

“Connected in Weakness That Is Strong”

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2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Dr Clay Smith

Here at the end of 2 Corinthians 12, we find Paul doing something he hates to do, boast. In chapter 11 he contrasts his resume with the resume of the so-called super apostles, those who had pulled the wool over the eyes of the Corinthians by being bombastic showmen, prideful and professional speakers, workers of signs and wonders...all without the gospel of the crucified Lord Jesus. Yet, they told the church, trust us because see all the wonderful things we are doing for you.

By way of contrast, examine Paul's resume. He had reasons to boast in the flesh, just like them, but he said that is madness. It doesn't prove anything. Instead, he produces a litany of his suffering and struggle. He received the thirty-nine lashes, a uniquely Jewish punishment of three leather thongs used to whip a person, literally giving them permanent stripes and scars on their bodies. That was the maximum allowed for a Jew, *who wanted to remain a Jew*. It was reserved for the brothers, the rabbis, said, so if Paul had wanted, he could have simply walked away, turn away from preaching among the Jews and spared himself this punishment. But he didn't: five times.

Further, he was beaten by rods, which is what the Gentile authorities did to him. The Roman authorities usually used elm branches and ax handles to beat someone who was not a citizen. Again, Paul could have appealed to his Roman citizenship as he did on one occasion in Acts 16 and stopped it all, but he didn't in order to continue his preaching ministry. He was stoned, shipwrecked, betrayed, sleepless with worry and more. All that to say to the Corinthians, you have no idea what I paid to be able to preach the gospel to you.

Here is my resume, he says, but, don't trust me. If I must boast, I will boast of Jesus, not of myself, he says. Rather than demonstrating how impressive I am, look at the Lord Jesus, the King of mercy and grace given to the weak and undeserving people, like me. What is in your resume so that you will be found impressive before this city? Paul says, your resume is best filled with six words: My grace is sufficient for you.

We are simply vessels for God's might to shine through.

¹² 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. ² 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. ³ 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— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ 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.

⁷ 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. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

I will never forget the sermon at my ordination service. Missy and I had helped to plant a church in Arizona, and I asked a dear friend to come preach at my service. He had meant so much to me through my life; he walked with me through the pain of my divorce and a few other matters. We had worked together. He officiated at my wedding to Missy. He knew me well and loved me well.

But when he stood to preach at the service, things got a little wonky. He began by relaying how glad he was to be there. He was privileged to speak to this congregation so he could tell them how drastic of a mistake they were making by calling me as their pastor. He said it twice: you are making a mistake. I felt my face turn red hot, my stomach drop and I could not for the life of me imagine what was happening.

It got worse. He then started to relay some of my weaknesses and failures...just to make sure they knew what they were doing. Clay has a weakness of wanting you to like him a lot, and that can be a deep liability for a pastor. He has been

wounded through a painful divorce he did not seek; he will probably have a hard time trusting you. He can be insensitive; he can be harsh; he can be ...and he went on. I could not believe my ears, thinking I flew you all the way out here to sabotage what is finally happening, to say that I thought I'd never be able to pastor because of an unwanted divorce. Now you are jeopardizing it all by parading all my weakness before these people, who, by the way, said they WANTED me to be their pastor.

After the airing of grievances, he said this: if you are wanting to hire a pastor who is perfect, and will lead you out of a sense of having it all together and perfect, then you are making a drastic mistake.

But knowing what you do about Clay and his sins, weaknesses and failures, now when some powerful move of God happens, you may only conclude God is the one doing it. If something is happening here, it is only because God is at work. You are hiring a weak man so that God may use him for mighty gospel purposes. He was right. But it still hurt. What I was left with was ONLY being able to boast in my weaknesses and Christ's strength!

We don't learn of and experience God's power most often through abundance and outward success and pretended strength; rather, it is in weakness and want and even lack that God's power takes up residence in our lives and is revealed THROUGH our lives. So we boast in not our abundance and success, but as Paul says in 11:30 in v. 9, we boast all the more in our weakness. What does that mean, and how does that look?

1. Boasting in weakness reveals God's everyday power.

In verses 1-6 Paul does something he says he hates to do, boast. He tells of a vision that God gave him, although he distances himself from it a bit. Did you notice the "I know a man" in v. 2 speaking as if he's not referencing himself? By v. 7, it comes clear that in fact Paul is writing about his own experience. But the most important thing to note was NOT the spectacular experience, but in seeing God show up in the everyday moments of weakness and fear. That's where God's power is seen and experienced.

He tells us in 11:30 that he would boast not in his pride, but the things that reveal or demonstrate his weakness, and boy does he. Paul had been converted on the road to Damascus just a couple of years after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection. He wrote in Galatians that he then went to seminary, out in the desert in Arabia. Not only was he learning but he was also boldly preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. The man who had been commissioned by the High Priest to persecute Christians met the crucified and resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Instead of persecuting, he started boldly preaching this Jesus who saves by the cross the resurrection.

Then v. 32 happened. Instead of boldly preaching, I had to be delivered through a basket in the wall. Hidden to escape in humiliation. God delivered when I was weak and afraid. In THAT, I'll boast because it shows God powerfully at work in my weak, everyday experience. That "weakness" that Paul keeps talking about is the real struggle and suffering that comes from living in a world of sin and death. Weakness is what it is like to live in a broken world, out there, and in here—in our hearts and lives. He will boast in God showing up there, in those profound places of need.

But, then v. 1, he must keep on boasting, and told the story of the tender vision God gave him. This is important. In the Bible, God gave visions to encourage his people. Fourteen years ago, just a few brief years after the incidence in Damascus, Paul was (v. 2), caught up into the third heaven. That simply means God's presence. In the Hebrew cosmology, the atmosphere was the first heaven, the stars the second, then they referred to God's very presence as the third heaven. He wasn't sure if it was physical, in the body, (v. 3), or spiritual. But he was caught up to paradise, into God's very presence, to the place where they envisioned God dwelling. For his encouragement, Paul is saying God called me into his presence to spend the day. Wow! God spoke with me, I (v. 4), heard things I can't tell. In the very presence of God himself!

But that, (v. 5), is NOT what I am going to boast in: not those ecstatic experiences. Instead what you, church, need to see and experience and hear is how God's amazing grace and power shows up in our everyday weaknesses—How the Jesus of the cross is the Jesus who steps into the mess of my life to love and forgive. What blesses us, and in turn what we have to offer the world is not some super spiritual high that makes us proud of what we have experienced, but others haven't. Instead, we have to offer one another how the Lord met us in the ordinariness of life, in the illnesses, in the fears, when we are isolated and wonder whether we are cared for or matter, or have I made so much of my life that there is no hope for me. What does God do then! He steps in with his love demonstrated on the cross to rescue the weak.

That's what we need to hear from each other, God's incredible power in the ordinariness and broken and tender and fearful places of our lives. Because he does show up, not only in spectacular things, but in ordinary life!

That's what the Corinthians, and St Louisans and Central folk need to hear—not a God who celebrates the powerful and the accomplished with mountain top experiences—but the love of Jesus who reaches into the lives of hypocrites, of cowards, of liars, of posers, of swindlers, of adulterers, of idolaters, and by the blood of Jesus invites us into his presence—not because WE are strong, but because HE is!

Hear what Spurgeon had to say on this text: *"It is easy to believe in grace for the past and the future, but to rest in it for the immediate necessity is true faith... At this moment, and at all moments which shall ever occur between now and glory, the grace of God will be sufficient for you... the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient to uphold you, sufficient to strengthen you, sufficient to comfort you, sufficient to make your trouble useful to you, sufficient to enable you to triumph over it, sufficient to bring you out of it, sufficient to bring you home to heaven. Whatever would be good for you, Christ's grace is sufficient to bestow; whatever would harm you, his grace is sufficient to avert; whatever you desire, his grace is sufficient to give to you if it be good for you; whatever you would avoid, his grace can shield you from it if so his wisdom shall dictate... let me press on you to take this promise personally at this moment, for no believer here need be under any fear, for at this very instant, the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient."*

That's what he does then and now. When we tell the truth about his power in our ordinariness and weakness—in our fears, our loneliness, our shame, our illnesses-- he receives the glory. When our lives are lived NOT to make people impressed with how buttoned up we are, but rather, how gracious and merciful is the crucified Lord who loves, forgives and pursues people like us, then our weak lives demonstrate his power. Tell THAT story and his power will shine into this world.

2. Often the Worst experiences of our lives reveal God's power.

But so Paul didn't get a big head about this experience, like the super apostles had pride about theirs, v. 7, God gave him another gift, a gift of suffering this thorn in the flesh.

We don't know what it was. It could have been these problem people. We say difficult people are a pain in the neck. In Paul's day, the expression was "thorn in the eye." So maybe these super apostles were the cause of his suffering as they constantly nagged him. Perhaps it was some physical ailment with his eyes or some other physical problem or illness. We don't know and it really isn't important to know.

What is important is the image. Thorns in the ME are long and big, a couple inches long, not like a little annoyance of a spine from the prickly pear cactus. The image is driving a two inch spike into your flesh and you can't get it out. Every day for the rest of your life—pain and irritation that affects your ability to function and move.

This was a big deal for Paul and he pled with God three times to get rid of it, v. 8. That's what we are called to do when we suffer—not be stoic and pretend with religious platitudes that it is OK, but to plead with God to remove our suffering. And he answers.

And for Paul, God answered, no. Not to make too much of the verb tenses here, but **God answered, v. 9**, is perfect tense, which is used to describe action with continuing effect. This was an answer of finality, in other words. Paul asked and God said, "not gonna happen." Why? **My grace is sufficient, present tense, continually sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect, present tense, continually made perfect, in weakness.** Wow. He is saying that his power is persistently shown in Paul's enduring weakness!

The principle here is that in God's economy of what is best for us, sometimes he knows that what we require most is NOT relief from our distress. That may be hard for us to accept. He knows that sometimes it is NOT best for us to have our distress relieved. Instead, it is better for us to have a heart gripped with the belief that God can use anything in my life to bring glory to himself and ultimate good to me. The worst experiences of our lives sometimes are the very means by which God reveals his power in us and through us.

¹ C.H. Spurgeon, "Strengthening from the Savior's Lips," a sermon from 2 Cor. 12:9, delivered on April 2, 1876, now in the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 22 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 196-197.

What we most need in this life is the bedrock belief that the Christ who dwells in us is more powerful than any opposition, any weakness, any struggle, any illness, any sin we face. He is more powerful. And friends, sometimes it takes weakness and pain and distress to put us in the place where we truly believe down to our toes that is true. There is a blood bought love given to you that is more powerful than any trial you face.

Therefore, Paul says, v. 9, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me, “ or we could translate take up residence in me.

It is sometimes in the worst times, the worst experiences of your life, that you are able to see and feel God’s power, his love, his commitment to you. Deep struggle, and yet a deep sense of God’s presence and kindness *in the middle of the struggle, not only when it is over.*

That is what I’ve experienced in my life. When I’ve felt lost and alone. When I’ve worried whether God could love me after what I’ve done. When I’ve seen friends die unexpectedly, unnecessarily. When I have been weary to keep going. When my faith has been tested and stretched. When my life fell apart. Then, in those very instances, God revealed his love and his power. IN the weakness that I might see him at work.

So, in the end, I can’t tell you how thankful I was in my ordination service. If anything good happened there, God did it. Same here at Central. God will do in and through us more than we could ask or imagine, for his power is made perfect, complete, in our weakness. Don’t hide.