



Part 10 – The Gift of Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

In the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul addresses head on the subject of weakness and suffering. It is a vulnerable attempt by Paul to both defend his ministry as well as to model gospel-centered humility. The church in Corinth was in need of both messages.

The Corinthians lived in a developed urban center, an area of resources and opportunity which provided the people with a certain level of privilege. One result was a developing climate of individualism where material wealth, external appearances, status, and strength were being praised. Further complicating the situation, the church had welcomed a group of self-proclaimed, boastful apostles who were forerunners of the prosperity preachers. They were attacking Paul's ministry stating his life was marked by excessive suffering and trials, therefore invalidating his message.

Paul's self-defense would include much boasting, boasting about weakness. What sort of effective defense incorporates the exposing of weaknesses and shortcomings? Paul said, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30). By taking this approach Paul put his critics to shame.

A proper understanding of human weakness is a mark of the work of the true gospel. Only the gospel of Jesus provides freedom from the heavy burden of shame without first requiring the weak to become strong. Paul shares of the "thorn in his flesh" that was given to him by God. This thorn, a humbling weakness of some kind, was purposed by God to protect Paul from himself, to protect him from arrogance and self-sufficiency. From this we learn the timeless principle that God's grace is sufficient for all of our various trials, sufferings, sins, and weaknesses.

Paul provided needed clarity to the Corinthian church helping to expose the false teachers among them. He also magnified the counterintuitive nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we grasp the breadth of our sin and weakness, it allows us to comprehend the surpassing strength and grace of God.

The Gift of Weakness

An Important Aside

2 Corinthians 12:1-5 – "I will not boast, except of my weaknesses."

- Paul mentions this as an opportunity to boast not in a fantastical experience, but to boast in his weakness. This should be instructive for us as we are often longing for the supernatural, the phenomenal, and the unusual.
- The treasures of the Christian life are most often found in the simple, less exciting, difficult things.

1. Intended Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:6-8 – "a thorn was given me in the flesh"

- For Paul's struggle with pride God did not offer a "guardian angel" to protect him, instead a thorn brought to him by a fallen angel. God's generosity does not always come in the forms we would anticipate
- The Thorn – What was it? Good question. Solving this mystery is not the main thrust of the text. Whether it was a physical ailment, persecution from opponents, or a sin struggle, Paul chose not to clarify. The ambiguity is a grace to us as it allows all struggles to identify with the principle at hand. Each person has weaknesses that God allows to remain. How then shall we live with them?

- “This verse expresses a supreme paradox. The juxtaposition of “was given by God” and “messenger of Satan” recalls the early chapters of Job, where God allows Satan to afflict Job. This language suggests three things, (1) that Satan was the immediate cause of Paul’s difficulty, the thorn. (2) that because the thorn was given by God, Satan is subject to God, not his equal, as in dualism, and (3) in a profoundly mysterious way God was the ultimate source of the thorn.”
~ Paul Barnett
- WSC Q 11: What are the decrees of God?
A: The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.
- God is neither the author of sin, nor is morally responsible for it. Men and angels are culpable for their own actions. God uses sin, sinlessly for his holy purposes.
- What are the implications of understanding your weaknesses as God given, God approved?

2. Sufficient Grace

2 Corinthians 12:9 – “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

- Paul is neither a stoic nor a masochist and reacts to the thorn as we would expect. He prays for it to be taken away. God answers him generously in the negative.
- Sufficient grace: Adequate. Plenty. Lavish. Abundant. Enough.
- Sufficient for any affliction, illness or sin struggle. His grace is sufficient. Your power, your energy, your strength will fail. God’s power is perfected in your weakness.
- We affirm that even the most complex situations (unwanted pregnancy, contemplated suicide, etc.) do not find themselves outside of the providence of God. God is not out of control and therefore does not need our help to remedy the situation by means of aborting a child or assisting with the suicide of a loved one.
- “God cares most not about making my life happy, healthy, and free of trouble, but about teaching me to hate my transgressions and to keep growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.”
~Joni Erikson Tada

3. Contentment with Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 – “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness...”

- This is Paul’s conclusion. After serious evaluation and critique from the false teachers, Paul concludes contentment is the proper posture toward weakness.
- Therefore, hiding our weaknesses is a stumbling block to the work of the gospel. Minimizing our neediness is an impairment to the work of grace.
- Weakness come in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Some are a result of sin in our lives, others are limitations given to us by God.
- Many of us have become masters at the performance, at wearing a mask, covering, hiding, denying, compensating for weakness. Others have argued away their weaknesses as someone else’s fault, making excuses, shifting blame, or deflecting. All of these efforts, whether we are aware of them or not, are done out of fear of exposure, judgment, and condemnation.
- The gospel gives us confidence to intentionally search out the dark places in our hearts. We can freely ask friends and our children to help us see blind spots and weaknesses. Only in the safety of the gospel can we pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me.”