14). The result is that God's revealed wisdom and truth in His word will tend to be opposed to the way we naturally think. It would seem upside down and wrong to us. It would come across as contradictory to what we would expect. Therefore, Scripture at times employs paradoxes to express and emphasize this.

Secondly, on a corporate level, the world's value systems, philosophies and wisdom are opposed to God and alienated from His truth (1 Jn. 2:16). We are constantly bombarded with the world's ideas about what will bring fulfillment, happiness, joy and success. The way back to God's wisdom and eternal truth is to reject the wisdom of the world and do what seems contrary to "the way the world works" and what everyone else is doing.

If it were not for sin in us and in the world, we would not have to lose our lives to gain it, nor become slaves to become free (another paradox examined in this booklet).

Facing the paradoxes of Scripture

How do we embrace the paradoxes of Scripture when they seem, by definition, contradictory and at odds with what we think will work? It all comes down to trust. God wants us to live by faith and not by sight (Heb. 11:1-2). We have to be convinced that God's wisdom is real wisdom, His word is truth, and that His ways lead to life and peace (Rom. 8:6).

We will find that as we embrace God's word and wisdom, the world will laugh at us and scoff (Acts 13:41). We will also find that we must constantly and humbly submit our natural wisdom and understanding to His word (Prov. 3:5-6).

The paradoxes in Scripture therefore challenge us. Are we going to embrace them and trust in the living God who spoke them, or follow our own reasoning and the wisdom of the world?

Understanding the paradoxes

We will work through each of the paradoxes in the following chapters with a common structure. This structure includes:

- An introduction to the topic of the paradox
- An identification of the paradox in the text
- An explanation on how to understand the paradox
- An articulation of the demands of the paradox
- An explanation on how the paradox facilitates Christian growth

Chapter 1

Finding through losing

²⁴Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his soul? Or what will a person give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every person according to his deeds. (Matt. 16:24-27)

The quest for the meaning of life

Everyone is searching for meaning, joy and fulfilment in their life. The fact that we are searching for it means that we recognise we have lost something of deep value. We know something is wrong, and that the meaning of life cannot just be reduced to being born, working, enjoying a few brief moments of happiness amidst the sorrows of this world, and then dying. In this passage the Lord Jesus uses paradoxical language to tell us how we can find the lives we have lost.

These words of the Lord assume and reflect the reality that people are alienated from God by their sin. They are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), blind and enslaved to sin (Jn. 8:34). To live a life without a relationship with the God who created us is not to live in the real, full sense of what we were created for. Life without God is not life!

The paradox identified

The paradox is stated in two different ways:

- If you want to save your life, you will end up losing it.
- But, if you lose your life for Christ’s sake, you will find it.

This paradox can be summed up as follows: the way to find your life is by losing it.

This is classic paradoxical language. How can we find something by losing it? We can now see how paradoxes tend to capture our attention and make us want to investigate. What exactly does this paradox mean?

The paradox explained

The Lord Jesus says that we will find our lives when we make a deliberate choice to lose them. The text explains what it means to lose our lives. In order to explain this paradox, the central statements will be taken in the order they are found in the text.

(i) If you want to save your life, you will end up losing it.

What does it mean to save your life in this statement? Verse 25 starts with the word “For”, which means the previous verse gives us the answer. Thus, to save your life includes:

- Refusing to deny oneself.
- Refusing to take up one’s cross. Note: a “cross” in this context is not only a great difficulty one has to endure; a cross was an instrument of torture and death. So, to take up one’s cross means to be prepared to give up your life.
- Refusing to follow the Lord Jesus.

These people then want to preserve their lives in the sense that they want to continue to pursue their own desires and interests. They want to remain in control of their own lives, make their own choices without reference of Christ, and live a life that suits them. They are trying to save their lives by living autonomously and for themselves. *Self-determination* is a good term to sum up this sentiment.

Such people, however, end up losing their lives. What exactly does it mean to lose their lives in this first statement? Verse 26 provides the answer, and speaks of people losing their very souls. Verse 27 indicates that this loss will ultimately be fulfilled at the coming of Christ and the day of judgement. There can then be no doubt that to lose one’s soul is to lose it eternally in hell – the ultimate place of suffering.

These people tried to save their lives by preserving their autonomy and self-determination in opposition to God. They thought that by living a life where they choose what they want to do and when they want to do it, they would end up finding ultimate fulfilment and satisfaction. These people, however, tragically end up eternally losing the very life they wanted to save.

(ii) If you lose your life for Christ’s sake, you will find it.

This second statement is the converse of the first statement. There is therefore some repetition required to explain it fully. A more detailed description of what it means to lose one’s life will be given in this section, so that the implications of this paradox are clearly understood.

To lose your life firstly involves denying yourself. We lose our lives when we live in such a way as to please God and not live according to our natural desires and inclinations. It means that we, amongst other things, set aside our worldly goals, comforts and ambitions, and

actively seek His will for us. In this sense we lose our self-governed lives and give them over to be God-governed.

Secondly, we are to take up our crosses. As mentioned earlier, to take up a cross means more than just bearing with something we dislike. When someone took up their cross in the Roman Empire it was because they were going to be killed. Another way we then lose our lives is through ultimate commitment to Christ, even if it means we will be killed for our faith. We may not be required to actually give our lives in martyrdom, but we will certainly be called upon to accept being ridiculed for our faith, ostracized by friends and family, and rejected by the world.

Thirdly, we are to actively follow Christ. Following Christ entails trusting in Him, obeying His word and seeking to live our lives to His glory and for His pleasure.

The Lord Jesus promises that such a person ends up finding his life. From the context, it is the very opposite of losing one's life in the first statement in the previous section. We will find eternal life. Instead of finding that losing our lives brings misery, depression and a joyless existence, we find that we experience abundant life. This abundant life does not mean that we will be healthy and wealthy, but rather that we have something of deeper value, including:

- A peace with God and a clear conscience
- Eternal hope of heaven where there will no longer be any tears or pain
- A sense of purpose and meaning in this world
- Joy in knowing our Creator in a deep and meaningful way
- The joy of having an eternal Father who loves and cares for us
- A spiritual family here on earth (a family of fellow believers)

In summary: if you are prepared and committed to losing your life for Christ's sake by giving up your independence and autonomy, and then following Him and taking up your cross, you will find true life. A true life is one of joy, with hope in this world, and then eternally in heaven. Do you want to find true life, eternal life, the very life that God intended for you to live? The only way to find this true life is to lose your autonomous life here on earth, where you pursue the things of the world as seem good to your judgement.

The demand of the paradox

Jesus is making a demand on our lives. There are conditions if you want to come after Christ and experience true life. You must give up your self-determined, worldly-driven ambitions and goals, and hand your life over to Him. You must do this for Christ's sake. You see in Him someone who is worthy of losing your life to.

Here is the challenge: will you trust Jesus enough and give up your life to Him? That is what Jesus is demanding from you and me. This demands a step of faith – to trust that what He says is true, and that His ways lead to life and peace.

It is important at this point to comment on the view that is prevalent in some Christian circles, that you can receive Jesus as your Saviour but not as your Lord. What is meant by this is that you can find His offer of forgiveness of sins attractive and receive eternal life, but you do not need to hand over control of your life to Him and live for Him. You can pretty much continue living your life as you please because, after all, your sins have been forgiven. You can have all the advantages of being a Christian and still live your own life, pursue your own dreams and goals exactly like the world. There is no call for sacrifice, obedience and trusting. The paradox strikes at the heart of this kind of teaching. The Lord is clear and definite that whoever desires to save his life (not being prepared to deny the self and follow after Christ, nor prepared to take up a cross) *will lose their life eternally*. There is no other alternative. This paradox teaches us the way in which we *are saved and become Christians*, not the conditions to become *a more committed Christian*. In the Bible the word *Christian* and *disciple* are used to describe the same thing (Acts 11:26), and so the conditions to become a disciple are the same as the conditions to become a Christian.

A paradox for Christian growth

For believers, spiritual growth is stunted when they turn away from their initial commitment to Christ.

You may be at a stage in your life as a Christian when you are wondering what you have done with your life. You look at other people around you who seem to have done so much more than you. They have a better career, more money, more interesting and exotic holidays and exciting hobbies. In contrast, you have often had to sacrifice many of these things as you have pursued Christ and His word. It is crucial to remember two things:

Firstly, if you have given your life to Christ (in other words, lost your life for His sake), you have done the most important and valuable thing that anyone can ever do with the life God has given them – you have given it back to the Lord. You have turned your back on the world, and your sinful self-determination. The world may look at you and say that you have wasted your life. But the promise of the Lord Jesus stands firm: you will find your life eternally.

Secondly, even gaining the whole world is not worth the cost of losing your soul (verse 26). The things of this world do not satisfy. Many of the rich, popular people of the world testify to the fact that these things have not brought the deep joy and satisfaction they seemed to promise.

The Lord Jesus teaches in this passage that the way to true life, in this world and the next, is found in Him. This continued commitment to deny yourself and follow after Him is the fertile soil for Christian growth.

Perhaps you are a Christian but have drifted back into the world. You have let the things of this world squeeze and choke a life of following Christ. You are more interested and excited about making money than serving the Lord. You find greater fulfilment in a good career,

exciting hobbies or consuming sport than serving Christ in your local church. Serving Christ has simply taken a back seat. It is obviously legitimate and necessary to have a career and earn money to support yourself and your family. You can certainly have a hobby and enjoy sport. But you can never let these things be your top priority so that they strangle your spiritual life.

The question of the Lord in this text needs to be repeated to you: what will it profit you even if you could gain the whole world (which you cannot) but it ends up costing your soul? Living a self-determined, worldly life with no reference to God is going to cost you your life. Don't start back down this road. Make sure Christ comes first in your life, and that you are living your life to His glory. Remember your initial commitment to Christ, when you gave up your life for His sake, and don't start enjoying and valuing the things of this world more than seeking His kingdom and righteousness.

Chapter 2

Freedom through slavery

¹⁸ and after being freed from sin, you became slaves to righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented the parts of your body as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your body's parts as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. ²⁰ For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in relation to righteousness. ²¹ Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. ²² But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:18-23)

Who wants to be a slave?

No one wants to be a slave. No child has the ambition of being a slave when they grow up. Everyone wants freedom and to be their own master, especially in our world today. Freedom is cherished. People even chose hardship and suffering over slavery. Nations have gone to war rather than become subservient to another nation or king. Here in our text, becoming a Christian is described as being a slave of God. How can being a slave (even to God) ever be good and joyful? Surely our complete freedom is to be ultimately valued. These words of the Bible are going to turn our thinking upside down. But that is exactly what the paradoxes of the Bible are designed to do!

The paradox identified

In verse 18 (and verse 22) we are told that a Christian has been set free from sin. This would surely sound very attractive to everyone. Any form of freedom is good, after all. Not only that but this passage also mentions an end state of having eternal life (verse 23). This gets better and better. Everyone wants that!

Unfortunately, however, this text says something disturbing and puzzling about this wonderful road via freedom to eternal life. It tells us that this road includes slavery, to both righteousness (verse 18) and God (verse 22). How can the process of being set free include becoming a slave to something else? How can inheriting eternal life, the ultimate form of freedom, come through a form of slavery?

There is no getting around this paradox: freedom and eternal life (what we would call complete Christian liberty) come through becoming a slave of God. Are we not just swapping

one form of slavery for another, and so are no better off? We do need to understand this paradox.

The paradox explained

(i) The curse of slavery to sin

Verse 18 starts with a statement that believers have been set free from sin. In other words, their original condition was one of slavery, and that slavery was to sin. The rest of the Bible indicates that everyone born into this world is born in sin (Eph. 2:1-3; Ps. 51:5), and we are increasingly enslaved to sin as we commit acts of sin (Jn. 8:34). Sin is pictured as a master. What was the outcome of this slavery? How does this master pay its servants? The text tells us: the wages of sin is death (verses 21 and 23). In the context, this does not just refer to physical death, but also to eternal death, as it is contrasted with *eternal* life in verse 22. Sin is indeed a cruel master.

True freedom for every human being is therefore a myth. Although people may be born into a democracy and never actually be a slave to anyone, they are in fact slaves. They are slaves to sin. They may feel free, they may claim to be free, but in reality they are not. They are living under the dominion of sin, and they are going to receive the wages of sin, namely physical and eternal death.

(ii) The blessing of being a slave of God

There are four blessings that result from being a slave of God mentioned in this text.

Firstly, being a slave of God means that we have been set free from sin. We cannot be owned by two masters. Even in Roman times, slaves were purchased and owned by a single master. When believers become slaves of God, they now belong to Him, and He releases them from slavery to sin. Sin's powerful hold over believers is broken, and sin's rights over believers are cancelled.

As an aside, this teaches us an important truth. As created beings, we always belong to someone. We are never in a state of complete autonomy. We may like to think of ourselves as the apex of evolution, having achieved self-awareness and complete self-determination. This is untrue. In the garden of Eden, Satan promised Eve freedom from the rule and reign of God. This was a cunning lie. Having fallen into sin, instead of becoming free, Adam and Eve and all their posterity became slaves of sin. They exchanged the loving Lordship of God for bondage to sin.

Secondly, having been set free from sin, believers no longer receive the wages of sin, namely eternal death.

Thirdly, when we become slaves of God, we also become slaves of righteousness (verse 18). In other words, we live lives that lead to holiness (verse 22). The power of sin is broken in the believer's life, as he or she is no longer enslaved to it.

It will help us to understand the concept of being a slave of God if we consider what slavery meant. Slavery in New Testament times meant at least two things: ownership and control. A slave was owned by a master, and therefore the master had control of the slave. In a similar way, slavery to God means believers are owned by God and are therefore controlled by Him. Slavery to a holy God means that believers are going to live holy lives in this world. Not perfectly holy, but truly holy. As believers come under God's rule and control, their enslavement to sin is broken, and they become controlled by a principle of holiness. Note the definite language and certainty of Romans 6. A holy life (to a lesser or greater extent) is the sure result of slavery to God and righteousness.

The heading of this section speaks of the *blessedness* of slavery to God. Hopefully, it is now clear why slavery to God is blessed. It transforms someone enslaved to sin (sins such as deceit, adultery, hatred, slander, gossip, murder, theft) and makes them a slave of righteousness (bearing fruit such as kindness, self-control, gentleness, love, meekness, goodness, truthfulness, faithfulness). Even the world admires a life marked by these qualities. So slavery to a holy life is a real blessing, not a curse!

Slavery to God is therefore not a life of bondage. It is not a life of joyless, servile hardship. It is in fact the opposite. It is becoming what we were originally created to be before sin came into the world and into our hearts. Slavery to all that is noble, good, pure and loving is a glorious liberty, as strange and paradoxical as that may sound.

Fourth and lastly, having become slaves of God, believers inherit everlasting life (verses 22 and 23). A slave of God therefore enjoys a glorious, sure hope which liberates them from the fear of death (Heb. 2:15).

All believers acknowledge that their new Master is good, and He leads them in paths of joy and peace. Instead of the wages of sin (eternal death), they receive a *gift* from Him, namely eternal life.

The demand of the paradox

This paradox demands faith and trust in God. We must trust that a life of holiness is more pleasurable and rewarding than a life dominated by sin. We must be willing to give up our sin, and our so-called liberty. The warning of this paradox needs to be taken seriously, as the wages of sin means eternal ruin in hell. A decision to be saved and become a slave of God does not result in a life of bondage and joyless servitude. It results in a life of holiness that yields the fruit of joy and peace in this life, and eternal life in the next. We must trust that God is a kind and generous Master. His wages are not death and misery, but true life and peace.

We must therefore willingly give up a life of sinful pleasure. What this passage tells us is that a life of sinful pleasure will be short lived. Sin is soon going to pay wages to all enslaved to it, namely eternal death, where there is no pleasure, only eternal pain and suffering.

A paradox for Christian growth

There are four important lessons for Christian growth from this passage.

Firstly, a life of holiness is only possible as we come under God's loving rule and reign. Only He can break the power of sin in our lives. The more we yield to His love and control in our lives through the Holy Spirit, the more holy we will become. We experience the blessed fruit of the Spirit as we do this (Gal. 5:22).

Secondly, we are reminded that sin may give fleeting pleasure, but in the end it will be bitter. It is a cruel taskmaster, and its wages are eternal death and misery.

Thirdly, a life yielded to God's rule and reign results in righteousness and true liberty. We are set free from sin, and slavery to God is ultimate liberty. It is what we were created for.

Fourth and lastly, this text tells us that a life of holiness is possible. We are no longer slaves of sin, meaning that we no longer have to obey it. Sin can be defeated, and this must spur us on and encourage us in our fight against sin.

Chapter 3

Strength through weakness

⁹ And He has said to me, “**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.**” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; **for when I am weak, then I am strong.** (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

Delighting in weakness is a tough one

No one likes to be weak, feel weak or even to be seen to be weak. We go to gym to make ourselves stronger. We study to make ourselves mentally more astute. We go on courses to get more skills so we can be better and perform better. How can Paul delight and boast in weakness in this passage?

The paradox identified

In this passage Paul indicates that when he is weak, then he is strong (verse 10). Those things that make him weak, actually make him strong. That is about as paradoxical as it gets! Paul therefore even boasts about the things that make him weak.

What is also puzzling is how Paul could delight in (other versions say “take pleasure in”) things like persecution, distress, and hardships? These things are, by definition, painful. How can someone take pleasure in them?

The paradox explained

This paradox can be understood using three headings.

(i) Paul’s deep desire

Paul had a deep desire for Christ’s power to rest upon his life. This is very telling, because it indicates that Paul’s life and goals were focused on Christ-centred ministry. It was certainly Christ-centred, as Paul indicates he suffered hardship for the sake of Christ (verse 10). It was ministry he was passionate about. As believers we instinctively know we do not call on Christ’s power to help us run a faster marathon or to close a big business deal. The only time, as believers, that we are concerned about Christ’s power resting on us is when we are involved in ministry.

As we pursue ministry, it very soon becomes apparent why our own power is useless. What can we actually achieve with our power? Can we change someone's heart from stone to flesh? Can we give spiritual life to people who are dead in sins (Eph. 2:1-5)? Can we open blind eyes? Can we illuminate someone's mind with spiritual truth? We can do none of these things. As we engage in ministry, we realise our own limitations and the need to have Christ's power rest on our lives and efforts. We come to a deep realization that without Christ we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

In contrast, think through the implications of having Christ's almighty power resting on our ministries. Paul understood the value of the power of Christ:

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:13)

Without Christ's power we are ineffective and hampered. With Christ's power we can do anything Christ wants to accomplish through us. If we have a heart like Paul had for Christian service, we will also have a deep passion to have Christ's power resting on our lives. Believers who don't have an interest in Christ's power resting on them, betray the fact that they don't really have a heart to serve Christ and others.

We are going to see, however, that there is a personal cost to having Christ's power rest on us.

(ii) Receiving the power of Christ

The text indicates that Christ's strength is made perfect (or complete) through human weakness. God is not in the business of glorifying man. He does not want to turn his servants into super men so that everyone looks at them and admires their natural giftedness or powers. God is most interested in accomplishing His work in such a way as it displays His grace and strength. Are we okay with that? That is how Christ works!

As an aside, always be suspicious of a ministry with a charismatic leader who is promoting himself, drawing attention to himself and flaunting his personality and natural gifting. Always be suspicious of so-called Christian books that have the aim of promoting your self-image, telling you how wonderful you are or how powerful you are. This is not biblical Christianity. Such talk is no more than popular psychology and positive thinking with some Christian words thrown in to make it look compatible with the Bible. In Christianity, God is at the centre of ministry. It is His power and grace that gets anything done. And that grace and power is best displayed when the human instruments are weak, and seen to be weak.

The understanding of this paradox can be summarized as follows: *We become strong in Christ's power when we are humanly weak.*

The text implies that if we do not become humanly weak, then Christ's power will not rest on us. The words "so that" indicate a condition. Paul boasts in his weakness *so that* Christ's power would rest on him. Paul concludes that when he is weak, then he is strong.

If we want the world to see us as great self-achievers who lifted ourselves up by the bootstraps and achieved success by our own efforts, then Christian ministry is not for us.

(iii) Paul's attitude to suffering and hardship

Paul shows two attitudes that are not natural to human beings. Firstly, he takes pleasure in his infirmities. This is not normal! It is a specific Christian attitude that is found in those wanting to serve Christ and extend His kingdom.

Paul did not take pleasure in infirmities in and of themselves. His pleasure in them came from what these infirmities did: they made him weak so he could be strong in the Lord. If we are living a self-oriented, self-serving life focused on our comfort, convenience and interests, then infirmities are seen as a hindrance and an irritation. But if we have the desire of Paul, to be effective servants of Christ here on earth, then infirmities have the very useful purpose of making us weak so we can have Christ's power rest on our lives.

The second attitude is very similar. Paul boasted in his infirmities. In other words, he made much of them. Our words often betray what we really feel about ourselves. There can be no doubt that when Paul spoke, he would speak about how often he was in need, distressed and persecuted. But he also spoke about how wonderfully God accomplished His powerful work through him.

It is important at this point to say a few words about Paul's weaknesses. Some may think that these verses mean that we *must make ourselves weak*. Surprisingly, the answer is no! Such thinking would be unbiblical. For example, if we were called to preach, it would be wrong to think that we should not prepare a sermon properly so that we could be weak, but then it would be powerful through Christ. If we did this, then all we would do is preach a bad sermon. The Bible encourages us to be diligent in what we do (2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Pet. 1:10). We must labour to make ourselves approved by the Lord (2 Tim. 2:15). We must study to sharpen our minds and grow in God's word. Apollos was said to be mighty in the scriptures. This applies even to our physical bodies. If we are physically weak, we should start going to gym to build strength so we can do more and have more energy. We should take our vitamins and eat healthily so that we can be stronger for longer to serve God. For example, Paul told Timothy to use a little wine to help cure his stomach ailments (1 Tim. 5:23). Why would he do that? To make himself better and stronger. All this is legitimate and showcases what it means to be responsible. We should seek to grow, exercise ourselves to godliness, study God's word, read books and the like. If we look closely at the text, the infirmities Paul had were God-sent, not self-inflicted. The text speaks of needs, infirmities and persecution. God in His wisdom will send these things to humble us, to make us depend more on Him and to make us more conscious of the fact that we are weak creatures.

We must therefore be able to say of these infirmities and weaknesses that we endure them for Christ's sake. They were not because of our sin, stupidity or laziness! If we are lazy, don't work, and get into need, then we should not boast about this need. It will not result in Christ's power resting on us. It is more likely His discipline will rest on us. Ungodly behaviour and an

undisciplined life do not bring about Christ's power in us. The infirmities this text is talking about are those things we endure for Christ's sake, placed on us by God, not placed on ourselves because of our sinful neglect.

The demand of the paradox

This paradox is very challenging. A life of infirmities, need and persecution is not very appealing. Where is one's quality of life in this? We naturally don't want to live a life like this. It is hard and uncomfortable. We would rather want a quiet, peaceable and comfortable life.

Paul embraced his hard life because he wanted to be an effective servant of Christ. *There is a cost to having Christ's power on your life.* The demand of this paradox is that if we want to be faithful, effective servants of Christ – at church, in our families and at work – then we must embrace the fact that God is going to humble and weaken us with a variety of circumstances that make us feel our weakness – so that His power may be perfected in us.

We will only be content with this kind of life when our desire to serve Christ is greater than our desire for a comfortable life. Otherwise we will constantly be discontent with infirmities and needs, and they will make us grumpy and prone to complain.

A paradox for Christian growth

Christian growth takes place as we live purposefully for Him and have a deep desire to serve Him. The context of this passage refers to Paul asking Christ to remove the thorn in his flesh, because it was (in his mind at least) hindering his ministry. He thought that if his infirmities were removed he would be more effective. Christ's reply to Paul's request reveals His agenda for us. His agenda is not to make us strong, dynamic, charismatic and famous in and of ourselves. It is not to give us instant success, popularity, sharp quips and clever arguments, so that people admire us, and think we are so gifted. Rather, Christ gives us things in our lives to humble us, make us feel distressed, and make us feel our weakness and dependence on Him, so that we can become strong in the strength of Christ.

If we then embrace these God-sent troubles and infirmities, we will grow. Christ's blessing and power will rest on our lives, and we will grow in Christian grace and effectiveness for the Lord.

Christian maturity can be seen in someone when they display Paul's attitude towards their needs and infirmities. They are accepting of them, and patient in them. They may pray for the infirmities to be removed, but will accept His answer if the Lord leaves them in their lives. Our Christian growth is going to depend on whether we are willing, like Paul, to accept that being used by the Lord effectively and powerfully does not include us being made greater for our own glory.

Chapter 4

Greatness through servanthood

*But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles domineer over them, and those in high position exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wants to **become prominent among you shall be your servant,** ²⁷ and whoever desires to be **first among you shall be your slave;** ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:25-28)*

Servant leadership is in vogue

The concept of servant leadership is very familiar. In fact, almost every politician, as he or she takes power, promises to be a “servant of the people”. This is quite fashionable today. The concept of servant leadership is not a modern invention of psychology or leadership theory. It was spoken by the Lord Jesus some two thousand years ago and comes from the Bible.

We must admit however, that while many pay lip service to servant leadership, the reality is far different. Almost everyone, once in power, seizes the opportunities that power and influence afford and use it for self-enrichment or self-fulfillment at the expense of others.

In this passage the Lord Jesus appeals to the knowledge of the disciples. They *knew* how the Roman emperors and leaders of the day did things (verse 25). The Roman emperors and governors had few restrictions and restraints. They could exploit or kill almost anyone in opposition and indulge in pleasure. Not much has changed. Dictators still exist in many countries of the world. Just look in the prisons and the courts of our own country. You will find many politicians and leaders there who also forsook their initial pledge to serve the nation and others and ended up serving themselves. Abuses of power include corruption, self-enrichment, money laundering and giving tenders to family members.

So how does the Lord Jesus want things to be done in the church and in his kingdom?

The paradox identified

How do we become great in the kingdom of God, and in the church? If we want to be great and be first, what must we do and what must we be?

The answer given by the Lord must have been shocking to the first century disciples. To become great in God’s eyes is to become a slave or servant. This must have been shocking because in the first century, a slave or servant had no value except for what he or she could

do or be sold for. They were just an asset or possession, with the sole purpose of benefitting their owners. We cannot imagine what it was like being a slave in that culture. Imagine working the whole week. We would have no days or nights off, apart from the rest we needed to make us more productive for our masters. There were no unions to set maximum hours of work before having a compulsory break. In the middle of the night, if someone vomited in the house, you would get called to clean it up. Perhaps you got a few hours off because you had a kind master, but his wife decided to host a dinner that night, so you would be called to cook, clean, and wash dishes. Your break had the lowest priority and was not a right. You would have to do anything at any time it was required of you. Your rest, preferences or conveniences simply did not feature. As a slave in the Roman context there was no consideration of your rights. You basically had none. Being a slave would never be considered to be achieving greatness. It was the worst and lowest fate.

So how do we become great in the kingdom of God? We must see ourselves as slaves of others. This does not mean that we must literally sell ourselves and our children into slavery, but that our attitude and focus must be on serving others and not ourselves.

The paradox explained

(i) How the Gentiles did it

The Lord Jesus and the disciples knew very well how the rulers of the Gentiles exercised their authority. To “lord it over” conveys the idea of using power and influence for self-promotion, self-benefit and self-enrichment. It included trampling on others with no consideration for them. Exploitation and abuse would be included. These leaders were essentially self-serving.

This sinful tendency has not gone away with the rise of democracy. There may be more restraints with checks and balances, yet it is still the way of leadership and power in the world. Just look in the courts and in the jails. You will find leaders who once promised to be servants of the people but, they were then caught in self-enrichment, fraud, corruption, sexual exploitation and the like. Many leaders are also simply not caught or brought to justice.

(ii) The church must be different

The Lord Jesus draws a contrast. “*Yet it shall not be so among you.*” The disciples and the church should be radically different to the believer’s experience of the world. When outsiders look at the church, they should be surprised and see something that is different to what they are used to in the world.

(iii) A godly ambition to be great

Did you notice that the Lord Jesus did not condemn the desire to be great in the kingdom? He rather showed His disciples how they could be great in God's sight. We should all have ambition to be great in God's sight and in the kingdom. We should strive to be the best Christian we can be. The Lord Jesus shows us the way to greatness, and it is not through abusing power, self-enrichment or exploiting others.

(iv) What does greatness in the church look like?

As already indicated, greatness is achieved by truly having the attitude and actions of a servant. A few points need to be emphasized.

Firstly, it is interesting that in this passage the Lord Jesus does not say we are to become God's slaves (which is also a biblical truth), but to become each other's slaves. As we look around our local church at the people around us (the young, the old, the grumpy, the likeable, the handsome and the not so handsome) the Lord wants us to adopt an attitude of slavery to them. Of course, being a servant of God is linked to being a servant of others. It is linked in two ways:

- As servants of the Lord, we want to please Him, and one of the ways we do this is to become servants to other believers.
- When we serve each other out of obedience to God, He accepts this as serving Him, as the passage below indicates:

³⁴ *"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink..."*

³⁷ *Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink?..."*

⁴⁰ *And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.' (Matt. 25:34-40)*

One of the ways we express our servanthood to God is to be a servant to His people. If we are not prepared to be a servant to God's people, we cannot call ourselves servants of God.

We need to think through the implication of seeing ourselves as servants and slaves to those around us in the church. It includes the following:

- Our rights are not a priority. Indeed, a slave had few or no rights.
- Our convenience or comfort is not a priority – this did not even feature in the life of a slave. They did what they were told to do when they were told to do it.

- We should have an attitude of serving, blessing and benefitting others, even though at times it will be hard, inconvenient, exhausting and involve sacrifice.

Have you ever asked yourself the question: why must I go without something I want so that someone in this church can get something? Our paradox supplies the answer. That is what it means to be a slave of someone else. If you feel that this is not fair, then you have not got what the Lord is calling for here. A servant went without many things to benefit the master. This is the type of attitude that should be seen in the local church and towards one another. Is this evident in our churches? I fear that such a servant heart is sadly lacking. If it were more widespread, then:

- Our serving rosters would be oversubscribed. There would be too many people volunteering and not enough areas of ministry to serve in. I doubt any local church has had this problem!
- Families and individuals would be more sacrificial in how they spent their “me time”, their money and their energy when meeting needs, being hospitable, discipling and caring for each other.

At the end of the day, if we are not serving others eagerly and sacrificially, no matter what we may think of ourselves, we are not great in God’s sight.

As an aside, it is important to consider if and how this principle of being a servant applies to elders. After all, the Bible says elders do exercise a rule in the church:

¹⁷ Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb. 13:17; NJKV)

This paradox of greatness through servanthood applies to everyone in the church, including elders. The principle is that all believers should be using their gifts to serve others. Elders are gifted in leadership, in theological understanding, in wisdom and discernment and in their ability to teach. They are therefore, just like other believers, to see themselves as servants of the church, and to use their gifts to serve the body as a slave serves his master. In doing this, they must exercise some authority, but in a kind, gentle, humble way in submission to Christ. Elders are never to lord it over the church and pursue self-enrichment or self-promotion. In our passage, the Lord was speaking to the disciples who would become the apostles of the New Testament church. They were not to lord it over the church as the Gentiles did in the world.

The demand of the paradox

This paradox is one of the most demanding that the Lord spoke. It takes great faith and humility to see yourself as a slave of God and of others. It demands self-sacrifice, setting aside rights, desires and comforts to benefit and serve others. At times we will go without some things so that we can serve others.

You and I will only embrace servanthood if we desire to be great in God's sight. Only a passion to serve and please Him will motivate us to submit ourselves and see ourselves as slaves to those around us. This is indeed a challenging paradox, and few in the church live up to its demands.

An implication of this paradox is that it demands that believers be involved in their local church. How can you be a slave to other Christians if you are not in community with them? How can you be a servant to a local church if you only interact remotely or virtually? This is not possible.

A paradox for Christian growth

Christian growth is essentially about becoming more Christlike. As we become more and more like Him, we are truly growing in grace. This text therefore points us to the example of Christ as a servant to His people. We are to consider His example:

- He did not come to be served, but to serve.
- This serving required Him to lay down His very life. His servanthood cost Him everything.
- He did this for many, which includes you and me.

He did not come to take, but to give, and to serve His creation.

Do you want to be great in God's sight and in the kingdom? Then become a slave to His people and serve with joy in the kingdom.

Chapter 5

Receiving through giving

*²⁴There is one who **scatters**, and **yet increases all the more**, And there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in poverty.²⁵ A **generous person will be prosperous**, And one who gives **others plenty of water will himself be given plenty**.²⁶ One who withholds grain, the people will curse him, but blessing will be on the head of him who sells it. (Prov. 11:24-26)*

Avoiding the health, wealth and prosperity heresy

We have a major obstacle as we approach texts like this. The health, wealth and prosperity error is so widespread and popular in the church today, it would be irresponsible not to mention it or provide some guidance as we approach a text like this.

The health, wealth and prosperity teaching is a perversion of the Bible. It teaches:

- If you are financially poor, then you have a weak faith.
- There are fixed, certain spiritual laws that guarantee an outcome: give some money to the church and you will receive multiplied money.

There are two guiding principles as we seek to understand the biblical concept of receiving through giving. Firstly, there is no connection between faith and material wealth as the prosperity gospel would have us believe. In fact, the Bible teaches the opposite. God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith:

⁵ Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶ But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? ⁷ Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? (James 2:5-7)

James could look at the church and point out to his readers that those in the church who were rich in faith were not characterised by great wealth, but by relative poverty. So a strong faith does not necessarily lead to material wealth. In most instances it does not.

Secondly, the Old Testament promises of God's favour are often couched in physical and material terms, as Israel was a physical nation in a physical land with a national economy. These promises do not always apply literally to New Testament believers. The prosperity preachers generally focus on Old Testament texts for their support.

We also need to understand what a Proverb is. The Proverbs in the Bible should not be seen as infallible promises, but rather general principles that God is pleased to usually adopt as He works in the world. For example:

Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it. (Prov. 22:6)

This Proverb is not an infallible promise that *all* the children of believers who have received instruction from their parents will *definitely* be saved and go to heaven. It is rather a general principle with which God often blesses believing parents.

As we examine this paradox, we need to keep the above-mentioned principles in mind. We can and must let Proverbs 11:24-26 speak for itself, and not throw out the baby with the bathwater. God does bless and prosper those who are generous, just not always in a strictly material way.

The paradox identified

The paradox is repeated in slightly different ways to drive the message home. Firstly, there is someone who scatters. This does not mean being wasteful but refers to someone who liberally shares with those around him as he responds to needs. And *yet* (or one could say paradoxically) this person does not suffer deprivation, but rather increases. His giving to others has not diminished his resources, but rather increased them. This does not follow the logical rules of economics and mathematics! By contrast, the ones who withhold from others to enrich themselves come to poverty. This also does not add up mathematically!

Secondly, a generous person, who gives away to others, is somehow made rich. His generosity does not result in his poverty.

Thirdly, someone who waters others (does things to help them grow and flourish, including giving to them), rather than becoming drained and withered, is watered themselves. They receive gracious watering as they water others. In other words, they receive through giving to others.

Fourthly, verse 26 has a scenario in mind where there is need, perhaps during a time of famine crop failure, and people are hungry. An individual has grain. If this person holds onto the grain for a while longer, the prices will increase due to people's desperation, and then he can sell it at a greater profit and make more money. So one would think this person who withholds grain would prosper financially, as they are increasing their profit. But the person who withholds the grain to make more money in the future ends up being cursed, while the person who sells it to help those in need (and accepts a loss of future profit) will be blessed.

All the above scenarios teach the general principle: people receive through giving.

The paradox explained

Six points are mentioned below to properly understand what these three Proverbs are teaching.

(i) The unseen hand of God

Did you notice that God's name was not mentioned anywhere in the three verses? This does not mean, however, that He is absent from the outcomes mentioned in the verses. Who causes the one who scatters to increase? God does. Who makes the generous person rich? God does. Who waters the person who waters other people? God does.

The book of Proverbs is a book of the Bible, which teaches God's hand in everything and over everything. These paradoxes do not come to pass because of some arbitrary, spiritual law that just automatically applies. It is the hand of God.

Even when it is said that *the people* curse the one who withholds grain (verse 26), it is not that people have got some mystical power to curse others. Rather, as the commentator Matthew Henry says, sometimes the voice of the people reflects the voice of God. God curses the person who tries to make greater profit off the misery and hardship of the poor. The verse below shows that the Lord is in control of the outcome when someone is generous:

He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, And He will pay back what he has given. (Prov. 19:17) (Emphasis mine).

(ii) The generous soul described

The picture of a generous person from these verses includes:

- Someone who scatters, not wastefully, but liberally to the needs around him.
- Someone who delights in the act of giving, and who has a genuine concern for the person on the receiving end.
- Someone who looks to grow, refresh and nourish others.
- Someone who accepts lower income or profit as they devote themselves to helping others around them.

(iii) The Lord's blessing on the generous soul

The consistent teaching of these verses is that the generous soul will prosper, rather than become impoverished and come to deprivation. Their prosperity can be financial, but not always, as the earlier comments about the prosperity heresy make clear. These generous people will be blessed, refreshed and grow. They will not be reduced to beggars as they give to others. They receive through giving, because the Lord's smile is upon them.

⁷*So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor. 9:7) (Emphasis mine).*

(iv) The stingy described

The stingy are essentially the opposite of the generous. The key word is “withholds”, found in verses 24 and 26. They are essentially looking out for themselves, and trying to make themselves prosperous by withholding from others. If they do give, it is carefully calculated and the bare minimum. Verse 26 describes a stinginess that is particularly repulsive, namely to make some extra profit off the hardship and desperation of others.

One can almost hear the justification for their stinginess in these three verses. They may say:

- If I don’t look out for myself, no one else will.
- Surely there is nothing wrong with a bit of extra profit based on foresight of market forces.
- If I look out for others, then who will look out for me?
- I need my *me time*, else I will get drained and wither. I cannot solve all the world’s problems.

(v) God’s displeasure towards the stingy

God’s displeasure is seen in the paradoxical nature of these verses. Those who withhold and do not seek to help others, suffer loss and need instead of becoming wealthy and prosperous. They end up in poverty. They are the ones who end up withered and drained. All of this is from God’s hand. This is His active displeasure towards those who are not generous.

¹³ *Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard.*
(Prov. 21:13)

(vi) Some qualifications

It is important to note two qualifications in the text. Firstly, verse 24 speaks of withholding *more than what is right*. In other words, it is right in some circumstances to withhold a certain amount. The Bible does teach, for example, that we are to take care of our own family. There is wisdom in storing up something for the future. We do not have to give away everything. The vows of poverty of certain monastic orders are therefore unbiblical.

Secondly, verse 26 speaks of selling grain, not about *giving it all away for free*. In other words, we can do business and make a profit. We can be industrious, and we do need to make some money to provide for our family and fulfil other responsibilities that God has laid on us.

The demand of the paradox

These Proverbs are challenging because they essentially call on us to trust God that as we seek to help others around us, to water them and look out for their needs, we will not come to poverty or wither ourselves away.

Although the Proverbs are not strict, infallible promises, we can see that they do contain an element of promise that our faith must act on and respond to. We find this promise in the New Testament:

⁶ But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2 Cor. 9:6)

We do truly receive through giving! We will not be impoverished through our generosity and care for others. Are we prepared to trust the Lord in this?

A paradox for Christian growth

The picture of being watered in verse 25 is essentially a picture of someone growing and flourishing. The Lord waters the generous soul. It could very well be that the reason for someone's lack of growth is that they are too preoccupied with their own needs and protecting their own quality of life. They are too self-centred, calculating, and tight-fisted. They lack a joyful generosity that God loves and blesses. And so they feel discontent and drained much of the time, finding little joy and satisfaction in the work of their hands.

Why do you not test the Lord in this? While we are generally not to test the Lord (Matt. 4:7), in the area of giving and generosity God calls us to test Him (Mal. 3:10). The Lord will bless the generous soul, and they will grow and prosper as they give to others.