

## **God Uses Weak People** **2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

When does God do his best work in gospel ministry? Throughout this series we've been talking about how all of us are ministers of the gospel, all are ambassadors for Christ, ministers of reconciliation. God enlists all of his children in the mission of making disciples in this dark world.

So my question is, when does God do his best work in all of this? Does God work best and pour out his Spirit and power to transform lives when his people are at their best? Does he do best with really smart, gifted, talented, and very capable ministers of the gospel? Does he do best with churches that have polished ministries, gifted musicians, powerful preachers, and impressive buildings?

I think a lot of people think that way. We have the tendency to look at other Christians or churches that are bigger, stronger, more talented, more gifted, more put together, as the ones that God does his best work in. They make the most impact. They have what it takes to be effective in gospel ministry. So we either try to become more like them, or we realize we can't and we just assume, "God can't really use me. I'm too plain, too normal, too weak, too shy, too quiet." That's very discouraging.

I think Paul may have thought that way early on in ministry. Before becoming a Christian, he was a rising star in Judaism. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees and a standout among his peers. He was willing and able to go further and do more than the rest of his peers. He was strong, determined, very smart, and talented. And that's what was making him successful.

But then he became a Christian. I think at first he may have thought to be the best Christian and best minister of the gospel you've got to be the best, you've got to be strong, skilled, confident, tenacious, persuasive, and so on. But then something happened to him that we're going to hear about today that totally changed his thinking and his approach to ministry. My hope is that God will use it to change our thinking as well and encourage us as we fulfill his calling on our lives.

At this point in his letter, Paul has resorted to what he considers foolish boasting. That's what the false apostles were doing in Corinth and the Corinthian believers were falling for it, so for a little while, Paul decided to do the same thing. I think he was mainly doing it to point out how foolish it was and how foolish they were for being swayed by it. So he boasted about his qualifications as an apostle and blew all of his opponents out of the water - no one came even close to being as qualified as he.

But at the end of Chapter 11 he changed direction and said, “if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” and that's what he does in our passage today. He tells of one of the greatest weaknesses he endured and the valuable truth he learned about weakness that we need to hear.

2 Corinthians 12:1-6

*I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man 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. <sup>3</sup>And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—<sup>4</sup>and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—<sup>6</sup>though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.*

This is the first part of what Paul experienced. He continues his boasting from chapter 11 and he's going to boast a little bit about his visions and revelations of the Lord – something the false apostles did and was highly valued by the Corinthians. Only Paul isn't going to boast the way they did – they boasted to make people think more of them. Paul's going to boast in order to point out his weakness, which he gets to in the second half of this story.

In these verses he tells them about some surpassingly great revelations he had 14 years earlier in which he was taken up to the “third heaven,” or “paradise” in some form – either in the body or in the spirit – he wasn't exactly sure, perhaps a similar experience as John in the book of Revelation. The RSB says: “According to a common enumeration, the first heaven was the

*atmosphere of the birds and clouds, the second was the sky in which we see the stars, and the third would be heaven, the dwelling place of God.”* The RSB also says in the NT, the Greek word for “paradise” always refers to heaven.

So Paul was taken up to heaven and had a series of revelations. He doesn't talk about anything he saw or heard because he was not allowed to, he just says that he had the experience. It sounds like he's talking about someone else because he refers to himself in the third person. I think he does that because he's kind of “boasting” about himself at that time and he wanted to make it clear that he wasn't boasting about himself in the present. He says in verse 5 that on his own behalf he wouldn't boast, except of his weakness.

He adds in verse 6 that he could boast about his many visions and revelations and wouldn't be a fool for doing so because he would be speaking the truth about them, but he won't do that because he doesn't want those things to puff up anyone's opinion of him. He wanted people to think of him from what they actually saw in him or heard from him.

So he's boasting about having these revelations, but that's not what he wants to draw their attention to, he actually wants to draw their attention to something else that happened to him at that time and that's where he goes next.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

*So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

At about the same time that Paul received the awesome revelations, he also started going through some kind of unique suffering. He calls it a thorn in the flesh and a messenger of Satan that harassed him. I'm not going to attempt to

tell you what Paul is talking about because it could be a number of different things and biblical scholars much more knowledgeable than me haven't reached a consensus and though it would be interesting to know what he was going through; it really doesn't matter for the point he's trying to make.

He was suffering and weak and it appears that he didn't understand it right away. So he pleaded with the Lord repeatedly that it would leave him. And it was through that process that he eventually learned some important things. He learned that the thorn in the flesh was ultimately given to him according to God's will to keep him from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations. So it was ultimately from God, for his good, and to guard him against conceit. Paul learned that through that process.

It was also through that process that the Lord clearly spoke to Paul and taught him a life-changing truth: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, Paul didn't need to be on his "A" game to be used powerfully by God in gospel ministry. He could be completely effective, even more effective, with a thorn in the flesh. The thorn would keep him from becoming conceited, and God's grace would be everything he needed to fully accomplish what God called him to do. The thorn would remain because Christ's power would be made perfect in his weakness.

That means Christ's power would not be made perfect in a fully healthy, strong and self-confident Paul who was kind of conceited. In that scenario, Paul would receive the credit, glory and praise, not Christ; not the cross. And that's not what God wanted at all. Paul was not worthy of adoration and praise. Paul didn't die for anyone. Paul couldn't save anyone. Paul couldn't forgive sins and transform anyone's inner being. Only Christ could. Only Christ was worthy. So Christ's power would be made perfect in Paul's weakness. When Jesus changed lives and used a weak minister like Paul to do so, Jesus would be honored and glorified.

Paul actually wrote about this in 1 Cor. 1:26-31: "*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.* <sup>27</sup> *But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;* <sup>28</sup> *God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things*

*that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.<sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

It was through his debilitating weakness that Paul learned the valuable truth that God uses weak people so that all boasting points to Christ, who is our everything. And after learning that, his attitude totally changed when it came to weakness: *“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.<sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

Fellow weaklings, you and I aren't going to save anyone. We didn't die for anyone's sins, we can't give them eternal forgiveness, we can't transform their hearts. Only Christ can. But he wants to use us to reach them. Who better to reach your family, friends, neighbors and co-workers than you with all your flaws and weaknesses? It's because of your weaknesses that you're real and approachable and effective. You don't come across as being better than them or unapproachable. That's not to say that we should be lazy and disobedient just so we're more approachable and fit in better. No, we trust Christ and walk in obedience, but we also aren't afraid to show our weakness and that we don't have it all together.

God delights to use weak people like you and me to accomplish his mission here on earth. And when he works through our weaknesses to save people's lives and change them forever, all the glory, honor, and praise goes right where it belongs – to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.