

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 1: 4-10
SECOND LESSON: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
July 7, 2024

“Strength in Weakness”

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The apostle Paul dictated most of his letters to a scribe. That was not an unusual practice. The scribe would get it all down on wax tablet so he could make edits before it was then transferred to paper. I picture Paul uttering these words with a little heat behind them. The Corinthian congregation had really put him through it. He'd been criticized for his appearance and his preaching style. He'd had outsiders come in and make all kinds of claims regarding their spiritual experiences and their inherent superiority and denigrating him. He'd had people say that if he *really* was God's servant then none of the terrible things that happened to him would have happened. And so here he is at a “I have totally had enough” moment and he lets loose, *only he refers to himself in the third person*. “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 and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

Of course, Paul was talking about himself. And this was not his conversion experience. This took place a few years after his conversion experience. We don't know anything about this spiritual encounter other than what he says here. He makes it clear that he doesn't know if what happened was in the body or an out of body experience, but he makes a deliberate effort to put Gnostic ideas to rest by stating it the way he did. Some of the foreign teachers were Gnostics and taught that the body and the physical realm were evil. According to them the physical body could not possibly enter heaven. But Paul deliberately left the possibility open.

We do find some of what he says confusing, however. What's all this about a third heaven? Isn't one heaven enough? A little bit of ancient cosmology is in order here. People in the 1st century believed that heaven was quite literally UP THERE. It was an overarching dome upon which the sun, moon and stars traveled across. Rain fell through holes or windows in the heavens. And according to popular thought there were multiple heavens. The Gnostics went positively crazy with the number of heavens they came up with and the secret codes you needed to get from one level to the next. They would have done a great job designing video games. But the population generally concluded that there were three, five or seven heavens. Paul opted for three,

the third being the highest, literally in the presence of God. He also said he was “caught up into Paradise.”

Paradise is a word borrowed from Persia, or modern day Iran. A paradise was a walled garden, a beautiful place where a king spent his time. Jews would think of the Garden of Eden. It became another way of expressing the idea of heaven. Jesus told the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Paul had an extraordinary experience, an experience that he could not even put into words. In fact, some of the things he learned he was not permitted to utter. Paul was in God’s inner circle, like the prophets before him. But, he says, if that’s not good enough for you all, let me tell you about my weaknesses, because there is where the real source of boasting should be.

Because of these great and powerful spiritual experiences, Paul said that he had been given a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him grounded and humble. No one knows what his thorn in the flesh was, although some think that it may have been a chronic eye condition that was both personally distressing and unsightly to look at. In Galatians Paul wrote: “As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself . . . I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.”

If Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was a visible physical condition, this would be yet another answer to those who criticized his appearance as unimpressive. There was a reason Paul suffered from whatever this condition was. It was a divine counterbalance. Paul says that he pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away, but each time God responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Now I spend a lot of time explaining to people that God is not the author of evil and does not maliciously sit up in heaven saying, “I think I’ll give this one cancer.” Paul is not helping my case. But I also know, and you also know, that there are times when we pray for healing and healing does not come. Sometimes we ask God to remove a problem, and the problem remains. Sometimes our thorn in the side is a colleague at work or a family member, and they don’t go away either. There are life circumstances that make no sense to us, but God uses them anyway. Joni Eareckson Tada wrote after fifty years of being quadriplegic: “Ten words have set the course for my life: God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.” God may not be the author of our brokenness, but there are times when God does not fix it.

God hears our cries. God grieves with us in our sorrows. God is not indifferent to our pain, but sometimes God can accomplish things in us through struggle that happen no other way. God told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

When something is wrong, we storm heaven for answers. What we want to hear is yes, and we want to hear it immediately. But the answers we receive are yes, not yet, no this is not a good thing to ask for, and “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And I, like you, do not want to hear the third or fourth answer. But grace is the

lovingkindness, mercy and faithfulness of God. God isn't saying, "That's the breaks!" God is saying, "I am with you."

How could it be possible that struggle brings us closer to God? How can a weakness make us strong? I have seen people go two ways when illness or loss or opposition comes. Some lose their faith altogether. They walk away. I remember a couple I met many years ago whose daughter was born severely disabled. He lost his faith. Her faith grew into a solid rock, because she relied on God every day to get through all of the medical interventions and help their little girl needed as she grew up. She came to see her daughter not as a burden, but as a gift. He loved his daughter, but he could not find God in the birth of a child who would never walk, talk or be able to care for herself in any way.

When we are weak or in need we have a choice. We can choose to become resentful and bitter. Or we can choose to lean into God for help. And this is what Paul was speaking about. Because he had some kind of chronic and difficult thorn in the flesh, he relied on God more and himself less. The simplistic, and wrong, answer as to why a person's prayers are not answered is because they do not have enough faith. The true answer is that all prayers are answered, just not all in the way we would like.

Paul concluded his "rant" by saying that he will "boast all the more" about his weaknesses and even delight in "insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties." That pretty much covers the gamut of things that can go wrong. Where most of us fear these things, Paul says they are irrelevant, because God can accomplish more when our determination to do things our way, gets out of the way. It is when we are weak that we are strong, because we turn to the one who is the source of all strength.

During the 1930s, 250 men were holding the ropes to a dirigible, which is like a large airship similar to a blimp. They were holding it to keep it from floating away. Suddenly a gust of wind caught one end of the dirigible and lifted it high off the ground.

Some of the men immediately let go of their ropes and fell safely to the ground. Others panicked, clinging firmly to the end of their ropes as the nose of the dirigible arose to greater heights. But their strength soon gave out and they let go. Several men who were stronger than the rest held on longer but eventually couldn't keep it up and were seriously injured when they fell. One man, however, continued to dangle high in the air for forty-five minutes until he was rescued. Reporters later asked him how he was able to hold on to the rope for so long.

"I didn't hold on to the rope," he replied. "I tied it around my waist, and the rope held on to me."

Instead of trying to hold on to God, we are far better off letting God hold on to us. Amen.

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

⁴ The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”
⁶ “Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.”
⁷ But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to
everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of
them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord.
⁹ Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me,
“I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over
nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to
build and to plant.”

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

² 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. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the
body I do not know, but God knows— ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard
inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about
a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my
weaknesses. ⁶ 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, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great
revelations. 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.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so
that Christ’s power may rest on me. 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.