
PROBLEMS

OF CHRISTIAN

LEADERSHIP

JOHN STOTT



IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
Internet: www.ivpress.com
Email: email@ivpress.com

This edition ©John Stott's Literary Executors 2014

Originally published in Spanish in Argentina under the title *Desafíos del Liderazgo Cristiano*. Published in the United States of America by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895, or visit the IVCF website at www.intervarsity.org.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd. All rights reserved. "NIV" is a registered trademark of International Bible Society. UK trademark number 1448790. Distributed in North America by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

Material in chapter 5 is excerpted from *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, edited by Christopher J. H. Wright (InterVarsity Press, 2011). Used by permission.

Cover design: Cindy Kiple
Image: © Allan Baxter/Trevillion Images
Interior design: Beth Hagenberg

ISBN 978-0-8308-7192-6 (digital)
ISBN 978-0-8308-4408-1 (print)

Contents

Foreword / 7

Preface / 9

1 The Problem of Discouragement / 13

How to Persevere Under Pressure

2 The Problem of Self-Discipline / 27

How to Maintain Spiritual Freshness

3 The Problem of Relationships / 45

How to Treat People with Respect

4 The Problem of Youth / 63

*How to Be a Leader When
Comparatively Young*

5 Two “Timothys” / 75

Mark Labberton and Corey Widmer

Appendix:

**John Stott on Ministry,
Leadership and Service / 89**

Praise for *Problems of Christian Leadership* / 96

Langham Literature / 97

About the Author / 98

More Titles from InterVarsity Press / 99

The Problem of Discouragement

How to Persevere Under Pressure

The pressures on Christian leaders are intense and often unrelenting. Let's think of some of them. There are our busyness and fatigue, with inadequate time for the family, not even for vacations. Then there are the responsibilities that recognized leaders have. If their ministry is criticized, they bear the brunt of the criticism, and they have the responsibility of making difficult decisions.

There are also the disappointments of the work. Promising potential leaders do not always live up to their promise. Some even fall away. Promising ministries begin to decline in numbers or in vision, and that is a great disap-

pointment to the leader. In addition there are the personal temptations with which the devil attacks all leaders, and there is the loneliness that we experience at the top. We may have no peers in whom to confide.

All these problems can lead us into discouragement. In fact, discouragement is the greatest occupational hazard of a believer, as it can lead to loss of vision and enthusiasm. So the question is how to persevere under these pressures.

I'd like us to turn to 2 Corinthians 4, and I hope you won't mind if I give a little Greek lesson. The first verse reads, "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." And then verse 16 says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

Notice the phrase that is repeated in these two verses: *ouk enkakoumen*. That is the Greek phrase that comes in verse 1 and verse 16. Most modern English versions say, "We do not lose heart." Another is "we refuse to become dispirited," another is "nothing can bug us." There is a similar expression that comes in chapter 5 to which I'd draw your attention:

verse 6, “Therefore we are always confident,” and again verse 8, “We are confident, I say.” That means we are of good courage.

You may know these chapters well enough to know that in chapter 3 Paul unfolds the glory of the Christian ministry, but in chapter 4 he unfolds the problems of the Christian ministry. This is his argument: because of the glory of the ministry and in spite of its problems, *ouk enkakoumen*. We refuse to become discouraged.

Two Problems: The Veil and the Body

There are two questions before us: what problems tempted Paul to lose heart? And second, what solutions or antidotes did he find to them? There are two problems that caused discouragement in this chapter. The first is an external and objective problem in our listeners, and the second is an internal and subjective problem in ourselves.

The first he calls the veiling, which is *kalyma*. This is the veil that lies over the minds of unbelievers, and it blinds them to the truth of the gospel. The second is *soma*, the body. That is our own body, its frailty, this fragile human vessel,

which maintains the treasure of the gospel.

So the first problem is *spiritual*: it is the blindness of the people we preach to. The second is *physical*: it is our personal fragility and mortality. When you have a weak preacher and a blind congregation, you have a problem on your hands. These are the two problems, and I do not think there is anything that causes more discouragement than these.

Where is the veil? Look at 2 Corinthians 3:12. “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face.” In other words, the veil in the people’s minds is not our doing. On the contrary, we are very bold in our preaching and we set forth the truth plainly. Therefore the cause of this human blindness is diabolical; it affects both Jews and Gentiles. Look on to chapter 3 verse 14. In the middle of the verse, “for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read.” Again, verse 15, “Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.” So twice Paul says it for emphasis: the Jews have a veil over their minds and hearts. Then Paul goes on to say: so do the Gentiles. Chapter 4 verse 4, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers.”

Now think with me, is this not one of our major problems? We make the gospel crystal clear, but people cannot grasp it. We spell it out so simply that we think even a child could understand it, but they don't. We explain it, we argue it, we plead with people until we think they are bound to yield, but a veil lies over their minds. I doubt if there is anything more discouraging than that to the Christian worker. It can lead to great frustration. So (a) the first problem is the veil, which we'll come back to in a minute when we think of the solutions to the problems, and (b) is the body.

Paul writes about the body in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. Verse 7, "we have this treasure in jars of clay"—that is, as in an old-fashioned oil lamp, so in the Christian worker, there is a contrast between the treasure and its container. There's no doubt that Paul is referring to our physical frailty in which we hold the gospel. Written all over the human body are the words "fragile: handle with care." The immediate reference is to his persecution, which is clear from verses 8 and 9, but it refers to this weakness other contexts. In 1 Corinthians 2:3 he says, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trem-

bling.” The weakness seems to be more psychological than physical: it was his natural nervousness when going to Corinth with the gospel. Then the third example in 2 Corinthians 12:7 where he referred to his “thorn in the flesh”: “To keep me from becoming conceited [because of these surpassingly great revelations], there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me . . . and [Jesus] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Paul goes on in verse 10 to refer to weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties, so it seems once again that this is a physical disability. It may have been a sickness or a disability of some kind. We can probably add frailties of our own to this list. You may have the shyness of an introvert, the liability to depression, or you may have headaches. All these are examples of the weakness of the human body. It is the weakness of the container, which holds the treasure of the gospel.

Here are two major problems that we cannot handle by ourselves. We cannot lift the veil, we cannot cure the blindness of unbelievers, and we cannot overcome the frailty of our own

minds and bodies. Yet it is in spite of these apparently insuperable problems that Paul says *ouk enkakoumen*. We do not lose heart. How then can we overcome this discouragement when we are faced with these problems?

The Antidote to Discouragement

Let us turn secondly from the problems to the antidotes to discouragement. Rather, I think we should say “antidote” in the singular, for although there are two problems, there is only one solution: the power of God. Let’s look again at the veil and the body.

First, the veil. What do we do when people refuse to respond to the gospel? Well, you know what our temptation is. We are tempted to force them to do it. We are tempted to resort to emotional and psychological techniques to manipulate people into believing, or to manipulate the gospel to make it easier to believe.

But although the temptation to some kind of manipulation is very strong when people don’t believe, Paul specifically renounces that temptation. 2 Corinthians 4:2, “Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of

God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience." You reject manipulation but on the contrary make the plain proclamation of the gospel.

Now read 2 Corinthians 4:4,6. "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." I think these are very important verses for us to understand. In verse 6 Paul is referring back to Genesis 1:2-3. He likens the unregenerate heart to the primeval chaos, when everything was formless and empty and dark until God said, "Let there be light," and light shone into the darkness. There is Paul's picture of regeneration. This is what happened to him on the Damascus Road. The God who in Genesis said, "Let there be light," has shone in our hearts. Thus regeneration is nothing less than a new creation of God, and it does not take place until God says, "Let there be light."

Here we have two gods in conflict with each other. In verse 4 Satan is called “the god of this age”; in verse 6 Paul speaks of the God of creation. The god of this age blinds people’s eyes, their minds, while the God of creation shines into their hearts. There is a complete and absolute contrast between them. One god is blinding and the other is shining. What then can we hope to contribute to this conflict? Would it not be modest and wise perhaps to retire from the scene of conflict? Shall we not let these two gods fight it out?

But no, Paul’s conclusion is a different one. Look at verse 5, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” You see the battle between God and the devil concerns the light. The devil seeks to stop the light from shining, but if God is causing the light to shine, what is this light? It’s important to notice that it is the gospel. Look at the end of verse 4, “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God,” and the end of verse 6, “the knowledge of the glory of God.” So the gospel is the light. It is the means by which God overcomes the darkness and shines into people’s hearts.

So if the gospel is the light, we'd better preach the gospel. Far from being unnecessary, evangelism is absolutely indispensable. Preaching of the gospel is the God-appointed means by which the prince of darkness is overthrown and by which God shines into people's hearts. So *ouk enkakoumen*. We do not lose heart. The veil is there over people's minds. We cannot penetrate it by our own power, but it can be penetrated by the power of God when the gospel is preached.

God's Power in Weakness

Let me move to the final point, the second problem, the body. I want to look at the three Corinthian verses we looked at before. We begin with 2 Corinthians 4:7. "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Just note that "to" ("in order that").

Second, turn back to 1 Corinthians 2:3-5. "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (and again "in order that") "so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

The third one is 2 Corinthians 12:7, “There was given me a thorn in my flesh,” which Jesus declined to take away from him. So Paul says in verse 9, “I will boast . . . about my weaknesses,” and again we have “in order that,” “so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” Three times Paul uses this phrase “in order that,” and I cannot think that it is an accident. This is the emphasis of the Corinthians’ correspondence: that God’s power is demonstrated in human weakness and that God’s might is manifested through death.

Back to our text in 2 Corinthians 4, let’s look at verses 10 and 12. “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. . . . So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” See, we are carrying about in our bodies the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifest in our mortal flesh. Power through weakness and life through death is the theme of these two letters.

What then do we do if we feel this weakness of our mortal flesh? Like Paul, we pray that we may be delivered from a thorn in the flesh, and God may deliver us. Our headaches may pass, our

physical infirmities may be healed, our psychological shyness may be taken away from us, but they may not. I believe that Scripture and experience both teach this rather unpalatable lesson: that God often deliberately keeps us in weakness in order that his power may rest upon us.

A Personal Example

Before I conclude, I would like to take the liberty of sharing one personal experience with you. It was during a mission at the University of Sydney in Australia in 1958. During the week of the convention I had caught what we call a “bug,” and I lost my voice. What can you do with a missionary who has no voice?

We had come to the last night of the mission, the eighth night. The students had booked the big university hall and a large number of students came. It was agreed that I would attempt to preach. I was sitting in a little room just outside the university hall. A group of students gathered around me, and I asked them to read this passage in 2 Corinthians 12. We prayed that the thorn in the flesh might be taken away from me, and if I remember rightly they laid hands on me with prayer. But we went on to pray that if it

pleased God to keep me in weakness, I would rejoice in my infirmities in order that the power of Christ might rest upon me, because when I am weak I am strong.

I remember that I had to get within one inch of the microphone. I croaked the gospel. I was unable to use any inflections of voice, was unable to express personality. I was just a croak in a monotone, and all the time we were crying to God that his power would be demonstrated in human weakness. It would be tempting for me to exaggerate or to be dishonest, but I can honestly say that there was a far greater response that night than every other night.

What encourages me much more is the following. Since 1958, I've been back to Australia about ten times, and on every occasion somebody has come up to me and said, "Do you remember that night of preaching in the university hall when you'd lost your voice?" and I'd say, "How could I ever forget it?" And the person responded, "I was converted that night." It has been a great illustration of this principle to me, that God's power is demonstrated in human weakness.

Let me sum up what we've tried to learn to-

gether. The veil over people's minds is very thick. Our body is very frail. But it is not beyond the power of God either to penetrate the veil or to sustain the body, so *ouk enkakoumen*. We do not lose heart, and that is perfectly clear even against these pressures.

I finish with yet another Australian illustration about perseverance. Thomas Sutcliffe Mort was an early British settler in Sydney. Some of the docks in Sydney are named after him. At the beginning of the nineteenth century he set himself the task of solving the problem of refrigeration. They were exporting meat from Australia to Europe, but it all went bad before it arrived. So Thomas Mort determined to invent an effective method of refrigeration. He gave himself three years in which to do it, but it took him twenty-six. He lived long enough to see the first consignment of refrigerated meat leave Australia, but he died before it arrived.

Written all around his study is his motto. I happen to know about it because his house is now occupied by the Archbishop of Sydney. Round the top of the wall he's written his motto twenty times: to persevere is to succeed. So God give us grace to persevere. *Ouk enkakoumen*.