

FEELING INADEQUATE

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Before looking at our reading for today I just want to take a brief look at the background to that reading. Throughout Chapter 11 of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians Paul has been talking about his unique qualifications as an Apostle and as an evangelist and gospel teacher. To use his own words he's been boasting. Well, perhaps I could boast, I could tell you what a great preacher I am, but when I think of people like John Stott I realise I'm just a very ordinary preacher. Paul certainly had far more reason to boast than I do, but at the beginning of Chapter 12, he qualifies what he's been saying and he talks about his special revelation from Christ and says that he'll only boast about that, but not about himself – he'll only talk of his weaknesses. Let's hear it in Paul's own words from the first six verses of Chapter 12: "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 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. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 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." (2 Corinthians 12:1-6 NIV)

Now, having looked at the background, let's turn to our reading for today and as we study this together, the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen, or you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church Bibles.

Paul speaks of a "thorn in the flesh" which was given to him on account of the great revelations given to him by Christ. Look at verse 7:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” (verse 7)

Paul’s saying that he’s being tormented by a “thorn or sharp pointed stake in the flesh” on account of the revelations we just read about in verses 1-6. Well, this phrase “thorn in the flesh” has given theologians almost as much trouble as the initial affliction gave to Paul. Paul never tells us what this thorn in the flesh was, but there are five major theories about it:

1. It was an illness or physical malady;
2. It was demonic attack;
3. It was his human opponents;
4. It was sinful desires he experienced; or
5. It was a parody to mock those who were opposing him in Corinth.

Whatever it was it was certainly fairly serious because, as we shall see, Paul pleaded with God on several occasions to take it away from him. Let’s look at various theories in reverse order. I think we can dismiss the fifth theory of parody immediately, it just doesn’t fit in with what the scripture says – it’s stretching things too far. I think we can also dismiss the fourth theory of sinful desires fairly quickly. It seems to derive more from the Latin Vulgate translation of “thorn in the flesh” as *stimulus carnis* rather than from anything in the original Greek text. The third theory of human opposition is slightly more difficult to eliminate. Paul *is* writing about opponents – the “Super Apostles” mentioned in verse 11 – but this doesn’t seem to fit well with them being a source of weakness – as verses 9 and 10 tell us the thorn in the flesh was. I don’t think this is the most likely answer.

Turning now to the second theory, demonic attack does seem to fit quite well. Paul himself says in our verse 7 that the thorn in the flesh was a “messenger of Satan”. In the Greek the word for messenger is an *aggelos* or angel and the word translated “torment” could also be rendered “buffet” or “beat” as with a fist. Additionally the Greek translated “take it away from me” in verse 8 requires a personal object

– a him – again consistent with the idea of demonic attack. So this theory is plausible.

The first theory of illness or physical malady is probably the most widely accepted. The idea of “thorn in the flesh” fits with the physical body. Also the *weakness* of verses 9 and 10 and the illness suffered by Paul which he writes of in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 4:13) are both translations of the Greek word *asthenia*. Many widely different illnesses from epilepsy to malaria have been proposed, but, if the thorn in the flesh was an illness, scripture gives us no further clues. Certainly the affliction appears to have gripped Paul from time to time – which fits with either epilepsy or malaria – because verse 9 tells us that Paul prayed for its removal upon several different occasions.

My own conclusion is to combine the first and second theories and take the view that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was an illness which afflicted Paul periodically and that this illness was a result of demonic attack designed to make his ministry less effective.

As we’ve said Paul prayed to Christ several times for relief, look at verse 8:

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” (verse 8)

The “three times” parallels Christ’s prayers for relief in the Garden of Gethsemane and it might well be a symbol for repeated and persistent prayer, but Christ answered Paul’s prayers with a resounding NO – look at verse 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (verse 9)

Although this answer is superficially negative, in that Paul doesn’t get what he’s asking for – it’s also wonderfully positive. Christ is telling Paul that his grace is sufficient to deal with the problem. Christ’s grace is still sufficient for us today no matter how dire our

circumstances may be. There is no circumstance or affliction which cannot be overcome through God's grace. Furthermore Paul is telling us that Christ's power is brought forth, is perfected, in human weakness

This verse 9 is probably the most important verse of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. The idea of Christ's power being manifested in human weakness is a theme of this letter which reaches its clearest expression here. Christ's death and resurrection life are reproduced in the lives of his people. God's power through Christ's weakness in *death* by crucifixion is brought forth in the "crucifixion" of Paul's inflated pride, by means of the thorn in the flesh. God's power, which caused Christ to be alive in resurrection – and believers with him – is brought forth in the power of Christ experienced in the patience, endurance, meekness, and gentleness of Christ. So, Christ's reply to Paul's prayer for the removal of the thorn or stake in his flesh is given to Paul in terms of the very gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ that Paul and the other apostles proclaimed. Christ's answer is clear and Paul has told us what he said.

The stake or thorn in the flesh remains, and Paul *continues* to be afflicted or buffeted. But, the Lord's reply *stands*: his grace *is* sufficient, his power *is* being made perfect in the unremoved "weakness" of the stake or thorn.

This is God's basic way of operating in the world:

"But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29 NIV)

The "Grace" of verse 9 means that "merciful kindness" which is characteristic of God – and of Christ particularly – in regard to Christ's humbling and impoverishment of himself for the sake of the exalting and enrichment in salvation of his people. But, God's grace isn't for our salvation alone. There is a close association between

“grace” and “power,” here. The grace that Christ displays toward his people is expressed in, and is inseparable from, his power. To be shown the one is to be given the other. But this power is “perfected,” or becomes a reality, in *weakness*, of which the thorn or stake “given” to Paul is a concrete example.

Here we need to be very clear that this affliction Paul experienced wasn't in any way because he was leading a sinful life. This wasn't a punishment from God. God allowed Satan to afflict Paul because God knew that he could bring good out of this affliction. Equally when we're afflicted, we shouldn't see the affliction as a punishment for our sins – real and serious as these sins are. Jesus was very clear about this when he taught about those killed in the fall of the Tower of Siloam (Luke 13:4-5).

I'm sure that when Paul prayed he was thinking about the onset of the stake or thorn and I believe this prompted him to reflect on the weakness and powerlessness of Christ in crucifixion and the power of Christ in resurrection. This is how Christ spoke to Paul, the Lord told Paul that his resurrection power in this age is perfected in weakness, that is, in the weakness of the stake or thorn that is not taken away.

These words continue to be relevant for us all today whatever experiences and circumstances of life afflict us, or even render us apparently powerless. Whether our afflictions and powerlessness are bodily, relational, financial, or structural, we can pray for their removal – just as Paul did. But, if they are not removed, then we must call out to the Lord, whereupon the grace of Christ is shown and the power of Christ rests on us. The words of the Lord spoken to Paul nearly 2,000 years ago, are universally applicable, they're for all of us at all times. Yet they don't call for resignation, which is passive and impersonal, but for acceptance, which is active and obedient to the Lord. The same Lord who, in response to our prayer, continues to say, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul finishes verse 9 by saying that he boasts in his weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on him.

Paul goes on to say that he delights in weakness and hardship because in and through these he is made strong in the power of our Lord – look at verse 10:

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (verse 10)

Paul concludes verse 10 with an original thought in a memorable form – more technically called an aphorism: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” This paradox is only resolved through the power of Christ. Paul knows that his suffering follows the precedent of Christ’s suffering. Weakness (such as the unremoved stake or thorn) creates the human context of helplessness and utter vulnerability in and through which – when we come in prayer and repentance – Christ is enabled to give his grace and resurrected power to the one who calls out to him. The fragile clay vessel which Paul has said that he is and that we are (2 Corinthians 4:7) is held together by the power of God.

Paul’s ministry wasn’t in fact hampered by the stake or thorn. The weakness which this caused in Paul enabled Christ’s power to be released in and through Paul and that actually made his ministry more effective. May this be our own motto in our Christian service “When I am weak then I am strong.” The success of our ministry and Christian service won’t be determined by our own strengths or abilities, but by Christ’s power working in and through us. God can use our feeble words and our puny efforts in the most wonderful way.

So let’s just briefly sum up what we’ve learnt this morning. We see that when we’re afflicted and buffeted by difficulties and problems in our lives we can and should turn to Christ in prayer, BUT we need to accept that Christ may not give us precisely the answers to prayer that we’re looking for, he may not remove our problems. There may not be any miraculous fix. When that happens we have to lean on Christ’s resurrection power and strength to make us strong as we are troubled and afflicted, always remembering those words from verse 9 – “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. God’s grace isn’t just the unmerited favour that saves us from our sins, but also a force that sustains us throughout our lives.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father I'm sure that many of us here this morning are suffering from troubles and afflictions. Help us to turn to you in prayer accepting that you may decide not to take away those troubles and afflictions and, when you do decide not to remove them, we pray that you will send down your grace and power so that we may stand not in our own strength but in your all sufficient resurrection power. Amen