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2 Corinthians

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:9

This verse is one which has brought two thousand years of comfort to those faithful Christians who are facing affliction, anguish, pain, or trial. Knowing that Christ Jesus spoke to Paul, and that his words are recorded for our benefit, allows us to know that the Lord is speaking to each of us through his words. Paul had asked three times for his thorn to be taken away. But the divine answer came back with soothing words for the path which lay ahead of him. The thorn would remain, but the Lord would be there with him through it.

What the words, "He said to me" mean can only be speculated upon. Did the Lord audibly speak to him? Was it in a vision? Or was "no response" a response in itself? In other words, did Paul deduce that this was the Lord's chosen path for him while reading Scripture and contemplating the silence concerning the removal of the thorn? Though the third option seems unlikely at first, isn't this exactly how we now receive our response? We pray for relief, we wait on an answer, and while we read Paul's words here, we realize that the affliction we are suffering is intended to be there. Maybe Paul was reading Job and came to this conclusion.

No matter how the Lord spoke to him, His answer was, "My grace is sufficient for you." We have an infirmity which limits us, we think it is a hindrance to our walk with the Lord and the accomplishment of His mission that we are trying to carry out, and yet we find that the affliction is what allows us to be fruitful in our

mission. Think of Joni Eareckson-Tada! The Lord has used her *because* of her affliction and His grace has been sufficient.

Paul continues to cite the thought in the words, "for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Moses had an affliction of speech and yet the Lord's power was made perfect through his weakness. In fact, maybe it was Moses who Paul was thinking of all along! Moses questioned the Lord's decision three times (Exodus 3:11, 4:10, and 4:13) just as Paul had done. However, he eventually yielded to the Lord's will.

However the Lord spoke to Paul, it was evident that he finally realized that God could do great things through one with an affliction. And not only would great things be done, but He would be the One to receive the glory. Who else could use the weak, infirm, dull, poor, or shunned to do such great things!

It should be noted that some manuscripts leave off the word "my." If this is correct, it turns the verse into a general proposition by saying, "Strength is perfected in weakness." If this is the correct rendering, it might make it seem cold and impersonal, but it is not. The fact that the Lord is the one who is speaking keeps it both personal and powerful.

After his realization that the thorn would stay and yet not be a hindrance to his mission, Paul says, "Therefore..." Yes! Because of these things, a good result will follow and I will be honored to carry the thorn as a badge of that surety! "Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities."

Paul was let down the wall of Damascus in a basket because he couldn't do it himself. He was conducted around by others as he traveled because he couldn't conduct himself. He struggled through his thorn with pride in the Lord who sustained him and used him despite of it. His infirmity was the greatest point of his boasting. As he says, "that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

The word for "rest upon" is *episkénoó*. This is its only use in the New Testament. It comes from two other words: *epi* (on) and *skénoó* (to dwell in a tent). Thus it means to "arise a tent (over), dwell, spread a tabernacle over." The word *skénoó* is the same word used in John 1:14 when speaking of Christ coming to "dwell" or "tabernacle" among us.

What Paul is saying with this special word is that it is as if the power and glory of Christ Himself enveloped him like a tent. It rested upon him and the shining glory of Christ blazed upon him *because* of his thorn. He therefore had every reason to boast in this. For Paul, the Lord's power and majesty were on display because of his infirmity! Again, think of Moses, Jone Eareckson-Tada, or any of the vast number of people in redemptive history who shined forth more brightly because of their affliction. What a great God to use the weak and fallible to reveal His power and love to the world!

Life application: If you have a limitation which you feel hinders you from a ministry for the Lord, think again. The Lord is probably waiting for you to realize that it is this very limitation which He can use most effectively.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2

Corinthians 12:10

This is the paradoxical attitude of Paul and of countless faithful believers since he penned these words. In Christ there is a strength which transcends our weakness. When the divine word came, he realized that he had been asking for the wrong thing. Instead of "Take this thorn from me," he found that the words, "Be exalted through my weakness" were all that was necessary to find contentment and peace.

Because of this (therefore), Paul says, "I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses." "Infirmities" are physical limitations in an otherwise normal human state. "Reproaches" are probably the insults that he

bore because of his infirmities - such as the charge concerning his "contemptible speech" in 2 Corinthians 10:10.

His "needs" are those things which he lacked, but which were necessary to sustain him. He mentioned these in 2 Corinthians 11:27. "Persecutions" are surely speaking of the words hurled at him because of his faith in Christ, and of any physical harm that came along with the verbal abuse. He detailed some of these in 2 Corinthians 11. "Distresses" would have been the trials he spoke of in the previous chapter which came along with his travels. He was shipwrecked, faced perils, had anxiety for his beloved brethren, etc.

Each of these he faced with a new sense of vitality, taking pleasure in them "for Christ's sake." When he realized that they were a *part* of the Lord's plan for him and not merely a hindrance to it, he learned to revel in them. And the reason is explicitly given as, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." He may be weak in the body, but he had a renewed strength in the spirit which transcended anything his physical afflictions could throw at him. It was a strength which came from Christ and it was made perfect in his weakness.

Life application: Paul has given a list of a wide variety of troubles he faced, both external and internal. And yet, none of them could overcome him to the point of dejection. Instead, he learned to exalt in them because they were bestowed upon him by Christ. Let us learn this lesson. Nothing is outside of the providence of God. If we bear an affliction, it is because He has allowed it in our lives. Let us use that affliction then to His glory.

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. 2 Corinthians 12:11

There is emphasis in Paul's words to highlight the situation. He says, "I have become a fool in boasting" with the emphasis on "I." It is an ironic statement to mean, "By the words of boasting which I have penned, I stand convicted as a fool."

Immediately after this, he says, "...you have compelled me." In this, the "you" is also emphatic. In essence, "*You* have forced me into this position of boasting, where *I* have become a fool."

To explain the emphatic nature of his words, he next carefully clarifies what has transpired - "For I ought to have been commended by you." The fault for everything Paul penned, which highlighted his qualifications and the exceptional things he had done and encountered, lay at the feet of the Corinthians. He had come to them, led them to Christ, fellowshiped with them, and together they had a personal relationship. They knew him in an intimate way. So why had they driven him to this position where he now needed to boast? They had turned from the man they knew to follow after false apostles who only meant them harm.

Because of this, he reintroduces them into his thoughts with the words, "...for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles." Here he uses the same unusual term that he used in verse 11:5. It is the "extra-super apostles" to whom he is referring. Since calling them this, he has spent a great deal of time and ink demonstrating that he wasn't just ahead of them, but he was eminently more qualified than them. He was far ahead of them in all ways. And yet despite this, he finishes the thought, "...though I am nothing."

In these words, he may be speaking sarcastically. If so, it would mean something like, "Despite all I have done, and despite all of my qualifications, the false apostles have spoken of me as nothing at all. At the same time, they have elevated themselves to a place of importance among you." It also may be that his words are serious. If so, then his intent is to say, "Despite all of the things I have done, and despite all of my qualifications, I am just a man. All of those things are rubbish and refuse. I am the bondservant of the Lord who alone is to be regarded."

Because of the possibility that either option is correct, it may be that he intended them to take it both ways. The Corinthians needed to take their eyes off of the false apostles and also keep them off of Paul when they did. Instead, they were to fix their eyes on Jesus.

Life application: As noted in a previous verse, it may be necessary to state our qualifications in order to establish a baseline of who we are in comparison to others. However, when we do this, it is important to not allow those qualifications to then elevate us to an unhealthy level in the eyes of others. After stating the qualifications to meet the intended purpose, we should remember to redirect the eyes of those we are addressing back to the One who truly deserves the attention.

Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. 2 Corinthians 12:12

Paul just said, "...in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing." Following up with that, he immediately says that, "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you." First, he is indicating that in contrast to the false apostles, he carried with him the signs of a true apostle. A "sign" (Greek *sémeion*) is something which points to something else.

Jesus gave signs which pointed to the truth that He is the Messiah. The apostles were granted to give signs to prove that they were, in fact, commissioned by the Lord. These are the outward witnesses of this fact. But more importantly than being just signs, they are the "signs of an apostle." Being an apostle carried certain conditions; the most important one was being personally commissioned by the Lord.

What is implied in the term "signs of an apostle" is that these signs belong to a select group of people and they are no longer given because there are no apostles today. Therefore, the things which supposedly confirm apostleship today are false. God has validated the work of the church and His word speaks of it. We are to have faith in His word and not in supposed externals which are falsely given by those who have no apostolic authority.

In the signs that were given, Paul says they were "accomplished among you with all perseverance." There is a decisive tone in the word "accomplished." These signs were fully wrought, thus attesting to the surety of the commission. Despite

all of the difficulties the apostles faced, despite their privations, despite those who came against them and attacked them continuously, they still worked the signs of their apostleship, validating the words that followed.

Today, those who claim to do signs don't do it under hardship. Instead, they do them with a money basket being passed in front of them. They then get into a limo or a Lear jet and take off to milk another congregation full of suckers.

But the true signs of an apostle were "in signs and wonders and mighty deeds." Again, the signs pointed to something else. They were validations of their commission. The "wonders" or *teras*, were those things we might call "miracles." The miracles were so obviously of heavenly origin that no man could claim that the power to accomplish them was from the apostles, but rather from the Lord.

The "mighty deeds" or *dunamis*, are those things which testified to the power of the Source from which they were derived. It is a miracle, or *teras*, that a man is healed, but the healing is also a "mighty deed" or *dunamis* because of the Source of the miracle. It is the effective working of God's power through the apostle.

Life application: If we have faith in Jesus to save us from our sins, then we should ask, "Where did I hear of Jesus in order to have faith?" The answer is, "From the Bible." If we believed the message about Jesus, then why should we not accept the rest of the Bible which gives us the full word of God? If we don't believe that the apostles had the power to work miracles, then why should we believe that Jesus can save? Either the Bible is true in its entirety, or it is a false book. And if we believe the testimony of the Apostle's signs, then why would we need other signs today? The Bible itself is to be our sign. Read your Bible and have faith that it is God's word.

For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong! 2 Corinthians 12:13

Paul asks the Corinthians a pointed question - "For what is it in which you were inferior to the other churches?" He had spent an immense amount of time with them. He had demonstrated the power of his apostolic ministry among them through demonstrations of the Spirit. He had treated them as his own children. In every way imaginable, he had elevated the church and its congregants above himself as he ministered to them. All of this was certain, but with one difference. He says, "...except that I myself was not burdensome to you."

They seemed offended at the thing which was the most endearing from his standpoint. He had not been any burden at all to them in order that they would be able to grow spiritually without being weighed down in caring for him. Here he uses the same word for "burdensome" that he used in verse 11:9.

It is a rare word which gives the idea of numbness or deadness. It is connected to the torpedo fish which makes anything it touches numb. The intent is that even though he was present with the Corinthians, he asked for nothing which would numb them to his ministry. And so, in what is the highest of irony, he states, "Forgive me this wrong!" He had lavished upon them the greatest of honors, one of which was to not burden them, and yet they took this as an offense rather than as it should have been received.

Life application: Paul's intent for the church was certainly pure and without any strings attached, and yet the people there misread his actions. It is always good to take a moment to ponder the reasons behind things before assuming ill intent. Let each of us be slow to anger or offense and quick to show gratitude towards others.

Now *for* the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. 2 Corinthians 12:14

Scholars generally agree that this isn't speaking of the third actual visit, but that he had intended to come a second time and was thwarted. This is now the third

time he is "ready" to come to them. Or, others disagree and feel that he simply had an unrecorded visit to Corinth. Either way, it is Paul's express intent to visit them when he arrives. And when he does, he plans to conduct himself in the same manner as he always had by stating that "I will not be burdensome to you."

This is one of the things they had found fault in him for. But he has carefully and methodically explained to them why he has been no burden on them and why that would continue. It is because, as he says, "I do not seek yours, but you." He cared nothing about their property or their wealth, but them. He wanted the people at Corinth to be saved and then to grow in proper doctrine; not to be led astray by false teachers.

His justification for this is that "the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children." He treated his congregations as his own children. This is implied in his words to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:2 and to Titus in Titus 1:4. Those he had led to the Lord became his sons in the faith. It can then be inferred that the congregations he had established also were his children in the faith. This verse confirms that.

And because they were, he gave them words which are obvious to all people in all societies. The parents, if they are wise with their resources and labors, will store up their wealth in order to pass it on to their children. Paul felt this was his spiritual obligation for them. He studied Scripture, he pondered the mysteries of Christ, and he worked with his own hands to not burden the congregation at Corinth. In all of this, he laid up for them so that they would be the benefactors of his resources and labors.

Life application: Paul has set a good example for pastors, preachers, priests, and ministers. It is right that the congregations remember those in such positions and take care of them (Galatians 6:6), but it is also true that they should not be burdensome on their congregations. They should be willing to work to supplement their pay if necessary. They should also not burden those under them with things that they can do for themselves. Above all, they should be a blessing in all spiritual matters to those they minister to.