

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 7

Paul's Strengths and Weaknesses

Last week, we studied the conversion of Paul on the road to and in the town of Damascus. While Paul was in Damascus praying and fasting, God appeared to a devout Jewish Christian named Ananias, instructing him to find Paul and lay hands on him. Ananias pointed out to God Paul's practice of arresting and persecuting the saints and God replied:

Go, for 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 (Acts 9:15-16).

As we covered last week, Ananias did in fact find Paul, lay hands on him, and pray for him. Paul's vision returned, Paul was baptized, and Paul's life as a Christian began. Paul began the phase of his life where he would "suffer for the sake" of Jesus' name as he carried that name before "Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

Time would bear out the full extent of God's words to Ananias. Paul would later write to the Corinthians about his many imprisonments and "countless beatings" adding:

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

To top it all off, if scholars are correct that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in the early to mid 50's,¹ then Paul was not even at the end of his life as he related these events. Paul had more suffering in store! In fact, Paul would ultimately pay the martyr's price and give his life for the sake of the gospel. No doubt, God spoke truly to Ananias! Paul suffered much for the sake of Jesus' name!

¹ McRay, John, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 77; Bruce, F. F., *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 1951) at 56.

What does this time of suffering have to do with our topic this week on Paul's strengths and weaknesses? Everything! (Although perhaps we are better suited to reverse the title of this lesson and make it "Paul's weaknesses and strengths!") Our focus here is a particular passage in Paul's letter we call Second Corinthians.² The passage references Paul's "thorn in the flesh" and how Paul's weakness *was* his strength.

Our approach will place the passage into its context in the Corinthian letter and its context within Paul's life. We then hope to import the significance of Paul's experience into our own lives.

THE PASSAGE

In 2 Corinthians, Paul is struggling to set aright the church's acceptance of deceptive teaching and authority. Some claiming status as "Super-Apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5) came into the Corinthian church and challenged Paul's status and authority. Paul rebukes these men calling them "false apostles" (2 Cor. 11:13) who, like Satan, disguise themselves in light in an effort to deceive (2 Cor. 11:13-15). These fake apostles were delivering a false message of Jesus, seeking to lead the Corinthians "astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Reading 2 Corinthians, one immediately is impressed with Paul's efforts to defend himself and his ministry while shackled by the humility that he valued so highly!³

Within this context, Paul writes that he has no choice but to "boast" to the Corinthians.⁴ Paul must emphasize his resume and bold-print his credentials. Paul does not do so happily, but reluctantly. Paul gives the Corinthians a glimpse into his life and experiences that he would rather keep personal. Paul never wants to cross the line that takes emphasis from Jesus and his glory and moves Paul into the central position. For Paul had already written the Corinthians, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

So with hesitation of boasting, noting that "if I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30), Paul writes:

² We know this is not Paul's *real* second letter to the Corinthians. It is just the second one we have! Paul did write the church at Corinth beyond our two letters. In 2 Cor. 2:3-11, Paul references back to a letter written "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears" that was clearly not 1 Corinthians. We do not have this tearful letter (although some scholars believe that it is incorporated into our Corinthian correspondence).

³ See, for example, Phil. 2:3 ("Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves") and Col. 3:12 ("Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience").

⁴ Barrett puts it, "It is not expedient to boast, but it might be even more inexpedient not to boast." Barrett, C. K., *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper 1973) at 306.

Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...this man was caught up into paradise...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from speaking it, so that no one may speak more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep from being too elated by 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 being too elated. 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 (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

This passage stirs one's soul. We can readily see Paul's discomfort with writing it. Paul speaks of a personal experience, an intimate revelation and vision that most every scholar agrees happened to Paul.⁵ Still, Paul puts his discussion of this time into third person, talking about what "a man in Christ" experienced. We do not know for certain why Paul begins speaking of this experience in the third person, although it seems Paul was wanting to make it even more apparent that he was loathe to brag on this blessing he received in his walk with God.

The experience is one where Paul was "caught up to the third heaven⁶... caught up into Paradise." Paul ventured before God and his throne where Paul heard things

⁵ It is not that Paul was unaccustomed to visions. We read of several visions of his in Acts. In Acts 9, he sees Jesus on the road to Damascus. In Acts 16, Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia calling him to evangelize. Paul has a vision of assurance while in Corinth, which is noted in Acts 18. Paul also speaks of a vision instructing him to leave Jerusalem in Acts 22. Acts 23 tells of the Lord appearing by Paul reassuring him of his days ahead. An angel appears to Paul and details the coming shipwreck in Acts 27. But for some reason, this one incredible vision, Paul never spoke of (to our knowledge) outside of this passage in 2 Corinthians.

⁶ The third heaven is likely a reference to the "immediate presence of God" based on the rabbinic teaching at the time that there were three heavens, with the third the highest heavens. The rabbis took this from the Old Testament in passages like 1 Kgs 8:27 ("Behold heaven and the highest heaven [literally 'heaven and the heaven of heavens']"). The same expression is found in Dt. 10:14; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18; and Neh. 9:6.

that “cannot be told, which man may not utter.”⁷ Paul’s experience was beyond words.

Paul dates the revelation and vision as “fourteen years ago.” That places the time into a period of Paul’s life where we know little.⁸ After Paul’s conversion (which most scholars date around 33-34 A.D.), Paul went into Arabia for three years. Paul then returned to Damascus and made a trip to Jerusalem.⁹ From there, Paul left for Tarsus, Syria, and Cilicia.¹⁰ It is in this time that we know little of Paul’s activities, but this is the 14-year period before writing 2 Corinthians.

Concurrent with this phenomenal (literally) experience of God, his throne, Paradise, and the third heaven, Paul is given a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble “to keep [him] from being too elated.” Paul says this thorn was a “messenger of Satan to harass me.” Three times, Paul implores God to remove the thorn, but to no avail. Instead, God uses the opportunity to make his power more perfect through Paul’s weakness.

Two natural questions arise from Paul’s narrative: first, what was the “thorn in the flesh;” and second, how/why was there a “messenger from Satan” that God would not remove? We should look at both these questions for Paul, no doubt, knew they would arise even as he dictated the letter.

First, we consider what the “thorn” was. Paul chooses not to tell us. For “thorn,” Paul uses a Greek word (*skolops* σκολοψ) that literally means a “thorn” or “splinter.”¹¹ Paul defines the “thorn” as one “in the flesh” and this gives us some

⁷ Paul puts together an oxymoron in the Greek here. Paul literally says, “unutterable utterances” or “unspeakable speakings.” In the Greek, it is *arreta remata* (ἄρρητα ῥήματα). This is the only place in the New Testament that this adjective is used. Paul uses unique words to express an inexpressibly unique experience.

⁸ Harris, Murray, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans 2005) at 837.

⁹ Gal. 1:15-18 “But when he...was pleased to reveal his Son to me...I did not immediately consult with anyone...but I went into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem.”

¹⁰ Acts 9:30 “they sent him [Paul] off to Tarsus” and Gal. 1:21 “Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.”

¹¹ Some scholars argue that the word could also mean a javelin or sharp stake. It was used that way in some classical Greek writings. But the Greek version of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”) that Paul used always uses the word to mean a thorn, never a stake (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24; Hos.2:8). While translating it “stake” may allow some to compare Paul’s travails to Christ on the cross, there is nothing in the context or likely word usage that makes such a reading likely.

insight, but nothing conclusive. The word for flesh (Greek *sarki* σαρκί) is not limited in meaning to the physical body. Paul also uses the term frequently to refer to the corrupt human nature.¹² So, this leaves us with many possibilities for what was Paul's thorn.

Over the centuries, the church has debated and offered many different explanations of the thorn. Some have thought it a physical problem. The earliest writers we have on this passage were also at odds over Paul's meaning. John Chrysostom,¹³ Severian of Gabala, and Theodoret of Cyr all writing in the 380-450 era believed the thorn referred to the many persecutions Paul had to suffer. Another view common in the early church was that Paul suffered from intense headaches and that was his thorn.¹⁴ Many have argued for other spiritual or physical maladies as the explanation.

Some argue that Paul's vision must have been impaired, referencing where Paul notes in closing his letter to the Galatians, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand" (Gal. 6:11). The theory here is that Paul had to write large because he could not see well. Earlier in the Galatian letter Paul told the church, "You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of the blessing you felt? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me" (Gal. 4:13-15). Many read this passage as confirmation that Paul had an eye problem. Another scripture sometimes used to support this theory is Acts 23:5 where Paul seems to have trouble recognizing the High Priest. Others point out that those passages have other interpretations. These folks also point to Acts 13:9; 14:9; and 23:1 pointing out Paul's habit of staring intently at people.¹⁵ Of course, Paul might be staring intently because he has physical eyesight problems! Other physical maladies

¹² See, for example, the multiple uses of "flesh" in Romans (Chapters 7, 8, 13); 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 5:16; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 2:3; Phil. 3:3, *etc.*

¹³ See Church History lesson 30, available at the class website www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

¹⁴ Both Chrysostom and Severian set out the headache view as a common one, but then argue that the persecution view is the correct one. See Chrysostom's *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* 26.2 and Severian in the *Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church* NTA 15:297 as cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 1-2 Corinthians*, (IVP 1999) at 305.

¹⁵ Ramsey, Sir William, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1908), at 38. Ramsey himself argues for malaria as the thorn. See pages 92-97.

proffered include malaria, epilepsy, Malta fever, over-strung emotions, and a speech impediment.¹⁶

Those sighting to spiritual problems include the enduring of persecutions, Paul's pangs of conscience over his "former" life, Paul's entrapment in some sin, and legions more.¹⁷

Where does this leave us? Harris puts it this way:

Paucity of data and the ambiguity of Paul's language have frustrated – and will always frustrate—all efforts to reach finality in this enigmatic question. If, in fact, Paul identified his σκῆλον [thorn], Christians of subsequent generations who lacked his particular affliction would have tended to regard his experience...as largely irrelevant to their situation.¹⁸

Paul certainly understood clarity and ambiguity. When Paul wishes to make a point, he does so with precision. In this regard, just consider the list of persecutions Paul suffered detailed in 2 Corinthians 11 and set forth earlier in this lesson. Paul wrote in a way that every Christian could relate. Everyone can point to the thorn that is in his or her life, and the problem or area they wish they could change. Paul's ambiguity is not accidental; it is purposeful. Paul wants us to recognize the direct application to our own walk.

If we set aside the question of what Paul's thorn is, then we should still consider the second question: How/why was there a "messenger from Satan" that God would not remove? Paul gives us a bit of that answer, although maybe not enough to satisfy us! Paul points out the messenger of Satan was allowed upon Paul and not removed to keep Paul from being too elated (colloquially, we might say "too uppity!"). Paul found in the thorn, a source of humility and reliance upon God. The trip to the holiest place, the throne of God, the trip very few would ever experience while still in their human life, was never a source of preening pride for Paul, because God used Satan's messenger to keep Paul ever mindful of Paul's own weakness and Paul's need to rely upon God.

Paul sought the removal of this thorn multiple times, but God never took it away. This prayer of Paul's was not answered, at least not with a "yes." Commenting on this passage, Augustine pointed out:

¹⁶ Bruce, F.F., *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 135, note 3.

¹⁷ See Harris at 858 and the citations therein.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

We pray that our troubles may depart from us. But this need of devotion we owe to the Lord our God, that, if he does not remove them, we are not to think that he has deserted us but rather, by lovingly bearing evil, we are to hope for a greater good. This is how power is made perfect in infirmity.¹⁹

Another early church father Cyprian wrote:

This finally is the difference between us and others who do not know God, that they complain and murmur in adversity, while adversity does not turn us from the truth of virtue and faith but proves us in suffering.²⁰

Paul puts it into his own words. Paul tells us through this experience he learned that “God’s grace is sufficient.” It is. Paul is right. God’s grace answers adversity. God’s sustenance holds together those falling apart. God’s love tenderly nurses the ravaged heart. God’s mercy completely surrounds the struggling sinner. “God’s grace is sufficient!”

This is Paul’s weakness, but this is also Paul’s strength. Paul brings us back to the title of our lesson finishing this passage with the words, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

POINTS FOR HOME

1. For Paul, the true mark of his apostleship was not showmanship or incredible experiences given to him by God. The true marks are the humble ones of suffering service for the kingdom. It was a pity to him that the Corinthians did not understand this. Let us put on the humility of service for our King. Let us show the world whom we serve by how we serve each other. May we follow our Master who, before going to Calvary, took time to wash his disciples’ feet telling them, “For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15).
2. We have a thorn, maybe a collection of thorns. Whether spiritual, physical, circumstantial, or otherwise, everyone has struggles and difficulties that threaten to overwhelm us. Joyful is the one who has God’s grace to accompany those thorns. At peace is the one who, though struggling with a thorn for even more than 10 years, finds the grace of God sufficient. On a practical level, might each of us take a solemn moment to come to God, set before him our thorn(s), and pray for removal. But failing the removal,

¹⁹ *To Proba* 130.

²⁰ *Mortality* 13.

may we pray for and see God's care and love shining into our lives, and God's strength sustaining us through our own weakness. May we also see God's glory that we have been counted worthy to have his strength. As Peter said, "Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (1 Pet. 4:19).

3. Humility... Let us seek it. May we never boast in anything, save the cross of the Lord. Before Paul wrote this section of 2 Corinthians, he had already told them, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17).