

### **In Weakness, Strength**

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

Our reading from Paul's second Corinthian letter is a little confusing at first. What on earth is he talking about? Actually, at first he is talking about "unearthly" experience. He knows someone who had this amazing spiritual experience, levitated right up to Heaven and beyond to the "third heaven." That's the penthouse of religious ecstasy! Now that's something to boast about, but Paul doesn't want to go there. He wants to talk about weaknesses, about experiences that are anything but ecstatic. The nitty-gritty of human life, with all its wounds and failures, weaknesses and disabilities of all kinds. Paul lets it slip that he is actually the guy who had these experiences. If he wanted to, he could put his religious experience up against anybody's. Instead he talks about boasting of his weaknesses, sufferings, failures in the eyes of the world. And he says that's exactly where God's power is—in the very places in our lives that we thought needed to be thrown out, rejected, or changed into something more impressive in the eyes of the world.

Paul has been the brunt of personal attacks from some in the Corinthian church. Earlier Paul wrote: "For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.'" (10:10) People were drawn to the powerful and charismatic types. Those folks, Paul believes, aren't really communicating the deepest truth of the Gospel of God's love in Christ. They are on ego trips, fostering divisions.

Paul's frustration may be familiar to us. We live in a culture, indeed a world, in which the wealthy, powerful, and "successful" get the attention of most people. Political leaders. Religious leaders. Business leaders. The measure of truth is the capacity to force one's way on others, as a person or a nation. The religious community is susceptible to the same notion of success and power. I was interested to read a news story about the recent opening of a huge church building in our community. The language is revealing. At the front of the auditorium – not sanctuary, mind you – is a stage, not a chancel. This is church without the sacred, success without the Gospel of the crucified servant Jesus. All the ingredients for success and power and popularity are there—religion, politics, nationalism, all rolled into one. It is very appealing to many people, but it has nothing to do with the Gospel.

That's what Paul is talking about. It's true on the personal level and true on the social level. We've got our notions of strength all messed up. We've been acculturated to believe that strength means having no flaws or "imperfections." It means having to be the "best" person, the "best" nation, the "best" whatever. Or the most physically attractive, the most intelligent, even the most spiritual!

What does that get us? Shame. Guilt. Self-hate. A pride or arrogance that really hide insecurities. A confrontational view of life, not one that sows seeds of peace in ourselves or others. Paul sees the spiritual dangers of focusing on our own perfection or prowess, and trying to ignore our weaknesses, or what the world considers weaknesses. When this happens, we have closed the door to our relationship with God. We no longer are seeking to be open to God, living our lives in partnership with God, but are caught up in the self.

Paul brings it around to his own situation. I have this "thorn in the flesh," he writes. We don't know what it was. A physical problem. Or a psychological one. Maybe Paul was a lousy speaker. Like all of us, he wanted to just get rid of this thing. Then he would be fine and could really make an impression. He prayed to God to remove this "thorn." The answer came back: No, my grace is enough for you. My power is able to work through weakness. So Paul came to understand that what he felt as a weakness, God saw as a channel of God's love and grace. Instead of collapsing into self-hate or despondency about this personal liability, Paul came to see it as something God could use even more effectively than any prowess Paul might have.

There is something very humanizing about accepting ourselves, including the things we have come to feel are unacceptable or undesirable. Call it humility. Call it honesty. There is something winsome and empowering about people who seem to be self-accepting in this way. Something shines through them. A spirit emanates from them that is refreshing and enlivening.

One such person for me is Elaine Marie Prevallet, of the Sisters of Loretto community. I first met her soon after I graduated from seminary. I was at the seminary to hear her speak and afterward we sat on the front lawn of the school for a talk. She spoke of her introversion, which struck a deep note with me. I had always struggled with what felt like acute shyness and sometimes near-panic when I had to be up in front of people or in groups of people for a long time. And yet I had also begun to learn something about the contemplative life. I don't mean going to a monastery and getting away from it all. I mean our capacity to be quiet, to enjoy being with ourselves, to silently look at and listen to the world and to one's own inner life. So while I had come to feel badly about my introversion, there was this positive side of it that I could not yet fully affirm.

Elaine shared with me her definition of introvert and extrovert. An introvert is a person who gets her or his energy primarily from within herself or himself. An extrovert gets energy primarily from being with people. That simple. No judgment. Not one right and the other wrong. Just the way we are put together. Elaine has said on occasion that she is very grateful to be part of a spiritual community that has not judged her for being an introvert, but has given her freedom to be who she is. Because of that acceptance, her study, teaching, and writing—the fruit of her contemplation—have brought tremendous benefit to her own community and beyond.

What our culture generally sees as a weakness, and what indeed is felt by us as a weakness, becomes a touch-point in our relationship with God. The Celtic Christians talked about “thin places” in the world where God is most clearly experienced. We have thin places in our own lives, too, where God is most readily touched and which God seems to be most able to use as channels of love and power. Paul is simply saying that what we view as “thorns in our flesh,” as things we feel stuck with, are “thin places” where we touch to presence and power of God’s love and grace.

One of the most important spiritual insights of this community has its root in what Paul was talking about. It is the paradox that God’s strength and our “weaknesses” come together to create a channel for God’s power in the world, the power of love and renewal. For this reason we try to be a community in which people are accepted for who they are, warts and all. The warts are as important as the beauty marks! It is the whole person that radiates the love of God and through whom God can work most powerfully. When we come together in mission groups, responding to what we feel God has called us to do, the group inward journey is so important in this regard. Being able to acknowledge our so-called weaknesses and to extend to one another the acceptance of the whole person unleashes a power that is able to work through us to accomplish the mission. In the atmosphere of this kind of love, gifts can emerge from the uniqueness of each person. And it is those gifts that will give shape to the mission as it unfolds.

All of this is not to say that we ignore our strengths, the abilities that we bring. We need those, too. Embracing our weaknesses in the sense that Paul is talking about it does not mean that we don’t try to do our best and offer our best. Quite the opposite. Paul did not use his “thorn in the flesh” as an excuse for not giving his all to what he felt called to do and bringing his best to it. He merely found the spiritual wisdom of knowing that as long as he embraced his weaknesses, he somehow stayed closer to God, more open to God’s spirit and power.

Neither does this mean that we shouldn’t seek healing for those things in us that cause us pain within ourselves or in our relationships with others. Paul wasn’t encouraging a kind of neurosis, that we see ourselves

in some fixed way—Well, that’s just who I am and you have to accept it! Paul wasn’t boasting of his weaknesses in order to boast of his weaknesses. He was saying that our so-called weaknesses or limitations or pains are a location of God’s presence and power. When we accept these things about ourselves and learn more and more how look deeply into them, they have a lot to teach us about ourselves, about life and God. They can be the source of our healing, our wholeness.

This is why the inward journey is so important. We commit ourselves to be on the path of accepting who we are, including those parts of us we would rather not even look at. We move toward deeper understanding of those things and how they affect the ways we feel about ourselves and other people, the ways they tend to affect how we live in unhappy, unproductive, or unpeaceful ways. The inward journey is a joyful path of realizing that what we for so long hated about ourselves or just wanted to get rid of is a location of God’s presence and power and healing.

A last thought: Paul implies that this “thorn in the flesh” was given him to keep him from being too elated. We might have problems with this, understandably so. I don’t know about the Satan part, except that here is the biblical view that Satan still serves God’s purposes by testing us, making us go deeper in faith. But what about this bit of seeing painful and difficult things as given us for a purpose? Does God give us these things or allow them to happen?

I don’t know about that. But if we are going to praise God as creator of all things, why not the difficult as well as the delightful, the painful as well as the pleasurable, the challenging as well as the comforting? I’m not saying that God causes cancer or depression or poverty or any other thing that people suffer. But can we not say that God is present in and involved with the things that confront and challenge us as well as the good stuff? That’s what Paul is saying, I think. Instead of ignoring or fighting against some “thorn in our flesh,” we can change our view of it so that we begin to look into it for what it is teaching us, for the way God is present there, too, bringing us to fuller and deeper life. We all have something we feel “stuck” with, some thorn in the flesh. Some experience. Some part of our lives. As a human family, we have them, too—war, poverty, the destruction of the environment, and so forth. Many weaknesses, many challenges. We may just want to run away from them or ignore them or pretend they aren’t there. Being in denial is certainly the pattern of our leaders. The wisdom of Paul’s words out of his life is that as we embrace these things, face them, accept them as part of our reality, we become open to God. To use Paul’s words, we can boast of our weaknesses because we are embracing them and finding in them the very presence and power of God to bring new life.