

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Cor. 12:7-10*

We gather together this morning in the afterglow of spending extended times of prayer together with Gerhard and Janice Du Toit last weekend. Many of you have shared and expressed how God touched your heart over the three days they were with us, as the residue of the Spirit of prayer continued to linger in our midst throughout the week. One of main deep truths that stood out last weekend is that prayer reflects the reality of how powerless we are without God - and that prayer is the also the means, along with the Word of God, by which God powerfully works in our lives and in the world we live in.

One of the ways our Christian faith has been radically perverted today is by the teaching that the power we are offered in God through Jesus Christ is the power to hide or ignore or evade our weaknesses by means of success in life or positive thinking or emotional health. But the biblical truth of what Jesus offers is that the power comes to us through our *weakness*. In the face of our contemporary society’s call to hide or ignore or evade our weaknesses through the message of health, wealth, prosperity, and positive thinking - Jesus rebukes and stuns us by declaring that his “*power is made perfect in*” our “*weakness*.”

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary and founder of the China Inland Mission, knew of this intimate relationship between God’s power and his own weakness. Complimented once by a friend about Taylor’s tremendous impact on the mission field, Hudson answered by saying, “It seemed to me that God looked over the whole world to find a man who was weak enough to do His work, and when He at last found me, He said, ‘He is weak enough—he’ll do.’ All God’s giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them.” While I served as a Lead Pastor in Wisconsin I came to know Jeff Siemon, the former all-pro linebacker for the Minnesota Vikings, who is now in full-time ministry, who came to experience the reality of this divine connectedness of God’s power with his weakness. In looking back over a football career that is exalted in the eyes of many, the best times Jeff remembered were times of failure, hurt, and inadequacy. It was after receiving a devastating injury during his college career, that he gave his life to Christ. During the final two years of his professional career, when he no longer started for the Vikings, relegated to the bench and treated as an outsider, he relates as his best in football - in terms of personal growth and influence for Christ with others.

While we do live in a society that is competitive, driven and self-exalting, whether in athletics, in business, or just in life – we still must face the reality that how we respond to failure, inadequacy and weakness reveals *who we are living for and where our strength comes from*. In our text for today we will see that Paul had his own strength taken away so that he would draw on the strength of the living God in Jesus Christ. The central theme of 2 Corinthians is the relationship between Paul’s suffering and his weakness - and the power of the Spirit of God in Paul’s apostolic life, ministry, and message.

Paul had planted the Corinthian church some years before this letter, and in his absence prideful, legalistic, Jewish Christians began to privately and publically question Paul’s motives and God’s call on his life to be an apostle. The words we are looking at today are Paul’s response to those accusations – most specifically to their questioning his personal courage and their argument that Paul had suffered too much to be a Spirit-filled apostle of the risen Jesus Christ - reflecting their belief in the health, wealth and prosperity therapeutic gospel which we still see in our world and in the church today.

But Paul, throughout this letter, responds to their accusations by arguing that his weakness and suffering as an apostle are the very means by which God in Jesus Christ is made known in the world. The apostle's weakness and his sufferings for Christ embodied the cross of Christ, while his endurance in the midst of adversity, with thanksgiving and contentment, manifested the risen power of the Spirit. Paul declared that his weakness and suffering as an apostle was the means God used to reveal His glory.

In the immediate context for our text today the apostle Paul opens 2 Corinthians 12 by saying, "*I must go on boasting.*" And so, in order to understand what he means by "*I must go on boasting.*" we need to understand the context in which Paul was speaking, which we see in the first sentence of chapter 11 where he says: "*I wish you would bear with ME in a little foolishness.*" This "*foolishness*" that Paul was sarcastically speaking was the foolish "*boasting*" of the prideful, legalistic, Jewish Christians who were attacking him, who saw themselves to be "*super-apostles*" (11:5). But, the apostle writes: "*such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ*" (11:13). Paul then goes on to challenge the foolish boasting of those who are pridefully questioning his motives and calling from God.

*Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. 2 Corinthians 11:22-33*

In the context of confronting his ego-driven opponents Paul boasts in the weakness of physical suffering, the weakness of emotional pressure and the weakness of a humiliating defeat. He turns the tables on those had pridefully questioned his motives and call to ministry by not boasting of success or triumph but of weakness. Paul reaches back twenty years into the past to an incident that occurred shortly after his conversion, and says, "If I must boast, I will boast in the things that show my weakness." It was then Paul would begin to realize that in and through and because he was weak, Jesus could be glorified.

This text we are looking at this morning is the climax of Paul's defense of his apostleship - and of the divine glory of the purpose his weakness and his suffering for the sake of Christ. Paul was somewhat reticent to defend himself by writing about his own personal experiences with God, but there seemed to be no other way to invalidate the accusations against him. In fact, to avoid exalting himself, Paul describes his experience in the third person rather than the first person. In our text for today Paul shares three experiences he had with God that validated his call from God be an apostle - through the power of God in Paul's weakness.

*I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 2 Cor. 12:1-6*

Here we see that God validated Paul's call from God to be an apostle through the power of God in Paul's weakness by *enlightening him*. We see that in that God gave Paul visions and revelations. Paul saw the glorified Christ on the day he was converted (Acts 9:3; 22:6), and he saw a vision of Ananias coming to minister to him (Acts 9:12), and he also had a vision from God when he was called to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17). During his ministry, God's Word tells us Paul had visions from God to guide him and encourage him. Along with these special visions that related to his call and ministry, spiritual revelations of divine truth were also communicated to Paul. God gave him a profound understanding of the plan of God and the mysteries of God. And here we now read that fourteen years before the writing of this letter, God enlightened Paul by taking him to heaven, and then sending him back to the earth again. There is no record of the details of this event, and it is useless for us to speculate – but Paul clearly saw and heard and experienced things that were wondrously glorious beyond description.

There is no doubt that this vision of God's glory was one of the sustaining powers in Paul's life and ministry. No matter where he was he knew that God was with him and he had seen where he was going. You and I are not going to heaven until we die or until our Lord Jesus returns. But we have a marvelous encouragement in the fact that today we are spiritually seated with Christ in the heavenly places – and while we have not seen God's glory as Paul did, we do share God's glory now and one day we shall enter into heaven and behold the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ face to face. When boast in our weaknesses we will see glorious things of God in our lives and in the life to come.

*So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 2 Corinthians 12:7-8*

God validated Paul's call from God to be an apostle through the power of God in Paul's weakness by *humbling him*. These words are a dramatic shift from his previous ones. Paul had just been speaking of paradise and now he speaks of pain. He goes from glory to suffering. He tastes the blessing of God in heaven and then feels the cursing of Satan on earth. Paul understands why. The Lord knows how to balance our lives. If we have only blessings, we will become proud; so, He permits us to have burdens as well. Paul's great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth; and so God, in His divine goodness, sovereignly permitted Satan to harass Paul in order to keep him from becoming proud.

The mystery of human suffering will not be solved completely in this life. Sometimes we suffer simply because we are human. Our bodies change as we grow older, and we are susceptible to the normal problems of life. The same body that can bring us pleasures can also bring us pains. The same family members and friends that delight us can also break our hearts. This is part and parcel of what it means to be a fallen human being who lives in a fallen world. Sometimes we suffer because we disobey God. Our own rebellion may afflict us, or the Lord may see fit to discipline us in His love. Sometimes we suffer because God wants us to draw us closer to him. God uses suffering as a tool to build godly character.

Paul's thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him "*from becoming conceited*." The emotion of exciting spiritual experiences has a way of inflating the human ego; and pride leads to a multitude of temptations to sin. We do not know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. The word translated "*thorn*" means "a sharp stake used for torturing or impaling someone." It was a physical affliction of some kind that brought pain and distress to Paul. Satan was permitted to "*harass*" Paul. The word means "to beat, to strike with the fist." The tense of the verb indicates that this pain was either constant or recurring. No wonder he prayed at least three times that the affliction might be removed from him. But God permitted Satan to afflict Paul, just as He permitted Satan to afflict Job. While we do not fully understand the purposes, God had in mind when He permitted evil to come, we do know that God controls evil and can use it even for His own glory. When boast in our weaknesses we will humbly see our desperate need for God, which will keep us from becoming prideful and enable us find our greatest joy in God.

*But 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10*

God validated Paul's call from God to be an apostle through the power of God in Paul's weakness by *empowering him*. In the midst of the weakness of his suffering Paul humbly saw his desperate need for God, and as he cried out for God to remove his suffering, God gave him the power of grace instead. The grace of God does not remove the struggles, troubles, suffering and pain we go through in life, but rather the grace of God is "*the power of Christ*" that God gives us grace in our weaknesses in order to get through times of struggles, troubles, suffering and pain we go through in life. Just as Jesus died on the cross by an act of God's violent grace and rose from the dead by an act of God's glorious grace – so too does God forgive our sins and give us new life by an act of God's sufficient grace, when we humbly see our desperate need for God and find our joy in nothing and no one else but God through Jesus Christ.

God's grace is the power of God in our weaknesses that is God's provision for our every need when we need it. "*Sufficient grace*" means there is never a shortage of God's grace. "*Sufficient grace*" is God's strengthening grace which allows us, permits us, pushes us, pulls us, makes us to become weak - so that we might receive the strength of "*the power of Christ*." Paul proclaimed the reality and power of God's sufficient grace when he proclaimed: "*When I am weak, then I am strong!*" Strength that knows itself to be strength is actually weakness; but weakness that knows itself to be weakness is actually strength.

In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. When Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for a substitution: "Give me health instead of sickness, strength instead of weakness." But quite often God does not meet our need by substitution, but by transformation – which means God does not remove the affliction, but He gives us His grace so that the affliction works not against us, but *for us* and *in us*. As Paul prayed about his problem, God gave him a deeper insight into what God was doing. Paul learned that his thorn in the flesh was a gift from God. There was only one thing for Paul to do: accept the gift from God and allow God to accomplish His purposes. When Paul accepted his affliction as the gift of God, it was then possible for God's grace to go to work in his life. God did not give Paul any explanations; instead, He gave him a promise: "*My grace is sufficient for you*" We do not live on explanations; we live on promises. Our feelings change, but God's promises never change. Promises generate faith, faith strengthens hope. But God does not give us His grace simply that we might *endure* the weakness of our sufferings. You don't have to be a Christian to manifest great endurance. God's grace is given to us enable us to rise above our circumstances and feelings and cause our afflictions to work for us, both in accomplishing good for us, and to transform our hearts and lives in us. God's sufficient grace enabled Paul not only to accept his weakness in afflictions, but he also gloried in it – because it was then that the power of Christ was able to "*rest*" on him. The word translated "*rest*" means "to spread a tent over." Paul saw his weakness as a frail tent but the glory of God had come into that tent and transformed it into a holy tabernacle as God transformed Paul's weakness into strength. The powerful blessing of weakness is that when boast in our weaknesses we will possess the power of God's grace to joyfully live above the pain of this life until we enter the glory of the life to come. When boast in our weaknesses we will be enlightened, humbled and empowered - which will deepen our dependence on God and build the humble character of Christ into our lives. Paul gloried in weakness of his suffering because "*through the power of Christ*" he glorified God by the way he embraced the difficult experiences of life. P.T. Forsyth wrote: "It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than its removal." Paul knew that removal not by substitution, but by transformation when he received the sufficiency of God's grace. How we respond to failure, inadequacy and weakness reveals who we are living for and where our strength comes from. May our response to the struggles of life reveal we are living for Jesus and that he is our strength, the sufficient grace in our weakness!