

## Power In Weakness, 2 Corinthians 12:9

Theme: God is able and is likely to work in powerful ways in the midst of our weakness.

Paul is one of my heroes. He is arguably the greatest warrior for the faith that has ever lived. He traveled across the known world of his day, fearlessly proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, facing trials and odds that would make even the strongest men cringe, staring into the faces of kings, generals, governors, and emperors without shifting in his convictions one inch. He was a man of moral steel, immovable in his values, unstoppable in his ambitions, and unwavering in his faith.

Yet I wonder if any one of us were to be able to view Paul in the circumstances of his life, if we would be greatly disappointed with him. Historical accounts passed down to us do not offer a flattering picture of this man. It portrays an image of a man who was short, bald, with a crooked nose and a stuttering problem. Aside from these physical defects, Paul's socioeconomic status would make most of us hesitant to consider him a close acquaintance. For one thing, he was often found on the wrong side of the prison bars. He was not wealthy. As far as we know he did not have a permanent mailing address throughout much of his later years. He certainly wasn't a homeowner. He needed to depend upon the generosity of others to live. What would his employment history have looked like? He could have either indicated "missionary" or "textile-worker" for his occupation, neither of which were particularly lucrative fields. In material or physical terms, Paul would not have been considered very respectable, nor would he have struck anyone as a man of status or success. The man that we now would hail as a valiant hero would have likely been considered a loser in the estimation of many.

Paul's words here are so revealing in what they say about Paul's predicament and his motivation. He found himself in a hardship of some sort. We're not exactly sure what that hardship was. Some believe it was a physical condition; it could have just as easily been a particular person or group of people who were oppressing him; or it could have been the constant state of poverty and persecution that he had to face. Whatever it was, Paul prayed that God would get rid of it. The word that's used here for "weakness" is a significant word. It's often used in the New Testament for sickness or timidity. In this political season that we're in, the opposite of what we'd expect from men and women who are striving to portray themselves as capable, competent and in-control is this weakness that Paul was speaking of.

Yet God's answer was indeed the opposite of what Paul was praying for. Rather than telling Paul, "All right, I'll get rid of the thorn. I don't want you to have to suffer. You need to be confident and in-control in order to effectively serve me," God's answer was, "No, Paul. My grace is enough to get you through this situation. You need to learn to depend upon my power, which is easier to do when you're not depending upon your abilities. And also, when others see powerful things coming through your life, they won't be impressed with you, but with me."

I've thought a lot about what it means to be used by God in powerful ways. I used to think of it as being over a vast ministry or a dynamic church, or to be a popular speaker in seminars, or a sought-after counselor. While God may use people in those positions, that isn't what each of us should aspire

to. When it comes to seeking greatness in the world's eyes, we naturally seek those positions that will bring us the most authority, the most status, the most notoriety and wealth and power. What we look to—our goal—is that place in life in which we are respected by others. But when it comes to seeking greatness in God's eyes, the pursuit is of an entirely different nature. Rather than becoming greater in ourselves, we may become weaker, more despised, lowlier, less wealthy and prominent.

Very often, as I am talking with those who are terminally ill, they talk about how difficult it is to be in a place of absolute weakness and dependence. They can't walk without assistance; they can't perform any activity or function; they have lost nearly all their physical—and often even mental—abilities; they can't even go to the bathroom by themselves. Their entire lives are marked by a single, dreadful word: weakness. Yet I firmly believe that God has a powerful purpose for those in that state of life, when they are willing to allow God to have his way. In our place of absolute weakness, God's strength is made perfect. In the state in which we would be the least dependent upon our own abilities, in which we think it is the least likely that God can do anything significant in our lives, God is powerfully at work. This is because we're not trusting in our own meager resources, but in God's unlimited resources.

I think that it's significant that throughout Scripture, God called people to do great things for him at the lowest point in their lives. He finally blessed Abraham with a son when he was worn out with age and far past the time of having children. He caused Joseph to become the second-highest leader in the known world of his day after he had been a slave and prisoner for thirteen years. He called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, not when he was a prominent member of Pharaoh's household, but when he was a peasant-shepherd. He commissioned Gideon to lead in people in battle against the Amalakites when Gideon was hiding out in fear and threshing his wheat. He promoted David to become king over Israel after he had been a vagabond in the wilderness—running away from the current king, Saul—for years. He used Daniel to reveal his mysteries to the world when Daniel was in the position of a captive in exile from his country. And finally, the man that we began today by considering—Paul—was “demoted” from a powerful religious and political figure to that of a fugitive, an outcast, even a prisoner.

You may very well find yourself in a place in life in which you feel weak—either a physical weakness, or a financial weakness. Perhaps you don't feel particularly powerful or important. Possibly you're not the one with the biggest house on the block—or maybe you don't have a house at all. You may not be the “big man” or “big woman” at work. You might not feel like you have talents or abilities that make you special, or you may not feel as attractive as you'd like. There may not be anything that you feel sets you apart; you may even feel a little bit “less” than others. Or this time in your life could very well be a “low point,” a time in which you don't feel as strong or mighty or confident as you have at other times in your life. Let me tell you confidently, you're probably in the perfect place for God to use you in great ways and to do powerful things in and through your life.

That may not be what you wanted to hear. But think about it this way: how many “important” or “successful” people have come and gone? How many of yesterday's world leaders and leading figures and “who's who” have passed from the scene only to be forgotten forever. Meanwhile, the influence of a nobody like Paul is still powerfully felt today.

Be careful when you ask God to use you in powerful ways. It may not be what you expected. It may not come with an elevation in position; in fact, it may come through an apparent demotion in your current standing in the world. But God's ultimate purpose for you isn't for you to become great in the world's eyes. What God has ultimately destined for us is much greater than to be on anyone's "A-list." If we settle for that we're settling for far less than what God truly desires for us. God's purpose for us entails him being glorified through us. That's fulfilled in the words of John the Baptizer concerning Christ: "I must become less; he must become greater." Once we've mastered that statement, we're well on our way to truly seeing God work powerfully through our lives.

Again reflecting on my experience with people who are terminally ill, I think that it can be a healthy experience spiritually to be faced with the reality of our own mortality and vulnerability. I think that one of the worst states that we can find ourselves in in spiritual terms is to feel invincible and overly confident in our own abilities. It can be a good thing to recognize that each of us, no matter how talented or prominent we are, will one day face our own demise.

A thought even came to me a few days ago as I was getting ready for bed. In the regular course of our lives, for several hours every day, our bodies have to go through a period of sleep in which we are absolutely out of control of our lives and our world. A lot of things may be going on around me; there are things that need to be done. But my body needs to sleep, and there's nothing that I can do about it. And so for a period of some (for me) six or seven hours, I am totally out of control over what is going on around me. I think that it's interesting that when God communicated to his people in special ways in Scripture, it was through peoples' dreams, perhaps because they were in a state of complete mental and physical vulnerability—they couldn't do anything other than receive God's message.

And consider this: in relation to God's mightiness and wisdom, the relative difference between us and others in terms of intelligence and talent is meaningless. I might feel down because I'm not as intelligent or gifted as someone else, or I may be tempted to boast because I'm more capable than another, but the difference among us is miniscule in comparison with God's superiority over us. In that sense, what does it matter—in God's estimation—how much more attractive or competent one person is over another. In the end—in God's presence—the only being that will receive any glory whatsoever will be God alone, regardless of how talented I think I am now. So it's a waste of time for me to boast over others, or to bemoan my lowly state in comparison with others. It won't matter in the end. So when it comes right down to it, there are really only two classes: Creator and creature.

Again, perhaps you're in a place of weakness, of vulnerability. Maybe you're praying that God would get you out of this situation and restore you to a place of confidence and security. If you're in that place, I hope and pray that God would grant you his blessing. But maybe his purpose for you right now is even greater than that promotion or job offer or physical healing you've been seeking. Paul was himself praying to get rid of that dreaded thorn in the flesh. God had something far more important that he wanted to do in and through Paul than to merely get rid of the thorn—that would have been easy for the Lord. Maybe God is wanting to do something powerful in the midst of your difficult situation, in which you feel weak and out of control. Maybe what God wants to do couldn't be accomplished if you felt strong and confident and secure.

I realize that this may not gel too well with those so-called Bible-teachers who proclaim that the Lord's will for us is to be successful in our businesses and physically well at all times. But it strikes me as significant that Jesus didn't seem to have any trouble healing the sick or even raising the dead. What he did have a difficult time with was in teaching his disciples lessons related to trust and humility and servanthood. Could it be that the "easy thing" for God to do in answer to our prayers is to grant us the healing or the promotion or the new car or bigger house, while the "more difficult"—but more important—answer may come in the way of allowing us to undergo—at least for a while—the state of lowliness while he teaches us the valuable lessons of trust and humility that we need to learn?

Be open to what God is wanting to do. If you've prayed like Paul, "God, get me out of this situation. Get rid of this thorn. It isn't pleasant; I feel weak and out of control," then perhaps you need to pray, "Lord, what is it that I need to learn right here, right now? I recognize that you're more than able to grant to me wealth and success. But is that really what I need? Is that really what would be best for me? Is there something even more valuable that you want to do in me?"

I was visiting with a family this last week in which the husband/father, who is in his fifties, is dying of cancer. At this time, he's bedbound and heavily medicated to control his pain. His business has had to be sold, cutting off the family's primary source of income. Their garage—which stored most of the business' equipment and years' worth of memories for the family—recently burned down, charring everything inside to a crisp. The entire family—including the wife and three college-age children—has had to organize a round-the-clock schedule to care for their husband and father. Yet this family—as much as any family I've ever talked with—manifests a peace and joy that you couldn't find among those living in the best of luxury and comfort. They've learned lessons of trust and provision from the Lord that you just can't learn when everything's going well. They realize—much better than even I do—how that it's really only in that place of weakness that we can truly experience a sense of the Lord's hand working powerfully in our lives. We need to become weak in order that his power can truly shine forth.