

PAUL'S WEAKNESS

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

12 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

MESSAGE:

In contemporary jargon, Paul was an A-type personality. He put 150% into everything he did. When he was a Pharisee he zealously persecuted the word of God. After he became a Christian he zealously preached the word of God wherever he went—and he went just about everywhere. Time and again he walked into synagogues to proclaim that the Messiah had come and he was flogged, beaten with rods, stoned and imprisoned for all his efforts. But he continued to preach the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles all the way from Jerusalem to Rome until he was finally thrown into a Roman jail. Even there, he continued to teach the good news to prison guards until he died. Paul gives new meaning to the term “high achiever.” He probably had more influence on human history than anyone other than Jesus Himself.

Yet in spite of his courage and strength of character, in our Epistle lesson today Paul writes “...*I delight in weaknesses....For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2 Cor. 12:10) What in the world can Paul mean? How can it be strong to be weak? Did Samson destroy the temple of the Philistines with weakness? Did David slay Goliath with weakness? Paul’s statement makes no sense: how can weakness equal strength?

To answer that question we have to ask what may seem like a strange question and the question is: Which Paul are we talking about?

You see, Paul said himself that there were two Pauls—an “old Paul” and a “new Paul.” The old Paul consisted of the sinful nature he was born with, and the new Paul consisted of the new nature God had given him. They were totally different persons and Paul was both of them. The old Paul loved to sin and cared nothing for God; the new Paul loved God and hated sin. He describes these two persons in the seventh chapter of *Romans*: “...in my inner being I delight in God’s law, but I see another force at work in the members of my body waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members: wretched man that I am...[for]...in my mind I am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to...sin.” (*Romans* 7:21-23; 25). The two Pauls were at war with each other. One Paul longed to indulge his sinful nature; the other Paul hated his sinful nature and longed to be rid of it and obey God’s law. Paul is referring to these two natures in today’s lesson when he describes a mystical revelation God once gave him: “I know a man in Christ who was....caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.” (2 Cor. 12:2-4) Paul takes pride in the new man, the spiritual man, because he knows that that man comes from God and lives only for God. When he boasts in that man he is really boasting in God. But when it comes to “old man Paul,” the Paul who still is enslaved to sin, he has nothing to boast about—only something to confess and renounce. This is what Jesus was talking about when he said that if we want to follow him, we must first deny ourselves. We deny ourselves when we acknowledge our weakness before the power of sin, confess it to God and ask Him to forgive us. There is a word for this: it’s called “repentance.”

Repentance is all-important in the life of a believer. As long as we cling to the idea that there is some natural good in us that justifies us before God we won’t despair of ourselves and turn to Him for help. Our eyes and ears remain closed. But when we acknowledge that we are poor and miserable sinners and turn to God for help, He is quick to help us. The Holy Spirit Who lives in us opens our eyes and ears and we begin seeing things from the perspective our new man. We learn to hate our sins rather than love them and seek the Lord with all our heart and soul and mind and strength.

When I identify with the old man—when he is me—I have neither room nor time for God. When I identify with the new man, I open the door to Christ and allow his grace and power to flow into me. I find his strength in my weakness.

Then Paul provides us with a personal example of how the Lord went about demolishing old Paul so that new Paul could grow stronger. After describing his experience of being taken up to heaven, he writes the following: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2nd Corinthians 12:7-9) You can’t imagine how much time theologians have spent arguing about what Paul was talking about when he mentioned a “thorn in his flesh.” Was it a recurrent illness—something like malaria which thrived in some of the

places Paul had visited? Could it have been some physical malady like a lame foot or poor eyesight which hindered his ministry? Toward the end of his letter to the Galatians he writes, “*See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!*” (Galatians 6:11) Was it an enemy of Paul’s who followed him around and tried to undermine his ministry by distorting his teaching or libeling his character? Was it chronic pain that resulted from the floggings and beatings he had endured? Any of these would qualify as a “thorn in the flesh.”

The problem is that none of these possibilities makes sense out of God’s response to Paul’s request that He remove the thorn. On a spiritual level God’s grace is all sufficient for all our needs but it doesn’t necessarily make pain or sickness or a disablement go away.

But what if the thorn in Paul’s flesh were a sin that he continually struggled with? Lust, for example. He wouldn’t have been the first man to struggle with that. Anger? Also common among men. The inability to forgive those who had abused him? Understandable. He knew he should forgive them with all his heart and even pray for them as Jesus had commanded in His Sermon on the Mount, but it’s one thing to know you should do something and another thing to do it. Any of these sins could have dogged Paul and filled him with guilt. And a guilty conscience is one of the sharpest thorns that can afflict a person.

If there were a sin that had the whip hand in Paul’s life and he had prayed repeatedly for God to take it away—it would make perfect sense out of God’s response: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness..*” (2nd Corinthians 12:9) Paul’s confession of his weakness, his helplessness before his sin, and his prayer to God to take it away opens the door to God’s grace. In the fifth chapter of *Romans* Paul had written, “*Where sin abounds, grace super-abounds, so that just as sin reigns through death grace reigns through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Romans 5:20-21) We cannot out-sin God’s willingness to forgive. As we sing in one of our hymns, “*The vilest offender who truly believes—that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.*” (*To God Be The Glory*).

This, then, is why Paul says, “*...when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2nd Corinthians 12:10) When we come to realize how powerful our sinfulness is and how weak our ability to control it—let alone get rid of it, then we are ready to turn to God and let Him handle our sin. Our weakness becomes the channel for God’s strength.

There’s an old story about a young monk who is walking through the forest with his abbot—an older, more experienced monk. The young monk is speaking to the abbot of how dismayed he is by his inability to control his sinful thoughts. He took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, yet he dreams of luxury, sex and rebellion. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot get rid of his sinful thoughts. As they come to a river, the abbot asks the young monk to put his face in the water. When he does so, the abbot gets a firm grip on the young monk’s head, forces it under water and holds it there until the young monk’s

struggles become desperate. Then he releases his head and as the young monk gasps for air he says to him: *“When you come to the point where you hunger for God’s forgiveness like you hunger for air right now, He will take away your sins and you will be healed.”*

Lord, show us our weakness so that we may be filled with your strength.

Amen.