

“Trusting God’s Power When We are Powerless”

2 Corinthians 12:9

The apostle Paul was given a thorn in the flesh in order to keep him from being conceited about receiving special revelation from God that he wasn’t allowed to share. This thorn was used by Satan to torment him. He prayed that it would go away and God answered his prayer with ‘No’ saying ‘My grace is sufficient for you for my power is perfected in weakness.’ What exactly was this thorn?

Scholars and Bible students cannot agree. They all use Scripture to back up their theories but none of them are conclusive. Some of the suggestions are; poor vision, poor constitution, unimpressive speaker or speech impediment or another physical ailment that limited him. Some suggest that it was his opponents, the constant attacks from Judaizers or his many trials and sufferings. There isn’t enough evidence to know for sure and that’s more important than knowing what it was. The fact that we don’t know what it was allows this passage to be more applicable to all of us. The thorn limited Paul’s natural abilities to do ministry in his own strength and forced him to trust God instead. As believers who still have a sin nature and live in a sin-marred world, we all have or will have situations and infirmities that will hinder our natural ability to serve God in our own strength, forcing us to go to God who has all strength. Let’s see what how this applies to us and as we uncover what it meant for Paul.

2 Corinthians is an unusual letter in that Paul the apostle had to defend himself, explaining to the believers in Corinth that the things being spread about him by false apostles were untrue. These people dogged Paul for most of his ministry, seeking to discredit him while puffing themselves up. When you read 2 Corinthians you see some of these accusations. They claimed Paul was inconsistent, a hypocrite, untrained and an unimpressive man. The Corinthian church loved signs and wonders. So, their worship services were a chaotic mess of shared spiritual experiences from anyone at anytime. Paul addresses this in 1 Cor. 14 when he says in v.26

²⁶ What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. ³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. ³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. ³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.

Paul didn’t talk about these things except to the Corinthians because for some reason they were enamored with spiritual experiences. Some of these false apostles claimed to have spiritual experiences, but Paul was reluctant to talk about his own. Yet because they were so arrogant and so disruptive Paul now shares an experience to silence these people but also to help the majority of people who may have ‘ordinary’ spiritual experiences and who also have some kind of thorn in their life to cause them to look to God not ourselves. Because

**Boasting About Spiritual Experiences Robs
God of His Glory (12:1-6)**

This boasting discussion began in 11:16 but Paul's boasting is not self-boasting (v.18) which is why these false teachers called him a fool. Paul plays along with them for a bit. These were obviously Jewish false teachers who claimed to be apostles (Paul sarcastically calls them 'Super Apostles' in 11:5) because Paul says let's compare our Jewish credentials in 11:22 but then he asks in v.23 "Are they servants of Christ". Then he lists a whole pile of his spiritual experiences – all dangerous and life-threatening to prove his faithfulness to Jesus. The in 11:30, as we turn toward what he discusses here in 12:1-10, he writes,

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

While at first it doesn't sound something to boast in but when you realize that Damascus was kind of like a modern-day Ottawa, and that the king had the whole city on the lookout for Paul to arrest him for preaching the gospel, it actually is impressive. Yet Paul says 'Guess how I escaped? I was lowered in a basket out a window in a wall. Not very glamorous. He didn't even do it himself. He relied on others because he was powerless to do anything himself.

If we're not careful we can use our own spiritual experiences as a way of building ourselves up and not God. *Our* testimony. Our devotional life. The books *we've* read. How many online sermons we listen to or bible studies *we've* completed? Or maybe something miraculous happened to you – praise the Lord – but make sure you actually praise the *Lord* for it and don't use it to make others feel less of themselves because they weren't healed. Their loved one passed away. They still struggle with their 'thorn in the flesh'.

What Paul warned here was,

Don't get caught up in one-upmanship (vv.1-4)

Paul's been getting tired of this kind of talk from the 'super apostles'. The one thing Paul had been defending himself about was his love for the Corinthian church – something the false apostles accused Paul of not doing. They were quick to claim many things Paul wasn't doing or he lacked the credentials or he was physically unimpressive and an untrained speaker. But when they question his love for the Corinthians Paul gets a little upset. In 11:10-15 he writes,

¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! ¹² And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. ¹³ For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵ It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

And now in Ch. 12 Paul's going to do a little boasting about his own spiritual experience but not for his own glory, because he actually doesn't tell us what he really saw and heard.

^{12:1} I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God

knows— ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

Paul sounds like he's going to one-up the false apostles but he actually doesn't. Because for one thing, why has he never mentioned this before? 'You had a glimpse of heaven 14 years ago and you've never mentioned it? You just kept it to yourself even when everyone else was bragging about their own spiritual experience. Dude, tell us what you saw!'

"I'm not allowed". 'Yeah sure Paul!' Paul resisted the temptation that we all have (and often fall for) to one-up someone else when they are sharing something about how God was working in their life. 'Oh yeah, I had the same thing happen to me years ago only . . .' and often ours was different or bigger or more exciting or more something. When we do that, how do you think the other person feels? How do you feel when someone does that to you? Like what happened to us seemed inferior. Forgive me if I have even popped your spiritual enthusiasm balloon by feeling my need to share something. We just can't listen and let people talk, can we?

Paul could have won this contest but instead he says this in vv.5-6,

⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

Instead of winning the sharing contest hands down Paul

Let his life speak for him (vv.5-6)

Let your actions and your witness speak for you. Because we all know what would have happened if Paul shared this; 'Hey, did you hear about Paul's experience? He saw God! He saw heaven!' And everyone would have flocked to Paul and wanted more info. And everyone would have oohed and awed about Paul. And it happens doesn't it? People claimed to have died and saw heaven. We want to know what they saw. We elevate them. We get them to write a book and even make a movie about it. Sometimes it backfires because it was faked. The book 'Heaven is Real' that was made into a movie was a fraud. The boy never saw anything. His father made it all up.

Paul's, however was real and it wouldn't have been foolish for him to share it because it was the truth. But he didn't because he would have got the glory and not God. So Paul says would rather boast about my weakness. What weakness? The weakness God gave him so that he would never share what he saw. Paul had many spiritual experiences. Paul performed many signs and wonders, but he never wrote a book about them or made a movie about them. But there was something he wanted to talk about; his weakness, his thorn in the flesh. Everyone who knew Paul knew what this was, that's why he never wrote what it was. But the evidence of his weakness was so that people would be reminded that God did that to keep Paul from exalting himself through the great things he learned, heard and saw. So, Paul explains,

Boasting in our Weaknesses Allows God To Shine Through Us (12:7-10)

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

The 'thorn in his flesh' Paul called a weakness. It deprived him of power; his own power. Paul was a type A personality. He took charge. He got stuff done. Especially before he was saved. But God had to curtail his giftedness and intelligence and personality so that he would rely more on God and less on himself. But he understood this thorn had a purpose

As all life's difficulties have purpose (vv.7-9)

This is a great passage on how do we handle the difficulties in our life; the things that happen to us that weaken us, that limit us. Paul gives us three views on life's difficulties when he talks about his thorn, his weakness. First, he says Satan has a purpose for our difficulties.

Satan's purpose is destructive (v.7)

Paul said this thorn was given to him to keep him from being conceited. The giver then was God because it was for a good purpose. But Satan loves to confuse us and get us off track. When something negative happens to us we instinctively ask 'Why God?' as if it is always bad? Satan wants us to think life that. Paul says it was also a "*messenger of satan to torment me*". If we understand Job, satan has permission from God to give us a hard time sometimes. Whether it was or not it reminds us that the enemy wants to beat us up when we experience something negative. This one, this weakness, made Paul less strong, less powerful, less in control. We don't like being weak, powerless or not in control. And so we beat ourselves up about our weaknesses, our inability at times to control our life and circumstances because it makes us look weak or unintelligent or foolish. The word 'Torment' is the same word used to describe Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane about the cross. Because the cross made Jesus look weak, foolish, defeated, powerless. The insults, the beatings, the humiliation, yet Peter writes in 1 Pet. 2:22 writes,

²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

Jesus knew that His weaknesses allowed God to shine through Him, because He knew God would deal justly, first by keeping His Word and raising Jesus from the dead and second, by dealing with every person who ever insulted or hurt Jesus.

When we experience difficulties

We think they are restrictive (v.8)

We do what Paul did and pray for God to take them away. Nothing wrong with that but sometimes God doesn't take the pain away. Here's a verse the health and wealth gospel people will never show you; Heb. 11:

³² And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. ³⁵ Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins

and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

Some escaped the sword while others were killed by the sword. Some received back their dead while others were stoned to death. We don't know whether our difficulties will stay with us or not. But if they do,

God's purpose is constructive (v.9a)

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Grace means God favours us just because He wants to. Undeserved. How is a difficulty an illustration of God's love and pleasure in us? Because it's all we really need to get through life's thorns. Because when we recognize the areas we are weak in, the skills that we lack, the times when we are made to feel weak but want to retaliate, the times when we inadequately defend Jesus and want to crawl in a shell, the times when we look foolish by an intelligent God-hater who twists Scripture to make his point that we can't defend right then and there; God says 'trust Me to deal with it in My time and way. I have the last word. There is a brutal end for those who reject me and humiliate you. Paul understood through his thorn in the flesh that prevented him from sharing about his amazing vision that

God gives us His power when we trust Him in powerless moments (vv.9c-10)

None of us like being made to feel weak, powerless, foolish or unintelligent. We work very hard at times to show we're fully in control. But God reminds us with thorns and weaknesses that we're not. And we need to learn that its okay. Actually, it's better. Because when we realize our limitations, we will more readily look to God to do what we can't. Paul said in v.10, 'insults, distresses, persecutions, difficulties – they just remind me of my powerlessness over my life but I can exercise my faith muscle by asking God to do something through them. That my confident silence when insulted for Christ will rattle my opponent. That my unwavering faith even though I can't think of a smart reply to that smart-alec will show him or her that I won't be shaken. And that my pain or difficulty can be a window for God's grace and glory to shine through if I'm willing to trust God to use it for His purposes. When we realize we are weak – not completely capable, we don't know everything and not the best – then we turn to the One who loves us and will defend us and meet our needs because He is fully capable, He knows everything and He's the best thing that ever happened to us. If God is for us, who can be against us!

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If you have any questions or comments about this message please
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