

The Power of Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Key verse:

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

Larger Context:

Paul, in chapters 10-13, directly challenges the “false apostles” (11:13) who have moved into Corinth and have maligned Paul. They are Jews (12:22) whose commendations and authority are based upon worldly standards (10:2, 12): they possess letters of recommendation (3:1), they are skilled in rhetoric (10:10; 11:6), they have connections to the 12 apostles (11:5; 12:11). As such they charged fees for their ministry (2:17), boasted in their position (10:12) claiming credit for work done by Paul (10:15-16) and exercised authority in a way contrary to Christ by “lording over” (1:24; 11:20) the believers in Corinth.

In chapter 11 Paul does some worldly boasting himself. But instead of pointing to his many accomplishments and connections, he highlights his hardships declaring that if he must boast, he will boast in the things that show his weakness (11:30) so that the credit goes completely to God (10:17).

In this context Paul goes on to tell of the early days of his conversion which accomplishes both the goal of establishing the credibility of his message (vision from God - 12:1; signs and wonders - 11:12) as well as his reason for not boasting in his worldly credentials.

2 Corinthians 10:1-10 contains three key elements:

- Paul’s Vision (v.1-6)
- Satan’s Thorn (v.7-8)
- Christ’s Command (v.9-10)

Paul’s Vision - 2 Corinthians 10:1-6

Paul goes on “**boasting**”, though he is clear that there is “**nothing to be gained**” by doing so. He has already stated that this worldly boasting is “foolishness” (11:16) and that he is not speaking as Christ would (11:17). But, for the sake of the Corinthians who were enamored of these false apostles, he makes comparisons of his earthly credentials along side their worldly claims.

The qualitative difference between Paul’s credentials and that of the false apostles is that Paul’s point to his experiences of suffering and hardship. Such experiences are indicative of one who would call Christ “Lord.” Jesus himself said that anyone who does not “take his cross” (a sign of suffering) and follow him is not worthy of him.” (Mt 10:38). Christ later added that the world would hate his disciples because it first hated him (Jn 15:18). And again, Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Paul later confirmed that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Tim 3:12).

Paul goes on to describe a vision that God gave him early in his ministry.

“I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.” In these it seems that the false apostles laid claim to having received such. Paul presents his own experience as evidence of his apostleship.

“I knew a man...” Why does Paul speak of this in third person? Undoubtedly because of embarrassment - for he does not want to bring undue attention to himself. In addition, Paul refrains so that **“no one would think more of [him] than is warranted”** (12:6).

“Fourteen years ago” would date this vision around A.D. 42-44, before any of his missionary activities recorded in Acts. This likely occurred after his flight from Damascus (11:32-33 cf. Acts 9:23-25) during the so called “silent years” between his visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:30) and his early ministry in Antioch with Barnabas (Acts 11:25-26).

Paul said he was **“caught up to the third heaven”** - to **“paradise.”** These designations describe three things in Jewish literature: the original paradise (Eden), the eschatological paradise (Rev.2:7), and the intermittent secret paradise -- the abode of the righteous dead in the presence of Christ (cf. 2Co 5:1-10). This third designation is what Christ referred to as he spoke to the repentant thief at his crucifixion (Lk 23:43).

“Caught up” (ἄρπάζω) is the same word used to describe the “rapture” (1Thes 4:17) which is said to occur in a “moment”, in the “twinkling of an eye” (1Co 15:52). This would explain Paul’s lack of knowledge whether he was **“in the body or apart from the body”** (2Co 12:2-3).

While in the presence of Christ, Paul heard (saw?) **“inexpressible things”** of which man is **“not permitted to tell”** (2Co 12:4). This may shed additional light on the reasoning for Paul to speak of this experience in third person. He was not permitted to tell of what he had seen or heard and due to the fact that such things were categorically “inexpressible” in human language. This is the first time in which Paul broke his silence about the experience. He undoubtedly felt that it would be beneficial to the Corinthians to hear about such a vision though he does not reveal the vision’s content.

Though he has never spoken of this vision or the contents thereof we see the evidence of this experience in Paul’s unyielding hope in this life and intense longing to be in Christ’s presence:

Romans 8:17-18 “...we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. ¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

1 Corinthians 2:9 "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"--

2 Corinthians 4:17 our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Philippians 1:21-23 ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far..."

2 Timothy 4:7-8 ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

If Paul thought that the suffering that he endured did not result in eternal reward and this life was the best we could hope for he concluded that we should be "pitied more than all men" (1Cor 15:19). He goes on:

1 Corinthians 15:32 ³² If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

On the contrary, our faith and love demonstrated in this life spring from the hope of heaven.

Colossians 1:4-6 "...we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- ⁵ the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶ that has come to you.

In fact, this vision may have been given Paul as a source of hope in spite of the continual difficulties and sufferings Christ promised would happen to Paul when he called him to service (Acts 9:16).

If Paul were to boast in such visions/revelations he would not be a fool by the world's standards because he was "**speaking the truth**" (12:6a). In other words, there could not be evidence found that any of his boasts were a fabrication.

Satan's Thorn - 2 Corinthians 12:7-8

Along with these "**surpassingly great revelations**" came a "**thorn**" in Paul's flesh (v.7). Though we do not know what this thorn consisted of for Paul, we do know that he identified it as a "**messenger from Satan**" (v.7). Who was it that gave Paul this thorn? By implication, it appears to be God for Paul appeals "**three times**" to the Lord for it to be removed (v.8). Therefore, God gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh" via a secondary agent: Satan.

What are the theological implications of God using a secondary agent of evil to inflict a believer? Does this mean that God is guilty of evil?

The most prominent example is that of Job in which God gives Satan authority to harm Job's possessions, his family and even his own person. He does so limiting Satan's actions by commanding that he must not take Job's life. This is a test of Job's character and devotion to God - a test in which he passed and for which he was rewarded.

The unjust suffering of Joseph is possibly another example for he credits God with using the evil actions of his brothers (agents of evil) toward Joseph to ultimately result in accomplishing the saving of many lives (including the future nation of Israel) (Gen 50:20).

This is also likely the case as it pertains to David's census for which he was judged. God incited David to count the number of the fighting men (2Sam 24:1) via the evil agent: Satan (1Chr 21:1). In this case, David failed the test (he takes full responsibility for his actions - 1Chr 21:17) and paid the just consequence as a result.

Truths to consider:

1. God is holy, righteous and just.
2. Satan and other agents desire, in their own self serving interests, to cause harm.
3. God, in his infinite wisdom, allows secondary agents (Satan, people, natural disasters, disease, false teachers, etc.) to cause harm to his children. These trials are never more than an individual believer can bear for God gives them supernatural power to endure (1Cor 10:13). They are free to respond to these tests according to their will.
4. God himself tempts no man (James 1:17) but uses trials to develop the character of his children (James 1:3-4) in order that their faith, which is of greater worth than gold, may be proved genuine (1Pet 1:7). Paul writes that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). In the context of Romans 8 "all things" refer to "our present sufferings" (v.18).

In each of these examples, God is relieved of culpability for evil by allowing a secondary agent to carry out an evil act. Each person of faith responds according to his own free will. God's intentions are to accomplish good. As a result the person of faith is justly rewarded or judged.

What is the good God intended for Paul in spite of this "thorn" and the many sufferings that would define his life?

Christ's Command - 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

God's intention toward Paul with regard to the thorn is to (1) "**keep him from becoming conceited**" (2Cor 12:7) and (2) reveal to him the source of his "**power**" which is made "**perfect in weakness**" (12:9).

Paul then rightly concludes: “**I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me**” (v.9) “**...for when I am weak, then I am strong**” (v.10).

This truth bears out in all that Paul did and taught. Paul did not only acknowledge the truth that God’s power is made perfect in his weakness - he intentionally lived by that truth every day.

In our immediate context, Paul chose to boast about his “**weaknesses ... insults ... hardships ... persecutions ... and difficulties ... for the sake of Christ**” (v.10). This in direct contrast to the false apostles who delighted in their worldly accolades (2Cor 10:12).

In Paul’s previous epistle to the Corinthians he reminded them that when he came to them initially he did not use “eloquence or superior wisdom” as he proclaimed the gospel but had resolved to preach nothing but “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” This was in order that their “faith might not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power.” (1Cor 2:1-5).

To the Philippians Paul wrote that his earthly credentials - circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee who kept the law faultlessly with great zeal - were rubbish compared to “the greatness of knowing Jesus Christ, for whose sake [he had] lost all things.” (Phil 3:7-8).

Paul goes on in Philippians 3:10-11 to relate the power of Christ’s resurrection to the fellowship of his sufferings: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Coming back to 2 Corinthians, this is why Paul is vehement in declaring that he does not live and operate his ministry by the standards of this world:

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 ³ For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

This truth cannot be forgotten. The weapons that God has given believers are His Word and Prayer. These are the tools the God uses to establish and build his church.