

My Grace Is Enough
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
John Breon

We live in a culture that values strength. We value physical strength. Athletes, from T-ball to professional sports, compete to show their skill and strength.

We value political strength. Political campaigns and conventions are about trying to convince voters which party should be in power, who has what it takes to run the country.

We value military strength. Military spending is the one of the largest portions of our national budget.

We value emotional strength. Not showing emotions is supposed to be a sign of strength. We're often uncomfortable with the weakness we associate with being "emotional."

Our TV and movie heroes are typically strong people. On *NCIS*, Gibbs tells his team, "Don't apologize. It's a sign of weakness." Though even Gibbs apologizes occasionally.

Our culture sees "success" as a sign of strength. But sometimes we need to rethink what we mean by success.

A man named David told about attending his high school reunion. There he met two former classmates at the punch table. He hadn't thought of either of them for twenty years, but he remembered them right away. One was Jack, voted by the class as "most likely to succeed." He was a jock, graduated near the top of the class, went to a private school on a scholarship and got an MBA. The other was Andy, whom nobody seemed to know. His family lived in a trailer park on the edge of town, his mother cleaned houses and his father drank. Andy read a lot—mostly science fiction paperbacks. He never missed class and never attended extracurricular activities.

Jack was telling Andy about his business and showing pictures of his family, his house, his fancy car, his summer home in Maine. He asked Andy what he was doing. Andy got out a couple of sentences, then Jack spotted

someone else and took off to show them his pictures and tell them all about his business.

David said to Andy, "I'd really like to know what you're doing." Andy told him that he had gone to a state school and majored in psychology. He specialized in alcohol treatment and now was the director of a small treatment facility. He saw a few successes and he did a lot of bicycling with his teenage sons. He liked to read and had written a science fiction novel that he couldn't get published.

David talked for forty minutes with the kid nobody ever noticed. Jack was still working the crowd, dealing his photos to all who would give him a chance.

On the drive home, David says he

...thought of the kid nobody had ever noticed and the kid everybody had always noticed and how their lives had taken shape. Maybe Jack had just grown into our expectations of him. He was indeed "most likely to succeed," and I suppose everybody at the reunion thought him a success, even if they were dodging him and his pictures by eleven. Nobody had any expectations for Andy to grow into, so I guess he made up his own. (Michael Lindvall, *The Good News from North Haven* 87-90)

Who was truly successful? Who was really strong?

We don't like weakness. We want to learn how to *overcome* our weaknesses. But we turn to the New Testament and find the apostle Paul bragging about and delighting in his weaknesses. What do we make of that?

The issue of weakness and strength is a recurring theme in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church. It may be *the* theme in 2 Corinthians. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of God's wisdom seeming foolish to the world and God's power seeming weak to the world. The heart of the Christian gospel is the message of a crucified Messiah. You can't get much weaker than dying on a cross. Yet Christ crucified is the power of God (1

Cor 1:18-2:5). In writing to the Corinthians, Paul emphasized this because they were caught up in worldly wisdom and displays of power.

In this section of 2 Corinthians (chs. 10-13), Paul is again dealing with challenges to his authority and ministry. These challenges are coming from some people who have come to Corinth, claiming to be apostles. These “super apostles,” as Paul calls them, promote themselves as truly spiritual because of their Jewish heritage, their polished speaking skills, and their extraordinary spiritual experiences. But Paul says they’re preaching a different gospel and a different Jesus. They seem to be in ministry for financial gain. Paul describes them as false apostles and servants of Satan.

The “super apostles” have been criticizing Paul. Some of the Corinthians have bought into what they’ve said. So Paul is seeking to reassert his authority as the Corinthian church’s apostle, the one who founded their church. He’s trying to make sure that they hold onto the true gospel.

He tells the Corinthians, if you want to hear boasting, I can boast as well as these others who impress you so much. Paul doesn’t want to talk like this. He says he knows it sounds crazy. But he feels like he has to speak this way to get through to them.

The false apostles have boasted about their accomplishments. Paul turns their boasting on its head. Starting in chapter 11, he boasts of his still greater “accomplishments” for Christ—but his are in the form of every kind of weakness. He claims that he’s all the more a servant of Christ because of how much he’s suffered for the sake of Christ. He lists many hardships he’s gone through such as five floggings with whips, three beatings with rods, having stones hurled at him, three shipwrecks, constant travel and danger, among others. Then he says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30). He gives another example: his cowardly escape from Damascus, being lowered in a basket from a window in the city wall.

Now Paul goes on to boast about visions and revelations. This is the kind of experience the false apostles delighted in, bragged about, and based their authority on. Paul argues on their terms for a little bit. He doesn’t see these kinds of visionary experiences as validating his apostleship, but he feels like he needs to let them know he’s had this kind

of experience since that's what they value. Then he quickly moves on and emphasizes that the real proof of his calling and apostleship is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in his ministry, especially in the presence of his weaknesses, so that Christ may receive the glory.

Paul describes an experience he had fourteen years earlier. He was caught up into heaven, into God's presence. He speaks of it like it happened to someone else. But verses 6 and 7 make it clear that it was Paul who had this experience. Paul probably spoke of it the way he did in order to show how unimportant such experiences are for proving authority for ministry.

Not only does he distance himself from the experience in the way he tells about it, he doesn't know much about the experience. He doesn't know whether he was in his body or out of it when this happened. Was it a real transport to heaven or a vision? He doesn't know. But he emphasizes that God knows. And Paul doesn't relate anything that happened during this trip to heaven. It's almost like Paul's saying, "O.K., you super apostles, you put so much stock in visions and revelations. I have them too." But then he gives very little information about this extraordinary journey and he has nothing to say about its possible religious significance. How, precisely, he was taken up to Paradise he doesn't know, what he saw there he doesn't say, and what he heard there he mustn't repeat (Victor Paul Furnish, *Second Corinthians, The Anchor Bible*).

Paul's not saying that such experiences are invalid. He obviously had such an experience and it surely meant a lot to him personally. He just doesn't want to be known as a visionary (even though he is one) and he doesn't want such extraordinary experiences to be the focus of attention and the basis for evaluating his ministry. Instead, he wants to focus attention on Christ and he wants Christ to be the basis for evaluating ministry.

Also, since there's no way to prove or disprove his revelatory experience, he'll boast only of what's before their very eyes. He doesn't want them to evaluate him based on some personal extraordinary experience. He doesn't want them to think more highly of him than they should. He wants them to evaluate him based on what he does and says.

He wants them to see that his speech and action are consistent with each other and they're consistent with the gospel. They should see his own personal weakness and the undoubted power of what Christ is doing through him.

Paul goes on to say that to keep him from becoming conceited, or too elated, or exalting himself because of these surpassingly great revelations, he was given "a thorn in the flesh," a messenger of Satan. This satanic agent gave him a beating, treated him roughly.

The word translated "thorn" here (*skolops*) can refer to a pointed stake or a thorn. Most English translations use "thorn." But sometimes it referred to sharpened wooden stakes that were used to defend a position or that were put in a pit hoping opposing soldiers would fall on them, or stakes to impale enemies and torture them. Paul sees the fulfillment of God's purposes and rule as a battle. And he sees this "stake" as one of the enemy's messengers or agents. Whatever the stake was, Paul interprets it as a trap or torture prepared by a clever enemy to take him out of battle. But it doesn't have the result the enemy wanted. Instead, it serves to give Paul perspective and to keep him from being overly elated by his many revelations (J. Paul Sampley, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians, The New Interpreter's Bible*).

Nobody now knows what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. Most scholars agree, based on what Paul writes here and elsewhere, that it was some sort of physical ailment. Paul says that he asked the Lord three times that it should leave him. But it wasn't taken away. Paul's prayer seemed to go unanswered. But he goes on: The Lord said to me. No prayer is unanswered if as a result of lingering in God's presence we can say, "He said to me." And what the Lord says is "grace" (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Ask Him Anything* 76).

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," the Lord tells Paul. He's free to share *this* revelation. The Lord doesn't remove Paul's thorn in the flesh and he doesn't promise to remove it. Rather he directs Paul to understand his affliction as part of that *weakness* in and through which God's powerful grace operates.

"My grace is enough for you" is a simple and concise statement of the gospel. Salvation, our only true sufficiency, is by God's grace and in God's

power (Furnish). There's not a simpler expression of the good news: God's grace is sufficient. Period (Sampley). The gospel, the good news of what God does in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, is the baseline for all of life. It applies to us in all our experiences.

It doesn't say we're worthless or that there's nothing good in us. But it does say that we can't save ourselves. We need God's grace and power to save us, to keep us, to help us face life, to become the people God intends us to be.

We could say that, in the NT, *weakness is not so much something to be overcome as it is the place where God dwells* (Bob Tuttle used to say this a lot). Our weaknesses are God's opportunities to give grace and to make his power known.

Don't confuse weaknesses with sins. Our weaknesses may be occasions for sin, but they can just as well be occasions for relying on God and experiencing his grace and power.

All of us, just as we are, with our mixture of strengths and weaknesses, are the people God wants to use to show his strength and power. That's why Paul says, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may dwell in me and work through me."

John Wesley echoed Paul in his *Journal* as he recounted persecution he and the early Methodists faced. Preaching in fields and streets, Wesley sometimes had to face mobs that opposed him. People would throw rocks and other objects at him. The Methodist chapel in Bristol, England is called the New Room. Bristol was a hub for the slave trade and Wesley opposed the slave trade. The pulpit in the New Room is surrounded by a rail. When Wesley and others spoke against slavery and the crowd would sometimes storm the pulpit. The rail gave Wesley just enough time to escape (Robert Tuttle, *The Partakers* 98-99).

I tend to be ashamed of my weaknesses, but Paul learned to brag about his because they were the showcase for Christ's power. Paul goes on to say that he delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Not just Paul's frailty, but the adversities and afflictions he has to bear as an apostle, have become a means for God's great power to be revealed.

The Corinthians know how weak Paul is. That's been one of their criticisms of him. They think that because he's so weak he's not spiritual enough. But these very weaknesses that characterize his life as an apostle represent the effective working of the power of the crucified Christ in his ministry. A little later Paul says that Jesus "was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you" (13:4).

There are some popular teachers today who say that Paul couldn't really have had a physical affliction that he wasn't healed of. These people hold that believers can always be healed and live in a state of divine health. So they reinterpret the Lord's refusal to take away the thorn and his word about grace being sufficient to mean not that Paul's weakness was the occasion for the working of God's grace, but that the Lord was telling Paul to grow up and deal with it himself, to take authority over this messenger of Satan and cast it out of his life.

This reinterpretation sounds more like what some of the Corinthians or the false apostles would say. My response to it is to echo one of my ORU professors. A student said in class that this passage means that God was telling Paul not to be a baby and to take authority over the thorn. The professor replied, "No, that's what you wish it means."

Paul's response would probably be to reaffirm that his weaknesses are part of life in this present age, before God's kingdom comes in its fullness. He no longer pleads for God to take away the thorn in the flesh because it, and all his weaknesses, allow for God's grace and power to work through him. That way there's no mistaking Paul's ability or wisdom for the power of God's Spirit.

Paul made a similar point in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. We saw last week that he says there, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

One writer says that being weak liberates us from trying to prove our own spiritual adequacy. We don't have to have ideal conditions to grow as disciples and we don't have to be in control. We don't have to rely on our natural strengths. We can try to do things that we're sure to fail at. We can dare to do new things, however great the risk. We can face opposition

without fleeing or becoming defensive (Jerry Sittser, *The Adventure* 152-53). God's grace and power will be made known in those moments.

If people can believe our weaknesses, they might just also believe our strengths. If we can be ourselves, weaknesses and all, our lives can become the places where God makes known his grace and power.