

## READY TO SHEPHERD

1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5

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For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.  
1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5

The first thing that we should say about the readiness to shepherd—the readiness to pastor a church or a particular ministry

within a local church—is that in fact you are never ready when you start. When you are about to assume your first pastorate it does not matter how old you are, how much education you have, whether you have read all the right books, listened to all the right podcasts, read all the right blogs, attended all the right conferences, have argued all the right doctrines, whether you have your license, your ordination, and your resume—you are not ready. And here is why: Because you do not know yet whom you are pastoring. Now, you might know the name of the place, of course, and some names of the people in the place, but you do not know yet whom you are pastoring. What I mean by that is, you do not yet know who you are loving.

Of course, none of the accomplishments that I have mentioned above are bad things. There is nothing wrong with any of those things and you should pursue all of them if you are able. But you are not really ready to shepherd until you are neck deep in the sheep. You are not ready until you know what it is that keeps your people up at night, what it is that breaks their heart, what they are chasing after, what their hopes are, what their dreams are, what drives them during the day, what they are praying about, what they are worrying about, or what their idols are. You are not ready to shepherd until you have had in some way your heart moved by these people. And you are not ready to shepherd until you have had your heart in some way broken by these people.

In a way, pastoring is like marriage. I have been married for eighteen years and I have performed many wedding ceremonies and discipled many married couples. But I have to laugh when I think about the way the whole thing begins. I tend to see the idea of the wedding ceremony as two idiots standing up in front of a group of people making all sorts of crazy promises they have no idea if they really have the strength to keep. They are each assuming the best of each other as they say, “I am going to love you and forgive you, no matter what.” But they have no clue what that “no matter what” will actually turn out to be. In fact, the worst that they can imagine tends to not be all that bad. I’ve never counseled a couple who expected their spouse to cheat on them or abuse them.

Most married couples, however, think they will be prepared when the “for worse” time comes. But in the moment they make this audacious promise, even though they don’t know what they’re promising to forgive in the future, the promise is still a good thing. Not knowing

the future should not prevent a couple from getting married. But, still, they are not ready. They are not ready until they have had their dreams of marriage shattered by the actual marriage that they are in. And the same is true for pastoral ministry. The shattering is the preparing.

When it comes to the Corinthian Church, Paul felt deeply for them because they were a messy bunch. I find it funny that often we look back to the early church with this idealistic vision and we think wistfully, "If only we could just get back to the early church, everything would be great." But have we actually read the Bible? The earliest chapters of Acts may paint a rosy picture, but the further you go, the messier it gets, and once we get into Paul's epistles and see what kind of problems he is addressing, we realize that our church is probably more functional than the Corinthian Church!

At the time Paul is writing 1 Corinthians, it is likely everything that he wanted for the Corinthian Church was being threatened in his imagination. He has such hopes, dreams, vision, love, and affection for them. He desires for them to come alongside Christ and see Christ's glory. He sees how all the practical functionality that they lack would come from this vision for them if they would center on the gospel of grace. Yet they've become so distracted by the flesh and divided among themselves, it has frustrated the realization of Paul's vision for them, and you can almost feel his brokenness about them as he writes.

You are ready to shepherd  
when you are ready to sacrifice your dreams.

The first thing that I would say to anyone contemplating pastoral ministry is this: you are ready to shepherd when you are ready to sacrifice your dreams. Of course, nobody undertakes ministry with a plan to see decrease. Nobody undertakes a ministry with a plan to struggle. Each of us has aspirations and ambitions. We have big dreams, big visions, big ideas, and we want to see growth, success, and flourishing. There is nothing wrong with desiring those things or praying for those things. But the church has never been built on big ideas.

Consider this: when looking at the gospels, do you ever get the sense that Jesus has intentionally picked the biggest morons that he could find? One of my favorite examples of just how deep the levels of cognitive deficiency go with the disciples, is in Mark's Gospel, beginning

with the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6, when the disciples are looking out at the hungry crowd. Jesus wants to feed them and says, "What do we have?" They have a few loaves and fishes. Jesus feeds the five thousand with what they have and leftover are twelve baskets.

Going a little bit forward into the narrative, Jesus performs other miracles and then encounters another hungry crowd. It is a large crowd, but not as large as the first one and yet the disciples are saying, "Where are we going to get bread?" Jesus says, "What do we have?" and this time they have more than they had with the five thousand. If you are doing the math, they have before them a smaller crowd than previously but more resources than previously. And while the disciples are still scratching their heads, Jesus feeds the four thousand with seven baskets leftover.

Shortly after that, perhaps in the same day, the disciples get on the boat and Jesus begins teaching them, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." The disciples say, "Oh, he's talking about bread! He must be hungry. Where are we going to get bread?" Then, Jesus responds with questions the answers of which he already knows, essentially saying, "Are you still so dull, that you are asking about getting bread?"

The disciples are just like us. Jesus was not looking primarily for the intellectuals or the cultural elite when he selected his disciples. He picked these sort of blue-collar guys and some outcasts with scandalous occupations, sure, but I think that Jesus was also really looking for dumb people. Or I guess we should just say ordinary people.

This certainly proves true through the explosive growth of the early church in the pages of Acts. The church does not spread with great power through the work of experts, but through the work of converts.

So Paul in 1 Corinthians seeks to remind them of this fact. He is probably looking at all they're doing and thinking, "You guys are so stupid! You just don't get it!" However, in Paul's mind, in the economy of the gospel, this fact actually can be an asset. Paul goes right to reminding the Corinthians of the recipe for faith itself: God's grace and their utter nothingness. "Consider your calling brothers, not many of you are wise," he says, which is probably a very polite way of saying, "Y'all are really a bunch of dum-dums. Jesus was not picking the cream of the crop with you people. You weren't wise according to worldly standards, not many of you are powerful, not many are of noble birth. But look what God does

in his grace. He chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

The ministry frustration that comes out of this dynamic is that actual ministry runs so often counter to visionary ministry. Frequently, chasing the vision for the church that we want keeps us from loving the church that we have. One of the most obvious things that Peter says when exhorting the elders in 1 Peter 5 is, “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” You might read that and think, “Why would he need to say that? What other flock would they be shepherding?” Well, there is the flock that is in your head. Or the one down the street. You look around and see who seems to be experiencing growth and excitement and you start thinking, “Man, it would be great to get to shepherd that flock over there. They seem so much better put together than my flock.”

One of the most formative books of my Christian life, much less ministry, is a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *Life Together*, which is a little book about the experience of Christian community. One thing that Bonhoeffer discusses is the concept of the wish dream. Bonhoeffer challenges us this way:

If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ. This applies in a special way to the complaints often heard from pastors and zealous members about their congregations. A pastor should not complain about his congregations, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men. When a person becomes alienated from a Christian community in which he has been placed and begins to raise complaints about it, he had better examine himself first to see whether the trouble is not due to his wish dream that should be shattered by God; and if this be the case, let him thank God for leading him into this predicament. But if not, let

him nevertheless guard against ever becoming an accuser of the congregation before God. Let him rather accuse himself for his unbelief. Let him pray to God for understanding of his own failure and his particular sin, and pray that he may not wrong his brethren. Let him, in the consciousness of his own guilt, make intercession for his brethren. Let him do what he is committed to do, and thank God .... What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.<sup>3</sup>

What Bonhoeffer is calling the “wish dream” is essentially the vision we have for the church we want. In one sense, this is a good thing. If you are in pastoral ministry, you should want your people to be moving along, following Christ, and growing in grace. Whether you call that process discipleship or whether you are looking from the 30,000 foot view, thinking sanctification, you certainly want to see some progress, some victory over sin, some repentance. That is all biblical and good. But it is nevertheless so dangerous and insidious to begin dreaming, wishing, hoping, and loving the church that exists in our head and not the church that has been given to us.

The flock you currently have is the flock God has given you. He has not given you anybody else but the people you have. In his grace he may give you more, but the ones you have are the ones you are to love. Do not let your vision for the disciples you want get in the way of God’s vision for the disciples you actually have. Let us not be our church’s accuser.

Are you ready, then, to have your wish dream shattered by God? We come to the ministerial task with our ideas, visions, plans, and

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated and with an introduction by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harpert, 1954), 26. See also *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 37-38.

strategies, but then we actually have to pastor. So when Satan draws you up to that high mountain and shows you the brilliant vision of the valley below—all the vast kingdoms built by your ministry, the multiple campuses, the filled sanctuaries, the fawning congregants, the book deals, the speaking tours, the admiration and the adulation—and he says, “All this can be yours,” you say, “Be gone Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord my God and him only shall you serve.’” You are ready to shepherd when you’re ready to sacrifice your dreams.

You are ready to shepherd  
when you have been brought low.

Secondly, you are ready to shepherd when you have been brought low. With all that the New Testament says about weakness and suffering, it is amazing that we still find these things weird. Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” How many times have you thought, “Man, I did not see that coming?” For me, it is on almost a daily basis. I find the landmines by stepping on them.

In my own wisdom, I tend to think that what is “normal” is the absence of difficulty. But if the biblical pattern is to be believed, we should find it weird when everything is going well! This is why R.C. Sproul has said we need to redirect our “locus of astonishment,” which is to say, we need to relocate our astonishment from tragedy to success. Whenever tragedy or disaster strikes, we are quick to respond, “This is such a catastrophe!” Yet Sproul is saying that because the world is sinful and broken, fragile and dysfunctional, our astonishment should really run the other way. We should be driving over bridges and when they do not collapse underneath us, we should say, “I can’t believe I crossed that bridge!” You take a deep breath and say, “I can’t believe I didn’t die just now.”

When you have your heart tuned to what is normative ministry according to the New Testament you begin to see the difficulty as not just normal but sanctifying. But we are not naturally astonished in this way because we have a built-in sense of entitlement. We assume that we deserve life and not death, so when little deaths of hardship, suffering, and affliction come, our entitlement is violated. Our sense of self-

sovereignty is violated, and our pride gets hurt. And if there is one thing pastors must get used to, by the grace of God, it is having their pride hurt. And not just hurt, but assailed, pummeled, and eviscerated. Listen to Paul in verses 28-31:

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Do you know who the greatest preacher who ever lived was? I assume it was John the Baptist and this is why: He certainly preached and declared the way for the coming of his cousin the Messiah, but it is Jesus himself who said, "Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matt 11:11). I assume this means by virtue of his being "the greatest man who ever lived," excluding Jesus Christ himself of course, that John therefore is the greatest preacher who ever lived. But what I find really telling about the whole scenario is what precipitates Jesus' startling declaration.

John is in prison awaiting execution, and he sends the question, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Now, this is the same man who said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" And "I'm not fit to touch his shoes!" Yet, in the midst of his suffering, sitting in jail, stewing on life and death and ministry, it is as if he is suddenly thinking back and wondering, "The Lamb of God? Okay, I know I said that, but let me make doubly sure."

Like John, we pastors have to be honest about our weaknesses and our questions. We have to own up to our failings. In every church, the pastor should be the primary repenter. We should not cover up our flaws with fig leaves. The reason that we do not often own up to our failings is because we are really interested not in being known, but in being idolized. We want to be our people's idols. We like the idea of being their functional savior. We are not interested in being followed but in being worshipped. This is when it's really helpful to understand that Jesus did not die for some false version of us. He died for the real you, the you that you are when you are all alone in your study or your room and it is just little ol' you with your little ol' mind going to the places that are a little darker and a little more depressed. You are not putting on the

smile for the people, not sucking it up, and not pulling yourself up by your boot straps. Instead, you are the you with fears and doubts, questions and concerns. With wounds. That is the you that Jesus loves.

So when John sends this question, “Are you the one who is to come?” it is because he is scared. But it is also, in an odd way, because he is not scared of being scared. He could have “sucked it up” and put on a happy face and pretended, “I guess I started this thing, so I better ride it out. You know, just sort of cross my fingers.” He could have not wanted to risk offending Jesus. Yet in asking the question, we see that he had a little bit of doubt. He was not sure and so he thought perhaps that the answer to his question actually might be “no.” And how devastating would that be? To find out that your ministry had actually been based on a lie or a misunderstanding?

However, rather than avoid the devastating truth, should it be the actual truth, John took the risk. He was scared but he was not scared of being scared, and that is really the essential quality of discipleship—following Christ. John was willing to be brought low and to own his brought lowness. Pastors and would-be pastors, we need to get over ourselves and start being ourselves. He knows you are afraid. He just wants you to not be afraid of being afraid. We have to own our weakness.

What’s more, I find it incredibly interesting and helpful that it is in the context of receiving this question from John the Baptist that Jesus says what he says about John. Jesus does not say, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me! This John character. I’m telling you. What a loser! With everything that he saw, everything that I said to him, everything that’s been revealed to him, the strength of his ministry, and now facing a little weakness, he’s going to get all wobbly on me? Can you believe it?” No, instead Jesus says “Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”

Is that not a picture of grace? We honestly bring our wounds to Christ and in the gospel he says, “I’ll take those. I’ll take those from you.” He is not tapping his foot when you show up. He is not checking his watch when you are there a little while longer than you thought you would be. Jesus is not surprised at how your sanctification is progressing. He knows.

Jesus then adds something extraordinary and spectacular. He has first a message of grace for John who was brave enough to show his fear. Jesus says, “The greatest man ever, that guy.” But then he follows it

up to say, “The one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

How can this be? It is almost as if in the kingdom of God things are upside down. Well, really, they are right side up! If we will own our weakness, our sinfulness, and our failure—if we will be willing to be brought low—Christ will give us his strength, power, life, and righteousness. As John the Baptist has said, “He must increase, I must decrease.”

This is the only deal that Jesus will make. When you come to the negotiating table of the gospel, you better have nothing in your hands but your sin. If you bring your nothingness to him, he will give you his “everythingness”—that is, he will trade you all of your poverty for all of his riches. But if you bring one little penny of merit, of works, of ambition, you cheapen the whole thing and the deal will be off. As Paul says in this passage, “As it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

So, I ask you, is he your boast? Are you prepared to boast of your weakness? To own it, to be brought low? You have sent your resume to a church but what do you send to Christ? You are not ready if your approval in ministry is tied to anything other than the finished work of Christ. If your ministry approval is tied to the feelings of your flock—you are set to boast in yourself. To have your justification tuned to either the approval or the disapproval of your people is a recipe for disaster because their admiration will puff you up or their criticism will steal your joy.

Now, Paul’s words on calling in verse 26 are not about the calling into the work of pastoral ministry. He is speaking to the Corinthian church and he is referencing the effectual calling of God upon their lives, the call that brought them to saving faith. This is an important passage to consider because we must never forget that being a pastor does not put us into Christianity 2.0. We are no more holy or justified than the brothers and sisters in Christ in our flocks. We may have an office of authority in the church, we may be a leader to whom ecclesial submission is due, but all that we are at the end of the day is because of Jesus Christ, not ourselves. This is important to remember because when we forget it we begin to take license with our office.

Pastoral humility results in obeying God rather than men. God is not calling the self-assured into the pastorate. He is calling an army of men confident in the gospel and fearful of themselves. One of the first

things I look for when we assess men for our eldership process is their response when I say to them, “Hey, I’d like you to consider being an elder.” When they say, “Man, I don’t think I’m good enough,” I think, “Whew, you passed the first test.” We need pastors who have had the swagger gossiped out of them. We need men who are lowly.

Of course, none of us are naturally that kind of man, and very few of us begin ministry that kind of man. But by focusing on our brother Jesus, who scorned the shame of the cross and forsaking the leverage of his divinity and emptying himself to nothing, we can share in his suffering and fill up what is lacking in his afflictions (Col. 1:24) and thereby enjoying the indomitable power of the one who is calling us to this work. The one who is himself filling the world with his glory through the faithful ministry of men who will get low. You are ready to shepherd when you have been brought low.

You are ready to shepherd  
when you are centered on the gospel.

Thirdly, you are ready to shepherd when you have centered on the gospel. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

We face daily competing messages from outside in the world and inside our own heart. Messages that would distract us, messages that would frustrate us and debilitate us. The siren song of cultural relevance comes scratching our ears. The complaints of those who, you know, kind of like this gospel stuff but would really like, say, something a little more “meaty” fill our inboxes. The constant, thrumming crave of the law pounds beneath our flesh like the beating of a drum in the bowels of a slave ship with its “do more, be more, try harder,” ominously seeking to set our rhythm of life. The bar of worldly wisdom gets raised higher and higher. “Yes attendance was ‘x’ this week, but what about next week?”

But we must resolve to know nothing but Christ crucified. “The heart,” John Calvin said, “is an idol factory.” As those idols come down that production line of our ministry output on a daily basis, we must set about slaying them all. As you navigate the murky waters of ministry idolatry, you will hear the siren songs of all sort of competing messages—

the “lofty speech” of the intellectualized ministry, the “wisdom” of pragmatism—but you must lash yourself to the mast of the gospel. Some trust in academic chariots and some in practical horses but we trust in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our God. We resolve to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

James warns us, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (3:1). For a very long time I assumed this meant in the final judgment that God would judge us with greater strictness, and maybe there is some truth to that. But I also wonder if James is just looking at the practicality of ministry. You are going to be in a fish bowl and you are going to be judged, and you are going to have arrows fired your way. You are going to be considered with a lot more strictness than if you were not in ministry. So it is important to center on the gospel.

I have been reading 1 Corinthians and also 2 Corinthians to my friend, Natalie. She was one of the first people at Middletown Springs Community Church to hurt my feelings. I was very new and as an introvert by nature it takes me a little while to warm up in crowds and to make an effort to go talk to people I do not know. I was relatively new to our area and there was a funeral that I had attended that took place at our church. I was not officiating the funeral but I was present at the reception. Everyone was out at the tables, eating. It was a big crowd. And do you know where I was? I was in the kitchen with the ladies from my church. Because I knew them; that was a safe place to be.

But Natalie comes in and she says, “What are you doing in here?” I said, “I’m just talking to people.” She says, “You’re the pastor, you need to go out there and talk to the families!” And it hurt me. What she said was not a hurtful thing to say but if you knew me and you knew what is inside my heart, I am thinking she is disapproving of me and I just got to this church and I really want people to like me. She was the first person to hurt my feelings and I have to tell you she did it plenty of times after that too!

I will tell you, though, that Natalie is one of my closest friends, one of my greatest encouragers. And by God’s will, Natalie is slowly dying of pancreatic cancer. She’s taking a long time to die, which is good from our perspective, because it gives us more time with her, but she hates it. She is just ready to go home. Hospice has been set up and she is actually living in the basement apartment of some friends of hers. Her husband

sleeps there with her and the hospice nurses comes in every day. Her pain is increasing day by day, so the pain medication is increasing day by day. Barring a miracle, the writing seems to be on the wall. I do not know much about pancreatic cancer but I have been told it is not one that people typically recover from, and she has opted not to pursue surgery or chemotherapy or anything like that. She is just going to let time run out.

I have been visiting Natalie almost daily and we read Scripture together. We look back at our time together and reminisce and cry and laugh and have wonderful talks. We have also been able, by God's grace, to share the gospel with some of her lost friends. Natalie is a gal on mission. She has more lost friends than any Christian I know. I love the way that she defines them or labels them so I will know who is coming into the circle. She says, "Sue, my communist friend, is coming over later." "Linda, my atheist Jewish friend, is coming over after that." We have been able to share the gospel with these folks and also with some of her caregivers, which she loves because it is not like they can leave the room!

Natalie's favorite books of the Bible are Ecclesiastes and Revelation, so we have read those a lot. But 1 and 2 Corinthians have become very special to us also. One reason why they are special to me is because you feel Paul's heart for these people. His heart is broken for them. This has been a very difficult year in our ministry. For lots of reasons many people in our church know about, and for some that only a few in leadership have been aware of, it has been a very hard season. My wife and I have lost two close friends to cancer in the last year, within two months of each other, both to brain tumors. Now I am about to lose a third friend. And these are not just people at my church; they are my friends. We have also had some growing pains that come with a growing church. God has really blessed us with a lot of growth and a lot of excitement. When I came they were somewhat small, the average age was a little older, and there was one baby in the church. Over the last four years we have had young families, young couples, and young singles flocking to the church. The place is overrun with children. But within this growth, within this energy there are all sorts of stresses and none of us were prepared for the rate of growth and it has exposed some deficiencies in me and in our church. It has exposed some idols. It has just been a very difficult season.

Thus, as I read through 1 and 2 Corinthians at the bedside of my dying friend, I feel this text. I feel the weakness and the lowness. I do not feel very strong and I do not feel like I can boast in anything in myself right now. In fact, there are some days, and some hours, and some days that I wish I would just “poof! vanish” and not have to deal with this world anymore. Yet I love that I can feel that Paul is feeling this too. In 2 Corinthians 6:12 he says, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open.” The gospel that Paul preaches is not theoretical, not academic, and it is not merely an idea. It is a power, a force, and he has been hijacked by the Holy Spirit who has come and waylaid him. He basically says, “I was apprehended” in Philippians 3:12. Brothers, you are ready to shepherd when you are centered on the gospel.

You are ready to shepherd  
when you have had an experience of the gospel.

Fourthly and finally, you are ready to shepherd when you have had an experience of the gospel. I cannot tell you how important it is that you feel the gospel in the biblical text, that what is sad in it saddens you, and that what is glad in it gladdens you. If you want your people to be bored with God’s word, just treat it like it is boring.

You will learn, pastors, that your flock does not get excited about what you tell them to be excited about. They will be excited about what you are excited about. (This is something that I first heard from D.A. Carson and have seen it confirmed over and over again.) So if you are telling your church to be gospel-centered, but it is clear that what really fires you up is the law, guess what? They are going to be drawn more to the law. And they do not need any help with that! But we like to dress the law up to make it not seem so heavy. We turn it into helpful hints, or steps to victory, or whatever. I like to call it “Pharisaism with wax in its hair.” Most people love it because their flesh loves it. It makes them feel like they have what it takes, but the gospel is predicated on the very idea that we do not have what it takes. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:4:

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power my speech and my message were not in plausible

words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

He tells us what happens if we come with plausible words of wisdom in verse 5: “Your people’s faith will rest in the wisdom of men.” But when you have had an experience of the gospel, the gospel is not just an historical announcement, it is bread for a starving man. It is water for a man in the desert. It is oxygen. You are not ready to shepherd until you have been spiritually discombobulated by the gospel and essentially reconstituted by the gospel. I do not simply mean that you have become a Christian. I mean, you better be a Christian. Pastors should definitely be Christians! And I am not saying necessarily that you should not go ahead and become a pastor. I am just saying that until the gospel has “undone” you, until it has “woe is me’d” you, you are not ready.

When you have tasted and seen that the Lord is good and it has ruined you for everything else, you are ready. When you have been hijacked by grace, you are ready. By his grace, then, brothers, you are ready to pastor when weakness and fear and trembling actually make sense to you.

My friend David Pinckney in New Hampshire, director of Acts 29 for New England, says, “Every pastor should know what the carpet in his office smells like.” He means that your face should be in it often. The Lord is faithful. If he has called you to it, he will sustain you in it. You are never ready for the next heartbreak, the next tragedy, the next catastrophe, but the glorious truth is this—God is! He is always ready to help you. He is an ever-present help in a time of trouble. Christ the Good Shepherd, the only perfect pastor, is ready to gather up all his little lay pastors into his arms like little broken lambs. Where your wisdom fails, his will prevail. Where your righteousness falls short, his will justify. Where your spirit is flagging, his will empower. Where your glory fades, his will increase, expand, and magnify that the feebleness of your coming ministry might redound to his glory. He is the end-all, be-all. He is the first and the last.

You will notice as you study the Bible that for Paul and Peter both, especially in their encouragement to elders, the hope that they keep holding out for sustenance in ministry is not any kind of attendance benchmark or conversion rate. It is instead the unfading crown of righteousness they receive when their ministry is over. Peter bookends his exhortation to elders in 1 Peter 5 with this idea. You are “a partaker

in the glory that is going to be revealed," he begins in verse 1, and he follows that up in verse 4 with, "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

When the end comes, after you have suffered a little while (1 Pet. 5:10), it will all make sense and will be worth it. It is the unfading crown of righteousness that Peter and Paul receive when their ministry is over that motivates them for the thick of ministry day to day. Let us resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified that our ministries may serve only to adorn the blazing beauty of our King. May we say on that last day, "Man, I messed up big time. I have nothing, I am nothing, I claim none of my achievements. All of the things that they will say about me down there, back there the write ups, the memorials, the tributes, I claim none of that. I claim only your blood, Jesus."

May we be so tuned to His word of promise that we will entrust our approval not to our faithfulness but to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim 1:17).

You are ready to shepherd when you have had an experience of the Gospel.