

Then I Am Strong

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Have you ever been weak? You know when you are not able to endure the situations that face you? When the tasks that you have accepted seem unachievable? When you have been asked to hold an office or chair a committee and you are not sure you have what it takes? Have you been ill and just did not know if you had the strength to fight on? Have you ever been in a financial situation and you just did not know how you were going to make it?

In our scripture today Paul had worked with the church at Corinth and they are very near and dear to him. However when he left them, Jewish Christians who believed that you needed to be a good Jew in order to be a good Christian, had come in and taught things that were different from what Paul had taught. These teachers were called the Judaizers, and they were anxious to receive honors, and boasted about their “letters of recommendation” (2 Cor. 3:1ff). They wanted to brag about what they had accomplished in life. Now they were influencing the Corinthians who were themselves preoccupation with the external and the spectacular. But Paul did not look for honor from men and women; he let God honor him, because that alone is the honor that really counts.

However if they wanted to compare accomplishments, Paul was willing to talk about a few of the things that God had done in his life. First, God honored Paul by giving him visions and revelations. Paul saw the glorified Christ on the day he was converted (Acts 9:3; 22:6). 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, he had visions from God to guide

him and encourage him. It was by a vision that he was called to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). When the ministry was difficult in Corinth, God encouraged Paul by a vision (Acts 18:9–10). After his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul was encouraged by a vision from God (Acts 23:11). On another occasion an angel appeared to him in the midst of the storm and assured him that he and the passengers would be saved (Acts 27:23). These experiences, no doubt contributed to Paul's conviction that "our momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs" anything we are currently going through (2 Cor. 4:17).

When I initially read this passage I was confused, but Jewish rabbis often spoke about themselves in the third person, and Paul adopted that approach as he told of his experience to his friends and enemies at Corinth. The experience was so wonderful that Paul was not quite sure whether God had taken him bodily to heaven, or whether his spirit had left his body. However during the trip God gave Paul spiritual revelations of divine truth. God gave him a deep understanding of the plan and mysteries of God. However, since the experience, Paul had pain and suffering, a "thorn in the flesh." Some of his associates and especially those in Corinth thought his "affliction was a punishment from God," but Paul saw it as a gift from God. Others of Paul's good friends may have tried to encourage him by saying, "Cheer up, Paul. One day you'll be in heaven!" But Paul would have replied, "That's why I have this thorn—I went to heaven!"

God honored Paul by permitting him to hear "unspeakable words" while he was in heaven. He overheard the divine secrets that are shared only in heaven. These things could be spoken by God and by beings in heaven, but they could not be spoken by men and women on earth. None of Paul's critics could say they had these kinds of experiences! Even Moses, who was intimate with God, met the Lord on the mountaintop; but Paul met the Lord in paradise. This vision of God's glory

was one of the sustaining powers in Paul's life and ministry. No matter where he was—in prison, in the deep, in dangerous travels—he knew that God was with him and that all was well. Such an honor as this would have made most people very proud. Instead of keeping quiet for fourteen years, I might have immediately held a press conference and become famous. But Paul did not become proud. He simply told the truth and let the facts speak for themselves. His great concern was that nobody rob God of the glory and give it to Paul. He wanted others to have an honest estimate of him and his work (Rom. 12:3).

This teaches us about our Christian experiences and humility. The Lord knows how to balance our lives. If we have only blessings, we may become proud; so God permits us to have burdens as well. Paul's great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth; so God, in God's goodness, allowed Paul to experience suffering to keep him from becoming proud.

We don't understand why people suffer. It is a mystery that 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 a part of the "human comedy and tragedy" and there is no way to escape unless we use substances or activities that are usually more harmful than the original pain.

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient to the Lord. Our own rebellion may afflict us, or the Lord may see fit to chasten us in His love (Heb. 12:3ff). In His grace, God forgives our sins; but in His governance, He permits us to reap what we sow.

Suffering can also be a tool God uses for building godly character (Rom. 5:1–5). Paul permitted God to mold and make him in the painful experiences of his life.

Leroy and I were on the shores of Lake Michigan and Crystal Lake this week. When you walk along the shore, you notice that the rocks are sharp in the quiet coves, but polished in those places where the waves beat against them. God can use the “waves and billows” of life to polish us, if we will let Him. As I consider my son Isaac’s illness, I know that God was molding us into those that trust and accept His grace.

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from sinning. Exciting spiritual experiences—like going to heaven and back—have a way of inflating the human ego; and pride leads to a multitude of temptations to sin. You know what it is like to be named the teacher of the year, or employee of the month, or to graduate with honors, or be the preacher of a well-known church, pride moves right in and gets us in trouble! Had Paul’s heart been filled with pride, those next fourteen years may have been filled with failure instead of success.

We do not know what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. No matter what our sufferings may be, we are able to apply the lessons Paul learned and get encouragement from his experience.

When God permits suffering to come to our lives, there are several ways we can deal with it. Some people become bitter and blame God for robbing them of freedom and pleasure. Others just “give up” and fail to get any blessing out of the experience because they will not put any courage into the experience. Still others grit their teeth and put on a brave front, determined to “endure to the very end.” Unfortunately that usually drains the person of the strength needed for daily living; and after a time, they may collapse.

Paul dealt with his suffering by praying to be delivered. It was and is a normal thing for a Christian to ask God for deliverance from sickness and pain. But remember that God has not obligated Himself to heal every Christian whenever he

or she prays; even though He has encouraged us to bring our burdens and needs to Him. Paul did not know whether this “thorn in the flesh” was a temporary testing from God, or a permanent experience he would have to learn to live with.

There are those who want us to believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. “If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ,” they say, “then you will never be sick.” It is true that God promised the Jews special blessing and protection under the Old Covenant (Deut. 7:12ff) but He never promised the New Testament Christians freedom from sickness or suffering. If Paul had access to “instant healing” because of his relationship to Christ, he would have made use of it for himself and for others that were dear to him. (Phil. 2:25ff)

Did you notice that Paul went from paradise to pain, from glory to suffering, from tasting the blessing of God in heaven to earthly pains; from ecstasy to agony; these two experiences went together. His one experience of glory prepared him for the constant experience of suffering, because he knew that God was able to meet his need.

The words Paul heard while in heaven, he was not permitted to share with us; but he did share the words God gave him on earth. It was a message of grace, God’s provision for our every need when we need it. God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in His mercy He does not give us what we do deserve. Paul was given the message that God’s grace is sufficient for our spiritual ministries (2 Cor. 3:4–6) and our material needs (2 Cor. 9:8) as well as our physical needs (2 Cor. 12:9). Because God’s grace is sufficient to save us, surely it is sufficient to keep us and strengthen us in our times of suffering.

It was also a message of strengthening grace. God permits us to become weak so that we might receive God’s strength. This is a continuous process: God’s power is being made perfect in our weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9). It is when we think

we are strong that we are most weak. But it is when we know that we are weak that we find strength.

Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness. Sometimes God does meet our need as requested; but other times God meets the need not by removing the affliction, but God gives us His grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us.

As Paul prayed about his problem he came to understand that his thorn in the flesh was a gift from God. There was only one thing for Paul to do: accept the gift and allow God to accomplish His purposes. It was then that God spoke to Paul and gave him the assurance of His grace. Whenever you and I are going through suffering, we need to spend extra time in the Word of God and in prayer; and we can be sure God will speak to us. God gave Paul no explanations but a promise: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

God did not change the situation by removing the affliction; God changed it by giving grace. Paul learned that God is adequate for every need that we have. From Paul’s experience, we learn:

1. The spiritual is far more important to the Christian than the physical. This is not to suggest that we ignore the physical, because our bodies are the temples of the Spirit of God. But it does mean that we try not to make our bodies an end in themselves. They are God’s tools for accomplishing God’s work in this world. What God does in developing our Christian character is far more valuable than physical healing without character. When I am weak, then I am strong!

2. God knows how to balance burdens and blessings, suffering and glory. Life is something like medication: the individual ingredients might hurt us, but when properly blended, they help us. When I am weak, then I am strong!

3. Not all sickness is caused by sin. There are times when God permits afflictions so that God might accomplish a great purpose in our lives. When I am weak, then I am strong!

4. There is something worse than sickness, and that is the sin of pride. The healthy person who is rebelling against God is in worse shape than the suffering person who is submitting to God and enjoying God's grace. When I am weak, then I am strong!

5. Physical afflictions don't have to be barriers to effective Christian service. Today's Christians are too prone to pamper themselves and use every little ache or pain as an excuse to refuse to accept opportunities for service. Paul did not permit his thorn in the flesh to become a stumbling block. In fact, he let God turn that thorn into a stepping-stone. When I am weak, then I am strong!

6. We can always rest in God's Word. God always has a message of encouragement for us in times of trial and suffering. When I am weak, then I am strong!

Paul knew about God's power and assurance, because he trusted the will of God and depended on the grace of God. God's grace transformed Paul's perspective.

When Paul came to the end of himself, Christ alone was seen. When he was weak, then Christ, by His strength, could make Paul spiritually strong.^{1 2 3} When I am weak, then I am strong! Thank God for His great work in our lives!

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:582

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 2 Co 12:1

³Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 255