

September 12, 2021

CHRIST'S POWER IN OUR WEAKNESS
2 Corinthians 11:1-12:13
(21 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

Paul says something absolutely remarkable in 2 Corinthians 12:10. He says, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.” And there’s a chance the statement should be translated more strongly than “content.” Multiple times—even in Paul’s writings—the word is used to mean something like “delight in” or “take pleasure in.”¹ So it may well be that Paul is saying that he delights in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. And it’s not because he’s some kind of troubled person who simply enjoys pain and suffering. It’s because there’s something he’s learned about how the Lord works in and through our weakness that Paul actually finds more attractive than living a trouble-free life. And my hope this morning is that as we work through this passage, we’ll come not only to understand why Paul can make this remarkable claim but that we will find our hearts moving toward a place where they resonate with this statement, even as we consider our own weaknesses, hardships, and calamities. Because if our hearts will move toward identifying with Paul’s statement here, then we may well come to see this text we’re looking at today to be one of the most empowering, comforting, and helpful texts for helping us move forward in obedience to Jesus on those days when we just don’t feel like we can even keep going on. But in order to get there, let’s look at what’s going on in our text that builds up to Paul’s statement.

I mentioned last week that it is only in these last few chapters of the letter that Paul begins to address his opponents (whom he labels “super-apostles,” 11:5) head on. As those urging the Corinthians to dismiss Paul, they had attacked the apostle as being an unskilled speaker, not as impressive in his experience, prone to suffering, and obviously not worth paying (as he was ministering to the Corinthians without charging them). These are obviously foolish attacks, and throughout the letter Paul has explained why he’s approached things certain ways. But finally in chapter 11 it’s as if Paul says, “Fine, if you’re still not convinced why you need to listen to me as an apostle of Christ, let me start arguing as foolishly as my attackers speak.” He begins the chapter, “I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!” (11:1). And this is something he repeats throughout the text. What he’s having to write here he feels is foolish. But he feels like he must because the Corinthians are seemingly so immature, this is the only thing they’ll listen to. You can *feel* Paul’s frustration as he writes in 12:11, “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.” And so what we have in our text is Paul saying, “Fine, if I must, I’ll play by their rules and show I’m actually superior to them. As foolish as it is, here comes my own boasting, since that’s the only thing you’ll listen to.” But just at the point that we think Paul is simply engaging his opponents on their terms, he turns

¹ Murray Harris, for example, argues that “a more overtly positive sense [of the word] is preferable” in light of Paul’s usage in 2 Thess. 2:12. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 866.

everything upside down and reveals to us a reality that is life-changing if we can understand and accept it. So, let's walk through the text, which can be divided into three sections. First, in 11:1-15 we see that Paul shows his superiority to the super-apostles.

Paul shows his superiority to the super-apostles

We've already noted that Paul opens the text by asking them to bear with him in some foolishness. It's clear that Paul hates the need to go into a little boasting and self-promotion, but he's afraid that nothing else will jar the Corinthians loose from the draw they feel to these super-apostles. Paul wants so dearly to present them as a pure bride to Christ, but he's afraid that they are being led astray, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent (vv. 2-3). They're entertaining these men who are proclaiming another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel (v. 4). And so Paul is desperately employing every weapon he has—even boasting, as foolish as he thinks it is. So, he comes out and says in verse 5, "Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles."

But the Corinthians might counter, "But they're better speakers and charge big fees. Doesn't that make them seem superior?" Paul answers, "Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge" (v. 6). It might seem that if Paul isn't rhetorically flashy, maybe it's because he doesn't know much, but that's clearly not the case, and they know it. He was the one who brought them the gospel in the first place. And as far as not charging them for his ministry to them, Paul asks, "Did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel to you free of charge?" (v. 7). Then he ends our text referring to the fact that he didn't burden them financially by sarcastically saying, "Forgive me this wrong!" (12:13). The reality is that it cost other churches (e.g. the Macedonians) so that Paul could do this, but Paul wanted nothing to stand in the way of their accepting the gospel. Moreover, Paul acknowledges another motivation he had. He writes in verses 9-11, "So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do." In other words, Paul is letting it be known throughout the whole region where Corinth was a great city that he was laboring for free. And that could mean that others judged the Corinthians harshly. Why, if they are so well off, would they not pay Paul? But Paul wasn't trying to shame them or demonstrate that he didn't love them; God knows he loves them. Rather, he says, "What I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do." You see, Paul is exposing these "super-apostles" as men who are actually deceitful, greedy, and simply looking for gain. And so Paul concludes by saying it is no surprise they are deceitful because they're acting like their master, the devil (vv. 13-15).

And so, in the very head-on kind of way, Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that he doesn't in the least consider himself inferior to his opponents. He's more knowledgeable than them, more genuine than them, and godlier than them—for they are servants of Satan himself. Paul is coming out swinging. But then, in 11:16-33, Paul gets back to his point of foolish boasting. After all, if the Corinthians are won over by these men who are boasting in themselves, then Paul will

reluctantly play that game. He says, “I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast” (vv. 17-19). But what we’re going to find in this second section is that Paul boasts, but he mainly boasts of his weaknesses.

Paul boasts, but he mainly boasts of his weaknesses

Now, before he dives in, he once more mocks the Corinthians for listening to his opponents. He notes in verses 20-21 that these men are using them, making slaves of them, taking advantage of them, and yet the Corinthians still look down on Paul because he aims for their edification? How crazy is this? And so, he reluctantly boasts. He says, “But whatever anyone else dares boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman” (vv. 21-23).

The reason (it can be assumed) that Paul starts with this line of boasting is that these men may have claimed that Paul was not a true Jew. After all, he is the apostle to the Gentiles, and he was born in Tarsus. So, Paul clears that up right away. He can match their boasting of pedigree. But what about being a servant of Christ? Well, Paul says he’s better than them (though it makes him feel more than a little uneasy to talk this way, thus exclaiming, “I’m talking like a madman”).

But it’s when he goes on to illustrate how he’s a better servant of Christ that the Corinthians probably were tempted to cringe, like a child embarrassed because her parent doesn’t know what is cool. From 11:23-33, Paul shows his commitment as a servant of Christ in the things he suffered for Christ’s sake. And though that seems natural to us, to the Corinthians—as I’ve noted—it probably made them cringe. Here’s why. The Corinthians had always felt the lure of being impressive in the world’s eyes, and these super-apostles had only intensified that. Paul’s opponents were showing how they seemed to walk above the fray, untouched by those things that are low and despised. And here’s Paul about to launch into all the things that make him look weak, put in positions everyone would want to avoid, and facing humiliations that no one would want to endure. He mentions his imprisonments, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, constant dangers, sleepless nights, being hungry and thirsty, being cold, and being gripped with anxiety for the churches.

And just as the Corinthians probably want to say to Paul, “See, brother, you don’t get it. These things make you look weak, not impressive,” Paul comes right out and lets them know that he’s not ignorant of this. He says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30). And after all of these examples of Paul going through things all of us would hate, he adds one more. He writes, “At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands” (11:32-33). I mean, at this point, the Corinthians would have to be flabbergasted. “Paul,” they probably want to yell, “the humiliating visual of you being lowered down in a basket is more embarrassing than you can imagine.” But, again, Paul gets it. Though

he's started out with some traits to match his opponents, he's quickly changing his argument. He's *intentionally* boasting of his weaknesses. He's *intentionally* highlighting things that make him look small, foolish, humiliated, and that are embarrassing. Why? This brings us to our last point in the text, and the one that is most important for us to grasp. In 12:1-13 Paul reveals the secret blessing of our weakness.

Paul reveals the secret blessing of our weakness

As Paul begins this twelfth chapter, it seems that he's switching back to boasting in impressive feats. After boasting in his weaknesses a bit, he's going to boast in the greatest, most impressive reality he can boast of—he'd actually been given a vision of heaven. But what we find is that Paul is simply bringing this up to move on from that vision to something that happened afterward that was an even greater blessing. He was given a thorn in his flesh that he's had to deal with every day of his life since. But why would that be a greater blessing? Well, let's see.

Paul first reveals to us something that happened to him that he's apparently kept secret for fourteen years. He was given a vision of heaven. Here's what he writes after noting that he'll now boast of visions and revelations: I 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. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I don't know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—though 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" (12:2-6).

Now, at first, it sounds like Paul is describing another man's experience, doesn't it? He speaks in the third person. But by the time you get to verse 7 it becomes clear that Paul is talking about himself. He notes specifically in verse 7 that it was because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations *he* had seen that a thorn was given to him to keep him from becoming conceited. Paul himself had this vision of heaven. Why, then, is he talking in the third person? It's because Paul is so uncomfortable boasting about this—after all, boasting is contrary to the gospel and he's already apparently kept this amazing event a secret for fourteen years!—that talking about it in third person allows him to distance himself a little bit from it. It is a scheme to try to deflect attention away from himself. He wants the Corinthians to judge him based on what they see in him and hear from him (12:6).

Nonetheless, we can see that Paul had a vision of heaven. When he says "the third heaven" that is a way to refer to the highest heaven, or the real heaven. Whether he was actually bodily in heaven or simply given a vision while on earth, he couldn't tell. But it was so amazing that he can't even speak of things he heard there. I mean, in a boasting contest, Paul is about to win hands down. But here's the crazy thing. He's telling this story simply because it provides the context for something else he wants to talk about—another weakness.

After Paul had this vision of heaven, he was given a thorn in the flesh. He writes in verse 7, “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of 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 becoming conceited.” Now, we know this “thorn is a flesh” is a metaphor, and we don’t know exactly what it was, but let’s just think about the imagery Paul chooses for a second. Thirteen years ago when I was up in Louisville, KY, I heard Ray Ortlund give a lecture on preaching where he made reference to this, and it stuck with me. He said, imagine Paul having the most unbelievable moment of his life. He saw heaven. He heard things so glorious he can’t utter them. He’s on cloud nine. Life couldn’t get any better. And with all the joy and excitement in the world, he sets off on his newfound life—a life that has seen heaven. And then, in the midst of all this joy and excitement, he trips, and he puts his hand down to catch himself and a huge thorn stabs deep into his hand. It’s piercing. He can’t get it out. Now, the foremost issue in his mind isn’t the vision but this thorn.

That’s what Paul says happened (metaphorically). After his heavenly vision, something painful entered his life and didn’t leave. And though we don’t know what the thorn is, the imagery leads us to believe that it is something that brought pain to his life daily, something he had to wake up with every day and realize it was still there. It was something so bothersome and so constant, that he could measure his life before this thorn and after it. After it came into his life, he’d never get to go back to the life he knew before this troublesome issue.

And Paul calls it a messenger of Satan. In other words, it may well be that the first thing the enemy did as this malady came into his life was to accuse him, tell him he deserved it, tell him he was being punished. We don’t know all the ways the devil attempted to attack through this thorn, but we do know he’s the accuser. And yet Paul knew that God had another intention with it. More than once Paul notes that it was to keep him from becoming conceited. It was there to humble him after this glorious vision.

Nevertheless, Paul wanted it gone. He tells us that three times he pleaded with the Lord to take it away (v. 8). And though Paul could mean literally three different times he prayed about it, he may be using the number three here in the same way he referred to the “third heaven.” If the third heaven represents the highest heaven, then when Paul says that he pleaded three times, he may be referring to extreme pleading. Maybe he’s saying that he pleaded with the Lord to the point of exhaustion that God would take this away from him.²

You see, in Paul’s mind, there were two options. And this is how most of us would think as well, I would imagine. God could remove this thorn, and Paul could get on to life and ministry at full capacity. Or, God could not remove the thorn, but then Paul was going to be quite limited in his

² This is Dane Ortlund’s suggestion. *Second Corinthians*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 548.

life and ministry. And so the answer seems obvious, doesn't it, especially for someone God had called to take the gospel to the Gentile world. Yet God introduced a third option.³

Paul writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (vv. 8-9). The third option—that perhaps Paul couldn't conceive of—was that the Lord would leave the thorn, but he would give Paul grace to endure it, to keep pressing forward even with it, and to minister through it. And the reason for this third approach is because the Lord was going to reveal his power *through Paul's weakness*.

Do you see that? We often think that God needs our strengths. He doesn't? God uses our weaknesses. And it's because it is in and through our weaknesses that he demonstrates his power. Our weakness is the vehicle that God uses to channel his power through us. And *that*—God's power in his life—is what Paul desperately desires. Therefore he says, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (v. 9). Paul wants Christ's power on him, and he wants Christ to be known. And Christ's power is demonstrated through our weaknesses, and so Paul says, "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" (v. 10). In other words, everything that makes us weak—from our health, to insults, to hardships and struggles, to persecutions, to calamities—God uses all of them in our lives to show his power. Paul knew this, and so he could look at the very things he'd pleaded for God to take away and now find delight in their presence, *for Christ's sake*, because they provided a vehicle for Christ to demonstrate his power in Paul's life.

And so, brothers and sisters, it may well be that in the thing you most despise in your life—that thing that you use to mark your life before and after this hardship, before and after the appearance of this weakness, before and after this thorn in the flesh—God is using to demonstrate his power in you, perhaps in a way you've never known and in such power that you could have never imagined. That's why Paul can say that though he doesn't seek out weakness, hardships, and other thorns, he can delight in them, knowing that God's power is made perfect in his weakness. And this is a reality that I desperately want us to let take root in our hearts. That weakness, that hardship that you've pleaded to the point of exhaustion for the Lord to remove, that hardship that Satan has used to attack and accuse you without end, isn't a sign of the Lord's contempt for you. It's a reminder that he wants to (and indeed will) demonstrate his power in you to a degree that he simply could not otherwise. It's not a sign he's discarded us. It's a reminder of his commitment to us and a commitment to show his power in and through us.

The Corinthians despised the lowly things. It's why they were tempted to be embarrassed of Paul and write him off. But Paul knew a secret they hadn't realized. It's when we're weak—when the thorn we've pleaded with God to exhaustion to remove is still with us—that Christ's

³ Ibid. Ortlund frames Paul's requests in terms of only thinking of two options before God introduces a third.

power rests on us. And so he boasts of his weaknesses. He shouldn't have had to say all of this. That's what he says in verses 11-13. But aren't we thankful to God that he did? We need this, don't we? And so let's give thanks to God in and for our weakness this morning, knowing his grace is sufficient, and asking for Christ's power to rest on us as he said it will. Should we expect anything different from a savior whose resurrection glory was only known through the humiliation of death, even on a cross? So let's take up our cross now and follow him. Amen.