

Powerful Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

INTRO:

We are not guaranteed an easy life. Truthfully, being a disciple sometimes pushes us into painful situations. Jesus does not guarantee that we avoid the pain, but he does offer us a way through the pain. The cross is relevant to our painful times as God demonstrates powerful weakness. The cross never stops being a powerful and challenging image of who God is.

ME:

Sometimes I wear a cross without being mindful of the weakness it represents, or the power that it represents. **Weakness?** Powerful . . . Weakness.

How can weakness be powerful?

YOU:

Have you ever thought about this? How can ... *weakness* ... be ... *powerful* . . . **Does it even make any sense?**

Power...ful...weakness...

Let's trust God to reveal himself to us this morning through Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth.

Let us open our hearts in prayer that God may open our eyes that...

GOD:

2 Corinthians 12:2–10: 2 I know a person 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 such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

WE:

Paul wrote:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven (12:2).

Many wonder whether Paul is talking about someone else. Verse 7 seems to make it clear that Paul was referring to himself. He is so uncomfortable boasting about his wonderful experiences of God that he cannot even bring himself to say “**I was caught up to heaven.**”

It shouldn't surprise us that Paul described his religious experience using terms relevant to the way he saw the world:

“the third heaven.”

Other Jewish writings from this time describe a multilayered heaven, with God in the highest layer. A good example of this is [The Ascension of Isaiah](#) which thinks of the sky in terms of seven layers. [The Testament of Levi](#) thinks of three layers of sky, just like Paul does. Paul was simply using a certain Jewish way of referring to God's location. In other words, Paul's statement that he was taken up into “**paradise**” or the “**third heaven**” is just his way of saying that he went where God's presence is discernible. There Paul heard inexpressible things, things that people are not permitted to tell.

Paul continues:

I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

Paul is ashamed to be boasting the way he is. He is not really a fool to boast about these things, because they really happened:

he was speaking the truth.

But he does not want their respect because of these things. He does not want anyone to think any more of him than is warranted by his words and actions. Anyone can come up with stories about visions or things that are un-interpreted or in the past. **But what are those people doing in front of you? What are they saying now? Do they have the power Paul has?**

A person's ego could easily become inflated with the kind of revelations Paul experienced. But to keep him from becoming inflated ... he was given a thorn in his flesh. We do **NOT** know exactly what this was. It is obvious that it bothered Paul ... a lot. There are many theories. It was a thorn in his "**flesh**" so it probably means some kind of physical problem or a temptation of the "**flesh**" as understood in spiritual terms. This might be a chronic sin with which he continuously struggled.

It seems pretty likely that Paul refers to a real physical ailment. Paul does describe problems with his eyes in Galatians, and Acts tells us Paul went temporarily blind after he first saw the risen Christ. Actually, this is the only

real hint Paul gives us about what this “**thorn**” might be. Whatever the thorn in the flesh was, three times Paul begged God to take it away from him. But God did not grant Paul his request. God doesn’t always say “**yes**” to our prayers either. Certainly God did not discipline Paul for asking again and again. Once Paul had a sense of God’s answer, though, he stopped begging. God invites us to ask repeatedly, like the persistent widow of Jesus’ parable. But there is also a time when we must accept God’s answer and rely on his strength in our weakness.

God’s answer was not just no, but that Paul needed to rely on him. Christ said to him, “**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**” God would be glorified through Paul by way of Paul’s depending on him for strength. This is the paradox that Paul has tried to show the Corinthians all along. God is not found in the worldly wise or the worldly rich. God is not to be found in the wise or eloquent or powerful in the world. God shows his strength the most by taking the weak and making them strong.

God shows his strength the most by taking the weak and making them strong. Powerful Weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

Elisa Morgan, president of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International, writes:

I'm probably the least likely person to head a mothering organization. I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was 5. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother.

While my mother meant well—truly she did—most of my memories are of my mothering her rather than her mothering me. Alcohol altered her love, turning it into something that wasn't love. I remember her weaving down the hall of our ranch home in Houston, Texas, glass of scotch in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure I was asleep. I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work.

Sure, there were good times like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong.

Ten years ago, when I was asked to consider leading MOPS International, a vital ministry that nurtures mothers, I went straight to my knees—and then to the therapist's office. How could God use me—who had never been mothered—to nurture other mothers?

*The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering—**"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."***

There are times when we must simply rely on God's strength in our weakness. That is powerful weakness.

THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:

God shows his strength the most by taking the weak and making them strong: Powerful Weakness.

YOU:

So, **do you get it now?** Powerful Weakness. I said Luther's sermons are as boring to read as Wesley's last week, but that does not mean Luther has nothing to offer us.

CLOSE:

Martin Luther liked to compare and contrast a “**theology of glory**,” where the cross was optional equipment for Christians, a mere ladder by which we might climb up to God, with a “**theology of the cross**” that calls things by their proper names and is unimpressed with most that impresses the world. A theology of glory preaches the cross as just another technique for getting what we want. A theology of the cross proclaims the cross as the ultimate sign of how God gets what God wants. The cross says that our salvation is in God's hands, not ours. It says that our relationship to God is based upon something that God suffers and does rather than upon something that we do. To bear the cross of Christ is to bear its continuous rebuke of the false gods to which we are tempted to give our lives.

When we reduce the gospel to a means for saving ourselves by our good works or our good feelings or even our good thinking—then worldly wis-

dom and common sense are substituted for **cross-shaped gospel foolishness**, and blasphemy is the result.

It seems that the contemporary affluent church too often presents the Christian faith as a technique for getting what we want when the cross says that Jesus Christ is God getting what God wants!

All of our attempts to climb up to God are our pathetic attempts at self-salvation. God descends to our level by climbing on a cross, opening up his arms, and dying for us, because of us, with us. The cross is not only a window through which we see the true nature of God as the embodiment of suffering love, but also the truthful mirror in which we see ourselves. Cross-shaped faith can't help but speak of our sin. The cross offers a good dose of honesty about the human condition. After Calvary we could no longer argue that we are, down deep, basically good people who are making progress by getting ourselves organized and enlightened.

We are weak. We are weak. We. Are. Weak. But that's okay.

His power is made perfect in weakness.

Let's pray together now