

Weak to be Strong

Introduction

Paradox

A paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory. It is an opportunity to look deeper and find deeper meaning. Phrases like "you must spend money to make money" or "act natural" Statements that seem to contradict themselves. It turns out that the Scriptures are full of them. That is what this series is about.

We talked last week about Joyful fear.... how we are commanded to fear God and at the same time find great supernatural joy in our relationship with Him.

Today we are going to look at an odd statement that Paul made to the Corinthians. He said that it is when he is weak that he becomes strong.

Paul in Corinth.

Corinth was the church gone wild. Paul was trying to reign them in when several there challenged his apostolic authority. In other words, they challenged his role as the leader of the church and as an Apostle of Jesus.

This happened to Paul quite a bit because he was not one of the original twelve. He claimed his apostleship based on an encounter with resurrected Jesus that no one else witnessed.

His message was to take the gospel to Gentiles...so the Jews naturally questioned him and challenged him. It was in his suffering that his message was validated. Paul went through more than almost any man other than Jesus to spread the Gospel. People believed his message because of the way he handled himself in adversity.

They knew he was a Jewish Scholar of the highest order. His educational pedigree could be challenged by no one. However, they challenged his claims about being appointed by Jesus.

Paul is in a desperate moment for the gospel. He is a man who has been transformed from incredibly conceited to incredibly broken and humbled. He knows that boasting in his efforts is useless. However it was the only language these opponents would understand.

But before he goes down this path, Paul hesitates yet again in order to make it clear just how inappropriate such boasting actually is.

2 Corinthians 11:16–18 (ESV) 16 I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. 18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast.

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

2 Corinthians 11:30–12:1 (ESV) 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. 1 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.

After telling of the price he has paid to advance the gospel and the physical and emotional toil it has taken upon him....Paul then begins to reveal a secret...a secret that he has not shared with anyone for 14 years. Can you imagine having one of the greatest secrets in all of human experience and not sharing it with anyone for 14 years?

So Paul says...and if that is not enough....by the way....I have been to heaven and back.

2 Corinthians 12:1–6 (ESV) 2 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. 3 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— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 6 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.

I know a man....is a classic Jewish tradition of speaking of yourself in the vague reference so as not to boast and draw attention to yourself. In this case, the parallel between the “third heaven” and “paradise” indicates that Paul’s reference is to the highest spiritual realm, where one encounters the very presence of God. Paul tells these critics and scoffers...oh and by the way...I have been to heaven and back. God knows I am telling the truth. Although Paul is unsure how this experience took place—that is, whether he was actually transported there “in the body” or went there in a vision “out of the body”—he is sure that it took place.

Paul essentially says....I have kept the greatest secret....but you are forcing me to play this card. Paul has not mentioned this vision in any of his previous letters to the church.

And notice that he said that he is sharing just one of several "Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord."

The striking absence of references to visions and revelations in Paul's letters demonstrates his lack of interest in sharing such private, spiritual experiences. He viewed them as without benefit either for establishing his authority as an apostle or for building up the church

Indeed, that Paul would refer in 12:1 to his "surpassingly great" visions and revelations (12:7) and then only recount one of them is itself a reflection of his conviction that such experiences are tangential to a genuine boast in the Lord

Paul knew that to boast in his visions, as his opponents were doing, would lead to exalting himself in a way that would cut out the very heart of the gospel. So, rather than causing him to trumpet his visions aloud, the fact that his revelations were "surpassingly great" kept him from boasting in them, both for his own sake and that of others

By speaking in the third person, He is trying to report his experience while at the same time not reporting it. He wants the Corinthians to evaluate him only on the basis of what they themselves can see and hear from him directly, not on the grounds of personal reports of private mystical experiences

But you must admit...this is an incredible secret to keep. It would be so easy to boast about it.....Yet God protected Paul.

It would be easy for me in the flesh to get conceited...like you guys are....but I came back from heaven with something....

Today's Scripture

2 Corinthians 12:77–10 (ESV) 7 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.

Paul returned with some form of a physical ailment. We don't know what it was, but it was something he desperately wanted God to take away. Yet he understood that this thorn in the flesh served a purpose...to keep him humble. Something physical from Satan to harass him was being used by God to keep him from being conceited.

God allows a great deal in our lives to serve His purposes. We know that God often will put us through the consequences of our past sins, but did you know he sometimes puts us through consequences to keep us from future sins?

God knew Paul would become boastful about his trip to heaven and in order to prevent that...he was given a physical ailment to keep him humble. Many think it was a speech impairment as Paul often told of his ineloquent speech...unusual for a Jewish Scholar who studied at the highest level. Paul not only had the issue but understood why he had it. He still begged God to take it away.

Both Paul's rapture and his thorn are the work of God. As Ralph Martin observes, "The importance of the passive verb, *edothē*, 'was given,' can hardly be exaggerated. God is the unseen agent behind the bitter experience. It is important because if the thorn was solely from Satan and Paul could not overcome it, then his spiritual authority would have been challenged. This thorn was not in Paul because Satan determined it, but rather God allowed it and ordained it to keep Paul from boasting.

The "thorn" persisted for fourteen years; it was not a onetime experience that accompanied his rapture to the third heaven.

2 Corinthians 12:77–10 (ESV) 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul pleaded three times (a number of completion) and was told that God's grace was more than you needed....and then God says...My Power is made perfect in weakness....The reference to "three times" is therefore better taken as signaling an event that is now over and done with, having gone through its beginning, middle, and end. Read in this way, Paul's threefold prayer parallels Jesus' threefold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, which also culminated in confidence that the prayer had been answered, even though the cup of suffering remained

2 Corinthians 12:77–10 (ESV) Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 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.

The promise of God's grace and power leads Paul to be pleased in his sufferings rather than continuing to pray for their removal,

2 Corinthians 12:77–10 (ESV) For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is the mic drop moment. The culmination of Paul's argument to the scoffers. The paradox of paradoxes. Keep pointing out my weaknesses...go ahead...because when I am weak...then I am strong.

Paul boasts in the very things that cause others to slander him. His strength in is not his personal strength, but the strength that derives from his divinely granted ability to endure adversity for the sake of the gospel. This then is Paul's strongest argument for the legitimacy of his apostleship: His weaknesses are the basis of Christ's power. For to boast in his weakness is, at the same time, to boast in what the Lord is doing by his grace and power

Jeremiah 9:23–24 (ESV) 23 Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, 24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

The important thing is to know how God dealt with Paul because this is the way He might want to deal with us.

At his conversion in Acts 9, Paul had seen Jesus in glory and heard Him speak, and Paul's visit to heaven was an even more extraordinary experience. Like any believer, he could have become proud, but the Lord prevented him from boasting. There are times when the Lord must chasten us because of past sin but there are also times when God disciplines us to prevent future sin.

We rarely hear people speak of this. God knows not only our past..but our future challenges as well. Sometimes looking back on your life, you can see events that you prayed God would take away, and yet they persisted and changed the direction or course of your life.

I often wonder if my hearing deficits and vertigo attacks were allowed to keep me humble. It is hard to be conceited when you are playing drums with your whole body in the middle of sermon that is live broadcast on the web. I don't know. But I have prayed for healing and don't believe that it is God's will to heal me. No matter what physical ailment we must endure, God's grace IS sufficient for all of us.

If we accept the unexpected difficulties of life that God sends us, we will go from weakness to strength and glorify His name; but if we depend on our own wisdom and abilities and want our own way, we will only grow weaker.

People who believe themselves to be strong become weak....Those who know that they are weak become strong if they wholly trust in the Lord

James 4:9–10 (ESV) 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

When Paul first went to minister in Corinth, he was overwhelmed with weakness and fear and trembling. His preaching was not like the oratory of the popular pagan teachers in Corinth, but simple and compassionate. He did not want the people to be impressed with him but with Jesus and trust in Him

1 Corinthians 2:1–5 (ESV) 1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Our heavenly Father knows how to balance our lives so that success will not exalt us or pain and failure defeat us.

Jesus was "crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God" We can glory in the cross because Jesus turned its seeming weakness and defeat into power and victory

2 Corinthians 13:4 (ESV) 4 For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Whenever I get the foolish idea that I have arrived, my Father reminds me that I still have a long way to go. And His reminders are difficult to ignore! (Assembling anything with a lot of parts and diagrams often humbles me.) When I admit my feebleness, then God manifests His strength. And gives me the idea to let Tammy do it.

We never know when unexpected pains and problems will appear on the scene or what blessings the Father has in store for us. We walk by faith, not by sight, and we can be sure the Father will not abandon us. We live the Paradox of strength through weakness.

Unanswered Prayers

It was perfectly natural for Paul to ask God to remove the thorn. When we face problems or feel pain, it's normal to seek God's help, for the Lord commands us to cast all our cares upon Him

1 Peter 5:6–7 (ESV) 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

But it is also a good thing to come to the place where we are grateful for unanswered prayer.

For example, Moses forfeited entering the Promised Land because he had disobeyed the Lord. He prayed several times for the Lord to change His mind, but God refused. But centuries later the Lord gave Moses an even better blessing when He permitted him and Elijah to have glorious fellowship with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration . That was a postponed blessing worth waiting for!

The Lord did not remove Paul's thorn in the flesh, but He did give him the grace he needed to turn the burden into a blessing

By His grace, the Lord transformed weakness into strength. This does not mean that Paul was now able to endure the pain but that he was able to enlist the pain and make it work for him and not against him. "My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord told Paul, "for My strength is made perfect in weakness" The word "grace" is used sixteen times in 2 Corinthians. Someone has made an acronym out of the word GRACE:

God's Resources Available to Christians Everywhere

God's grace is God's love in action, meeting every need and using every circumstance to edify us and to glorify Jesus.

The Lord does not measure our inability but He tests our availability so He can give us His divine ability.

As you read your Bible, you meet men and women who did extraordinary things for the Lord because they had no confidence in the flesh or in other people . They depended only on the grace of God and He turned their weakness into strength

Psalm 20:7–8 (ESV) 7 Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. 8 They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.

When God calls and commands us, He always graciously provides all that we need so we can obey and serve Him. Paul boasted about his weakness because it glorified the Lord who turned that weakness into power. When we are willing to be nothing in ourselves and let God get the glory, He is willing to meet every need, solve every problem, and defeat every enemy—in His own way and His own time. Look at these words from Jesus.

John 14:15–18 (ESV) 15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

There are two words in the Greek language for the word “another.” One means “another of the same kind” (allos), and the second means “another of a different kind” (heteros). When Jesus spoke to His disciples about “another Helper”, the word in the Greek text is allos, “another of the same kind.” He was saying that the Holy Spirit is a Helper to us today just as Jesus was to His disciples! The same Holy Spirit who taught and empowered Peter and the other disciples is available to minister to us today, if we will permit Him. For us to disobey the Spirit and do things our own way is to grieve Him and lose the guidance and power we so desperately need.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit in us tells us to sit still and wait. Too often we go charging ahead and then ask God to bless what we have decided to do. We wonder why it didn't work and it is simple. We didn't follow the Spirit....we tried to lead the Spirit.

Isaiah 40:31 (ESV) 31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 30:15 (ESV) 15 For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” But you were unwilling,

In many churches, instead of quietness and confidence, we have noise and nervousness, and the Lord is not glorified. I spoke about this last week. Following the Holy Spirit means that you Go when He says Go....You Stop when He says Stop....and you Wait when He says Wait.... But the only way you will know what to do is if you abide in Him and LISTEN. We must prioritize abiding in Christ...connecting to the vine...in order to get the guidance and instructions that we need. There is power in abiding in Christ. When you pray, spend as much time silent and listening as you do speaking. All of us need the rest that abiding brings to us each day.

Mark 6:30–31 (ESV) 30 The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going,

Unlimited power is available to us as we wait on the Lord and trust Him, for His grace is always sufficient and efficient. As we wait before the Lord, He is at work on our behalf because all things are working together for our good and His glory.

Rejoice in Suffering?

Paul said that he learned to rejoice in his suffering. Paul could rejoice in his sufferings because they were for the sake of Jesus, his Savior and Lord. Any suffering we bear for Him is nothing compared to all that He has suffered for us. Peter helps us put suffering in perspective.

1 Peter 4:12–13 (ESV) 12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Suffering and glory go together in the life of the dedicated Christian, and as the song tells us, "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus."

But something else is involved: when we suffer for the sake of Jesus, it makes us more like Jesus!

Romans 5:2–5 (ESV) 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Suffering works for us and not against us because the power of Christ rests upon us

2 Corinthians 12:8–10 (ESV) 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 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. 10 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.

What a paradox! Our physical pain can produce spiritual maturity, and our physical weakness can produce spiritual strength!

Closing

So what are we to do with this....how does this apply to us today. I have often asked God about suffering. I see a lot of death...but it is the suffering that always challenged my faith. God why do some people suffer before they die and others just go to sleep?

For reasons that we will likely not understand on this side of eternity, God calls all of us to suffer during our lifetime and some seem to get a particularly large dose. Jesus didn't just die on the cross...He suffered and died all the way to the cross...and some are selected by God to endure incredible suffering.

2 Corinthians 4:16–18 (ESV) 16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

I think that when we are faced with our weakness and suffering we should do what Paul did.

- He looked upon his thorn in the flesh as a gift from God.
- He listened for God's message about the thorn.
- He accepted God's will concerning the purpose of the thorn.
- He depended on God's grace in handling the thorn.
- He experienced from the thorn strength out of weakness and joy out of pain.

More than anything else, Paul wanted the power of Christ to rest upon him. There is nothing like suffering and your own weakness to make you desperate for Christ's power.

2 Corinthians 12:8–9 (ESV) 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 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.

The word translated "rest upon" is related to the word "tent," and it pictures God's overshadowing "glory cloud" as in the Jewish tabernacle and on the Mount of Transfiguration. The angel Gabriel used this image when speaking to Mary: "the power of the highest will overshadow you". Her body would be the tabernacle for the miraculous conception of the Son of God. The believer's body is the temple of God and as we yield to Him, He uses us and glorifies His name. His cloud of glory hovers over us, guides and protects us, and we have nothing to fear.

There are some things that can only be learned and accomplished through suffering. Suffering crystalizes our needs and draws us into the strength of the Spirit. In our weakness we find His power. We don't find power beyond our ability until we need it. Suffering is part of the fallen human existence. Like Paul we must learn to embrace it as identifying with Christ.

Almost every time in the Bible when believers must suffer...they experience greater glory. Jesus endured suffering and was glorified and his followers shall do the same.

Phillips Brooks said it best: "Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be better men and women. Do not ask for tasks equal to your powers. Ask for powers equal to your tasks."

Let's stop praying for easy lives. Instead let's pray to have fully surrendered lives. Let's not ask for tasks equal to our powers....but rather ask for powers equal to God's tasks.

For when I am weak....then I am strong. Strength through weakness...and incredible paradox of God's truth. In your suffering may the Power of Christ rest upon you and overshadow you and may you find God's strength in your weakness. Let's Pray.