

THE POWER OF THE MINISTRY
2 Corinthians 12:1 – 13:14

What comes to mind when you hear the word “weakness”? Cf. key verse 12:9

If Paul were a “James Bond” or a “Rambo” he wouldn’t have boasted in all those things he listed in chapter 11. His attitude was that he was glad that he could suffer for the sake of Christ.

1. THE POWER OF A HEAVENLY VISION 12:1-7

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man 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. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷So to keep me 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.

Visions and Revelations

“Visions” are when you actually see something;

“revelations” are a disclosure to the mind of God’s truth.

It is pointless to speculate about what Paul saw that he said he couldn’t describe. If Paul says he saw things that cannot be told it is probably wrong to guess about it.

My opinion is that even if Paul could tell us what he saw that we couldn’t understand it apart from a personal vision of our own.

Is Paul referring to himself? “I know a man...” is in the third person; however it surely is Paul. This vision was so personal to him that he didn’t speak of it for 14 years. This is the only place in Paul’s writings that he mentions it. This probably happened soon after Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus.

What is the “third heaven?”

The first heaven is our immediate atmosphere.

The second heaven is the outer universe.

The third heaven is God’s “place.”

Of course, as Mr. Charles Alexander says, “God is not somewhere because God is everywhere.”

The Jewish expressions are the “third heaven,” the “highest heaven” or the “heaven of heavens.”

Nehemiah 9:6

“You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

1 Kings 8:27

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

Psalms 148:1-4

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!

² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his hosts!

³ Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!

⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

Paul’s main point is that any focus on glorious spiritual experiences, without regard to one’s weaknesses leads to spiritual problems.

There are at least two dangers in telling about any such experiences:

- 1) Without admitting weakness, people may think too highly of the servant of God [6].
- 2) Without the disclosure of weakness, God’s servant may fall into the trap of self-exaltation [6, 7].

A paraphrase of verses 1-7: “I experienced visionary flights into Paradise. I saw things the limited laws of human speech make it impossible to tell. How I would love to tell you about it. The experiences were so powerful! They changed my life! But I will tell you a more recent experience that is even more powerful. Because my earlier experiences with Christ were so phenomenal and because I have a tendency to become conceited about them, God has given me a special unwanted gift to keep my pride under control. God has given me a ‘thorn in the flesh.’ Actually it is the kind of thing that is so bothersome that it has to be the work of the devil himself. But God permits the enemy to afflict me to keep me from exalting myself.”

2. THE POWER OF DIVINE GRACE 12:7-8

⁷ So to keep me 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. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

Paul did not specify the exact nature of his affliction.
What is the “thorn in the flesh?” In God’s wisdom we just don't know.

Why is that good?
It leaves room for each of us to apply the message to ourselves.

Do you have a “thorn in the flesh?”
Perhaps chronic back pain; problems with vision; stiffness in our knees; etc.

Paul hated this diabolical infirmity and he prayed for its removal.
Apparently it was painful and embarrassing.

The persistent answer of the Heavenly Father was “NO!”

3. MY WEAKNESS IS HIS STRENGTH

12:9-10

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Note three important words in verse 9:

Power; strength is Greek: *dunamis*

English equivalents are dynamite, dynamo, and dynamic. The concept the word expresses includes: power, strength, ability, energy, effectiveness, might, authority, and majesty.

Made perfect is from *telos* which means finished, completed, matured, fulfilled, and realized.

Weakness from *astheneia* meaning feebleness, bodily infirmity, ill health, sickness, suffering, distress, and calamity.

When Paul grasped the mysterious truth that human weakness is the starting place for God's power, his attitude toward himself changed: "I am content in weakness!"

Has Paul gone mad? No, he finds contentment in his weakness on two fronts:

- 1) By grace, he now has the insight that weaknesses in his life, are "for the sake of Christ."
- 2) By faith, he understands the revelation that, "when I am weak, then I am strong."

4. THE POWER OF A PERSEVERING WITNESS 12:11-18

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

¹⁴ Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? ¹⁶ But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

Paul has finished with his boasting to which the Corinthians had driven him. He says, "I have made a fool of myself." As he concluded his list of spiritual credentials he was embarrassed by the entire exercise. The Corinthians had been misled by the "super apostles" when they should have accepted Paul on the basis of the apostolic signs [12].

He uses irony again concerning the "wrong" of not taking their money [13].

Paul anticipates a third visit and continues his witness [14].

Don't think that Paul told of his troubles to evoke pity from them. It was his way of showing that the effectiveness of his ministry at Corinth was not a result of personal competence, but of God [Cf. 1 Cor 15:9-10]

The Signs of an Apostle

Paul reminds the Corinthians that his ministry among them was authenticated by four signs of an apostle: signs, wonders, miracles, and great patience.

Signs are proofs; wonders are signal acts; and miracles are powerful deeds.

Cf. Acts 2:22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know....”

miracles: {mighty powers, works} powers, which looks specifically to the agency by which they were performed - thus defined: "... which God did..."

wonders: regards the state of mind produced on the spectator by the sight of them. They were of such a nature, so entirely out of the common course of things, and so thoroughly transcending merely human powers that the beholders were astonished at them.

signs: refers to their significance as being the seals by which God authenticated Him who worked them; and as being themselves also a symbolic or parabolic part of the revelation which He brought to men.

“Signs” is another word for miracles. While it may describe miracles, it simply means convincing proofs, miraculous or not.

Although there are no miracles recorded in connection with the Corinthian Church, Paul was known in the early church for his miracles, especially healings.

Cf. Acts 13:11; 14:10; 15:2; 16:18; 19:11-12; 28:3-6, 8; Romans 15:18-19.

Paul was an eyewitness to the resurrected Christ [1 Cor 15:8-9].

God called and assigned Paul to the office of apostle [1 Cor 1:1; Acts 9:15-16].

Great Perseverance: Paul endured beyond human ability.

5. BUILDING GOD’S HOUSE

12:19-21

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. ²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that his boasting [chapters 11-12] did not come from a need for their approval. He did not need to defend himself to the Corinthians or to anyone else.

The only approval that matters is from God [5:10-11].
So he spoke “in the sight of God...”

Edification [upbuilding] means the “building of a house.” [12:19]

The Corinthian “house” was their acknowledgment of Paul’s authority. Rejection of apostolic authority hinders the building of the church, as it still does today.

Verse 19 states the purpose of all sound biblical leadership; edification.

Good leadership builds people up to where they are able to function with power in their own spheres of influence. True spiritual leadership adds, matures, and enables disciples to use their own gifts for the glory of God and the upbuilding of others.

Consider these four principles which characterize leadership that builds people up:

1) Provide an Example.

Paul stated this principle at least eight times in his writings [Acts 20:35; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess 3:7-10; 1 Tim 1:16; 2 Tim 1:13]

Peter applied this principle to elders, exhorting them not to “lord it over the flock” but to be examples to the flock [1 Peter 5:3].

Paul and Peter followed the example of the Lord Jesus {Servanthood} [Luke 6:40; Matt 20:28; John 13:13-17, 34].

Leaders allow themselves to be known. Paul exposed his feelings so those he led could identify with him and learn by how he handled the difficult situations in life.

2) Communicate Confidence

In the Corinthian letters, in spite of the many serious spiritual and doctrinal problems, Paul expressed confidence in them.

“I have great confidence in you...

I take great pride in you my joy knows no bounds.”

How could Paul have such confidence in people whose behavior had been so wrong?

Paul had confidence in the spiritual transformation taking place in their lives through the Holy Spirit [3:18].

Because Paul believed they had the Holy Spirit, he knew they would acquire the character of Christ [5:1-6; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19].

Paul had confidence in what Christ had done, they were a new creation [5:14-17].

He knew that God had been reconciled to them and declared them righteous in His sight [5:18-21].

3) Preserve Freedom

In the passage on Christian charity [2 Cor 8-9] Paul invited the Corinthians to join in generous giving to help the believers in Judea. Paul challenged, informed, exhorted, and warned, but he carefully preserved their freedom to make choices.

Some leader resort to pressure tactics to get people to do what he thinks is right, but preserving their freedom is the only way to develop people into Christian maturity.

4) Confront with Authority

The purpose of authority in the local church is to build people up, not tear them down. Authority and Servanthood go hand in hand. The leader who serves others gains influence and authority.

Authority is exercised in the context of a personal relationship with those being led [6:11-13].

Authority is exercised not from an “above you” position, but by coming alongside [11:7].

Authority is exercised by appeal, not by demand [10:1].

Authority is exercised with full acknowledgment of the leader’s own weaknesses [12:9-10].

6. THE POWER OF THE RISEN CHRIST 13:1-4

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them— ³ since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

When he comes this third time, he will, if necessary exert his apostolic authority and sit in judgment on those who refuse to acknowledge his teaching as coming from God. He reminds them that witnesses must be produced in support of any charge they seek to bring against him.

This is how Paul will prove that Christ, who was crucified in weakness and raised from the dead by the power of God, is working among them with divine power through Paul himself [3-4].

Humanly speaking, Paul is weak, as he says in chapters 11-12. But through the risen Christ who dwells within him, he is powerful in serving the Lord and the Corinthians.

7. THE POWER OF DIVINE AUTHORITY

13:5-10

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. ¹⁰ For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

Instead of examining Paul, the Corinthians should have been examining themselves. If they do so, they will find that Christ Jesus is in them [5], and this will vindicate Paul and his ministry among them [6]. Though he recognizes the possibility that someone might “fail the test,” it seems plain from the context that he does not anticipate such an outcome. His primary goal is not self-justification, but their growth in the faith. He is even willing to appear to have failed if that would lead to their doing what is right [7].

Paul is always ready to work for the truth [8]. His desire for the Corinthians is their maturity [9]; their becoming complete in Christ.

8. FINAL GREETINGS

13:11-14

Greetings and benediction,

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

As Paul closes his letter, he summarizes his appeal to the Corinthians in four exhortations in verse 11. Such attitudes will ensure that God, who produces love and peace, will be with them.

A “holy kiss” was the first-century equivalent of a handshake. It was a symbol of unity within the family of God [12]. Paul sends this greeting from the saints with whom he was then fellowshiping [13].

The letter concludes with a benediction that has become frequently used in the Christian church, for it expresses concisely and beautifully both the theological truth of the triune God and the heartbeat of the Gospel, as it speaks of the blessings that flow from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To this ministry of the Gospel all believers are called.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.