

The Power of God in Our Physical Weakness

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Date: 25 March 2018

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[0 : 00] And turn to 2 Corinthians 12 for our scripture reading tonight! 2 Corinthians 12. And we'll be reading verses 1-10.

! I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up into 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.

[1 : 17] 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. 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. I want you to put your thinking caps on at the very beginning here. Imagination caps.

And I have a question for you. What did the Apostle Paul look like? What did he look like?

[2 : 25] Tall? Short? Was he handsome or plain? Long hair? Short hair? Short hair? No hair?

Well, the simple answer is we're not sure. There are some people that people are just naturally attracted to. Good-looking people.

Dynamic speaking. Good-looking people. And so did Paul go around with this sort of magnetic attraction that people saw him speaking and they wanted to go hear what that good-looking, fine-sounding guy was saying?

Well, we don't know what he looked like. One very early book in the Christian tradition. It was eventually just rejected from being in the Bible, but it was this early book in the Christian tradition from the second century.

It had a story in it. And Paul was coming to a certain town. And Titus and Onesephorus were already there. And Titus sent Onesephorus to go meet Paul.

[3 : 41] He said, I want you to go meet him on the way. And apparently Onesephorus had never seen him. And so he said, what should I look for? What kind of man should I look for? And this was Titus' answer.

A man small in size, bald-headed, bow-legged, well-built, with eyebrows that met, rather long-nosed and full of grace.

I don't know what full of grace looks like after a long road trip. But the rest wasn't too impressive, was it?

Now, we don't know, and I'm not saying that's what he looked like, but it does fit in with what people thought about Paul. 2 Corinthians 10, you could look there, but for some say his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive.

He's unimpressive. Paul didn't have everything going for him physically. Whatever he looked like, he was unimpressive.

[4 : 53] And besides that, we read about in this passage that he had a thorn in the flesh. And it was the thorn that dogged him for the whole last half of his life.

And so he wasn't spectacularly good-looking. He wasn't young and healthy and handsome. And besides all that, he had this thorn in his flesh.

A thorn that made things difficult. A thorn that made ministry difficult. And that's what is really important, that this wasn't just a personal problem for Paul.

It was a personal problem. But you have to understand, it was a personal problem and it was a ministerial problem. It made serving the Lord difficult and hard. But God didn't leave him hopeless and helpless with just this impossible task in front of him.

And yet here he is hobbled. Well, we see what the Lord said. My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[6 : 03] And so today we're going to talk about the power of God and physical weakness. The power of God and physical weakness. And so we want to start by just saying, what is this thorn in the flesh?

Let's talk about thorns in the flesh. The million-dollar question is, what was Paul's thorn in the flesh? And that's what people are dying to know.

One commentator said he found at least a dozen possibilities. And most of them, when he dug into them, were nothing but mere guesses. But there were some that were more probable than others. And just like the question of what did the Apostle Paul look like, this question of what was that thorn in the flesh is equally, really, finally, we don't know.

He never came out and said, this is exactly what I'm talking about. But we do have some good guesses. And I just want to talk about one of the best guesses.

[7 : 07] And it's the one that I'm fairly convinced of. I'm not going to die on the hill or teach it like it's gospel truth. But it fits most of the facts. It fits all the facts that we know about Paul and his life.

And it's that Paul had a very disfiguring, ugly eye problem. And I'm fairly convinced of that. Again, at the end, we don't know. So, do you have an eye problem? Paul definitely had an eye problem where he could not see very well.

We're not sure, like I said, if that was the thorn in the flesh. But, like I said, it fits all the data that we have. We do know for certain that Paul had eye problems. In Acts 23, he's on trial before the Sanhedrin.

And the high priest tells the people standing next to him to slap Paul for what he said. And they do that. And Paul said to him, God will strike you, you whitewashed wall.

[8 : 12] And everyone sort of takes a collective, You can't talk like that to God's high priest. And Paul says, oh, I didn't know that that's who that was.

Because he couldn't really see him. In Galatians 6, he's been dictating a letter.

And to prove that it's him, he takes the pen and he goes to the papyrus or the paper or whatever. And he says, see what large letters I use as I write with my own hand.

Obviously, whoever had been writing it was using letters that were small that he could see. But now with big, large letters, because Paul cannot see very well, he begins to write. In Galatians 4, so two chapters earlier, he's pleading with the Galatians.

And he's talking about how they used to love him. And he used to think so fondly of him. And when he came, he wasn't this impressive guy. He wasn't this super apostle or anything like that. And he came in sickness.

[9 : 15] And there he said this very specific thing. He says, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. It's in this context of that sickness that he says this strangely specific thing.

And I think what he meant was, you saw my sick eyes, but you had so much love for me. You would have torn out your own ones to replace mine. It also fits the timeline.

In Galatians, or in 2 Corinthians here, chapter 12, it says, these surpassingly great visions happened 14 years ago. 14 years ago.

And when you do all the timeline and you get your dates all lined up, it took place in the second missionary trip. And we know that in the first missionary trip, Paul didn't have any problems with seeing.

On the first missionary trip, he was in the city of Lystra. And he saw a man who was lame from birth. And as Paul spoke, so he's speaking in front of this group, he fastens, it says, he fastened his eyes on this man and he saw that he had faith to be healed.

[10 : 31] And he called them out and he said, stand up on your feet. And the man did. And so on the first missionary trip, it seems clear that Paul has no problem seeing the crowd, seeing who's in

front of him, seeing how people are looking, their facial expressions.

But by the end of Acts, he's blurting out against the high priest. On the island of Malta, he's gathering a pile of brushwood and he can't see the snake in it. Now that might be nothing.

That might be an accident or it might be more evidence that his eyes are very bad now. And if this as an eye disease was his thorn in the flesh, it was a fitting humiliation.

And what I mean by that is, remember, why did God give this thorn in the flesh? It was to keep him from being conceited with the surpassing great revelations that Paul had.

Paul, with his eyes, had seen things and with his ears had heard things that man can't even repeat.

[11:42] So if it was Paul's eyes that he really could have boasted in and said, you know what these eyes have seen? But now all that boasting is gone.

Sure, Paul had seen great things in heaven. But now he can hardly see anything on earth. And now when people looked at his eyes, they would insult and scorn him.

And if they loved him, they would pity him. And you know, pity sometimes is the most humbling thing. So, you know, why am I going to all of that?

Well, whether it was the thorn in the flesh, Paul did have a legitimate physical weakness, an infection, a sickness, Galatians says. And combine that with Paul's already unimpressive appearance.

You don't exactly have a recipe for ministerial success. If you wanted to craft a pastor or a preacher, you don't start with he's totally unimpressive and he can't see very well.

[12:52] Well, is that a recipe for success? Well, on the first blush, it's not. But we're going to get to it in a second. That's exactly what God's recipe for success was. Well, let's go on about the thorn in the flesh.

So whether it was his eyes or not, what do we know about it from this passage? Well, we know that the thorn in the flesh was physical. It was in his flesh. We know that it was painful.

It was a thorn. It was painful. We know that it was perpetual. It didn't go away. Paul prayed and it didn't go away.

God never took it away. We know that it was humbling. It was enough of an ongoing humiliation that anytime Paul's heart might have begun to boast about who he was and what he had seen, this thorn in the flesh would suck the pride right out of him.

There wasn't going to be any boasting in his heart about being taken up in heaven after this. And we know that it was a messenger of Satan. In other words, this thorn was a way, one way, that the devil had a foothold, a voice, a speaker, a microphone, a megaphone into Paul's life and heart.

[14:11] That's what thorns do, don't they? They are cracks that allow the devil's voice and his lies to get into our hearts.

And Satan used it to get his word, his discouragement into Paul's heart and into Paul's mind. And so it wasn't just a physically tormenting experience. It was a spiritual tormenting experience.

Paul had great things he wanted to do. He was this man of drive and zeal. You can't read, I mean, before Paul was a Christian, after Paul was a Christian, whatever he was, he was a zealous go-getter.

He had things to do. And now he's full of love for the Lord. And he wants to serve the Lord. And he wants to go places. He wants to do things. He's ready to go. But Satan used this thorn to say, Paul, it's over.

You can't, God can't use you. You're broken. You're too broken now. How are you ever going to keep serving the Lord now? How can you stand in front of people now? You can't even see them.

[15:23] I mean, if we know in Galatians, he has this infection of the eye. So there he is with pus, puffing, swollen. You can't see the people.

Can I say as a preacher, I can really relate to this? Because if I took my glasses off right now, I would be hopelessly lost.

I couldn't see my notes unless they were literally right here in front of my face. And I'm not exaggerating. Sometimes I say when I take off my glasses, I can hardly hear.

And I'm hardly joking. It's so disorienting. So discombobulating. So it's so uncomfortable.

And now that's how Paul feels. No wonder he's praying, Lord, take this away from me. And he's not merely praying it for himself. It seems and it feels like his whole ministry is on the line here.

[16:25] How am I supposed to travel and preach and speak and have conversations with people with this going on? And so you can see why he's so desperate.

If this thorn doesn't go away, then what am I going to do? If this isn't taken care of, how can I keep going on? And so this thorn in the flesh was more than just the thorn in Paul's side.

It is a spear into the side of his ministry. Of his apostleship. It's threatening its very life. It's saying to him, you can't do this.

And it's probably getting some of Satan's words in there about God isn't for you. And God has turned against you. And so now, let me ask you.

Is there something like that in your life? A physical problem. A thorn in the flesh. Not only personally difficult, but makes serving the Lord difficult.

[17 : 33] Maybe it is your eyesight. Maybe it's your hearing. Maybe it's migraines or insomnia. Maybe it's digestional problems.

Hormonal issues or recurring disease or a long-term disease. Maybe it's memory loss. And it's a thorn in your flesh.

It's physical. It's perpetual. It's painful. It's humbling. It's a messenger of Satan. And through it, Satan comes in and speaks into your life. And he tells you lies.

Says you're useless. Ministry is impossible. So there's without hope. Without help. So where do you turn to then? When you're where Paul was.

Where do you turn then? When it's desperation. When it feels like everything is on the line. And you don't have what it takes. And this physical problem has robbed you of that.

[18 : 33] Well, what do you do? I'll tell you where you turn. You turn to God. You turn to God. You take your faith, your hope off of your own power. And you look to his power.

Because he says, my power is made perfect. Complete in weakness. And again, we don't run into God's attributes in the abstract, do we?

We're not running into God's power in a theology book. As good as that is. We're running into God's attributes in our need. And here Paul is desperate.

And here we are desperate. And so do you have weakness? God is powerful. Do you have hope in physical weakness? And the answer is yes. Yes. There's hope that God might take it away.

That was Paul's initial hope. And he prayed for it. And there's nothing, nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with it at all. Paul prayed for that. He prayed three times, three seasons of prayer, three times where he was very serious about this, that God might take it away.

[19 : 35] Is that a hope? Yes. But your hope doesn't end there. The Apostle Paul's hope doesn't end there either. It ends where it ended for Paul.

And not taking it away. But God's saying, you're going to continue with this thorn. You're going to continue to be insulted.

You're going to continue to have the hardship and the difficulty. You're going to continue to have the weakness.

It's going to stay hard. It's going to stay difficult. And you're going to stay weak. But in all of that, you're going to have my power.

My power. And that's your hope. And that's our hope. So God could say to Paul, take your eyes off of your eyes. Turn your eyes on me.

[20 : 33] Turn your eyes on me. Look to my power. And so now let's talk about God's power. This is our next point. What about God's power? Well, what is God's power?

Well, it's his strength. It's his ability. It's his capacity to do everything and whatever he pleases. And so that's what it is. Now, how great is it?

How great is it? Well, we've been memorizing Job 37 and 38. How great is God's power? 38, 39.

How great is God's power?

He shut the seas behind doors when they burst out of the womb of creation. He drew a line in the sand and said, you can go no further than this.

And they cannot cross that line. He gives orders to the morning. He tells the sun to rise, the earth to spin. He tells he gives orders to the dawn. He shows the dawn its place.

[21 : 31] He stacks up snow and hail and silos for times of war and trouble. He cuts channels for the torrents. He binds Pleiades and he cuts the Orion's cords loose.

He raises his voice to the storm clouds. And this week we're going to find out that the lightning asks him where to strike.

And he tells them how great is his power. Psalm 2. He laughs at the kings of the earth. Completely safe in his power.

He, Psalm 9 or Psalm 10, he breaks the arm of the wicked. He brings all men to the grave. Jericho, he shoves down a city wall.

And Joshua, he destroys armies with hail. The Lord is a warrior mighty in battle. Well, how great is his power? He comes to an old barren woman whose husband is now 99 and she is about 90.

[22 : 35] And he says, next year you're going to have a baby. And the woman laughs. And God says, is anything too hard for me?

How much power did God use up? To give Sarah a baby. Gabriel, the messenger of God, comes to an old man and says, your wife Elizabeth will bear a son.

And the old man doesn't believe him. Doesn't believe him. How can I be sure of this? I'm old. My wife is old. And Gabriel says, it's like Gabriel sticks out his finger and puts it on Zechariah's lips and says, no more talk out of you.

That's stupid. That's audacious. That's unbelieving. You don't know the power of God. You will get to talk when that baby comes. And we can keep going.

The same Gabriel visits a teenage virgin. And she has the same sort of question. But now it's not confrontational. The answer is not confrontational. There's no silence for her because there was another spirit behind her question.

[23 : 40] And Gabriel's answer to little Mary full of grace was, nothing is impossible for God. And Mary took it and believed it.

So you have physical weakness. Thorns in the flesh. Messengers of Satan. What's your hope? Well, God is powerful. So what is your hope?

Well, this book is full of hope inspiring things. Because wherever we turn, we're seeing God in action, showing his power. And so you look at creation.

You look at the virgin birth. You look at the miracles. Those aren't just stories for us to just hear about and know about. They are that. But they are telling us, this is your God.

It's a display of God's power. So you see the Red Sea splitting. And you can look at the resurrection. And you see, your God is not weak. Your God is not weak.

[24 : 39] Your God is indomitably strong. He is utterly unconquerable. He cannot be defeated. He has more power than any way. He's omnipotent. And that's God's power. And that's what power is for you.

And that's what power God was saying to Paul. My power is going to be more than enough. My grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in weakness. I don't need you to be strong, Paul.

I don't need you to be strong. My strength is perfect. Perfected in your weakness. Now, three truths from 2 Corinthians 12 about God's power and our weakness.

The first is God has power for you to make you strong. God has power for you to make you strong. What does Paul say? Look at the end of verse 10. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Was Paul strong?

[25 : 49] Would anyone here say that Paul was a weak Christian? Paul was strong. He was strong. But it wasn't native strength. It was God's strength in him. Did Paul experience victory?

Strength? Did he overcome in battle? Yes. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Paul could say that of himself and he could say that of everyone. This is something he had experienced.

Paul didn't go around defeated and weak. He went from victory to victory. They go from strength to strength. And that was lived out in Paul's life. God gave him power in his weakness to make him strong.

So Paul was on the one hand weak, but on the other hand, incredibly strong because of God's power. That's true of Paul. That's true of us. God has power to make us strong in our physical weakness.

Paul was no whipped puppy. And neither are you. God is powerful. He makes us strong in his strength. Now, secondly, God intends you, intends for you to rely on that power.

[26 : 57] God means he intends for you to rely on that power. God's power is not some sort of thing that's out there, unavailable, inaccessible.

I can't get to it. It has no relation to my situation and my problem right now. No, it is for you. So in this passage, God promises him the power.

And Paul's response was, OK, I'm going to rely on that power. So how did that power come to Paul? Well, it didn't come by the taking away of the weakness.

And that's important for us to realize. Because I think in our minds, in our imagination, we think the only way that God can give us power is by taking away what is making us weak. But that's not what we see here.

In Paul, instead, it came by Paul's hour by hour relying on God's strength in his weakness. And so what do you see here in this whole passage?

[27 : 56] You see a man leaning in, relying on, depending on God's strength. God set it up so that Paul never got to feel strong in himself.

He never got to feel strong in himself. He always felt weak when he was leaning on himself. When he leaned on himself, he got poked by that thorn.

And that's how it works. We never get to feel strong in ourselves. But that doesn't mean we don't get strength. And it doesn't mean we don't get to feel strong.

Paul leaned on Christ. And it says that Christ's power rested on him. It was something that Paul knew. The power of Christ resting on me.

Peter in 1 Peter writes, If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides. There's two ways of serving.

[29 : 04] There's two ways of serving in the church. And we're probably always going back and forth. And Peter is saying, this is how you do it. You either lean on your own strength.

You go into the situation and you look at your resources. You look at how you feel. You look at how you're doing. You look at how you slept. You look at what you did. You look at your preparation. You look at whatever. You look at yourself.

You lean on your own strength. Or you use the strength God provides. So you go into that situation saying, When I get there, God is going to provide me power. God has given me power up to this point.

And God is not going to abandon me now. So what does that look like? Leaning into his strength. I want you to think of Johnny Erickson Tata. Quadriplegic.

Let me ask you. Is she weak? Is she weak? I don't think I'd put her in the weak category. She's strong.

[30 : 06] And where does she get such strength? She relies on the Lord. This is what she wrote. Sometimes when I'm at work, I can almost get overwhelmed with all the things that need to get done.

But you know what? I've learned to tackle my work the Psalm 84 way. It says there, Blessed are those whose strength is in you. They go from strength to strength.

What's that got to do with tackling all that work on my desk? Well, to go from strength to strength means to ask God for fresh energy for the next thing on your plate. It's to pause in between projects to pray.

To go from strength to strength means that you recognize that God is in the middle of your very busy day. For blessed are those whose strength is in the Lord.

Blessed are those whose strength is in the Lord. Blessed. Blessed. What does that mean? Happy. Johnny Erickson Tata is happy.

[31 : 24] She's strong. She's not walking. She's not all better. Happy. Happy. That gets us to our last point.

The first was God has power for you to make you strong. The second was God intends for you to rely on that power. And the third is God's power is so great that he can make you rejoice in your weakness.

God can make you rejoice in your weakness. And I think that might be the most striking thing of all. Paul now has come full circle where he is now happy in weakness and insult and hardship.

God's power was so great in Paul's life that it took him from sadness and desperation to joy, to contentment, to feeling strong.

Even when the thorn was still there. He says, so he boasted gladly. He boasted gladly. I delight in weakness.

[32 : 34] He delighted in it. I'm sure not in the thing itself, but when the weakness was there, it was not something that stole his joy. It was something that said, look, here's a chance to rejoice because now Christ's power is going to rest upon me.

So maybe that's your question or that sounds impossible to you. How can you boast and delight in weakness? Well, I can tell you, you can when Christ's power is resting on you.

When Christ's power is resting and you feel it and it's working and that's joy to know and feel the Christ power resting on you and say, no way I could do this on my own. No way I could do this on my own. This would be impossible for me. But look, it's it's happening. I'm doing it in Christ's strength. Christ is at work in me and I see it and I know it's happening. I shouldn't be able to do this. But yet here I am doing it. This is real and he is here. This is his power at work in my life. That's what God is doing in your life.

[33 : 39] He's taking you from fear and sorrow and getting stuck on that weakness to joy and strength. And his power.

Even while keeping the weakness there. He's taking you from fear and sorrow to real joy. Joy in him.

And so his power is not something that you read about or just know about. But it's it's something that you've experienced in your life. And you've experienced it through the weakness.

And so Paul says, I delight in weakness. And insults. And hardships.

And persecutions. And difficulties. Why does he delight in those things? Because God had brought him to the point where when he was weak.

[34 : 36] Then he was strong. He was strong. And so those things didn't make him more. Or less useful. They made him more useful. They helped him on in his ministry.

And God used them to strengthen Paul instead of weakening him. So let that be true of us too. This is our God. He hasn't changed.

We have weaknesses just like Paul did. And so let's lean in on God. Trust him for his power.

Rejoice. Let his power rest upon us.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that you do take us to those places where we feel physically, spiritually weak.

You take us to those places that we might grow. That we might learn to trust. That our hope and our character might grow.

[35 : 35] Thank you that you are teaching us to rejoice in all things. And rejoice in the Lord again and again.

Thank you that you are doing this wonderful and powerful thing in our own lives. Lord, Lord, thank you that you are doing this wonderful thing in our lives.

And to serve you. Lord Jesus, thank you that you know what it is to suffer in the body. For you did suffer in the body to release us from our sins.

And your suffering was real. And there was a crown of thorns upon your head. And you wore them for us. So we pray that we would be devoted to you.

So in love with you. So intent on serving you. That these physical things would not debilitate us. Or sideline us. But through them we might rejoice in your strength.

[36 : 38] And so continue to love and serve you. All the days of our life. Pray that you would send us on our way with your blessing. Your hand and your smile.

Pray this in Jesus' good name. Amen.