

The Strength of Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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Introduction

The strength of weakness is one of the many paradoxes that are found in Scripture. Two ideas that seemingly contradict one another. Other Biblical paradoxes would be losing your life to find it, making yourself last to be first, or being the servant of all to be the greatest.

Now apart from the incredible grace of God, there is no such thing as the strength of weakness. *Weakness is just weakness and strength is simply strength.*

Yet within the all-sufficient grace of God, the path to power is not found in our own abilities but in embracing the reality of our own inabilities before the Lord.

This is a challenging concept to consider because it's unnatural to us.

How is there any strength in being weak? It goes against our natural way of thinking.

It reminds me of how you back up a trailer. Let me just say that it is way harder than it looks. You have to completely reprogram the way that you think about driving.

It is quite the challenge at first and your brain seems to short circuit. As you can tell I have some trauma from this.

I remember clearly the first time I thought it would be easy backing up a trailer for a boat down a dock. Thankfully it was at a private dock where not too many people could watch.

And when it comes to the strength of weakness, it's similar in the way that we have to *reprogram our natural way of thinking.* This is to believe that it is ONLY when I acknowledge my insufficiency and inability that the power of Christ will rest upon me. That when I am weakest that then and only then am I strongest because of the unending grace of Almighty God.

If that makes no sense to you yet don't give up, let's get into God's word and allow Him to reprogram the way we think.

Context of the Chapter

If you're unfamiliar with the context of this portion of Scripture, Paul just came off going toe to toe with these false apostles who had infiltrated the church there in Corinth. This is the last thing that Paul wanted to do but was forced to because the Corinthians who should have known better were giving into slander against their father in the faith, Paul.

He continues here in chapter 12 where he lays his final blow of comparing credentials with these phonies. Paul here goes for what we could call his final foolish boast. Foolish because it was silly for Paul to have to prove his legitimacy as an apostle but necessary because they weren't just slandering Paul but the truth that Paul taught and that was something he wasn't going to let slide.

The Opportunity for Pride (verses 1-6)

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. ⁵ Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. ⁶ For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

What Paul was about to share was the boast of all boasts. No one would be able to top what the apostle Paul experienced when it came to visions & revelations from heaven.

There are 6 visions recorded in the book of Acts that Paul experienced, and we read of another in Galatians 1 where Paul talks about receiving the gospel straight from Jesus Himself, and then finally the vision referred to here in the chapter we are studying.

And yet again Paul says that boasting about these revelations was not profitable for anyone.

This wasn't going to help anyone, yet he was compelled to talk about these supernatural divine appearances and communications with the Lord Jesus to shut the mouths of these false apostles.

Paul knew that it wasn't visions or revelations that would profit but rather the Word of God!

2 Timothy 3:16

¹⁶ All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

That is precisely why before this letter, he never told anyone about it!

Paul gets all funny here and says, "I know a man" even though he is clearly talking about himself. He was talking about himself in the third person. I think this kind of wording reveals to us how reluctant Paul was even to bring this up. *He knows the potential for his own spiritual pride.*

He mentions here that this took place 14 years earlier, which places Paul on his first missionary journey in the book of Acts when he had this encounter.

We know that Paul experienced the glories of heaven but what is unknown is if Paul was physically transported or if it was a spiritual experience.

Repeated twice – “whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know”

But He does certainly know that He was caught up! (also said twice: end of v.2 & beginning of v.4)

Caught up: “harpazō” har-pad'-zo - to snatch away, to pluck, to pull, to take by force, to seize

Same word as rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17

This experience seems similar to what John experienced in Revelation 4...

Revelation 4:1-2

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.” ² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne.

The difference is that John is told to write down everything he sees and hears, while Paul is not allowed to talk to anyone about anything he saw or heard.

Third Heaven/Paradise (referring to the same “place”)

Third heaven is not like a secret level in heaven. In Paul’s day it was not uncommon to refer to actual heaven in this way. Remember back to Genesis 1, God created the “heavens” and the earth.

That refers to the first & second heavens. First heaven(s) refers to the sky and the earth’s atmosphere. **Second heaven(s)** is outer space where the stars and planets are. **Third heaven** refers to God’s dwelling place which is in the spiritual realm.

Paradise is not a reference to the beaches of Hawaii but somewhere much greater.

Paradise: “paradeisos” par-ad'-i-sos - which is of Persian origin, it is the word for an enclosed, luxurious garden often found among royalty in the ancient world. This leads us to believe that the Garden of Eden on earth was a model of what is found in heaven!

It’s the same word that Jesus used when He spoke to the thief on the cross...

Luke 23:43

43 And Jesus said to him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

So, what was it like for Paul? What did he see? What did he hear?

heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. (verse 4)

Inexpressible: “arrētos” ar'-hray-tos - unspeakably holy, too sacred to be spoken, what must not be expressed

NOT...

Lawful: exesti ex'-es-tee - permissible, authorized, allowed

This is opposite of all the books that have been written over the years of people who supposedly visited heaven. How they died and were in heaven. They have so much to say they write a book!

Our theology of heaven must come from one place only and that place is the Bible.

*I would strongly recommend you get the book called **Heaven** by Randy Alcorn.*

Though there was the opportunity for pride, but Paul wasn’t going to take it. (verses 5-6)

He would mention it foolishly to compare so called credentials but not dwell on it. He has learned that he would much rather boast in his weaknesses.

While Paul certainly wants to brag about this, he won’t. He isn’t going to be a fool but simply tell the truth of what happened.

He doesn’t want them to exalt him to a place that they shouldn’t like they were doing with these false apostles they had received. *Paul wanted them to see Jesus, not him.*

He wanted them to see his weakness so they could see God’s power.

Thankfully Paul wasn’t on his own. As much as he would choose not to be prideful regarding what he experienced, the Lord would make sure that he would be humbled. *That Paul would have no choice but to fully rely upon the grace of God. (verses 7 & 8 describe the guarantee of humility)*

The Guarantee of Humility (verses 7-8)

⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ⁸ Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

Iest I be exalted above measure. (phrase used twice in verse 7)

Exalted above measure: “*hyperairō*” hoop-er-ah'-ee-ro - overly proud, conceited, self-exalted

There is no greater danger in the life of a believer than pride and especially that of spiritual pride. To lean into the paradoxes within the kingdom of God, the closer you get to the Lord the more you embrace humility as you realize who He is and who you are. **Humility exalts the Lord Jesus Christ where pride exalts self.**

This same word is translated as “*exalts*” when Paul refers to the antichrist who will exalt himself...

2 Thessalonians 2:4

⁴ who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.

However, given the abundance of the revelations that was granted to Paul, God would see to it that he would remain humble.

How would this guarantee of humility come to pass? “*a thorn in the flesh was given to me,*”

Thorn: “*skolops*” skol'-ops - not just a small spike from a rose bush but a sharp stake, a pointed piece of wood, more than just a splinter

This reveals this was not a minor annoyance, but a deep pain that was caused by this thorn.

And who would administer this thorn into Paul’s flesh? A messenger of Satan, that is one of Satan’s goons, but it would be done on his behalf.

And what would this messenger of Satan do? “*a messenger of Satan to buffet me,*”

Buffet: “*kolaphizo*” kol-af-id'-zo - to hurt, to strike hard, to hit with a clenched fist

The word is derived from the Greek word of knuckles. This wasn’t going to be a love tap this would hurt and this would hurt deep.

For the good Bible student this should bring to mind the account we read of in Job.

Job 2:7

⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

Satan’s purpose was to destroy the faith of Job, and yet God used even Satan for His divine purpose in proving Job’s faith victorious. We have something similar here with Paul.

God allowed this for His divine purpose of keeping Paul humble & therefore usable.

Every plot of the enemy is only allowed as it fits into the sovereign plan of Almighty God. We can be rest assured that everything in our life is truly **Father Filtered**.

In the last chapter in Genesis, Joseph speaks this incredible truth to his fearful brothers...

Genesis 50:20

²⁰ But as for you, you meant evil against me; *but* God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as *it is* this day, to save many people alive.

So what exactly was this thorn in the flesh for Paul?

This has been a debate for centuries. While there are many theories, we really don't know for sure. There are some theories that are quite compelling such as Paul having eyesight issues and others that involved malaria, migraines, epilepsy, speech disability, or even a nonphysical struggle. But these speculations can honestly be endless, but we do know this, *it really affected Paul.*

One of the possible reasons for why the thorn is never explicitly described is so that the answer that Paul receives from Jesus here could be appropriately applied to a variety of challenges that we face as believers knowing that God is using all things for our good and His glory.

You know how it would be. If Paul's thorn in the flesh was really bad eyesight, then if we had 20/20 vision, we would say that what Jesus said must not apply to me. *The truth found here is universal.*

We do know this, this harm caused humility, and this humility drove Paul to prayer and in prayer *though he didn't get the answer he wanted, he gets the answer he needed.*

⁸ *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*

Pleaded: "parakaleō" par-ak-al-eh'-o - to earnestly ask, often translated begged

This was not a casual request but a passionate plea.

Can you think of anyone else in the Bible that also prayed three times for something to be removed from them? A: Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed

Matthew 26:44

⁴⁴ So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

"O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

Luke's account tells us that an angel ministered to Him and eventually we know that Jesus got up from his agonizing prayers and *headed for the cross without looking back.*

As painful as this thorn was for Paul during his life it was nothing compared to the pain that would have come if Paul lived a prideful life. Why? Because according to the Scriptures it's pride that goes before destruction & a haughty spirit before a fall. It's the proud look that God hates and a proud heart that is an abomination to Him. *God resists and gives no grace to the prideful person.*

Have you ever considered that some of the challenges that you go through in life are God's display of His grace upon you? To keep you humble and to keep you usable? That thing you've prayed for and not got the answer you wanted could in fact be His hand upon you?

I once heard someone say that His rejections are His protections.

The Sufficiency of Grace (verses 9-10)

⁹ *And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Jesus certainly answered Paul's prayer, but it wasn't the answer that Paul was asking for. Rather than just telling Paul no, Jesus points him towards His all-sufficient grace.

Paul received this sentence straight from Jesus Christ Himself. As you know this wasn't abnormal for Paul. Remember how he got saved? Jesus spoke to Him. (*should be red letters*)

We find the direct words of Jesus in a handful of places in Scripture. The obvious places are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the book of Acts during Jesus' earthly ministry. Then you have of course the book of Revelation when Jesus speaks to John out of heaven. *Then you have 2 Corinthians 12:9 which is one of the most unsuspecting of places.*

These words from Jesus would change Paul's life forever. This transformation of Paul would of course start on that road to Damascus, but it certainly wouldn't end there. Paul's life would continue to change over the years by the sustaining words of God.

And so too in our life. Now unlike Paul we won't get direct words from Jesus that become Scripture, that's where you can get into some strange territory and bizarre doctrine.

But is Jesus still speaking? Absolutely! You want to hear from Jesus? Jesus speaks through what He has already spoken! And even in this sentence that Paul received from Jesus, **it's ours for the taking.** *The truth revealed in it is perfectly applicable to every one of us who walk with Christ.*

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

We find two parts to this incredible encouragement given to Paul by Jesus Himself.

1) Sufficient Grace - "My grace is sufficient for you."

Grace: "charis" khar'-ece – appears 155 times in the New Testament and is defined as God's undeserved favor, lovingkindness, and goodwill toward us

The Scriptures tell us that He is the God of all grace (*1 Peter 5:10b*), that He sits on a throne of grace (*Hebrews 4:16*), & that He promises to give more grace. (*James 4:6*)

1 Peter 4:10

¹⁰ As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Manifold: "poikilos" poy-kee'-los – having great diversity or variety

The grace of God is multifaceted like a diamond. More and more brilliant from every angle.

What does all this tell us? It tells us that it is this grace of God that can meet every one of our needs. **Nothing we go through falls outside the realm that His grace can handle.**

Sufficient: "arkeō" ar-keh'-o - enough, adequate, to hold you up and transport you through

Without a doubt His grace is sufficient, but do we believe that? Do we view His grace as enough? Most of us would confess this to be true but do we live like it? Do we bank on His sufficient grace?

As with most things, it's all about perspective. Sometimes we look at what God gives us through His grace as not enough like Philip did when Jesus asked him, **"Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?"** referring to the thousands that surrounded them.

John 6:7

⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little."

Philip only factored in what they had to work with but failed to consider the all-sufficient grace of God.

For us to think that God's grace isn't enough would be like a little fish in the Pacific Ocean freaking out thinking that there wasn't enough water for him. ***THERE IS MORE THAN ENOUGH!***

This isn't the first time that Paul has shared with the Corinthians on the topic of sufficiency...

2 Corinthians 3:5

⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God,

2 Corinthians 9:8

⁸ And God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all *things*, may have an abundance for every good work.

Both of these verses point to the culmination of the book here in chapter 12, verse 9.

This was Jesus' answer to Paul's request. *Not what Paul wanted but exactly what Paul needed.*

That while Jesus wouldn't take away the thorn in the flesh, He would supply all He would need to keep on keeping on. *Rather than removing the burden, Jesus would strengthen him under it.*

Warren Wiersbe

God did not give Paul any explanations; instead, He gave him a promise: "My grace is sufficient for thee." *We do not live on explanations; we live on promises.*

2) Perfect Strength - "for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Jesus then shares with Paul the key to experiencing the power of God upon his life. It wouldn't come by continuing to plead to take away the difficulty but by embracing it. It would come by recognizing that he was insufficient and unable to do anything without Christ.

Made perfect: "*teleioō*" *tel-i-o'-o* - complete, to be fully accomplished, to add what is lacking to make something full

That is that God's power would be able to do what God wanted to do in Paul's life without any hinderances.

This would only be accomplished as Paul would acknowledge his own weakness.

Weakness: "*astheneia*" *as-thene'-i-ah* - incapacity, inability, limitation, frailty

The Bible describes the Lord as the Almighty God who is all-powerful, and His desire is to give power to those who recognize they need it.

Isaiah 40:29

²⁹ He gives power to the weak, And to *those who have* no might He increases strength.

If you ever have washed a car at home before, then you know what happens when the hose gets a kink in it... the water suddenly stops. In a similar way when someone thinks they have it altogether or have what it takes, it stops up the flow of God's divine power upon someone's life.

How does one unkink it? The Bible says God resists the proud but gives **GRACE** to the humble.

Psalm 51:17

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart— These, O God, You will not despise.

Despise: “*bāzā*” *baw-zaw'* – to show contempt for, to regard as of little value, to look down upon

Now we must understand that we're always weak whether we recognize it or not, but it is only when we believe this to be fully true that we are able to be strong in the Lord.

R.C.H. Lenski (*German American Pastor & Scholar from the late 19th & early 20th century*)

“The Lord’s power is certainly always mature, complete, and it cannot be made perfect, for it is ever so. But this power works and does things in us. It has much to do. When it has brought us to the point where we are utter weakness, its task is finished. It has then shaped us into a perfect tool for itself. As long as we sinners imagine that we still have some power we are unfit instruments for the Lord’s hands; he still has to work on us before he can work properly through us. But when he has reduced us to utter nothingness, then the perfection is reached; with such a tool the Lord can do great deeds.”

Paul wants that power and so that is why he will gladly boast in his infirmities!

Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Most Gladly: “*hēdista*” *hay'-dis-tah* - with delight and enjoyment

This part of Paul’s life that he pleaded for God to remove is now looked at with a whole new perspective. While Paul certainly doesn’t enjoy that painful thorn in the flesh, He now knows that it is that very challenge that pushes Him to depend on the Lord for His grace and His strength.

In verse 10, Paul lists 5 areas that He now takes pleasure in compared to before. Not for the difficulty itself but with how He knows God will use it in his life. **This is that RADICAL way of thinking that goes against our natural way of thinking.**

¹⁰ *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Infirmities: (already been used) weakness, sickness, limitation

Reproaches: insulted and injury

Needs: troubles, hardships, and calamity

Persecutions: harassment and oppression

Distresses: anguish, extreme affliction

These trials didn’t change for Paul, but his perspective changed. *How? By the word of God!*

This is why being in the word of God **consistently & constantly** is so crucial to living a victorious Christian life.

I mean come on, how is reading the Bible going to fix anything? Is the Bible going to fix my broken family? Is the Bible going to fix this pain I am in? No... the Bible wasn’t designed to change your circumstances; ***it was designed to change you!***

Christian maturity is not marked by an independence from God but a further dependance upon Him! The closer you get to Him the more you realize you need Him.

Growing in the Lord doesn't make you more independent from Him but more dependent on Him knowing that it is only by His grace that we are anything and can do anything.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

The reverse of this is true as well... “For when I am strong, then I am weak.”

God doesn't help those who help themselves, in fact it is the opposite! He only helps those who confess they can't help themselves at all! He gives power to those who confess their weakness! The one who agrees with Jesus that apart from Him they can do absolutely nothing! Not some things or one or two things but nothing apart from Him!

C.H. Spurgeon (in a message he gave on November 4th, 1888 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle)

“Moreover, when a man is weak, then is he strong, because he is sure to pray, and prayer is power. The man who laments his weakness is sure to cry to the strong for strength. The more his weakness presses on him, the more he will pray. While he can do without his God he will do without his God; but when his own weakness becomes utter and entire, and he is ready to perish, then he turns unto his Lord, and is made strong.”

In a previous sermon on April 2nd, 1876, he concluded his message on this passage saying...

Dear brothers and sisters, go home and never ask the Lord to make you strong in yourselves, never ask him to make you anybody or anything, but be content to be nothing and nobody. Next ask that his power may have room in you, and that all those who come near you may see what God can do by nothings and nobodies..... Live with this desire, to glorify God. Sometimes when God honours us in his service a great “I” stands in the Lord's way. The best of men are flesh and blood, and they have no power except as God lends them power, and he will make them know and feel this. Therefore, neither exalt others nor exalt yourselves, but beseech the Lord to make and keep you weakness itself, that in you his power may be displayed. God grant it may be so, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Why is it this way? Why is His strength only perfected in our weakness?

THAT HE MIGHT GET ALL THE GLORY

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. ²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence.

NOT UNTO US BUT TO YOUR NAME BE THE GLORY

HE ISN'T LOOKING FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS IT ALTOGHTER,

He hasn't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He is looking for those who realize that they have nothing apart of Him!

This is not only true for the believer when it comes to being used by God but applies also to the unbeliever who thinks they need no saving.

Romans 1:16 says that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. But if you think you can save yourself and your strong enough to do that, then you won't think you need His salvation.

This is why humility is a key element to coming to Christ. You can't come prideful. You have to come with bended knee.

*It is only when you humble yourself in the sight of the Lord, will He lift you up.
Only when you humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, will he exalt you in due time.*

For some of you even tonight I wonder if God is allowing things in your life to humble you and to bring you to the end of yourself, but you are resistant to His grace. Give in and lay yourself low before Him.

Come to the foot of the cross on bended knee and *you will encounter His all-sufficient grace.*