

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

One of the elements of modern-day Christianity that we may consider guarding ourselves against is our love-affair with 'bigness' (mega-stature). We should be reminded of the need to "*de-spectacularise*" the church. Jesus declared that God's Kingdom comes quietly, invisibly - spreading its influence like yeast in dough. But the corporate model of church growth is bigger crowds, bigger buildings, and bigger TV networks, etc. This seems distinctly contrary to the Lord's view.

I wonder if **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** does not hold the key to this dilemma..... ***Each time Jesus said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong*** (New Living Translation).

It would seem from Paul's experience and mature reflection that *power* and *strength* are not tied to well-run organisations, or slick promotional material, or expository preaching, or finding the right songs to sing and structuring the worship service exactly right - although surely none of these things are wrong in and of themselves. Neither are *power* and *strength* tied to having the right version of the Bible, or view on divorce, or the role of women in the church; although once again all of these things are important in their own place. The experience of Christ's **power** is ironically tethered to weakness!

It comes to us when we come to the end of ourselves and our human resources. In this passage of scripture, Paul mentions that his authority was questioned; he was accused of being a time-waster; and he was criticized for being weak. He was not in any sense thought to be "charismatic." Paul began in this letter to boast, "*I am a Pharisee among the Pharisees. I know more about the law than anybody.*" He began to list his credentials. Paul said he hated to do this, but his opponents were driving him to it. Then he backed off and said, "*Maybe I should not take this path of boasting.*" Paul then said, his authority was not based on any accomplishments of his, and he made this startling statement: "***My authority comes not from my strength, but from my weakness.***" Following on by speaking about his "thorn in the flesh."

What was his thorn in the flesh? Did he have fainting spells? Did he have poor eye sight? Maybe it was some humiliating ailment - nobody knows! However, Paul says he asked the Lord to remove this thorn in the flesh three times. Then he received a direct word from God stating that he was going to have to live with this thorn. Why? Because God's grace is perfected in weakness.

We live in a culture that prizes strength. It was no different in Paul's time. In spite of this fact, Paul said, "*My authority comes because of my weakness.*" Paul had revelations from God in which he was taken up into paradise. Paul could have said, "*Look at all of these revelations I've had. They confirm my authority.*" No, he said he would boast only of his weaknesses. Too often than not we look for *strength* in the wrong places.

So what does this passage mean for us? Most people have a way of wanting to discount, hide or deny anything about themselves that might communicate a sense of weakness. We only want to present a sense of strength. If something bad happens to us, if we have a loss of career direction, it can be embarrassing. Therefore, we want to keep it quiet. If we have a physical health problem, we may say, *"I'm just going to keep that quiet. I'm not going to tell anyone about this."* Telling someone about this problem could display a lack of faith. If a person has a psychological problem, he or she may say, *"I'm pretty sure don't want anybody to know about this. People may look down on me. I only want to communicate a sense of strength."* Paul's attitude is really revolutionary. He is saying that if we accept our weaknesses, such **acceptance** can give room for God's **presence**. Note, he didn't flaunt his weakness.

I myself have found that my credentials as a human being and pastor come more from my own experiences and struggles than from any training. If someone is talking to me about a matter with which they're dealing, and if I can say, *"Maybe I haven't struggled with exactly the same thing, but, I have dealt with something similar,"* then that recognition is my calling card - my credentials. It isn't my degrees (or lack of them) or the years of study or the years of training. A person can have all that and come across as pompous or sanctimonious. I don't think a person can be very helpful if he has not experienced the usual challenges of life. When you can say, *"I understand that. I have experienced something similar,"* you may then go on to say, *"But my power really comes from God, this is why I'm standing here today."*

Your weaknesses can lead to **strength**. Your weaknesses, struggles, and shortcomings, though they are painful and may sometimes feel embarrassing, can keep you from that awful smugness and arrogance and make you more open to God. Going back to my earlier statement about church life. We need to "de-spectacularise" on order to "re-sensitize". God want's His presence to manifest more and more. However, until we accept our weaknesses this is severely hindered.

Back to the apostle Paul. We do not know what the thorn in Paul's side was, he never tells anyone. What we do know is that Paul believed it was from the devil and repeatedly prayed to have it removed. *"Three times I appealed to the Lord about this,"* Paul wrote, *"that it would leave me."* Jesus replied to his pleading with, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."*** Grace would sustain Paul through the difficulties that he was experiencing. The same is true for each one of us. It is the presence of Jesus and God's grace that carries us through the most difficult of situations.

We have to be careful at this point. God never ever causes terrible things to happen to us or our loved ones. However, God is present in all things, even in those tragic things. The grace of God can be found through afflictions, grief and sorrow. The **power of God** is made known through those difficult times. That was Paul's own experience. Three times he asked to have the thorn removed and he was told, ***"My grace is sufficient for you."*** It is for this reason that Paul claims, ***"I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."***

Not only could Paul reach more people by accepting his weaknesses, but also in doing so he was strengthened in his relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul learned that when he is weak, then he is strong. ***“Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ,”*** Paul wrote, ***“for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”***

Instead of bragging about your personal experiences and accomplishments, may you follow Paul’s example to accept your weaknesses. You will be able to reach more people and do more good when you follow this advice. ***“Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”*** Accepting your experiences of limitation and trusting that God’s **power** is sufficient to conquer all that would work against you means believing that, *“Nothing, no matter how severe, can happen for which God does not also provide a way out - because God’s grace will always prevail over life’s challenges.”*

Paul finally understood this, but don’t forget that he petitioned God three times before he heard God’s message clearly. (Even the best among us sometimes needs a little extra time to accept what God has in mind for us...) And Paul’s eventual response to God was, ***“So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”*** He found the strength in weakness. Paul recognized that our power and strength come in the letting go, the emptying out, the stripping down - to make *room* for God to ‘take up residence’ within us.

Your thorns may continue to cause pain, even deep anguish, but hopefully your prayers will change things for the better. In addition to praying for God to remove your thorns and heal your wounds, you might also pray for God’s grace to dwell within you, filling you with the love and **power** that conquers all. That **grace** which is sufficient for your insufficiency; that grace which is limitless to your limitation; that grace which is strength to your weakness; that grace which is life to your death - yes, that grace will overcome and you will gladly boast of it to all who will listen.

It is my hope that the anyone battling relentless struggles will recover to go from glory to glory. And I pray that the boundless love of God will be present among you through everything. Paul prayed in such a way for the church in Corinth, that they might realize God’s grace was sufficient for them, even in the midst of their turmoil, even as they questioned his leadership among them. The fact that he wrote such a letter at all, in the midst of his own emotional pain, reveals his desire for the members of that church to open their hearts, to accept their weaknesses and to make a place for *Christ to dwell within them*. May it be so for every one of us.

So let’s declare out aloud... ***I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*** Let His power dwell in you right now!