

POWER

2nd Corinthians 12:7-10

Power! The very word has energy!

Power is something almost everybody craves.

Every high school boy would like to be the toughest kid in his class.

Every high school girl would like to be the most attractive girl in her class.

Both of them would like to be the most popular kid in their class.

All three fantasies are power trips.

When I was a kid I loved the Charles Atlas advertisement about the 97 pound weakling who got sand kicked in his face, then buffed up and decked the bully who did it AND won the girl. (I was the 97 pound weakling)

Elizabeth Taylor once famously remarked that power was the ultimate aphrodisiac.

That certainly didn't diminish its appeal to men.

Some of the most famous people in history are known mainly for the power they wielded: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Napoleon Bonaparte.

All of them were powerful people who changed the course of history.

The question is: did they change it for the better or for the worse, for good or for evil?

Well, how did the ones I just named use their power?

Mainly, they used it to exterminate as many of their enemies as possible so they could rule over the ones left alive.

They were all driven by the spirits of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who periodically come riding out of hell to afflict someone with a lust for conquest and the war, economic chaos, famine and death it leaves in its wake.

Even those who can clearly see the destructive side of power are drawn to it.

I just finished reading a book entitled *1945*--an account of the Manhattan Project--the huge scientific and military project that produced the world's first atomic bomb.

Several of the scientists associated with the Manhattan Project--including its leader, J. Robert Oppenheimer--had serious reservations about what they were doing.

While they knew that the bomb would be used to end the war with Japan, and save hundreds of thousands of American and Japanese lives that would be lost in a land invasion of Japan, they also knew of its terrible power and that it would cost thousands of civilian lives as well.

They estimated that its power would be the equivalent of 20,000 tons of TNT, and that it would kill every living thing a mile within a mile and a half radius.

Yet when it was tested and they saw the huge, red ball of fire and the mushroom cloud that reached an altitude of 40,000 feet, they were in awe of its power and were proud of what they had achieved.

People are drawn to power--and to the people who have it and use it.

"Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Jesus spoke about the use of power to his disciples when James and John asked him to give them the two most powerful positions in the Kingdom of God.

He said: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant..."*

Jesus made it clear that power took a very different form in the Kingdom of God than it does in this world.

In this world, power is exalting yourself over your fellow man.

In the Kingdom of God, power is serving your fellow man.

Paul speaks about power in today's Epistle lesson in his complaint to the Lord about a "thorn in his flesh."

"To keep me from becoming conceited...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.'"

What was the Lord trying to tell Paul? What is he trying to tell us?

First of all, Paul had quite a few thorns in his flesh.

In his earlier days, he had lived a life of privilege.

He had been born a Roman citizen and enjoyed legal protection and privileges unavailable to the average Jew.

He was raised by a wealthy family, because only rich Jews were able to purchase Roman citizenship.

He grew up under the tutelage of the most famous rabbi and Pharisee of his time, the great Rabbi Gamaliel, whose writings have been revered by Orthodox Jews right down to the present day.

Paul himself became a Pharisee, a member of the most powerful ruling party of Jews in Israel.

He served as a policeman for the Pharisees, investigating and prosecuting Jews who dissented from their teachings.

He had power and privilege, yet he gave it all up in exchange for a life of thorns: of hardship, humiliation and abuse--all for the Name of Jesus Christ.

And when I say hardship and humiliation and abuse, I mean it in spades.

Paul walked hundreds of miles visiting cities and towns in Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, just to tell people something most of them didn't want to hear: that they were dead in their sins and that God had sent His Son to save them.

By the way, if you think that's a message people DO want to hear, try talking to your unbelieving friends about it.

Better yet, try walking into a synagogue and trying to convince the people there that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God.

You'll soon find out how much people want to hear the Gospel.

Paul went into synagogue after synagogue in village after village offering salvation in the name of Jesus Christ.

In return for his efforts he was cursed, libeled, maligned, attacked by mobs, beaten with rods, flogged, stoned and thrown in jail.

He was shunned by his own people.

But he never wavered: he continued to proclaim the Gospel throughout Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy.

He looked satanic powers in the face and never blinked.

And by the power of God, he overcame them.

But you would never have guessed that he overcame them.

The last we hear of Paul he was preaching the Gospel to the guards in a Roman dungeon as he awaited execution.

But in God's time, he was victorious.

If we define power in human terms, Paul had very little power indeed.

Quite the opposite, he was repeatedly overcome by hostile forces that he encountered.

He gave up one of the most powerful and influential positions a Jew could have to live a life of suffering service for his Savior.

And he knew exactly what he was getting into before he got into it, because before Jesus gave Paul his commission to go and proclaim the Gospel he told Ananias: *"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."*

So Paul knew what it meant to have "thorns in his flesh"; he had become so used to beatings and floggings and stonings that he referred to them as "light and momentary troubles."

There was, however, one particular "thorn in his flesh" that caused him so much grief that he prayed to the Lord repeatedly to have it taken away.

We have no way of knowing what it was, but that hasn't stopped people from speculating.

Some have suggested that it was an enemy who followed him around, slandering him and introducing false teaching in the churches he had planted.

Others have suggested that it might have been a chronic disease like malaria, which was rampant in the areas Paul visited and lived.

Still others have proposed that it was a physical handicap--like poor eyesight or stuttering or lameness.

The bottom line is that we just don't know: Paul didn't see fit to tell us what it was.

All we do know is that it caused him a great deal of misery.

Personally, I don't think the thorn in Paul's flesh was any of the above.

If I had a sore foot, and I prayed three times to the Lord to make it stop hurting, and he said, "My grace is sufficient for you"--I'm afraid my reaction would be, "Thank you, Lord, but MY FOOT STILL HURTS!"

I think that the thorn in Paul's flesh was some particular sin that tormented him.

What if he felt resentful toward Peter and the Jerusalem crowd?

After all, here he was getting the tar beaten out of him and they were taking it easy back at the corporate headquarters in Jerusalem.

What if he couldn't shake a sense of guilt for having participated in the stoning of Stephen?

What if he nursed a grudge against John Mark who had deserted him along the way?

What if he was filled with anger against the same Jews he was trying to save because they continued to reject the Gospel?

We don't know what went on in Paul's heart, but if he was dogged by some habitual sin, and had prayed repeatedly for the Lord to remove it, then the Lord's reply makes a lot of sense: *"My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

"My grace is sufficient to cover your sin."

Perhaps this is what later moved Paul to write in his *Letter to the Romans*: *"Where sin increased, grace did increase all the more."*

Our sin provokes God's mercy so God's mercy always exceeds our sin.

We cannot "out-sin" God's willingness to forgive us.

But what about the "power" part?

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

How does our weakness serve to perfect God's power?

It makes sense when you consider that sin is our weakness and grace is God's answer to sin.

God's power is made known to us in His mercy.

In our weakness, we sin; in His mercy, God forgives us; and out of gratitude, we forgive others.

Coming into us through faith and working through us in love, God's power, shown in His grace, draws others to Him.

Thus is his power made perfect through our weakness.

Human weakness is the channel through which God pours his grace and mercy and peace into this world.

And his grace and mercy and peace accomplish what no amount of human power could ever hope to accomplish: *they renew and re-create people.*

Human power destroys life; God's power creates life.

When we are filled with confidence in our own strength, there is little room left for God to work in us.

We are too busy trusting ourselves to trust Him.

But when we are blessed with knowledge of our own weakness, our terrible sinfulness and our need for forgiveness, we make room for God's power to work in us.

And what He can do in us—and through us—is far beyond anything we could ever do ourselves.

Alexander the Great, Caesar, Attila, Genghis Khan, Charlemagne, William the Conqueror and Napoleon were powerful men.

Now, however, they are dust and their kingdoms have passed into oblivion.

But God's power, His grace and mercy and peace, still flow into this world through OUR weakness and build the Kingdom of God—a kingdom that will last forever.

Amen.

