

12 Corinthians 12:1-10 - Glory and Weakness

As we gather this morning and celebrate worshipping together for a whole year, two things continually came to my mind. First, is how much God has accomplished among us here in the last year. We truly have seen God bless us in amazing ways. He gifted us this property and building only weeks after even knowing it was available. I tell my pastor friends about that and they just stare blankly at me. How is that possible? God has given us a rich fellowship of believers with various gifts by which we've all benefitted. It seems as though every time I talk to one of the local neighbors they ask "Where do all these people come from?" It's obvious even to outsiders that God is doing a work here.

The second thing that comes to mind as I think through our congregation are the hardships and trials and sufferings that we have. I'm going to let the cat out of the bag here, most of us have some serious difficulties in life. Whether it's relationships, health, financial concerns, loss of loved ones, our own personal devotion to Jesus is not where it should be, you're busier than you'd like to be, away more than you'd like to be, maybe concerned about the eternal destiny of a loved one. Some of our troubles are self-inflicted; things we bring on ourselves. But many of the things we deal with are out of our control. We are weak.

And so as we gather together week-by-week these 2 truths hang in the balance: We are the messed up people who sing the praises of the glorious, Triune God. And what I want to remind of this morning, is that is exactly how God has planned it all throughout the ages.

1 Cor. 1:26-29: For consider your calling, brothers; not many of you were wise...not many were powerful...not many of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in this world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in this world, even the [nothings/nobodys] to bring to nothing those who are somebodies, so that no one will boast in the presence of God.

It is those who are weak who most clearly see the power of God. And therefore those who are weak who most praise God.

You remember the lady who came into the dinner meeting between Jesus and the Pharisees and anointed Jesus' feet with perfume? She couldn't stop weeping and praising Jesus. The Pharisees knew she was a sinner - likely a prostitute - and were disgusted at such a display. Jesus said: suppose 2 men owe someone a debt. One 50, one 500 and the man forgives them both. Who loves the man more? The one who received the greater forgiveness. It's the one who is weaker, who has more baggage, more sin, more need for the awesome God of the universe to shower him with mercy. **(Luke 7:36-50)**

Do you realize it pleases God to forgive massive, incalculable debts - ongoing debts - because he receives love and praise as we are reminded of his grace?

God didn't choose Israel because they were a strong and mighty people. He chose them because they were weak and small. Only a weak and small people would be able to praise God for the wonders he would do among them.

That's what I want to drive home this morning: God has done a great work among a weak people on purpose because it brings him glory.

And if we are going to be a church that **continues** to magnify the Lord Jesus Christ in all that we do, we need don't need to hide our weaknesses, or conceal them for fear of judgement. We also don't need to wallow in our weakness with a continual "woe is me!" attitude. No, what God wants is for us to boast in our weakness and rely on his strength.

I want to get at that from this passage. And I think it divides neatly between the glory of God and the weakness of his people.

1 - Like Paul, we have seen wonderful things from God.

This is an amazing passage, where Paul somehow was taken up into heaven. He doesn't know if it was bodily or just in a vision. It was so real felt like he was physically there, but maybe it was simply a vision like one the of the OT prophets received.

Why does Paul even mention this amazing episode in his life? Well, throughout the letter, but specifically in chapters 10-12 Paul has been defending his apostleship. Some false teachers have come into the church and claimed that, yeah, Paul might be an apostle, but they are **super-apostles**. They aren't really. They are false teachers - they have a different understanding of Jesus, a different gospel.

And their claim is that Paul is kind of a weak guy. He's a nobody. Physically, he's not all that impressive. Seems like he's battling ailments, has eye problems. He's also not very stern with the church. Oh, he seems tough in his letters - he roars like a lion, but when he arrives at the church he's more like kitten. Plus, the church doesn't pay Paul. Paul always had get a job to supply an income. Why would anyone respect a part-time pastor? So yeah, maybe he's an apostle. But they are "super apostles." They are "true leaders." They demand payment. They are harsh with the Corinthians. They are probably more physically impressive.

And Paul says: my weakness is actually my credibility. My weakness is actually proof that God is at work. Paul is gentle because he is the father of this church. He planted it. He doesn't take payment - not because it isn't owed to him - but so that no one can accuse him of false motives. And even though **he** is unimpressive, what is impressive is how God has worked amazing things among these people despite Paul's weakness.

Paul says: You want my credentials as a true apostle? I was beaten 5 times with 40 lashes minus 1, I was shipwrecked 3 times, he's frequently homeless, frequently in jail for the gospel, frequently without food. Jews hate him, Gentiles hate him, he has to make secret escapes out of cities to keep from being killed. Yet still he goes on and the gospel goes forward and in his wake are dozens of churches.

And that's where we pick it up here in chapter 12. Part of the credentials he gives as an apostle is that he was actually taken up to heaven. Again, he doesn't know if it was physically or in a vision - and he has seen the glory of heaven. **Read 1-4**

So Paul is very reluctant to even mention this vision. He begins talking about it as though it were some other man who saw this. In **Vs. 1** he says "he knows a man." It's almost as though this description is so fantastic no one would believe him. This man was caught up into paradise. He also calls it the third heaven.

What is the third heaven? Mormons believe that there are 3 levels of heaven - celestial, terrestrial, telestial. Is that what he's talking about? No. They're aren't 3 levels of heaven.

If you think about how the Bible uses the word "heaven" it uses it in 3 ways. There's heaven where the birds fly. There's heavens where the sun, moon and stars are. And there's heaven where God reigns. And from our perspective here on earth, the farthest one away is where God reigns; it's the third heaven.

Then he connects this man - to himself in **Vs. 7** where he says that because of this revelation he was given a thorn in the flesh. Because he saw amazing and glorious things, God wanted to keep him from being proud.

And this isn't the nonsense we've seen from all those heaven tourism books like *Heaven Is For Real, 90 Minutes in Heaven*. Those are all made up stories. No, this was real. But Paul was quiet about it. Why was that?

Well, imagine I came up here one morning and I told you "I've been to heaven." Oh sure. "No, no, really. I don't know if I was physically taken or it was just a dream." What was it like? "Well, I can't tell you. It was so amazing words don't even describe. I can't even begin to describe how amazing it was!" Sure, Jason.

As much as you might love me and appreciate me, there'd be some doubt wouldn't there? Same with Paul. "You mean shipwreck-guy has been to heaven? Fourteen years ago, you say? Why hasn't he told us before?" Oh, well, because it was indescribable. Sure. I wonder if Paul wasn't concerned that people would scoff.

At the same time it seems that there were people who might have believed Paul and given him greater weight based on this vision because he was privileged to see it. **Read 5-6**

So why didn't Paul like to talk about it? It was true, it did happen, he wouldn't be a fool for speaking the truth. So why not talk about it? Because there was a chance that people might think too highly of Paul. Yes he did see glorious things from God but it wasn't because he was so great. It wasn't because he was so awesome.

And he wanted to be very careful that people didn't get the impression that he was bragging when he told people about these amazing things. They were good and true. He could tell people. But he didn't want people to think too highly of him. And you can see that tension where he says he'll boast in this man, but not in himself. But it is him. He's in this tough spot. He doesn't want to boast - though he could because it was true.

There's this old saying: "It ain't boasting if you done it." That's not true, of course. But that's the tension he's getting at with being caught up into heaven.

Okay, well this is great. But what does this have to do with us? We haven't all been transported to heaven. We haven't see the unspeakable glories of the Lord Jesus. No, but we have seen God's glory revealed here, haven't we? We've see God do some amazing things among us. Things that could only be explained by a sovereign, gracious king. And because of all that God has accomplished at RBC in just 364 days, it might be easy for us to boast. It might be easy for us to give God glory with our mouths while all the while harboring in our pride in our hearts:

We worked, we gave, we did, we accomplished, we deserve.

No, it's God's good pleasure to reveal his glory to us - not in heavenly visions - but in material provisions, in relationships, in doing ministry together. Everything that we have, everything that has been accomplished among us, everything that we have to rejoice in has all been given to us by a sovereign, glorious God. It is he that deserves the credit. It is he that gets the glory.

And so we need to be careful that we don't speak of God's work in such a way that **we** get glory, or **we** get honor.

Why has God blessed us? Because in his own good pleasure he has chosen to do so. We have seen wonderful things from God and he deserves all the glory.

2 - We are a weak people.

At the same time God graciously revealed to Paul all the glories of the third heaven, he gave Paul suffering. And at first Paul talks about his specific suffering with this thorn in the flesh. **Read 7**

So we don't know what this thorn in the flesh was. Was it a physical ailment? Was it a false teacher in the church who aggravated Paul? Was it a demon who harassed him? We really don't know. I go back and forth, to be honest. Sometimes it seems as though it's a person. Because he says it's a messenger that seems to lean toward person. But the word weakness is more commonly associated with a physical ailment. And we see throughout Jesus' ministry where people are physically tormented by demons. We just don't know.

This malady is called 2 things in **Vs. 7**. First, Paul calls it a messenger from satan. So whatever this was there was a demonic aspect to it. We don't talk a lot about demonic spiritual activity but it's real. Demons are real. Satan is real. And they work against the people of God.

He also calls it a thorn in the flesh. I grew up in the Tri-Cities and we had these weeds we called goat heads. They were a small, green plant that looked like ground cover but the seeds were this little hard ball that had 2 or 4 razor sharp spikes that were super hard. If you walked through a field they would collect all over the bottom of your shoe. If you rode a bike over them your tire would be instantly flat. If they lodged into your skin deep enough - like if you stepped on you - it was a nightmare to get out. It was this small thing that was a constant terror.

This is what Paul had. And it was given to him from God. A satanic messenger from God. That sounds weird but this is something that is mentioned regularly in the Bible: that God uses Satan for his own purposes. We know that God's sovereignty encompasses even Satan. Satan is not somehow independent from God's control. And God is not responsible for Satan's wickedness. How does all of that fit together? We have no idea, but it does.

In any case, this thorn was given by God to Paul. And Paul asked for it to be removed three times. This was unbearable. Back to the goat heads. Unless you've actually stepped on a goat head with your bare feet, it's hard to describe. Stepping on Legos is a vacation compared to goat heads. And when you do step on one, life stops. The pain is constant and aggravating and increases with even the slightest amount of pressure or movement.

Why did God give Paul this thorn? Paul says twice it was to keep him from becoming conceited, arrogant. The greatness of the things Paul saw could play to his own pride. Maybe God thought Paul was special and that's why Paul saw these things. We often think of Paul as the greatest man ever after Jesus. But Paul was keenly aware of his own tendency to sin. He was aware of his bent toward pride. He was the chief of sinners. And God used this thorn to perpetually keep Paul humble.

Now, just to be clear: Paul knew exactly why he had a thorn in the flesh. It was because he had seen these great things and God needed to keep him humble. We don't usually understand the connection between our afflictions and what God is doing. I certainly don't think that anyone is suffering because of the good things God has done here. Nevertheless, we often live with the same tension Paul did. **Read 8-9a**

"God please take it away!" The Greek word is to strongly urge someone for something. It's okay to ask the Lord to take our weakness away. It's okay to ask him to take away sickness and disease or relational conflict or whatever the thorn is. Those are okay. And he could say yes. Just because he said no to Paul doesn't mean he'll say no to you.

But he might say no. How do you know if he says no? You still have it. God could remove it. He could flip your difficult situation like a light switch from hard to easy. And if he says no he gives 2 promises.

1 - That his grace is sufficient. That his work in you through this difficult situation is on purpose and you will be given what you need to get through.

I was hauling a load of wood in my truck last year when my back tire blew out. We got the spare tire on but as we lowered the jack we realized the spare tire didn't have much pressure in it at all. It looked like something from a cartoon, half smashed down. So I drove really, really slowly to a gas station where I could finally get some air. The blown tire wasn't what I wanted. And the tire with just a little bit of air in it wasn't what I wanted. But you know what? The air pressure in the spare was enough for me to get to where I needed to go.

This is the hard part. When we are going through a difficult time, God's grace is enough to get us through. And that could be 1 week. It could be 1 year. It could be 1 lifetime. But it is enough.

And just like I had to slow down and come to reality about my tire pressure situation, a lot of times we have to slow down and embrace the reality of our situation. Maybe we want monster truck tires of grace to get through our issues. When in reality, God has given us a spare with just enough to get us where we need to go because he wants us to rely on him and trust in him. His grace is sufficient - it's all we need to get where we need to go in a way that pleases God.

2 - His power is made perfect. What does that mean? Isn't God's power already perfect? It is. But many people don't realize that.

You remember when Gideon was going to go kill the Midianites back in the book of Judges? And God kept telling more and more of his army to go home? You remember why God did that? Because if Gideon defeated the Midianites with a huge army, no one would see God as being all that great. So God cut the number down to 300. It was 300 versus tens of thousands of soldiers. Why? Because 300 men couldn't possibly destroy a

whole army. But God could do it through them. And that's exactly what he did. And who got the glory? God did.

See, when we are weak and we trust God's sufficient grace to get us through a situation you know who looks powerful? God. He's the one that looks amazing and awesome and glorious. But we're often so busy wanting our health back and our weakness gone - which isn't necessarily wrong - but we clamor for it and complain that we are weak or have this thorn that we forget that if we would patiently rely on God's sufficient grace he would be shown to be powerful. Isn't that what our lives are about anyway? Don't we want God to be seen as powerful and amazing? The best way to show that is through our weakness.

Why is it that David killing Goliath is such an amazing thing? Because David was tiny compared to Goliath.

You know Joni Erickson Tada? She writes books, has a radio program, and sings. You know what makes her ministry so amazing? Her weakness. She's a quadriplegic.

We don't like our weaknesses because they are an inconvenience to us. But in reality, if we rely on God's grace and walk in obedience to him, they show God to be amazingly powerful. **Read 9**

I was sharing this passage with someone recently with someone who has just had some difficult situations come into their life. And they were tracking with most of the passage until I got to the part about boasting in weakness. They didn't like that part. They're not a complainer, they're optimistic about their difficult situation. But boast? Why would anyone boast about their weakness?

Listen carefully: Because their weakness is an opportunity to bring God glory. "Well, I'm kind of tired of my opportunity." We might be, but God's not. If you have a weakness, God's planned it out. And you really only have 3 options. To complain, to ignore, or to boast. Complaining is sinful, and ignoring it is foolish.

But boasting, really? When I think of boasting I think of professional athletes who make a great play and then rub it into the face of their opponents. Do a little end zone dance.

But who boasts about cancer? Who goes around with a big head because of arthritis or marriage difficulties?

It's not that kind of boasting. Boasting in God's kingdom is different. It's not that we go do some ridiculous end zone dance about our rebellious child. It's that we faithfully and patiently go through these difficulties knowing that in our weakness God is being shown to be strong. Our weakness is the blank canvas that God uses to paint amazing pictures of his grace.

And we don't always know what that looks like. We don't always see the fruit of patiently relying on God and enduring day after day after year after year. But one day we will. One day God will make it more than worth our while.

2 Cor. 4:16-17: For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

One day God will pull back the curtain and show us how our weakness revealed his power. And Paul knows it's not just this thorn in his flesh that will show God's power it's every affliction we endure where we have to rely on the grace of God. **Read 10**

I think just about all of us can fit into one of these camps. Weakness we've already seen. It usually describes a physical limitation. Insults - that's people slandering us, tearing us down, lying about us.

Jesus: Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. **(Matt. 5:11-12)**

Jesus says we can rejoice in those things. Paul says we can boast. Why? Because great is our reward in heaven.

Hardships are any kind of general difficulty you might have to go through. The people dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Florence are going through hardships. People getting the run-around with their doctors are going through hardships. God knows.

Persecutions are attacks on us for the faith. Difficulties is another general term for problems. All of these serve as a means by which God is shown to be powerful in us. When we endure these faithfully, God is glorified.

What about that word boast? I think maybe we can think about it in terms of an opposite. I think the opposite Paul has in mind is shame. A lot of times when difficult things come into our lives we don't boast to others. We hide it from others because of shame. "So and so has their life together, what's my problem?" Can I just let the cat out of the bag? So and so doesn't have their life together. Some are more reserved than others, some are more shy than others. Some don't have the exact same problems we do and maybe not as many or as obvious. Don't take this the wrong way, but we're all messed up in our own special way - myself included.

There's no shame in weakness because weakness is the way God is shown to be strong.

Which is what makes what we celebrate so sweet. God has taken a group of weak, sinful people who deserve only his wrath and he has done amazing things through us and in us. Not because we are special or great or smart. But because he takes pleasure in showing his strength through our weakness. Don't be afraid to boast in your weakness. In reality, it's how we enjoy his power in us. **Pray**