

Matt Henry
2 Cor. 12:1-10
08 July 2018

“Thorn Again?”

God’s grace and peace...

If you were to interview for a job, you might be asked the classic question, which is: “What are some of your strengths and some of your weaknesses?” If you can’t come up with a weakness, either you don’t know yourself or you’re not being honest. The trick is to have the “good” kind of weaknesses—like, “I just work too hard, or I am just too punctual.”

In this world, we’re trained to boast about our strengths—not our weaknesses. It’s what comes naturally. Our society is built upon competition—outdoing one another. So imagine how odd it would be if someone went out and boasted, not in their strengths, but only in a resume of their actual weaknesses. They wouldn’t get the job, would they? But that’s exactly the angle Paul takes in 2 Corinthians 12, the text for today’s message. He chooses to boast about his weaknesses.

Now 2 Corinthians 12 is an interesting chapter because Paul alludes to two different experiences but he refuses to describe them in detail. One is a great joy. The other is a great pain.

First the joy. He begins to speak as if he were talking about another believer, but really he's referring to his own experience that apparently happened fourteen years ago from writing. "I 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. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise." (v. 2-3). (The term "third heaven" is a little odd. In Paul's day, they argued about how many levels there were to heaven. This is just his way of saying he was at the top.) And there in God's presence, Paul says "he heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:5). Isn't that intriguing?

So Paul writes, "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" (2 Cor. 12:7). What is this thorn? He doesn't name it, but I can tell you, it vexed him. We don't know what anguish this evil messenger caused, or what the message was. But it's clear, this thorn was causing him grief and affliction. So Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from him.

And isn't that our first reaction to hardship as well? "Lord, take it away! Lord, heal this person! Lord, just make it all better!" And it isn't that our pleas

are insincere or wrong. Just as Paul wasn't insincere or wrong. But sometimes the response is "No, I have something greater for you to learn." Sometimes he tells us to endure the thorns of life—whatever those may be weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties—sometimes he tells us to endure the thorns of life knowing there is something greater coming in the end—like the rose teaches us. The thorn—even if it's of Satan—can still serve a good purpose: keeping us focused on God and not on ourselves. As Jesus said to Paul, he so often says to us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Paul had spent the majority of his life boasting about his strengths. His power. His authority. His greatness. But as an apostle, he begins to boast in his weakness. Why? Up to this point, he only wanted people to notice him. But now, he only wants people to see Jesus. Whatever he has to endure to help people see Jesus, he'll do. Let's take the last verse first. Verse 10: "That 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."

In moments of weakness, the power of Christ is most evident. Do you accept that? We who are believers in Christ have to come to terms with a God

who is good—very good—but for some reason, He doesn't always remove what vexes us.

I was at the bicycle shop last week getting flat tire fixed on my bike. The guy said that he had fixed so many flat tires this year because the goatheads are so bad. A goathead is a tiny thorn from a weed. He offered to sell me tires with a thicker wall so the thorns don't puncture the tube. Costs more, but it's worth it because nobody wants a flat tire. Now I could have said, "Why don't we just get rid of all the goatheads?" Get rid of the thorns out there. It's not how the world works. The question is "What are you going to do to prepare yourself, to protect yourself from the things in life that are meant to harm you?" Satan wants to use the goatheads of pain, doubt, fear—in order to deflate our faith and leave us stranded. Without God's grace and strength, we're susceptible. But His grace is sufficient for us. It's strong enough to withstand the threat. Greater is He that is within us than He who is within the world. But as we pedal along in life, we have to acknowledge how both are presently working. In other words, we who are born again, may have a thorn again!

Over and over again, Scripture tells us that weakness isn't a bad thing necessarily in and of itself. It's just a part of who we are. It's what you do with weakness that matters. You can try and cover it up, or you can ask God to work in

you and through you, despite your weakness. Let me just say, the pattern of God's activity in the Bible is that God does extraordinary things through ordinary people. Over and over again, He loves to work this way.

Why? Because it's the clearest way for outsiders to know God is really the One at work. It is from the weak and ordinary that God is able to receive the greatest glory. The humble, the lowly, the hurting, the persecuted, the overlooked—these are the kinds of people God loves to work. So we boast in the things that show both our weakness and the Lord's mighty hand—and isn't this what salvation is all about? We couldn't do it...but Jesus has!

Weaknesses can be good things—no, great things—*so long as* they cause us to rely on God and not on ourselves. Weaknesses force us to look to God for strength. In other words, the moment we say, "I can't", God says, "I can."

Jesus says to Paul words I believe that are appropriate for you—especially those of you who are suffering in some way. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." His power is perfected not in our strength, but in our weakness! That has implications. It's meant to drive us to prayer. It's meant to keep us in relationship with God.

It's a strange message. We are not as strong as we think we are. So be weak. But be weak so Christ can make you strong.

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

That’s the verse I share in the hospital. It’s a verse for those situations when you feel weak or unable. We are quick to say, “Lord, take it away!” He may. He may not. That’s not the point! The point is that weakness keeps us in a close relationship with the Lord through it all. I shared that verse with someone in the hospital years ago, that Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness and that person said, “I’m counting on it.”

How about you? Are you counting on it? There are good kinds of weaknesses to have. The ones that cause you to rely on Jesus. The weaker you are towards yourself, the stronger you are in Christ. It’s just like the song “Jesus Loves Me” says. “I am weak, but he is strong.” That’s how God chooses to work. Through our weakness, perfecting his power, touching us with his more than sufficient grace.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.