

WHEN I AM WEAK, I AM STRONG

by Steve Zeisler

I was at a luncheon recently that was in effect a 20-year reunion. It was the fall evangelistic luncheon of the Christian Businessmen of Santa Clara County. Dennis Sheehan, an old friend of mine and a member of this church, invited me and a number of other men who had played football together on the Stanford team 20 years ago this fall. We were invited because the featured speaker was Jeff Siemon, who had also been a member of the Stanford football team, an all-American first-round draft choice to the Minnesota Vikings, and an all-pro linebacker for them. He is now in full-time ministry in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. So Dennis seized the opportunity to invite a number of former players to come to the luncheon and hear Jeff's testimony.

We were all sitting together at the table, and it was a delightful time. I enjoyed seeing people I hadn't seen since graduating. It was a wonderful mixture of jokes, memories, and catching up on the events of two decades gone by.

Then Jeff got up to speak. The essence of his message really took these men by surprise. He told football stories, and he was funny and engaging. But when he got to the heart of his message, which was to talk about his faith, what he said in effect was that the key times he remembers, looking back over a career that is exalted in the eyes of many, were times of failure, hurt, and inadequacy. He recalled receiving a devastating injury during his college career, and it was on that occasion that he gave his life to Christ. He talked about the final two years of pro ball when he no longer started for the Vikings, relegated to the bench and treated as an outsider, and said those were the best years of his pro career in terms of personal growth and influence with others. All of us have needs that we do not admit to ourselves if we can avoid it. We live in a society that is competitive, whether in athletics, in business, or in other areas. But it is facing failure, inadequacy, weakness, and need that really determines who we are. That was the essence of his message.

I spoke with one of the men at the table who had been a successful football player in college, and then had left the world of competitive athletics to enter the world of competitive business. He had gotten involved in a shady financial arrangement, trying to make it big. That had landed him in federal prison, and he was lucky he wasn't serving a 20-year sentence. He had moved back to California from New York and was looking for answers in the New Age movement among other things. He later sent me a letter that chronicled his life just because we had talked about it. He was fascinated by what Jeff said, although he wasn't yet ready to believe it.

Boasting of weakness

These verses we have come to bring to mind Jeff's message as an all-pro linebacker that it was the weakest, most difficult moments that were the most important. We will find that truth in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. This section ends a long argument in which Paul counters the claims of the pseudo-apostles who have infiltrated Corinth. He's trying to lay alongside phony and self-important leadership a vision of that which is godly. He says, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (10:1), and at the end of chapter 11, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness . . . [the time] I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall" He is attempting to make clear by various means that the servants of the Lord we should listen to are the ones in whom Christ is exalted and self has been set aside. Paul has made this point using caricature and boasting of his own, which begins sounding like one thing but actually turns out to be something else. It's a unique passage in Paul's writings. You have the sense, reading the letters of Paul, that he's comfortable in debating truth versus error, the gospel versus that which is not, but he struggles a bit when he has to talk about himself. He has a desire to clarify things and yet not promote himself. Even that ambivalence makes this passage fascinating.

Paul had his own strength taken away so that he would draw on the strength of the living God

Let's look at chapter 12, verses 1-6, where Paul has to speak much of himself in order to make the truth plain:

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know---God knows. And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows---was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 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.

Now remember what we have already looked at: The phonies in Corinth are attempting to remove Paul from any standing in the eyes of the believers and replace him with themselves. They have said, firstly, that Paul is physically unimpressive. Secondly, his rhetoric is unimpressive. Thirdly, his ability to raise money is suspect. These pseudo-apostles have bragged about letters of recommendation they have from high-sounding people in Jerusalem. They've boasted of their pedigrees. They've puffed themselves up and demanded perks in the way of those to whom arrogance comes easily. Paul does none of that, and they ridicule him for his lack of self-importance and swagger.

A remarkable revelation

Paul says in verse 1 that he will go on to speak of visions and revelations of the Lord. It's evident from this letter that his opponents had bragged about spiritual powers and encounters with God. In order to counter their claim, Paul tells of a remarkable occasion. It's clear in verse 7 that even though he speaks in the third person, the man he is speaking of is himself: "To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn..." But before we get to verse 7 we have a peculiarly told story ("I know a man...caught up to the third heaven"). Paul speaks with hesitancy. He is going to tell them something that is awesome to hear, and yet he is deliberately trying to distance himself from it, not because it's not true-verse 6 indicates clearly that he is telling the truth-but because he fears a tendency in his own heart to exalt himself.

Listen to the ways this ambivalence is expressed. First, as we've already noted, this account is in the third person. "I know a man . . ." "I will boast about a man like that. . ." In strange fashion Paul speaks as if this wonderful event happened to someone else. Secondly, for 14 years this subject has gone unremarked upon. We have records in the book of Acts of Paul's preaching on the island of Crete, in Athens and Ephesus, in Jewish surroundings and before Roman magistrates. We have a number of his speeches recorded in Acts, and he never brings this up. In all his other letters he never once refers to it. There is no indication that any of his associates knew anything about it. It went unremarked upon for a long time, yet it was a staggering thing, an overwhelming experience that left an indelible impression on the apostle. I'm sure it was transforming to him.

A third way we see Paul's ambivalence is in his inability to say exactly how it happened. He says twice that he doesn't know if his body went with him or not. He was taken into the presence of God in such a way that he heard things, saw things, and was dazzled by an experience at the very throne of God. God knows, but he doesn't know what it meant for him to be swept into the presence of the Lord. He refers to it as the third heaven and paradise. Those mean the same thing. The ancients thought of the earth as covered with an atmosphere made up of air, clouds, etc., which was the first heaven. Beyond this were sun, moon, and stars, which was the second tier of heaven. And beyond that is the third heaven-the world of the invisible spiritual realities, the throne of God. Evidently Paul was transported there by the Lord, but he didn't know if his body went with him or not.

A final note that sets this experience apart is the apostle's observation that he heard things he was not permitted to speak. That raises such curiosity in us! He was allowed to know what he must never express.

There's something that is absolutely moving to me about his description. We want to know more about what happened. There is within all of us who know the Lord a longing for an exalted vision of Christ, an opportunity to see him face to face, not "through a glass darkly" any more; to hear him say secret and wonderful things. Paul had that remarkable experience.

A thorn in the flesh

Now Paul's problem is to undercut the deceptive bragging that's taking place in Corinth and at the same time to keep himself from being undeservedly exalted in his eyes or anyone else's. He says in verse 6 that he refrains from boasting so no one will think more of him than is warranted by what he does or says. He wants their relationship to be based on what they heard him say and saw him do, on what they could verify in their experience, that he is a man in Christ called into his service. He doesn't want what he just told them to ruin things, to become more than it ought to.

He then goes on in verse 7 to speak about how the Lord ensured for him that the exaltation of this vision would not become too much:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The phrase "to keep me from being conceited" in verse 7 is actually recorded twice in Greek. The NIV translates it only once, but it's plainly emphasized by the apostle. He was in severe danger of becoming filled up with himself in recalling and speaking to others of the exalted day when he traveled, bodily or not, into the very presence of God and was told things that no one else knows and that he may not say. So God deliberately caused him a difficulty that he would not take away in order to remind Paul that it was in his weakness that he was strong.

We don't know exactly what the thorn in his flesh was. He is speaking of some bodily torment that recurred for him. There are three possibilities you'll run into most often in commentaries. One is that it was malaria, a feverish illness he contracted in his travels that would repeatedly beset him. A second is that it was epilepsy, regularly recurring seizures that would take place. Ancient people viewed epilepsy as an indication of rejection by God. These seizures would undermine his standing in the eyes of others and weaken him. The third and, I think, the most likely possibility is that it was an eye disease of some sort. He says in the book of Galatians, "If you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me." (Galatians 4:15.) At the end of Galatians he says he has to write with especially large letters. Both of these things could indicate his vision was impaired. It may have even been an oozing sort of disease that made him physically unattractive. But in any case he had something difficult that would periodically descend upon him and lay him low physically.

We read that he went to the Lord three times, not lightly, but in protracted seasons of prayer. He begged that he would not have to go through this problem again. The answer of God was the same in each case: "My grace is sufficient for you." If Paul had not had this thorn, his propensity for conceit would have overwhelmed him. It was the grace of God that sustained him in times of physical difficulty, and grace that used pain to prevent the greater evil of spiritual haughtiness.

Something else worth commenting on here is that he calls this thorn a messenger of Satan. Just in passing, this is a helpful commentary on the role of the evil prince in human lives. He is a tormenter; his entire role in life is to hurt, destroy, and cause pain and ultimately death. Even, as we've seen before, when he masquerades as an angel of light, it's only to gain entrée to do more damage. But he is limited in his role. He may do only what God the Father allows for the ultimate good of his children. The very torment itself in the hand of God becomes that which gives Paul great spiritual blessing. It's a remarkable insight, isn't it? It was intended by

Satan to harm, but God intended it for good (Genesis 50:20).

Rejecting the flesh

We are often told Christian truth in such a way as to bring out "the best" in ourselves. We hear preaching that uses biblical terms in such a way as to call forth a maximum response: "Do your best for the Lord, do your best for the church! You were meant for greater things than you've ever experienced . . ." There's a rush of adrenalin, and we're set to march forward to make a vital contribution. It sounds Christian, and it often uses the language of the Bible, but it's terrible! It's terrible to marshal the flesh in its proud array, to be made to believe in our own greatness, as if such were real Christianity.

Paul says, having been given an extraordinary revelation, he was also given something to deflate him, because what he needs to know above all else is that it is the grace of God that makes human life worth living. I am becoming more than ever convinced that the life and resources of Jesus Christ mediated through us is the only way to live. We have learned to think less of our capabilities and to count more on the resources of God.

Someone won \$30 million in the lottery last week. The intended and unfortunate result is that millions of others become inspired to bet at terrible odds, thinking maybe they're just on the verge of magnificent successes themselves. That sort of thing seduces us. We get the idea that success in promoting ourselves into something we really want to be is just around the corner. In contrast, what the apostle is saying is that God has refused for Paul's sake to do what he has asked him to do. This thorn would be for Paul a lifelong experience. The temptation, and therefore the need for that lesson, would never end. Therefore in verse 10 we have a wonderful statement of these things: "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

I don't particularly delight in insults, just to be really honest! If I know people are going to treat me in an insulting fashion, I don't want to be around them. I tend to fight back, finding subtle ways to undermine those who demean me. I would rather be thought well of and praised. But Paul says he has finally come to the point where he can honestly say he delights in insults. Those times when he has been put down in public are times he has learned to derive benefit from.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"

I don't like difficulty. That's a term that has to do with the ordinary hassles of life. Last night our family had planned to go out to dinner. It was to be a three-generation event with my parents. A series of problems developed, and our plans fell apart amid difficulties. I was irritated with the circumstances. I didn't for one minute, until I was dealing with this passage much later, think of any benefit at all that had come from the difficulties that had taken place in our home.

Weakness that leads to strength

Yet Paul says he has learned to delight in difficulties. This isn't dysfunctional thinking or masochism. He isn't saying he enjoys hurt or rejection because there is any inherent good in it. But he isn't beaten down to stay beaten down! Inevitably when these things happen he is reminded of the greatness of the power of God. He has his own strength taken away that he might draw on the strength of the living God. Then, without Paul's arrogance, Christ's glory is displayed.

My wife is an instructional aid in a class of retarded children at Palo Alto High School. A wonderful result of having this class on campus is the *Special Friendship Club*. Normal kids are given a buddy from among the mentally retarded kids in this class. Those in charge set up activities for them to do together, and try to arrange for a bit of mainstreaming for the handicapped kids so they can be around regular high school kids and learn from them. But to me the most remarkable thing is not the mainstreaming of the handicapped kids; it's the learning experience for the normal kids. This is a very competitive, arrogant town, and the kids feel it. It's a tough place to grow up in many ways. \

The academic competition is extreme, as is awareness of vast differences in family wealth. One of the things that the *Special Friendship Club* has done is give normal kids a chance to see life through the eyes of those who have severe weaknesses, yet aren't always conscious of them, who have limits and yet are often joyful. They have a chance to see that competing and winning can go on only so long, and at some point we all have to address the fact that we can't win every time. Just as Jeff Siemon talked about injury and loss of a career and the learning experiences that those things were to him, the awful drumbeat inside every one of us if we are honest is that we are really weak, and what we need is a savior who can make us strong. We've been foolishly seduced if we think anything else. That's the succinct message Paul has drawn from all this examination of the phony leaders versus those who are of the Lord. God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, Paul delights in weakness.

Amazing grace

The public broadcasting system in this country did an hour-long TV show on the American hymn *Amazing Grace*. I didn't get to see it, unfortunately, but I read a review of it. The reviewer marveled that there could be an hour's worth of material generated by the discussion of one hymn and its historical place in our culture. This hymn has had a wonderful ability to win its way into the thinking of people, including those who don't know Christ and little about the gospel. I remember hearing folk singers in the '60s sing the song, although they wouldn't have claimed its truth. The tune is engaging, but the message is irrefutable. It's telling a truth, explaining something that people can't deny. "Amazing grace . . . saved a wretch like me." Many have been captured by the imagery and testimony of John Newton, the slave trader who came to Christ. Another gentleman some years later wrote a final verse to the song, which we've also enjoyed singing:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

I think it's a fitting end to a song about the grace of God, because we will never make a dent in the outpouring of grace we receive from him; we will never run out. Bright shining as the sun though we be, it will always be reflected glory and praise of the grace of God. We will forever be in a position of thankfulness-for ten thousand years or ten thousand thousand years.

God made us to need him, and gloriously he has offered himself to us. This is a wonderful compilation of Paul's own story. He speaks of himself and his struggles, his weaknesses, his revelations, and his message; and finally he says he has learned a lesson he would never want to live without: "When I am weak, then I am strong."

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Steve Zeisler
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