

“Boasting About Weaknesses?”—2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Boasting About Weaknesses?”, is 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 → *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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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. 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.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Thorns on plants and trees come in all shapes and sizes. While some may be readily visible others may be less noticeable and catch a person off guard when encountering them. Even though being pricked by a thorn is irritating and painful we think they actually serve a good purpose—for protection, hindering plant-eating animals from eating the plant or tree. I guess this makes sense. Imagine what a little thorn feels like when it gets lodged under your skin, let alone in your mouth. It is

because of its thorns that many have used the rose to picture life. While you may encounter many joys and beautiful experiences in life it also has its struggles and pains.

In our text the apostle Paul spoke about “a thorn in the flesh” as something *given* to him to protect him. Protect him? Protect him from what? *From becoming conceited* or as some might put it, “full of himself.” To have an excessively high opinion of oneself is directly connected to the first temptation placed before humanity when the devil said *you will be like God*. (cf. Genesis 3:5) Paul was no different than you and me, tempted by our own sinful natures to focus on our own achievements, academia, experiences and giftedness at the expense of our relationship with the LORD.

In verse 7 of our text he refers to *becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations* which he received from Jesus when he was *caught up into paradise* somehow and *heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter*. (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:3-4) With his authoritative teaching and his mission work accompanied by signs and wonders, not only could others place Paul on a “spiritual pedestal” next to Jesus but he himself could be tempted to put himself there! This is especially tempting in light of his apostleship and ministry being called into question by other teachers in the midst of the Corinthian church so that he has to defend and commend himself to these Christians again.

For this reason Paul “boasted” but in a manner quite different than boasting normally happens. He defended his apostolic ministry by boasting about that which he called his *weaknesses*. These *weaknesses* were directly related to the thorn in his flesh which was given to him and to which he refers as *a messenger of satan to harass* him. I’ve heard many people speak about their “thorn in the flesh” in reference to constant or chronic struggles, pain or suffering or some other kind of constant irritation in life. However, I’m not sure I’ve ever heard them speak about it as *a messenger of satan to harass* them. Why would he refer to it as *given* to him as *a messenger of satan to harass* him?

Paul began this “boasting” about his ministry earlier in this letter by referring to the *persecutions* and *hardships* which he experienced and encountered instead of lifting up the miraculous signs and wonders which the Lord Jesus did through him. (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:16-32) These *insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities* (cf. Verse 10) were the devil’s attempts at striving to stop Paul from proclaiming the Good News of forgiveness of sins in Jesus. When Jesus called Paul to this missionary activity, he sent him to Ananias who shared the Gospel with him and baptized him. Jesus described Paul’s ministry to Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 → *He is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.* That suffering

came in the form of being persecuted **because of being a Christian** and was a “thorn” in his flesh for the rest of his life.

Instead of speaking of this thorn in his flesh in some kind of colloquial manner to describe this constant irritation in his life, he interpreted its presence by faith, recognizing his tendency toward sinful arrogance and Jesus’ keeping him humble in his ministry. Verse 8 of our text says *three times* he *pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave him*. Once again, Paul was like you and me, struggling with human suffering even to the point of asking Jesus to remove the suffering from him. No doubt Paul knew that famous invitation and promise of Yahweh from Psalm 50:15 → *Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.*

So, in what form did this promised deliverance come for Paul? The same form in which it comes for you today. Jesus says in verse 9 of our text: *My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness*. This is not the kind of “deliverance” which many people expect from the LORD. His *grace*? How does His *grace* provide deliverance in the midst of physical pain and suffering? How does His *grace* provide deliverance in the midst of adverse physical circumstances as a result of improper and bad choices in your life? How does His *grace* provide deliverance in the midst of coping mechanisms in life which you’ve chosen, taking you further and further into your own

idolatry? How does His *grace* provide deliverance in the midst of rejection and persecution you experience when you strive to confess the truth of God's Word?

God's grace is not dependent upon your circumstances, experiences and choices in life. Rather, it is completely dependent upon His steadfast love for you in Jesus, Who endured the rejection of people to the point of enduring death on a cross with a crown of thorns on His head. He willingly bore these signs of scorn and weakness as a sacrifice to free you from the power of sin, death and the devil, forgiving your sins in any and every situation as you look to Him in faith in the midst of those circumstances with both their struggles and joys.

These struggles leave us feeling weak and helpless, unable to control or manipulate the situation at hand. This point of humble repentant submission is the only place where you will experience God's power in all its perfection and righteousness as you simply cling to Christ. As 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 says: *Because of God you are in Christ Jesus, Who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, **boast in the Lord.**"*

Thus, Paul confesses in verse 9 of our text: *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* Our desire is for Christ's power to be manifested in our lives

in every way. Thus, faith in Christ will depend upon the power of God to carry you through! When you boast about your weaknesses you are actually giving God glory because the focus is on what He continues to do by His grace in Jesus Christ in your life, not what you do, no matter how “spiritually” wonderful or sacrificial or beneficial you consider it.

You will also be able to interpret those weaknesses of persecution and temptation in a manner which brings your sinful self-righteousness to the cross of Jesus Christ so that you can continue to serve and proclaim God’s Word by the power of the Holy Spirit, even knowing that more struggles are upcoming. You can pray in the words of a favorite hymn describing such boasting about weaknesses in faith: “Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace.” (LSB 761:3) Amen.

*I will bless the LORD **at all times**;*

His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the LORD;

let the humble hear and be glad.

Oh, magnify the LORD with me,

and let us exalt His name together!

(Psalm 34:1-3)

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