

FBC POWELL, 2-24-19 AM
"Boasting in Our Weakness"
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
21 in Series, "Be Encouraged"

"The Christian believes that in Christ he has died, yet he is more alive than before and he fully expects to live forever. He walks on earth while seated in Heaven and though born on earth, he finds that after his conversion he is not at home here...The Christian soon learns that if he would be victorious as a son of Heaven among men on earth, he must not follow the common pattern of mankind, but rather the contrary. That he may be safe, he puts himself in jeopardy; he loses his life to save it and is in danger of losing it if he attempts to preserve it. He goes down to get up. If he refuses to go down he is already down, but when he starts down he is on his way up. He is strongest when he is weakest and weakest when he is strong. Though poor he has the power to make others rich, and when he becomes rich his ability to enrich others vanishes. He has most after he has given most away and has least when he possesses most...The paradoxical character of the Christian is revealed constantly. For instance, he believes that he is saved now, nevertheless he expects to be saved later and looks forward joyfully to future salvation. He fears God but is not afraid of Him. In God's presence he feels overwhelmed and undone, yet there is nowhere he would rather be than in that presence. He knows that he has been cleansed from his sin, yet he is painfully conscious that in his flesh dwells no good thing. He loves supremely One he has never seen, and though himself poor and lowly he talks familiarly with One who is King of all kings and Lord of all lords, and is aware of no incongruity in so doing. He feels that he is in his own right altogether less than nothing, yet he believes without question that he is the apple of God's eye and that for him the Eternal Son became flesh and died on the cross of shame...Incredible Christian!" —A. W. Tozer, *The Incredible Christian*

2 Corinthians 12:6 (NIV) "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."

I. The Peril of Experiencing Extra-Biblical Revelation (vv. 1-6)

Acts 14:19 (NASB) "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead."

2 Corinthians 11:23b (NASB) "...beaten times without number, often in danger of death."

Matthew 6:9 (NASB) "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven...'"

Deuteronomy 29:29 (NASB) "The secret things belong to the Lord our God..."

II. The Precaution in Experiencing God's Goodness (vv. 7-10)

God doesn't show Himself powerful through us in spite of our weakness; He shows Himself powerful through us because of our weakness!

John 15:5b (NASB) "...for apart from Me you can do nothing."

A. Pride Must Be Avoided (vv. 7-8)

Proverbs 16:5a (NASB) "Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord..."

Isaiah 2:17 (NASB) "The pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of men will be abased; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."

James 4:6b (NASB) "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

B. Grace Must Be Appropriated (v. 9)

Colossians 2:6 (NASB) "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him."

Philippians 2:13 (NASB) "For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure."

1. Grace Is Personal – "**My** grace"
2. Grace Is Present – "**is** sufficient"
3. Grace Is Powerful – "**is sufficient**"

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

—John Newton

C. Contentment Must Be Acknowledged (v. 10)

Philippians 4:11b (NASB) "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am."

Chapter 22: Boasting in Our Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

A lot of people boast in their strength, but who boasts in their weakness? The Apostle Paul did! 2 Corinthians 12:5b: "... I will not boast, except in regard to *my* weaknesses." Why would anyone boast in their weaknesses? That sounds backward.

The world boasts in strength. When I talk about being "backward", I am focusing on the fact that "true Christianity is counter-cultural". That means that God's ways and the prevailing culture's ways (the ways of the world) are always at odds. I think that the clearest I have ever heard that stated outside the Bible was in a book by A. W. Tozer entitled, *The Incredible Christian*. Here is a short excerpt. You could "chew" on this for hours!

The Christian believes that in Christ he has died, yet he is more alive than before and he fully expects to live forever. He walks on earth while seated in Heaven and though born on earth he finds that after his conversion he is not at home here... The Christian soon learns that if he would be victorious as a son of Heaven among men on earth, he must not follow the common pattern of mankind, but rather the contrary. That he may be safe, he puts himself in jeopardy; he loses his life to save it and is in danger of losing it if he attempts to preserve it. He goes down to get up. If he refuses to go down, he is already down, but when he starts down he is on his way up. He is strongest when he is weakest and weakest when he is strong. Though poor he has the power to make others rich, and when he becomes rich his ability to enrich others vanishes. He has most after he has given most away and has least when he possesses most... The Paradoxical character of the Christian is revealed constantly. For instance, he believes that he is saved now, nevertheless he expects to be saved later and looks forward joyfully to future salvation. He fears God but is not afraid of Him. In God's presence he feels overwhelmed and undone, yet there is nowhere he would rather be than in that presence. He knows that he has been cleansed from his sin, yet he is painfully conscious that in his flesh dwells no good thing. He loves supremely One he has never seen, and though himself poor and lowly he talks familiarly with One who is King of all kings and Lord of all lords and is aware of no incongruity in so doing. He feels that he is in his own right altogether less than nothing, yet he believes without question that he is the apple of God's eye and that for him the Eternal Son became flesh and died on the cross of shame... Incredible Christian!

[Warren Weirsbe, *The Best of A. W. Tozer*, pages 98-99]

That is so good and so true!

Let's look at the context of our text for this message. After Paul left Corinth and the church he planted there, false teachers came in who claimed to speak for God, but they were actually wolves in sheep's clothing opposing God and His ways. They made horrible accusations against Paul. They accused him of not really being a true apostle. They even stooped to ridiculing Paul's appearance. Many of the Corinthians were beginning to

believe these false teachers. This is not the primary reason why Paul rebuked these false teachers. Paul was obsessed with defending the Gospel (and so should we be). Because these false teachers undermined and distorted the Gospel, Paul was committed to do whatever it would take to expose them as false teachers.

To expose the false teachers, Paul would have to do something that he hated doing. He would have to talk about himself and what God had chosen to do through him. He knew that this would sound like boasting, and (as we saw in the last message) he hated boasting. However, for the Gospel's sake, he had to share what God had done in and through him. The NIV translation says it best. 2 Corinthians 12:6 (NIV): "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." In other words, Paul would share facts and even though it may sound like boasting, in reality, he was simply sharing what he had to share to give the truth about the Gospel.

I. The Peril of Experiencing Extra-Biblical Revelation (vv. 1-6)

2 Corinthians 12:1-2: "Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven." Did you get what Paul is saying here? He was given a vision of Heaven! The Jewish Rabbis (that was Paul's background) often spoke of themselves in the third person. Paul is without doubt talking about himself, especially considering verse 7 where he says 2 Corinthians 12:7a: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself..." This vision that Paul is speaking about took place about fourteen years earlier. Some have speculated that this vision came to him when he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra. You can read about that in Acts 14:19: "But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead." That very well could have been what Paul was referring to, but we can't be sure. In the last message we saw that in 2 Corinthians 11:23b Paul was "...beaten times without number, often in danger of death."

Notice in verse 2 where Paul was caught up to – "...caught up to the third heaven." In Scripture, the first heaven is the earth's atmosphere. The second heaven is space; it is where the planets and stars are located. The third Heaven is the abode of God. In the Model Prayer Jesus said in Matthew 6:9a: "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven...'" This is the heaven (the third heaven) that Paul was caught up to. In verse 4, heaven is called "paradise". The Greek word literally means "a walled garden". It was derived from a Persian word. The greatest honor a Persian king could bestow on one of his subjects was to grant this person the right to walk in fellowship with the king in the royal walled garden. This experience was real to Paul, but he didn't know if it was there in his body or outside the body. It wasn't that Paul got a brief glimpse, verse 4 says that he heard "inexpressible words" and he was told not to share it. Allow me here to inject a caution. There are many people today who claim to have gone to heaven and came back. What do they do when they get back? They write a book. Some have been exposed as total

frauds and others claim to have seen things that contradict Scripture. Let me encourage to skip the books about man's experiences and focus on the book inspired by God – the Bible! God has chosen to withhold many details about heaven. Deuteronomy 29:29a: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God...” We must learn to be content with that and joyfully wait until we get there.

What is the peril of experiencing things like Paul experienced? It is pride and the worst kind of pride is spiritual pride. Look at 2 Corinthians 12:7: “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!” There is a great danger in focusing on *experiences*. People tend to get fixated on their experience and then keep trying to reproduce it or go further to a greater experience. They become “experience junkies”. I've seen this first hand. What is missed is that glorious daily walk with the Lord and finding our thrill in the inspired word of God – the Bible! I hope you see the peril of focusing on an experience.

II. The Precaution in Experiencing God's Goodness (vv. 7-9)

God doesn't show Himself powerful through us in spite of our weakness; He shows Himself powerful through us because of our weakness! I am not speaking of an unbiblical view of ourselves – a view that sees ourselves as unusable and beyond hope. I am speaking about a biblical view of ourselves and our strength apart from God. I am talking about the truth of John 15:5b: “...for apart from Me you can do nothing.” In order to meet the challenges of life and to see God's power at work through you, there are two things that must happen.

A. Pride Must Be Avoided (vv. 7-8)

We have already looked at this truth, but I am not sure it could be said too much. Paul was given a vision of Heaven, let that sink in! He saw things that probably no one else alive had ever seen. You can immediately see the temptation coming from this to be proud. “Wow! I've seen things no other living person has seen. I guess I'm pretty special.”

If Paul had lived in this day, his temptation would have been to write a book and go on the speaking circuit to give lectures or sermons on his firsthand knowledge of heaven. Pride is a besetting sin that all of us struggle with (unless you've just given in to it). Pride is when we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think and then begin to live independently of God. God hates pride and will do whatever is necessary to expose it and bring us to the cross to nail it there.

Proverbs 16:5a: “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord.”

Isaiah 2:17: “The pride of man will be humbled and the loftiness of men will be abased; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.”

James 4:6b: “God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Let me show you what a life filled with pride looks like. The picture I am about to paint will surprise some. We think about a pride filled life as someone who always talks about himself, regularly paints himself in a good light, boasts in his accomplishments, and speaks subtly and sometimes not so subtly about their superiority to others. That certainly qualifies as a prideful life, but that is not the most common manifestation of pride.

Let me give you a typical day in the life of a pride filled person. He (she) sleeps until the last possible minute and then jumps or staggers out of bed, showers, gets dressed, grabs some caffeine and a bite to eat on the run and gets in the car and heads for work or school. He never stops to set his mind on God, talk to Him, read His Word, or yield himself to God. His mind is spinning with the events of the day and what all he must get done. As he faces his day at work, he trusts in his own abilities, his own intellect, his own training, and his own strength to get the job done. After a hard day's work, he comes home, reads the paper, eats dinner, watches TV and falls in the bed only to go through the same scenario tomorrow. The only time our example here acknowledges God is on Sundays when he goes to church (if there's nothing more exciting to do like go to the lake) and when a crisis comes. This example is not "anti-God", or an atheist – he even considers himself to be a Christian. He doesn't hate God or deny Him; he just ignores God and lives his life independently of God. That is the typical picture of pride. It is a life that says (by actions) "I am strong; I am sufficient; I can handle my life."

Let's go back to the Apostle Paul in our text. In Paul's life, God took some rather drastic seeming steps to help Paul avoid pride. 2 Corinthians 12:7: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" Notice what this "thorn in the flesh" is called. It was a messenger of Satan. Remember that Satan and his demonic spirits can do only what God allows them to do. We don't know the exact nature of this thorn from Satan's messenger, but it was not a minor little nagging thing like a sinus headache or toe nail fungus. The word translated thorn literally refers to a wooden stake that was used to impale a person. It was an instrument of torture. It was likely physical in nature and it caused Paul to be humbled and to constantly be reminded of his weakness. Learn this valuable lesson: God will not spare us present pain if it will produce an eternal profit. We fight and strive to be strong, but God sets about allowing things in our life (even some things that are transported to us by an emissary of Satan) to show us how weak we are and how much we need Him. Pride must be avoided.

B. Grace Must be Appropriated (v. 9)

When we apply the cross to our pride, we are now ready to appropriate by faith the enabling grace of God. What is this grace referred to in verse 9? Grace is much broader than the common definition: "The unmerited favor of God." Grace, when applied to the Christian's life, is God's enabling power to do all that He calls us to do. What a great God we serve! Everything that He demands of us, He makes available to us His enabling grace to obey it! We are without excuse. Not only are we saved by grace, we walk by grace. Colossians 2:6: "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." Though the word grace is not used, I am convinced that Philippians 2:13 is describing this

enabling grace of God. Philippians 2:13: “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.” When I recognize my weakness, reckon myself dead to pride (Romans 6:11), then I am ready to appropriate by faith the enabling grace of God to live in obedience to God and to glorify His name through my weak life in this world.

Let’s look more closely at this grace.

1. It Is Personal – “It is my grace”

It is God’s grace; it emanates from God Himself. His throne is even called “the throne of grace” in Hebrews 4:16. What God has is grace that is from Him tailored specifically for what you are facing. Whether you are facing physical illness, family problems, job or ministry challenges, financial challenges, or relationship challenges, God’s grace is all that you need.

2. It Is Present – “It is sufficient”

God’s enabling grace is continually available at the throne of grace! There is never a shortage of grace, never a backorder, never a time where we have to settle for something less. “My grace is sufficient.”

3. It Is Powerful – “It is sufficient”

His grace is all that we need. Even when it seems that we must stand alone, His grace is sufficient, and He shows us that we are never alone. Whatever your thorn – physical illness, scars from the past, a broken heart, a broken home, loneliness, grief, or loss – His personal, present, powerful grace is *sufficient*.

Paul wanted the circumstances changed (just as we do with our thorns in the flesh), but God had something better for him. Our gracious God said, “I am going to insure that pride will not render you useless and I’m going to give you my grace in the midst of your weakness (your thorn in the flesh), so that in My grace you can become truly strong.” The last part of 2 Corinthians 12:9 says. “... that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” The word “dwell” (“rest” in some translations) means to take up residence or to abide. Someone put it this way, “Where human strength abounds, God’s grace is nowhere to be found.” When we see our supposed human strength as just pride and we bring it to the cross, now we are ready to receive the enabling grace of God which empowers us to walk in victory when we are dealing with life’s thorns. God will take us through the thorn room in order that we may experience the throne room of His grace (Hebrews 4:16). John Newton put it like this:

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

- John Newton

C. Contentment Must Be Acknowledged (v. 10b)

Contentment is a learned response. Philippians 4:11b: "...for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am." What God has chosen, we must joyfully embrace.

Conclusion

Are you feeling strong this morning? Watch out! Are you feeling weak? Are you so burdened down and stressed out that you don't know if you have the strength to go on? Praise the Lord! You are in just the condition to see God do a mighty work in and through you. His strength is made perfect in your weakness. His strength is given through His grace and His grace is received as you apply the cross to your pride and abide in Him – live in total dependence on Him. In your weakness through His sufficient grace you will be strong in the Lord.

NASB (New American Standard Bible)

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