

Ps 116:1,5  
Ps 116:7,9  
Ps 70:1,2  
Ps 73:8  
Hy 53:1,2,3,4  
2 Corinthians 11:5-12:13  
Job 1:6-12  
Acts 13:4-12  
2 Corinthians 12:9a

Yarrow, July 3, 2011

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We don't like being weak. That we haven't the where-with-all of ourselves to finish our work for the day, that we can't stand the noise of the children, that we can't seem to get things right in marriage, that we feel so tongue-tied in the presence of others: we get frustrated by such annoyances, even depressed from them. We'd love to be in control of ourselves, in control of our circumstances and our futures; somehow, being in control makes us feel safer.... We hate feeling vulnerable, weak, powerless....

The Lord our God moved the apostle Paul to record in Scripture an appreciation for being weak. Says Jesus to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." That's why Paul in turn can even boast of being weak....

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THROUGH A THORN IN THE FLESH, PAUL LEARNS THAT GOD'S STRENGTH IS REVEALED THROUGH MAN'S WEAKNESSES.**

1. The need for Paul's weaknesses
2. The nature of Paul's weaknesses
3. The result of Paul's weaknesses

### ***1. The Need for Paul's weaknesses.***

The apostle Paul – a man like you and me – was greatly bothered by a "thorn in the flesh". Just what this thorn was, and how Paul responded to it, will require our attention in our second point this morning. First we need to consider the wider context of this passage about the "thorn in the flesh". Why does Paul mention this thorn? Why had God given him this thorn? That's our first point: the need for Paul's weaknesses.

I draw to your attention that this "thorn in the flesh" troubled Paul for years on end. It was not a one-time thing that bothered Paul for, say, one week in his life, or a couple times in one month and then no longer. That Paul asked God to take this thorn away, and that God replied with No, He would not take it away, compels us to conclude that Paul was bothered by this thorn for an extended period of time, that it was part and parcel of the life he was given to live.

That fact prompts an intriguing observation. For notice: this passage in 2 Corinthians 12 is the only reference in all Paul's writings (and we've got thirteen of his letters, some rather long!) where Paul makes mention of a problem in his personal life. In other words: the apostle *does not bellyache* about the cross he is given to carry! Though he's repeatedly bothered by a thorn in his flesh, Paul does not keep complaining about it, does not wear a long face of discontent about his lot in life; his writings direct attention away from himself and demand the attention of his readers to the work of his Lord and Saviour.

I mention this for two reasons. The first is the matter of example. To the degree that we keep talking about the difficulties we encounter in health, daily work, family relations, etc,

to that *same* degree we show that our attention is not focused on our God and Saviour. That is not good. If God is Number One in our lives, there isn't place for me to keep talking about *me* – be it in positive terms or in negative terms. Most of us have grown up in a very me-centred culture, and the result is that we've learned well how to talk about *my* happiness and *my* toothache and *my* busy family and *my* holiday, etc, etc. But the apostle in his writings shows us that Christians have a radically different focus.

I have a second reason for mentioning that Paul nowhere else writes about the thorn in his flesh. That's this: why does Paul mention his thorn *here*? If throughout his writings his focus is obviously on his Lord, why does he now write about himself and his thorn? The answer lies in the words of vs 7. In our translation the apostle writes like this:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

Notice the reference to “becoming conceited.” In the original Greek those words even appear twice, once at the beginning of the sentence, and again at the end. In other words, Paul is putting this concept in bold letters. Paul wants his readers to know that he was in acute danger of becoming proud, haughty. *For that reason* “a thorn in the flesh was given” to him “to keep me from becoming conceited.”

What could prompt Paul to become conceited? Again, beloved, notice what Paul writes. Vs 7: “to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations.” That's the point: Paul has been privileged to receive numerous revelations from God. One may think of Jesus' appearing to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). One may think of the vision Paul received calling him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:9f). When the apostle first came to Corinth with the gospel now so many years ago, “the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision” in order to encourage him to work diligently in this apostate city (Acts 18:9f). After his arrest, “the Lord stood by him” one night with the promise that Paul would go to Rome to testify of Jesus in that city (Acts 23:11). The temptation is not small to conclude from such appearances of Jesus Himself that Paul must be quite something special; he must be extra good, extra important to God, if Jesus comes no less than four times with a word of encouragement!

Then there's the material mentioned in the first verses of 2 Corinthians 12. The apostle relates –apparently for the first time– a revelation he received 14 years ago, one that certainly had within itself the ‘stuff’ to make Paul think that he was something very special. He says in vs 2 that he “knows a man in Christ who...was caught up to the third heaven,” and he repeats in vs 4 that this man “was caught up into Paradise,” and “heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” This man “caught up into Paradise” is none else than Paul himself.<sup>1</sup> Precisely what we are to think of “the third heaven” and “Paradise”, let alone the “inexpressible things” which man is not permitted to tell<sup>2</sup> we can leave to one side. The point now is that Paul, some 14 years ago, was granted an experience in which he was elevated from this earth into the presence of God where he saw and heard things beyond human comprehension. Possibly we have to think of the kind of vision Isaiah saw in the throne room of God and the angels sang their ceaseless “Holy, holy, holy” (Is 6). Whatever it was, we can much understand that human nature is prone to boast of such privileges, and people who hear that another has received such an experience invariably look up to such a person, envy such a person.

<sup>1</sup>That this man is Paul himself is evident from the context. For Paul is defending his ministry against “most eminent apostles” (11:5; 12:11) who boasted of their abilities and accomplishments. Over against them Paul has much to boast about, even a revelation about heaven! But he won't boast in himself, and for that reason uses the indefinite third person to relate that he does have reason to stand head and shoulders above the “most eminent apostles”. See further the commentaries.

<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about it in the commentaries and studies. See, eg, AT Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pg 71ff; RP Martin, *II Corinthians* (Waco: Word, 1986), pg 387f.

Paul was no different from anybody else, was also human, prone to self-exaltation on account of the privileges God had been pleased to grant in “these surpassingly great revelations.” *For that reason* a thorn was given to Paul; this privileged apostle should stay humble. God would prevent any sense of exaltation arising in the apostle as a result of these revelations, and used a “thorn in the flesh” to achieve that goal. As a result, Paul stayed small, meek, kept his feet on the ground.

Why, now, does Paul write about this danger facing himself, this danger of becoming conceited? And why does he write about the antidote God gave him to this temptation? That, brothers and sisters, is because of the particular problem facing the Corinthian congregation. We began our reading at 2 Corinthians 11:5, where the apostle speaks about “super-apostles”. It appears that the church of Corinth was infiltrated by teachers of the Christian faith who thought an awful lot of themselves, who boasted of their abilities and their gifts, who related their experiences to the church membership in such a way that these members looked up to these “most eminent apostles” with respect, awe, and even envy. Given their abilities and gifts and spiritual experiences, these teachers were obviously a large cut above the average member.... And to make matters worse, they derided Paul because he was just a normal, plain man with nothing to boast about.... How, then, they said, can he be a real apostle of Jesus Christ and a genuine teacher of the gospel of God?!

In the face of that attack in Corinth against his credentials as apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul *could* have boasted of his own experiences, the numerous revelations he’d received, etc. But Paul does not want people to look up to him as if he were really something, as if he’d done so much, was so good, was extra-favoured in God’s eyes, etc. Paul’s principle is that those who boast should boast of the Lord (cf 2 Corinthians 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:31). That’s why, in the verses we read, Paul does not –in an effort to show that he is better than those “super-apostles”– stick his finger behind his suspender and then relate all that he has done and all that happened to him; when he talks about himself and his experiences he rather calls himself a ‘fool’ for doing so. And, he continues, if there is really something about himself that he could boast about, it’s his *weaknesses*. And yes, that sets Paul very much *over against* the false teachers that had infiltrated Corinth. They speak of what they have done, of who they are..., and Paul is content to speak only of what he can’t do, of his limitations, his weaknesses. How different the attitude, indeed....

That brings us, beloved, to our second point,

## **2. The nature of the thorn that troubled Paul.**

There’s been much speculation over the years as to what this thorn actually was.<sup>3</sup> Some have suggested poor eyesight, others epilepsy, still others recurring malaria, feelings of guilt and depression, a speech defect, etc, etc. We do better, though, to work with Paul’s own description of what the thorn was.<sup>4</sup> Notice that in vs 10 of our text Paul explains what he means when he speaks about “weaknesses”. As examples of weaknesses he mentions “insults”, “hardships”, “persecutions”, “difficulties”. And note: *these identical notions* he’s mentioned already in chap 11, in that list of various sufferings he’s experienced. We read it; Paul says that

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.<sup>25</sup> 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;<sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;<sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

<sup>3</sup> See DA Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pg 144. Also Martin, 413ff.

<sup>4</sup> See FJ Bijzet, “Paulus’ Doorn in het Vlees (2 Korint. 12,7-10)”, *Pro Ministerio*, Febr 1997, pg 3ff.

We read this list of incidents where Paul has been the victim of strife, and we're touched; we shake our heads in pity for the man who has suffered so very much. Fancy that: getting the 39 lashes reserved in the law of Moses for those found guilty of criminal activity (Deuteronomy 25:3), and then not once but five times – and each time (presumably) wrongly so! To be pelted with stones and left for dead, to undergo the harrowing experience of a storm at sea and shipwreck, to be fallen upon by robbers who knows how many times.... And that's to say nothing about sleepless night after sleepless night, endless work that never gets done, nothing to eat, no place to call home; we'd well and truly expect Paul to get depressed from such calamity upon calamity!

But listen: Paul doesn't get depressed from it at all! Look at vs 9: "therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses," and vs 10: "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties."

And we're surprised! "I delight," he says, "I delight in weaknesses...." How, we wonder, how is that possible!!

Notice, dear congregation, that the apostle in vs 7 describes his "thorn in the flesh" as "a messenger of Satan". Satan has elsewhere been presented in Scripture as being allowed to attack the people of God, to tempt them in an effort to break them. I remind you of Job. The Lord God gave to Satan permission to do what he would to prompt Job to curse God. In his efforts to destroy Job's faith, Satan used guerilla warfare; "the Sabaeans raided...and killed the servants with the edge of the sword" (Job 1:15; cf vs 17). Satan used "the fire of God" to burn up Job's sheep and shepherds (vs 16). He used "a great wind from across the wilderness" to level the house in which Job's children were eating, so that they all died (vs 18f). He took away Job's health by striking him "with painful sores from the sole of his feet to the top of his head" (2:7). Finally, he moved Job's closest companion –his wife– to give to Job the advice to "curse God and die" (vs 9).

In the same way, my brothers and sisters, the afflictions Paul experienced were not chance events, as in: Paul *happens* to be the victim of a lynch party, *happens* to be on a ship that flounders, *happens* to get in the way of robbers, *happens* to suffer from sleeplessness. Paul was stoned in Lystra because of devilish hatred from the Jews against the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 14:19); *behind the stoning was Satan*. In Philippi Paul was wiped and beaten because of devilish hatred from the crowds against the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 16:22); *behind the beating was Satan*. He was arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem because of devilish hatred on the part of the Jews against the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 21:26ff); *behind the beating was Satan*. And what shall we say of the shipwreck mentioned at the end of the book of Acts (ch 27)? Would one dare to say that Satan was not behind it? Recall Paul's words to the Thessalonians:

"...we wanted to come to you –even I, Paul, time and again– but Satan hindered us" (1 Thessalonians 2:18).

You see: the devil does anything to stop the progress of the gospel of Jesus Christ!<sup>5</sup> Observe what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:14: Satan will go so far as to transform himself into an angel of light in his diabolic attempts to frustrate the gospel of Christ Jesus.

This "thorn in the flesh": here, beloved, was the devil attempting time and again to silence Paul, to prevent the apostle from speaking to the nations of the world about the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.<sup>6</sup> Here was diabolic effort to frustrate the Lord's

<sup>5</sup> cf Dan 10:13; Is 24:21ff. In the days of Jesus' sojourn on earth, the devil was "out in full force" in an attempt to frustrate the coming of the kingdom. Hence the demon possessions, the sick, etc (cf Lu 13:16). The reader is further referred to FS Leahy, *Satan Cast Out: a Study in Biblical Demonology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Note Ed Murphy, *A Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), pg 378. Murphy concurs with the Phillips translation of the term: "harass", and comments: "Harassment wears on the nerves, the emotions, and on the body, becoming oppressive and wearisome. Frustration, anger,

church gathering work, diabolic effort to maintain his own evil kingdom in a world ransomed by Jesus Christ!

For our part, we find the thought that Satan is attacking us somewhat scary. Might Satan's efforts to destroy us, to silence us, be behind the strife we experience in church, behind the sicknesses that drain us of energy, behind the sleeplessness that makes us ineffective tomorrow? We don't exactly like the thought. But let it be clear to us, beloved, that this certainly *can* be the case. Recall Paul's words to the Ephesians:

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (6:12).

The apostle's reference to 'rulers' and 'authorities' and 'powers of this dark world' and 'spiritual forces of evil' is a reference to the devil and his demons. Says Paul: not the stubborn husband, not the annoying bedsprings, not the arrogant teenager is our ultimate enemy, but the *devil*. As John also heard the heavens proclaim:

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Rev 12:12).

But precisely that reality, congregation, opens the broad perspective to the *gospel* in the midst of our struggles in family, at work, with sickness. There is a reason why the apostle Paul in his adversity sought relief through prayer to God. That's vs 8: "three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." Why did Paul turn to the Lord in prayer in his pursuit of relief? It's because he knew and believed that the Satan who was hounding him was *defeated!* Not for nothing does Paul say in vs 8 that he three times "pleaded with the *Lord*". Lord: that's the *triumphant* Christ, the One who has defeated sin and Satan, and so received from God almighty the throne over all creation. So: even Satan himself cannot move unless this Lord permit; recall Job 1!!! Hence Paul's repeated plea: 'Lord, You are sovereign and have triumphed over the evil one, and so Satan can do nothing without Your permission. So I pray that You will prevent Satan from harassing me with rods and shipwrecks and robbers, with weariness and sleeplessness and anxiety.' Paul would prefer to get on with his work without being knocked to the ground, without being weak, without feeling so incompetent to do the work given to do. He wants strength to perform, he wants opportunity to make good progress. 'Lord, You have defeated Satan; please, then, take him off my back!'

Again, beloved, Paul's response is instructive for us. Instead of getting all down and desperate in the face of exhaustion and accident and hatred and danger, the apostle turns his eye to his God and Saviour. Sure, he goes to the doctor, undoubtedly, to have his wounds dressed. But first he seeks the Lord and works with the gospel of Jesus' triumph over Satan. He takes precautions when he boards a ship, undoubtedly satisfies himself that the ship is sea-worthy. But first he seeks the Lord and works with the gospel of Jesus' triumph over Satan. He'll make sure he has adequate food and water for his journey, undoubtedly. But first he seeks the Lord and works with the gospel of Jesus' triumph over Satan. He knows of Christ's triumph, knows that Satan's rage can never undo the Saviour's work, can never tear him from his God, can never destroy Christ's church gathering work. So the apostle keeps looking to the Lord, and therefore doesn't lose perspective, hope. All the ship-wrecks and the beatings and the imprisonments and the robbers and the sicknesses and the sleeplessness and the hunger and the thirst do not lead Paul to despair and giving up, for he knows *what's behind* the trials of his life; his enemy is the devil. And the devil is defeated! So his attacks, painful though they be, will ultimately come to nothing.

That perspective, my brothers and sisters, is instructive for us in the struggles and sicknesses and sorrows that make up our daily lives.

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loss of sleep, a sapping of strength and shortening of patience – this is what was happening to Paul." This agrees with 11:27.

We come to our third point:

### **3. The result of Paul's weaknesses.**

Three times Paul pleaded with God to please get Satan off his back. God's answer to Paul's request was not the answer he –or we!– would wish. What we look for in our struggles and weaknesses is *relief* from Satan's harassments, relief from migraines and sleeplessness, relief from fightings in the family and church, relief from exhaustion and depression and memories of bad experiences. Paul sought it too..., but did not receive it. Instead –O wonder of wonders!– he received from the Lord *another revelation*. Vs 9: "But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'"

Another revelation from God. But this revelation from God, beloved, was not simply a *word* that God *said* to Paul; this revelation was at the same time a *reality* Paul could *experience*. Time and again we read in the book of Acts of calamity that beset Paul, and each of these calamities was an effort by the devil to destroy this preacher of God's gospel. I read in Acts 13 that Elymas the sorcerer withstood the apostle Paul in an effort to prevent a leading government official from hearing the gospel. Make no mistake: behind Elymas the sorcerer was the devil. But, the passage continues, the result of the sorcerer's efforts was this: "then the proconsul believed" (vs 12). I read in Acts 14 of two attempts on Paul's life through stoning (in Iconium and in Derbe), and one attempt (in Lystra) to swell his head by having offerings presented to him. Those three satanic attempts on the apostle's standing as an apostle produced this result: the church was planted in Iconium, Derbe and Lystra. I read in Acts 16 that Paul and Silas in Philippi were beaten with rods, cast into prison, and their feet were fasted in the stocks. The gospel wasn't silenced though; God sent an earthquake to break them out of prison, and the result was that the prison keeper and his family were baptised.

And I can go on listing for you many attempts by Satan to silence the messenger of the gospel, listing also how God granted abundant grace so that Paul's sufferings resulted in *blessing* for many called to life. You see: it is as God had said to Paul in that last revelation: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness." In the face of Paul's weaknesses, in the face of his imprisonments and beatings and sufferings, God was publicly displaying that Satan's power was broken, displaying that following Satan's efforts in fact produced the opposite result than Satan intended, displaying that God was busy gathering, defending, preserving His Church. Paul experienced in his own life that his own weaknesses were not a problem to God; he experienced in his own life that God gathered His church *precisely through* Paul's weaknesses and tribulations.

So: shall Paul boast of his own accomplishments, boast of how cleverly he preached the gospel in Iconium, boast of how he out-smarted the sorcerer and persuaded the proconsul to believe? Shall he boast of how he patched up this marriage and bent that disobedient child into obedience, boast of his role in bringing so many to faith and making church life so peaceful? The apostle knows it: of myself I am weak, I have needs, I have distresses and aches and pains and who knows what else; of myself I can accomplish nothing, I am *weak*. But he knows also: Christ uses precisely such brokenness to gather His Church! Those weaknesses: those are the tools Christ Jesus uses to bring many to salvation! Not the self-sufficient, the mighty and the able and the talented, play such a crucial role in God's kingdom, but the weak and the tongue-tied and the self-conscious and the sickly: they have such a role, for through them and their weaknesses space is left open for *God's power to be revealed!* Therefore, says Paul, "therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses" (vs 9). He's learned it: precisely in his *weaknesses*, when Satan would throw him around so cruelly, can he be evidence of Satan's defeat and therefore of Christ's victory – *for Satan's attacks produce growth in God's kingdom!*

We like to be strong in our persons, attractive in our church life, healthy and handsome and likeable. We want to be able to *accomplish*, want people to acknowledge that we're *able*, that we *count*. In God's kingdom, beloved, *our ability ultimately counts for nothing*. Important is *God's working...*, and our willingness to admit that His strength is made perfect in our weakness.

Now I understand why Paul didn't complain about the thorn in the flesh that kept hounding him day by day. To moan about his weaknesses, about Satan's attacks upon him, would draw attention away from the *God* who sovereignly gathers His church precisely *through our weaknesses*.

To want to be strong, to complain of being weak, takes away from God's glory. And that will never do.