

## Strength through Weakness

2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

Our text today comes from the second letter Paul had written to the Corinthian church. The church at Corinth struggled with purity and spiritual consistency. While they had embraced the Gospel, many continued to walk according to the flesh, and the church had developed a carnal mindset. The attitude and behavior of those within the church guided Paul's letters to them.

While seeking to instill trust and devotion to the Lord, Paul recounts an encounter he had experienced some fourteen years prior to writing this letter. He offers few details, and doesn't even acknowledge that he was actually the man involved in this glorious encounter; yet Paul describes a man being taken up into paradise to witness unspeakable glory. No doubt this forever changed the Apostle, and he continually dealt with the effects of this encounter. Clearly it had shaped his life and ministry, bringing him closer to the Lord with a renewed commitment. It also presented a challenge for Paul – he had encountered something that no other individual had encountered. Such an encounter could potentially produce pride in his heart and adversely affect his ministry for the Lord.

Using this encounter as a backdrop for the verses we have read, we will discover how Paul dealt with the effects of this glorious encounter and overcame the pride it created within his life. Through all of this Paul learned one of the great paradoxes in Christian life – strength is found through weakness. Such a statement is contrary to the philosophies being taught today, but from a spiritual perspective, this reveals great truth. In order for the believer to become strong in the faith, we must experience great weakness. One will never be strong until he is weak.

As we continue to discuss *Paradoxes in the Christian Life*, I want to examine the [contrasts](#) within the text as we consider: [Strength through Weakness](#).

**I. The Potential for Vanity (7-8)** – As Paul continued to share about his miraculous encounter, he revealed a struggle that often develops following such an encounter. While our struggles are clearly different than Paul's, we too deal with the potential for vanity in our lives. Consider:

**A. The Temptation (7a)** – [And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh](#). The Lord knew Paul would be tempted to become vain and prideful following this encounter. This does not necessarily imply that Paul had developed a great deal of sinful pride following the encounter, but the potential was there. Satan would use this as an opportunity to create pride in the heart of Paul. It would have been easy for him to have focused more on the encounter than actually depending on the Lord in ministry.

- Pride is something we all deal with in some form or another. Regardless of the position we hold or the area in which we serve, we all are tempted with pride and vanity. This is especially true the longer we serve in a particular area, and the more familiar we become with the work in which we are engaged. If we are not careful we will begin to depend more on our own abilities and past experiences than in the power and provision of the Lord.

**B. The Affliction** (7b) – *And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.* There has been much debate as to what this thorn in the flesh might have been. That debate continues today, but it is really irrelevant. Regardless of what the thorn actually was, it was given to Paul with purpose. The Lord knew he would be tempted to feel exalted because of his unusual encounter. This would have an adverse effect on his ministry. The thorn in Paul's flesh was sent in order to prevent him from becoming arrogant about his experience with the Lord in paradise.

- We will discuss this more in a moment, but we must guard against assuming that every burden and trial we face is of no value within our lives. While none of us enjoy seasons of adversity, we should seek to learn from those times and trust they have been allowed for our good. If a trial prevents us from straying from the Lord, actually causing us to seek Him, then we would have to agree that it is beneficial.

**C. The Supplication** (8) – *For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.* Whatever the thorn in the flesh was, it caused great concern for Paul. There was likely some sort of physical discomfort or pain associated with his affliction. It was so burdensome that he asked the Lord three specific times to remove the thorn from him. This thorn was provided to buffet him. This reveals a burden that was continual; it never ceased. At this point, Paul saw no benefit in the thorn; he was focused solely on the suffering it caused.

- I am sure we all can relate to Paul's trial and his desire for it to be removed. Our troubles and heartaches are varied, but we all face adversity in life. I know of no one who enjoys physical pain or discomfort. Like Paul, we immediately begin to pray for the Lord to remove the burden or trial. We focus on the pain, and give little thought to any benefit it may bring. I do not enjoy adversity in any form, but if our trials create spiritual growth, drawing us closer to our Lord, they are beneficial in our lives.

**II. The Presence of Victory** (9-10) – At the onset of his affliction, Paul could see no benefit in it at all. He only wanted it removed. However, the Lord had allowed this thorn in Paul's life for a

purpose. He would use this thorn to teach Paul much about his faith, essentially bringing victory to him through his adversity. Notice:

**A. The Provision** (9a) – *And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.* The Lord's response to Paul is very interesting. He doesn't speak of the nature of the thorn or the severity of Paul's suffering. Jesus revealed that His grace was sufficient, and that His strength was perfected in weakness. Paul was focused on the thorn, the suffering, and Jesus was focused on His grace and strength. While the thorn would not be removed, the Lord would provide the grace and strength necessary to endure.

- While this verse has brought comfort and hope to many throughout the ages, it is also very challenging. We discover that our Lord has a different perspective than we do. Living in a body of flesh, we tend to focus on the physical aspects of life. When we have pain, we immediately focus on the pain. The Lord views life from a spiritual perspective. He desires us to focus on His grace and strength when facing adversity. I will agree that such focus is hard to obtain, but we must seek the Lord's grace and strength in our lives above all else. His grace is always sufficient, regardless of the trial we must endure. You will never face a trial that our Lord is unable to guide you through according to His grace and strength.

**B. The Perspective** (9b) – *Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* Very likely this attitude had not developed over night, but Paul reveals that he possessed a new perspective on life, and his suffering in particular. He had come to the place that he was willing to welcome adversity, even rejoicing in it, so that he might experience the power of Christ in his life. If suffering was the source of strength and power through Christ, he welcomed such difficulty with open arms.

- Such a perspective will never be developed on the mountain top. This attitude and commitment to Christ is developed in the deep valleys of trials and despair. We know such a perspective is contrary to human nature. One will never come to this place through physical pursuits. This perspective comes from a committed walk with the Lord, learning the value of His grace in our lives and the power it provides. Paul knew that spiritual power in the Lord exceeded physical strength. It is hard to admit that we would welcome a trial, but if it brings us closer to the Lord, being able to experience His power and grace, would it not be worth it? We can rejoice in the valley knowing we have the power of Christ resting upon us!

**C. The Pleasures** (10a) – *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake.* Paul had even come to the place that he could take

pleasure in various trials and adversities. Again, such an attitude is contrary to human nature. Let's take a moment to consider the struggles that Paul took pleasure in.

- **Infirmities** – This speaks of “*generally all kinds of suffering, whether moral or physical.*”
  - **Reproaches** – This refers to “*ridicule, insults, slander, or rumors.*”
  - **Necessities** – This speaks of “*hardships, needs, deprivation, hunger, thirst, lack of clothing, shelter, etc.*”
  - **Persecutions** – This deals with “*verbal or physical attacks, abuse, or injury.*”
  - **Distresses** – This speaks of “*perplexities, anxious moments, or inescapable problems.*”
- Such an approach to the difficulties of life will never be possible apart from a close and committed walk with Christ. Such adversity typically causes us to respond in anger and despair, not rejoicing. I want to develop such a relationship, so that I can endure faithfully, completely focused on the Lord and His will for my life. When we allow the trials of life to consume us, we submit to defeat and despair. If we could use the same trials as an avenue to obtain strength and grace in the Lord, we would experience greater victory!

**D. The Paradox (10b)** – *for when I am weak, then am I strong.* Paul lived his life according to one of the great paradoxes of Christian life. He had come to the place that he realized his weakness actually provided strength. When he allowed himself to be vulnerable and needy before the Lord, he then was able to receive the strength that only Christ could provide. This had not been available while he tried to handle every situation and overcome in his own strength. When he realized his inability, he found unmatched strength through Christ. Strength had come through his weakness.

- This is a difficult lesson to learn, and even harder to put into practice. We want to handle every situation, and fear being viewed as weak. Only when we come to the end of ourselves, realizing that we cannot handle the burdens we carry, will we find the strength available in Christ. Genuine strength for the journey is obtained through human weakness. When we stop relying on ourselves and trust solely in Christ, then we are made strong!

**Conclusion:** I don't know where you are in the journey, but I am certain many are dealing with struggles and adversity. You may have tried everything you know to bring a resolution, but the burden remains. If you will only admit that you are unable to handle the situation, and trust solely

in Christ, you can receive the strength to endure. Maybe you don't know the peace of walking with the Lord. If you are yet unsaved, come to Christ for salvation today. Whatever your need, Christ is the answer!