

There was a ship out at sea in a bad storm, and the ship sank to the bottom of the ocean. But one man escaped. He made it to an uninhabited island. He just had a few belongings. He built a hut on that uninhabited island to protect himself and the few belongings that he had.

Every morning, he would wake up and scan the horizon for ships. Every afternoon, he did the same. But unfortunately he never saw a ship come by. Then one evening, when he was coming back to his hut after foraging for food, he finds his hut enveloped in flames. Evidently lightning struck it in a storm. And everything that he had built and everything he owned was burned up. He was absolutely devastated, all for giving up.

He spent the night in the open that evening on the beach. But when he woke up, there was a ship that was docked at the shore. Down came the captain and the captain said to him, "We saw your smoke signal. And so we came."

Now think about that. Everything he owned had to be lost before he could be rescued.

Why does God allow bad things to happen to his people, to decent folks, those that seem innocent. After all there are a lot of cruel people in this world, and so why do they appear to be ok? Why do they appear to escape the terrible things that at times seem to happen to the most innocent? And I'm sure you know from your own conversations with people that the question of how can a Good God, full of love, allow disease and famine and war and evil to happen? It's difficult for people to grasp a loving God in the midst of a suffering world. Last weekend I walked through a gas chamber in Auschwitz, I looked upon Birkenhau concentration camp and its sheer scale and size, reflecting of the tens of thousands of people that were systematically terminated, and yet hearing of how some of the perpetrators were able to escape to South America without any trial. It doesn't seem right does it?

And as we move into our bible passage today, we come across Paul the apostle-- a good, godly, righteous man, courageous, bold, faithful, truthful, and honest. He planted churches. He taught Scripture. He preached Christ. He took collections up for poor people. And yet, God allowed him to suffer – that thorn in the flesh that he refers to. But why? And what do we do when we don't seem to get an answer? What are we to learn? In the middle of challenging situations, whether personally, or with someone else, or within our church, where does that strength come from to handle the pain?

Well, that takes us to 2 Corinthians 12 as Paul teaches us to boast in our weaknesses. You see the problem with the Corinthians was that they were always bigging up their successes. When they or someone around them was able to overcome obstacles, they would immediately celebrate their own achievements. They would boast in their own determinations. But Paul comes into this and says that strength only comes when we boast in our weaknesses and that our strength comes from the Lord Jesus. So let's jump into this.

Firstly, our strength doesn't come from what we have done.

The people of the time, and that included those in the churches, were turning to the message of the Super Apostles. They wanted impressive people who spoke well, who were

super confident, who dazzled them with stories about visions and dreams that they had had; in effect boasting about themselves. And yet here is Paul in the opening verse stating *“There is nothing to be gained from it, I will go on to revelations and visions from the Lord”*. He knew what scratched people’s itches, and so he says *“there’s nothing to be gained from boasting, but I’ll go on to tell you about these things because you want to hear it”*. Now surely at this point he is going to boast about his successes – all his letters, the many churches he has planted, the Damascus road experience. No. Instead in verse 30 of the previous chapter 11 he says, *“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness”*. And now he goes on to talk about an experience that he had, but because he doesn’t want the focus to be on his achievements, look at what he does in verse 2, *“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven”*.

Paul talks about someone else, or at least it appears that he does. But Paul is actually talking about himself here in the third person. Paul has had many visions and revelations from God through his journeys – the road to Damascus experience was the start, then remember in Acts 16 he has a vision from a man from Macedonia calling him to come, and as Paul wakes up he realises that it’s a call from God. Then later on the book, Paul is in a boat to Rome when a storm hits the boat. And an angel appears to Paul comforting him that he’s not going to die on the boat and he will stand before Caesar. So he gets lots of visions, but now to top it all, Paul some 14 years earlier was whisked up into the third heaven, where he saw and heard heaven.

Now the fascinating thing about all of this is that most people who might have had an experience that Paul had, would be telling everyone about it and sharing it immediately. They would write books and get all the detail out for everyone to hear. In fact today they would make money out of it. But with Paul he doesn’t even refer to it until 14 years after the event. You see the reason he keeps it secret, is because it’s not to be a source of pride. God used it to humble Paul, not so that Paul could flaunt it. And so Paul refuses to make it a big thing because he insists in boasting in his weaknesses. Verse 5 – *“I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.”* He wants people not to see Paul, but to see Jesus. He knows that his strength doesn’t reside within himself so he’s got nothing to boast in apart from his weaknesses and the grace given by Jesus Christ.

And it has to be the same for each of us. We have nothing to boast in because our strength really doesn’t come from ourselves. If we try to live this life keeping up appearances like the Corinthians did, trying harder at that job, claiming that our achievements are all down to our own works, then all that it will do is exhaust us. Let’s refrain from boasting about ourselves or our family, but like Paul remain humble. Remember that pride comes before a fall.

So Paul knows that his strength isn’t about what he tries to do with the attention all on him, nor secondly does he try to think it comes from the praise of others.

Now for those that follow Social Media, you will know that I am active on Facebook. But the problem with Facebook and Twitter and other platforms is that it becomes a place where people publicly applaud your ego, and then the problem comes when they don’t applaud

you. You take it personally as if this electronic internet world is real. Social media is actually a real waste of time, but for today's culture it's also incredibly dangerous. For young people who eat, sleep, and breathe social media, they so desire to be affirmed by their peers, and in many ways they will conform to what is around them in order that they feel recognised and included. When they feel left out or not receive recognition, it can lead to loneliness, anxiety, and in some cases significant mental health issues. But let's face it, we all are people who need affirmed, we all need to know that our views matter. The problem with the Corinthian church was that they fed on approval and praise of others.

But the Christian walk is not that. It should never be about what other people think of us. We should not continually be influenced by people who we think we have to please. I am so encouraged when I hear stories of what God has done in people, of how God has worked in people to encourage and build one another up. The church therefore should never be about keeping up appearances. We should be able to come as we are knowing that we don't have to behave in a particular way in order to belong. All of you should know that sense of belonging in God's house – we may not always agree with each other – but we still belong. We are united in God's love for each of us. Paul emphasised this when he says in verse 6, *"But I refrain [from boasting about myself] so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say"*.

So our strength doesn't come from ourselves or from the praise of others, because ultimately and finally our strength comes only from Christ through weakness.

Verse 7 Paul says, *"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"*

We could spend hours thinking about what this thorn is that Paul refers to. But the answer is that no one knows, nor does it really matter, other than to know that it tormented him. I suppose the only thing I would say is that if you imagine a thorn in your thumb it might draw blood but after sticking a plaster over it, it soon mends. The phrase thorn in the flesh however is actually a bad translation. The Greek word thorn here is "*skolops*" and the phrase here is "*skolops te sarki*". It's better translated as a "stake in the flesh", as in a stake used to impale someone. It was what was used in battles to impale the enemy, so it's large and its destructive. So Paul's torment was much more severe than a thorn. Whatever it was we need to recognise that it disabled him severely – it impacted his life greatly. He didn't ask for it. But it wasn't given to him to destroy him or to turn him away from his loving God. Satan wanted to destroy Paul through it, but God allowed it to happen in order to strengthen Paul through it.

And so where does Paul turn to next with this thorn in his flesh? He turns to prayer. In fact he begged God that it would be taken away from him. It hurt him deeply and therefore it needed to be removed from his life. This is exactly what we do when something hurts us. When something hurts us, we immediately think, I've got to get rid of this pain, somehow. And that I think can be our response when it comes to serving in church. If only this thing was out of my life, I would be able to serve God more fully. If only Lord I didn't have these

aches and pains I would be able to serve you. If only Lord I was younger and more energetic I would be able to serve you. Lord if I wasn't so stressed with my work, I would be able to offer more of myself to you. If you just remove the thorn, life would be better. If If If.

But notice that Paul only prays 3 times and then he stops. He stops because God responds.

But God doesn't respond by saying that this stake in his flesh will be removed. God actually responds with a No. "No" is actually an answer. You know what that's like, parents. Your kids say, Mummy I want this. Daddy, I want this. And we might have to respond with "No." It's not to make our children feel hurt – it should be to shape them into something better. And it was the same for Paul. He had a choice as we do when God says no. The choice is whether it makes us more bitter, badder, or actually better.

Paul like the child wanted to hear yes from his Father. He wanted to hear God say, "Of course I'll cure you and heal you". But God said, no, I've actually got something better. He says, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*". Folks, His grace is sufficient for you. Christ is enough. In fact his grace is a reality of God's gift to each of us, of his promises to save us, to provide for us, to give us rest (as we've considered over these last few weeks), to strengthen us. His grace is sufficient. Paul, I'm going to give you my favour that allows you to have the ability to bear up under the thorn in the flesh.

You see God's glory and his strength are revealed when through our weaknesses, through our pain, we demonstrate and showcase or shine a light on the grace of God. We show unbelievers what it means to draw on God's resources. Yes we are not exempt from suffering, but through the suffering we demonstrate our dependency on God, we demonstrate that irrespective of what is thrown at us, God is glorified all the same.

But how is it feasible to allow strength and weakness to coexist? Well we need to look to Jesus.

He didn't look strong in the garden of Gethsemane.

He didn't look very strong as they mocked him and beat him and spat on him.

He didn't look very strong as he stumbled to Golgotha with a heavy cross on his back.

He didn't look very strong as they took off his clothes and drove nails through him.

He didn't look very strong as he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" and as he took his final breaths.

But through all of this, he was doing the strongest thing of all - defeating the power and grip of weakness, sin, death, and Satan. He was supremely strong and powerful as he was risen from the grave.

Conclusion

Are we willing to embrace pain and suffering in order to demonstrate to others God's grace, his presence and his love to his people? Are we willing to strive less for our own achievements but instead rely upon what he has done? Are we vulnerable enough to be able to say "Lord, I'm a mess. I'm tired. I'm anxious. My kids are driving me up the walls. I've

lost my way with you Lord. I'm run down Lord. I've had enough of trying to do it all on my own. I'm weak and I'm ready to give up. I need you Lord. Here I am. I am yours".

Are you ready as Paul was to say in verse 9 *"I will boast so much more about all my weaknesses, so that I can have Christ's power resting on me"*. That place of humility folks is a much easier place to start than one where you think you know it all. Humble yourself today, acknowledge the pains in your life right now, and know that his grace is all you need, and his power will be displayed when we are honest in our weakness.

I want to finish with an illustration that helps a lot. A pearl is a beautiful perfect object. And yet the process of how it is made comes from a place of pain and irritation. A pearl is the oyster's response to an irritation. So a foreign body-- a little object like a piece of sand-- works its way into the oyster. The oyster responds by sending out secretion, after secretion, after secretion, to cover the irritation, to cover the sand. And it builds up, and it builds up. And so, the more the irritation, the greater the value. In your life, the more the irritation, the greater the value you can be as a witness to God.

Perhaps you've come to church today with a thorn, an affliction, some negative experience in your life. God would want to say to you, listen. I can shape you through this, but you have got to place your entire trust in me. Allow this irritation in your life to be the thing that brings you closer to the Lord rather than the thing that drives you away, and that in his journey with you, whatever pain you may have to face – either in relationships, in addictions, in illness, in mourning, in conflict, you are able to be a witness that testifies of God's goodness, his faithfulness, and his strength as you depend more on him. His grace is sufficient, for his power is made perfect when we are weak and trust in him.

Let me pray.

Father we thank you that your grace is sufficient in all circumstances that we face. Thank you that even when bad things happen, you are sovereign. Help us daily to draw closer to you and to bring glory to you as we trust you in our weaknesses. May we know that all things work together for good to those who love you. Father for anyone here today who hasn't placed their trust in you, I pray that they may know your love and comfort that wants to walk with them on this journey of life. I pray that your all sufficient grace would draw men and women and children to you today. In each and every situation I pray that all of us can claim the wonderful saving grace of the Lord Jesus through and in it. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Bible Study Questions

WARM-UP Question

1. What is your reaction when you hear someone boasting in themselves or about their achievements? Why do you think you react that way?

READ 2 Corinthians 11:30-12:5

1. In boasting about these things, what does this tell us about the source of Paul's strength?
2. In what ways can we try and boast in and draw strength from ourselves? Why is this ultimately futile? What would this show about the condition of our heart?

READ 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

1. Why shouldn't we find our strength the praise of others? What's the difference between working for the praise of others and receiving encouragement from others?
2. When we undergo pain and suffering, what should be our response? Does God ever promise to take these things away if we ask?
3. What is the nature of God's grace as mentioned in V9? How is it sufficient for us? How do we receive it?
4. What's the difference between boasting in weaknesses and actively searching them out? Where do we find our ultimate source of strength? How do we receive it?

APPLY: In what ways can you see God's strength at work through your weaknesses?