

Confidence

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- [0 : 00] I want to start today with a wee questionnaire, okay? So we're gonna have a wee questionnaire and it's in two parts. First part is just a very simple question.
- Do you believe in the authority of the Bible? And whatever your answer to that question is, I want you just to put it in your back pocket because we'll need to, later on. So do you believe in the authority of the Bible?
- That's the first part. Second part of the questionnaire is that I am gonna put various scenarios before you. That you might encounter this week. And for all of these scenarios, I want you to pick one of two options to describe how that scenario makes you feel.
- And so option A is if it makes you feel something along the lines of positive or strong or optimistic or energized.
- So it doesn't have to be all of those things, but just one or two of those things or something along those lines. That's option A. Option B is if the thing makes you feel negative or weak, anxious or drained.
- [1 : 08] Now again, you don't have to, doesn't mean necessarily feeling all of them, just one of them, two of them, or something along those lines. So let me give you a few different scenarios.
- And for all of them, I'd love for you just in your mind to give yourself just to say I'm an A or a B. Now there's no right or wrong answers and you might be A for some of them, you might be B for others, you might be all A's, you might be all B's.
- There's no right and wrong. So don't worry about that side of it. Just an honest answer to yourself is what I want. So here's some scenarios. This week, you have to try something that you've never done before.
- So could be lots of things. Could be getting a new phone. Could be going to a new hairdresser. Could be driving a digger if you've never done a digger before.
- Could be going to the gym for the first time. Are you A or B for that kind of thing, trying something new? Next scenario, you make a mistake.
- [2 : 07] So you mess up your homework for school or you do something wrong on your computer and you've messed something up.
- You burn the dinner, you make a mistake. A or B. Your routine gets changed, that's the next scenario. So you can't do what you normally do on a Monday.
- Whatever you normally do on a Monday, you can't do it, everything's changed. Or you have to have something different for breakfast every day this week. How does that make you feel?
- Next scenario, you have to wear clothes that you don't normally choose to wear. So imagine we all had to wear tartan trousers this week or leggings or a boiler suit or a Celtic top or a Ranger top, whichever one you hate.
- How does that make you feel? Next scenario, you hear that someone has criticized you for something you've said or done. Next one, you have the eight people who are sitting closest to you right now round for dinner on Tuesday evening.

[3 : 18] Next one, you have a conversation with someone about Jesus. And then last one, you sit at the Lord's table next week.

What were you? Were you A's, B's or a mixture? I think the chances are you are a mixture. Probably most of us were mostly B's, but maybe there was the odd A in there.

Your answers don't matter because what I want us to think about is the fact that whatever your answers to those questions were, they are profoundly affected by one thing.

They're affected by your confidence. For all of those scenarios and for any others I could have thrown up, if you feel confident in relation to that issue, then you're likely to be an A.

If you feel confident, it'll make you feel energized or optimistic, strong. Even if it's making a mistake, some people will do things on the computer, they'll make mistakes, but they're like, well, I've learned from that, no bother, let's go.

[4 : 26] And they're energized, other people, I've made a mistake, I'm never gonna touch that computer again. Depends on your confidence. If you're a B, then that means probably that for whatever scenario it was, it's an area where you don't feel particularly confident.

Confidence is a massive part of life and it can have a huge effect on whether your experiences in the week ahead are gonna be positive and energizing or whether they're gonna be negative and draining.

Confidence is also something that the Bible has got some very important things to say about and that's what I want us to think about together. This morning, we're using Ephesians 3 a little bit, but we're gonna dip into various other passages as well as we think broadly about this whole issue of confidence.

We're gonna ask four very simple questions. What is confidence? Where do we find or lose confidence? Where should we find confidence? What difference does it make?

So first question is, what is confidence? Now there's lots and lots of ways that we could answer this question and we could probably talk all week about it. I want to just suggest a particular answer to you today that I hope is helpful and what I'd like to say is that confidence is a bit like your mental immune system.

[5 : 55] So if you think about your physiological immune system, that determines how much an infection affects you. So if you've got strong immunity against a particular infection, then it's gonna just bounce off you.

So somebody with strong immunity, a cold, it'll maybe give them a runny nose for a day or two, then it'll go away. Whatever else it might be, it'll bounce off you. If your immunity is medium, then it might knock you for a week while, but it will clear.

But if your immunity is weak, then that infection will really knock you and it can take a long, long time to recover.

And of course, the whole idea of vaccines is to stimulate your immunity so that things do bounce off you. I think exactly the same pattern applies mentally and emotionally in relation to confidence.

Our confidence will determine how much something affects us. So again, in areas of life where we've got plenty confidence, then things will bounce off us and they won't have a huge effect.

[7 : 04] But in areas where our confidence is low, if that area is exposed, then it can really knock us. And I'm sure everyone here has experienced that in different ways and different people are affected by different things.

Just as our physical immunities are different and we're therefore all susceptible to different types of infection in different ways, so too are different confidence levels will determine how much the same situation affects us.

So I know that for many people here, your worst nightmare would be to come up to this lectern and talk in front of a crowd and you're just like, no way. Whereas for me, I don't mind doing it.

It's what I do every week and I'm quite used to it, quite confident standing up, talking to people. But you probably think this sounds ridiculous.

I know that loads of you spend a lot of time during the week phoning people. I get very nervous phoning people and I don't like doing it at all. I would honestly rather come up here and deliver a sermon than pick up my phone tomorrow and phone the bank manager because there was something, I just get unit to do it because I don't like doing it.

[8 : 21] And that's just, so I mean, you think that sounds daft, but it's just a confidence affects people in different ways. And I think if I got sent the wrong bill, like if I was charged too much, I would be tempted to just pay more rather than have to phone the guy to change it.

That's just silly, but that's just the way I am. The truth is we're all a mixture. We've all got areas where we have lots of confidence and we all have areas where we have very little.

That brings up the second question. Where do we find confidence? Where do we lose confidence? Let's do this in two parts. First of all, where do we find confidence? I want to suggest, and well, again, there's loads of ways you could answer this question.

And so we're not giving a definitive answer. I'm just giving you categories to think about. I want to suggest two areas where we find confidence. We find confidence in opinions and in circumstances.

Let me unpack these a wee bit. We find confidence in opinions, whether that's people around us or our own.

[9 : 32] And that can happen in loads of different ways. So you go to school, we can think back to when we were in school, there's lots of pressure to wear the right clothes, have the right phones, speak in the right way so that other people's opinions are positive.

And if other people are positive, then that'll boost our confidence. Same at work. If our boss is pleased with us, that's a confidence boost. In relationships, if someone says that they like us or that they think that we're good looking, that's a confidence boost.

If someone does something kind for us, if they give us a gift or a card or a message, that's a confidence boost. If someone values what we do, if we're successful in our careers, if we've got a house or a car or a salary that will impress people, that's somewhere where people will find confidence.

But in terms of opinions, it's not just what other people think that gives us confidence. Our own opinion can be a big source of confidence as well. And that's particularly strong today when really in the culture around us, ultimate authority is often located within the individual.

So what I think of myself is crucial. My self-worth, my identity, my ability to make judgments, my dignity, my preferences, these are often elevated to the point where we find great confidence in them.

[11 : 00] And all of that can give us very powerful mental immunity. Our own opinions give us confidence. It means that things will bounce off us quite easily.

And we actually all do it. We all do it. And you can test whether or not you do it by ever asking if you thought to yourself, well, I'm right and they're wrong. And I think we all do that from time to time.

So we find confidence in opinions. We also find confidence in circumstances. And often you'll see that with children.

One of the things that's so fascinating with children, and I remember it myself as a child, you take them somewhere, whether they come to Sunday School Party, church, children's talk or whatever, a relatives house, and they can be so timid and shy and quiet.

But then you go back to their own house and the same child as the life and soul, because their circumstances are familiar and they're confident in their own home.

[12 : 08] Adults do it as well. So some of us might feel quite confident at home. We don't feel confident at work, but other people, it's the other way around. Some of us might feel confident when we are within our familiar routine.

So if we keep doing what we normally do, if Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, stays the same, Saturday, Sunday, if we're in that routine, we feel confident. Some people, some of you might feel quite confident driving in Lewis, but you don't feel confident driving on the mainland.

That's confidence determined by circumstances. Here it's okay, there it's not. Sometimes our confidence can even be determined by the clothes that we wear.

The clothes that we wear, our circumstances, the clothes that we wear. You think, is that through well? How many of you would feel confident coming here in your pajamas? Circumstances shape our confidence.

And heartbreakingly, this can be a very negative thing where sometimes you see people and their confidence is completely determined by whether or not they've had a drink.

[13 : 19] We all look for confidence in opinions. We all look for confidence in circumstances. But that's just the first part of the question.

Where do we find confidence, opinions and circumstances? Where do we lose confidence? The answer is that we lose confidence in exactly the same places, in opinions and in circumstances.

And that's where we have to see that when it comes to confidence, opinions and circumstances are a bit like a football pitch. People win and lose in exactly the same location.

So opinions, just as quickly as they give us confidence, they can also rob us of confidence. So someone gives you grief at school, whether it's a teacher or a pupil.

Someone is difficult towards you at work. Someone in your family undermines you. Someone you really like doesn't feel the same way about you. Someone at church criticizes you.

[14 : 29] When that kind of thing happens, our confidence, which we maybe thought was strong, just crumbles. And not just other people's opinions, in fact, even more damaging is our own opinion.

And so you might get a bad result at school and your teacher says, look, don't worry, you'll be absolutely fine. But you tell yourself, I'm stupid. I can't do it. You might look in the mirror every day and see someone that you think is ugly.

You might get involved in something and change something. Get involved in something in church or in something in the community. And then you face criticism or confrontation and you think, I am never putting myself forward again.

You might make a mistake. It might be a big mistake. And everyone around you might be saying, look, it's okay, we've forgotten it. We're not thinking about it.

We're letting it go. Everybody else has forgiven, but you cannot forgive yourself. You can't stop giving yourself a hard time for whatever it was you did.

[15 : 36] Opinions can rob us of confidence. Circumstances can do the same. Circumstances can be the place where we lose confidence.

And that makes sense. If our confidence is tied to particular circumstances, if those circumstances change, then the source of confidence we had has been lost.

Sometimes that can be over very small things. We said a while ago, some people are totally confident driving in Lewis, not confident at all driving in the mainland. Another example, I can think of when I was wee. I remember in Stornoway, I had a friend who lived at the other end of the street, and I used to go to his house to play.

The difference between walking to his house after school in daylight and walking home at tea time in the dark was massive.

Same street, same route, same circumstances, apart from the fact that one was daylight, one was dark, the first was fine, the second was terrifying.

[16 : 44] But it's not just small things, it's also the big things in life. Leaving home for the first time, going to a new class in school, moving house, starting a new job, getting promoted, or getting a new boss above you, having a new colleague that you have to work alongside, facing a health scare or a big health challenge.

And hardest of all, hardest of all, is when you lose someone that you love. And facing life without someone who's always been there, can transform the simplest everyday things into incredibly difficult challenges.

Confidence is so easily lost in changing circumstances. Two things I want to say here before we go on to the next question. First is, please always be compassionate towards people who've lost their confidence.

It's so easy to be impatient in life, especially in these kind of circumstances. We want people to do things, we want things to happen, and they're hesitant to do things, and we can so easily jump to the conclusion that, oh, they're just been awkward, or they're difficult, or they're this, or that, or the next thing.

But maybe their confidence has gone. Maybe their confidence is at rock bottom, and if that's the case, the last thing that they need is another blow from us.

[18 : 20] What they need is a hand. What they need is encouragement. So please, may this be a lesson to me and to all of us. Let's always show compassion to anyone whose confidence is low.

Secondly, though, I want us to think about and to recognize the problem that all of this raises. If we are looking for confidence in opinions and in circumstances, then that means that we are looking for confidence in the place where we are most likely to lose it.

We're looking for confidence in the place where we're most likely to lose it. The opinions and circumstances that give you confidence are all too capable of snatching it away.

But not only that, what if the opinions that we rely on are wrong? What if the things that people think or that we think are actually incorrect?

And that question swings in both directions. The opinions that give us confidence, that make us feel positive, they might not actually be correct. And that's something that you can see today, where there's a great emphasis on being really positive and affirming.

[19 : 42] Especially today, you see this among children, there's this kind of pressure that you have to tell every child that they're perfect. And that if anything goes wrong in their lives, it's someone else's fault.

If we do that, we are grounding their confidence on something that's inaccurate. If we make out you are just the most perfect, amazing child, because no child is perfect and amazing.

And actually the only way to help them grow is to say, well, look, this is something that you need to work on, because that's part of what life is all about. It can happen in loads of different ways. If we went to have a game of football and one of you was the coach and you came up to me afterwards and said, Thomas, you were just amazing.

It's like, well, that's never going to be accurate. It's not going to be accurate. It's not going to be helpful. I need to be told, actually, you need to improve in this area. So the positive stuff that we kind of ground ourselves on, it might not be accurate.

But also the opinions that rob us of confidence. They're also very prone to being wrong. And so the difficult critical colleague or neighbor, they are probably the one who's got the problem, not you.

[20 : 57] If a guy or a girl doesn't feel the same way about you, that does not mean for one second that you aren't a beautiful, precious, wonderful person. And even your own opinion can be wrong. In fact, your own opinion will very often be wrong.

If you look at yourself and you think I am a failure, I'm a waste of space, I'm a pain, I'm a let down, I am a write off. You might be very confident in that opinion when in actual fact you are talking absolute rubbish.

And in the same way, circumstances can change. In fact, circumstances are guaranteed to change. And that means that if our confidence is tied to them, then it's always at risk of being lost.

All of this means that if we look to find confidence in people's opinions and in our circumstances, that means that we're looking in the wrong place.

So where should we find confidence? That's our next question. Where should we go to find confidence?

[22 : 11] Well, the answer to this is actually very simple. The place we need to go to find confidence is opinions and circumstances.

The answer is the same, except we have to add one thing, God's opinions and God's circumstances.

And that's exactly what Paul does. We see it so clearly in the passage that we read. Here he describes himself as the least of all the saints.

And yet by God's grace, he has been able to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles. That good news of Jesus that's been revealed in the Gospel is the wonderful news that means that we can have access to God.

We can in fact have access to him with confidence. And so Paul, instead of just sort of lamenting the fact that he sees himself as the least of all the saints because of all the mistakes he's made in his past, he instead listens to what God is saying and he looks at what God is doing.

[23 : 28] And you see exactly the same pattern throughout Paul's writings. I'll just go through two or three examples with you. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he spoke about coming to them in weakness, in fear and in much trembling.

He didn't have plausible words of wisdom or anything like that, but his message was accompanied by the power of God.

And it was in that power that he found confidence. In 2 Corinthians 12, you've got this fascinating passage where Paul talks about a thorn in his flesh.

And we don't know exactly what that was, but it's generally considered to be some kind of physical ailment that was a difficult, horrible thing for Paul to have to deal with, something that he wished would go away, but it wouldn't.

And so he begged that God would take that away, this thorn in the flesh that harasses him. And yet because of that thorn, the Lord is able to emphasize that his grace is sufficient, that his power is made perfect in weakness.

[24 : 41] So Paul looks at his own body, his own circumstances. He sees a thorn that's just an absolute pain and a nightmare, but he takes his eyes off that. He looks to Jesus who says, my strength is made perfect in weakness, and that's what he finds confidence.

And then in 1 Timothy 1, we have this example of Paul talking about all the awful things he did before he became a believer. He was a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.

He had done all sorts of things against the church. He was so conscious of his sin, he actually saw himself as the foremost of the sin, of sinners, or the chief of sinners, as the older translation would have it.

And yet even though he sees all that weakness, all that failing and all that sin in himself, now he focuses on everything that Jesus has accomplished.

He focuses on Jesus' amazing patience and love and mercy towards all who believe in him. The key point is that Paul grounds his confidence in what God has promised, in everything that God has accomplished, and in everything that God is now doing through the work of the Holy Spirit.

[26 : 08] Paul could see a ton of things that were wrong with him in his life. He found many, many reasons to lose confidence, but yet he didn't fall into that sinking sand. Instead, he grounded his confidence in God's opinion and in God's circumstances.

Now, the key point is that both of those things, God's opinion and God's circumstances, both of those things are utterly reliable.

When we look to find confidence in other people's opinion or in our own opinion, or if we look to find confidence in our circumstances, we are grounding our confidence on something that we can't rely on.

We can't rely on other people's opinions to be right, whether it's positive or negative. We can't rely on our own judgment. It's so often skewed and we can't rely on our circumstances because they're not going to stay the same forever.

And that means that if we are finding confidence in these areas, then we're guaranteed to get hurt. We're guaranteed to get knocked because we're looking for certainty and reliability in places that cannot give it to us.

[27 : 25] We're looking for opinions and circumstances to give us something that they just cannot give. God is different. His opinions are utterly reliable with God. There's no harsh judgments.

There's no misunderstandings, no prejudice, no spin, no flattery, no cruelty, just total and utter truth. And His circumstances are utterly stable. He reigns over everything. He orders all things according to His providence.

He's the same yesterday, today and forever. He's infinite and eternal and unchangeable. From our perspective, our circumstances can feel surprising, unstable, even chaotic. But it's never like that with God. With God, there's no surprises, no chaos, no shocks.

He's always in total control. And Paul grounds his confidence in all of that. In other words, he finds his confidence in theology, in the utterly reliable truth that God has revealed.

And the lesson for us all today is that we've got to do the same. We've got to stop looking for confidence in opinions and circumstances.

[28 : 41] And instead, we look for confidence in God's opinion and in God's circumstances. And the difference between the two is massive.

And recognizing the difference is life changing. Between what you think and what's determined by other people's opinions and by circumstances between that and what God thinks.

And what God's circumstances are. So what's your opinion of you? What's your opinion of you? What's your circumstances? How would you summarize that?

What would your summary of that sound like? Of you in terms of how you stand before God? Well, obviously the details are different for us all, but I'm pretty sure that in terms of our confidence before God, for many of us, for maybe all of us, if I was to say summarize your confidence before God, you would say something like this.

I feel on the fringes. I feel kind of at the edge, maybe even slightly on the outside. I feel a long, long way down the list of people that please God.

[30 : 01] I feel like I'm not like other Christians. I look at Christians and I'm not like them. I don't seem to have what they've got.

I feel like God is distant. I wish I was close to him, but I'm not. And I'm all tangled up in sin and I keep messing up and I struggle in so many ways.

And I feel weak and I need a lot of strength if I am going to be the kind of person that I should be. If I'm going to improve as a Christian or if I'm going to be up to the standard that would make me a Christian, I need strength for that because I actually feel quite empty.

I've got nothing to offer. And even if I look okay on the outside, on the inside, I feel like a bit of a wasteland.

There's not much good in me or coming out of me and really deep down I feel quite useless.

[31 : 11] That is the mindset of the unconfident Christian, which is also known as the mindset of pretty much every Christian.

That's how we think, that's how we all think. Those of us who've been Christians for years, those of us who are not sure whether or not we're Christians or not, that is how we all think. And the reason we think like that is because we look for confidence in every opinion and circumstance that we can find, except for God's.

And I do it myself, I do it all the time and every single time it knocks my confidence. We look for confidence everywhere except the place that it actually matters.

We look for every opinion except for that of God's. So what is God's opinion of you? What are God's circumstances in relation to you?

We've given our summary of how we see ourselves. What's God's summary of you? What does that look like? What's his summary of you if you're a Christian or if you become one?

[32 : 23] Well, verses 14 to 21 will help us. They're telling us that you're not on the fringes, you're not on the edge, because the person doing the talking is your father and when God the Father looks at you, what does he say?

He says, my child, my beautiful precious child.

You feel like you're not part, that you're not like other Christians that you don't quite fit in. God says, no, no, you're part of my family.

You feel like God is far away. Christ himself has come to dwell in your heart by his spirit.

God the Son in you through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. You feel like you're all tangled up in sin, that you know, everything's just kind of stuffing up week after week after week.

[33 : 41] Everything's going wrong and it's all just a bit of a tangled mess. You think, I feel so tangled up in sin. God says, no, you are rooted and grounded in my love.

And so yes, sin might affect us as we go along, but that's not where our roots are. That's not where we are grounded. You are utterly planted in his love.

You think that you need more strength to be a better Christian? You think you need more strength to be a better Christian? God says, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

He says, what you need strength for is to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and length and height and depth of my love for you and Jesus.

That's what you need strength for. God said, I don't want your strength to make you a better person. He said, I want you to have strength so that you can see just how wide and deep and high my love for you really is.

[35 : 02] You feel like you're empty. God says, stop being so ridiculous. I'm going to fill you with all the fullness of God. I will keep on filling you forever.

You feel useless. God says, stop talking rubbish. Because through you, I am going to do abundantly more than you can ask or think because it's my power that is at work within you.

Now that's God's summary of you. Now, if you're sitting here thinking, that just can't be true. Because I'm just not.

If you're sitting here, I just can't think that way. If you're thinking that you need to go back into your pocket and take out the answer to the very first question that we asked in our questionnaire.

Remember what it was? Do you believe in the authority of the Bible? And I hope that for every single person in here, your answer to that question was yes. So if you believe in the authority of the Bible, whose summary is right?

[36 : 18] Your or God's? The moment we realize that we are wrong and God is right, is the moment that we take our first steps to finding true confidence.

Confidence that comes from his opinion and that comes from his circumstances. I run out of time, so I am just going to just do the last question super briefly.

There's loads of ways that this applies in our evangelism, in our discipleship, making sense of the world around us, dealing with things that would otherwise knock our confidence, even dealing with ourselves and our own weakness and problems.

Finding confidence in God's truth makes such a massive difference. I want to close with this though. To say that following Jesus, listening to Jesus, can give you a confidence that nothing else can match.

And for anyone who is maybe not yet a Christian or not sure where you stand, this is what the Gospel is offering you. And this is so crucial to recognize because it's so easy to think that the Gospel is offering you a kind of pathetic, whimpering hope.

[37 : 37] It's like this crutch for people who are needy and, you know, oh well, if you really are that useless, then you better start believing in Jesus because it gives us some kind of vague, vague, hopeful, like, oh I really hope it's okay kind of thing for going through life.

That's just rubbish. That's not what the Gospel is offering you. That is not what the message of the Bible is all about. The Gospel is offering you confidence.

Confidence that's grounded in the character and promises of the God who is just utterly good and wise and strong and powerful and wonderful and loving.

It's a confidence that nothing else can match. It's a confidence that nothing can take away. And that's why following Jesus is just brilliant.

Amen.