

God's Grace in Weakness

July 4, 2021

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“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows- 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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.” (2 Corinthians 12:2-10).

1. Our Strength and Weakness

The recent news in our world has been focused on COVID-19 and the condo collapse in Florida. Since the beginning of the year, new COVID cases have declined from 250,000 to 11,000 as of the last week in June in the U.S.. What has made the difference? 181 million people, about 55% of the total population in the US, have been vaccinated. We are proud of the people that developed these vaccines and the frontline healthcare workers who have worked around the clock to make sure that the people in our country stay safe and healthy.

At the same time, we are saddened by the news of a condo collapse in Florida. 24 people including 2 children are confirmed dead. 121 people are still unaccounted for. This tragedy reminds us of the fragility of human life and how our humanity is subject to both great strength and weakness.

2. Paul's Strength and Weakness

The concepts of strength and weakness come up throughout the letters of Paul. As we read the letters, we realize that Paul had many enemies including in Corinth. There were false teachers spreading false teachings and claiming that Paul was a false apostle. In response, Paul speaks back and says to them, ***“I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles”*** (2 Corinthian 11:5). In this

passage, Paul uses the term super-apostles sarcastically. These super-apostles aren't disciples of Jesus but are instead false apostles themselves.

Paul counteracts the charges against him by presenting his credentials. ***“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. ²³Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death.”***

When we read this passage, we see here that Paul isn't boasting about his credentials, but he is using them to silence any doubt to his authority and genuineness as a true follower and apostle of Christ.

In today's scripture, 2 Corinthians 12:2 and the following, Paul continues to talk about the visions and revelations he has received from the Lord. In verse 2, he says, ***“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven.”***

Who is the person in this vision? Paul is talking about himself. Why do you think Paul talks about himself in the third person? It is because he does not want to boast about himself. Paul talks about the incident to clarify that it is the Lord that let him have such an extraordinary experience. Instead of bragging about himself having this experience, Paul focuses on God's gift of a special revelation.

In verse 5 and the following, Paul focuses on his own weaknesses to further the point. Paul says, ***“a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.”***

We don't know the exact meaning of the term “thorn in the flesh.” Many suggest it is a disease like malaria, epilepsy or an eye disease. Despite knowing the exact meaning, we do know that this was a chronic problem. Paul prayed three times to be healed, but the thorn wasn't taken from him.

Instead, God says, ***“my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me”*** (verse 9).

When we pray, we often think our prayers are answered when we get what we ask for. But we experience times when God doesn't give us what we ask for. In these times, we often feel like God isn't listening to us or is ignoring our prayers.

Yet here, Paul learns, and we also learn that God's silence doesn't mean that God is ignoring our prayers. God wasn't ignoring Paul's prayers, but used the thorn as a condition for God to show his divine power in the face of human weakness. Our weaknesses can be God's grace.

3. Israel's Wilderness Life

Let's reflect on the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness. Why did the Israelites wander for forty years? Numbers 12 tells us that Moses sent 12 spies to explore the Promised Land. When the spies returned, there were two different reports. Ten of them brought back frightening reports about how strong the inhabitants are. On the other hand, Joshua and Caleb assure that the Israelites can conquer the Promised Land.

However, many people become frightened and want to appoint a new leader to return to Egypt. God gets upset and tells Moses that the people will wander for forty years until most of the people die.

This is why the time in the wilderness is seen as a punishment from God for the Israelites' unbelief. Yet we see the Israelites experience God's provision and guidance throughout the wilderness. When we reflect on the wilderness, we see that the wilderness isn't a punishment but the time that the Israelites experience more of God's love as his chosen people. The time of great weakness for the Israelites becomes the source of strength, the time where the Israelites experience God's constant presence with them for forty years. The exodus story becomes a reminder to the Israelites of God's provision and protection.

4. A Korean Poet

Does God care for only the Israelites? Of course not. God cares for everyone. In Korea, there is a well-known gospel song entitled "A Fair God." The song was written by a woman who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when she was born. She was handicapped throughout her life and would blame her mother and God for her condition. At 16, the woman prayed for God to meet with her.

One night, the young woman saw a vision of a scroll falling down, saying "Trust in the Lord. If you don't trust the Lord, you will die." One day after moving to a new house, the young woman felt especially alone. She said to God, "God, I have nothing. I have no house, no wheelchair, and no friends." At that moment, God told her to write down what would become her well-known poem and song.

"I have no wealth, I have no knowledge of anything, I do not have the health that others have. But I have something that no one has. I have seen what others have not seen. I've heard a voice that no one has heard. I've received a love that no one has received. I've realized what others didn't know. A fair God, I do not have what others have. A fair God, I have what no one else has."

The woman travels everywhere by wheelchair. She has problems with speaking and communicating with others. Yet God uses her to tell others that God remains with her in all situations. She continues to experience God's grace in her weakness.

5. Conclusion

Who is Paul? He is a very important person who brought the gospel message to the whole world. Yet God doesn't answer when Paul prays for the removal of the thorn in the flesh. Does Paul complain about God's different response? Of course not. Paul experiences God's power and grace throughout his ministry even when the thorn in his flesh is not removed. Paul realizes that Christ's power works in his weaknesses. He is confident that God would deliver him and take care of him always. That is why Paul says, "***I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who strengthens me***" (Philippians 4:12-13).

Paul reminds us that although we can face all kinds of the challenges and trials in life, we can be content in any situation. How often are we not happy when we do not get what we want, and God does not answer our prayers? But Paul trusts in the Lord and believes that God knows what is best for him and for us and provides him and us with what is best. Remember that Paul constantly faces death. Yet he does not mind dying for the Lord. Paul says, "***For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.***" Therefore, he could "***rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances.***" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

6. God's Grace in Weakness

What is the thing that we have prayed for that God hasn't answered? We all want to be without sickness or pain. Yet many of us know that our lives often include periods where we feel weak and vulnerable and have lots of troubles, sufferings, challenges. Sometimes we might feel that we are losers and God does neither care for us nor help us.

But in verse 9, Paul says, "***I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses.***" Why does Paul say this? It is because Paul realizes that his weakness is also the opportunity for him to experience God's power and grace in his life.

Paul learned through his circumstances that he can be grateful even in weakness or strife because God knows everything that is happening and will help him even in the middle of crises. So can we be grateful for every situation as well. Then we can say as Paul says, "***I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong***" (verse 10). Amen.