

GOD'S POWER & OUR WEAKNESS**2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10**

Many people just love a good mystery. The legend of the Loch Ness monster in Scotland has intrigued millions of people for almost a hundred years—and it's not stopping now. A few years ago, a group of Nessie enthusiasts, using a high-tech marine drone, conducted some of the most detailed scans of the lakebed ever. The vehicle allows sonars to scan just a few meters from the loch floor, giving resolution several orders of magnitude greater than anything before. This effort did result in a couple of big finds—literally. The device discovered a 27-foot shipwreck on the bottom of the loch and a 30-foot replica of the legendary monster used in a 1970 movie. But no real, live monster yet! But the possibility of one captivates and excites our imagination.

I love mysteries. It's probably my favorite kind of book to read or movie to watch. Does the Bible have mysteries in it? Well, if a mystery is about not getting answers to your questions, then – yes - the Bible has some mysteries in it. Sometimes, things happen or are said in the Bible that provoke good questions which the Bible never answers. We are nearing the end of our study of 2 Corinthians – just this week and next. The mega or overarching theme of this book is about being cruciform – having a cross-shaped life. In other words, if you are cruciform, your life resembles and reflects Jesus in a variety of different ways. Today's section of 2 Corinthians is one of the most important ones of all. It's all about God's power and our weaknesses. I came across two mysteries in our text today as I studied it. Two things are mentioned here that cause me to ask questions for which the Bible supplies no answers. I wonder if you can guess what they are. Let's read it right now and I'll show you what I mean.

Here's the first mystery. What on earth – or it might be more accurate to say - what in Heaven did Paul see in his vision? He mentioned an incredible and very personal ecstatic experience. Parts of it were still mysterious to him. It was so powerful; he wasn't sure if he'd been in his body or taken out of his body. He knew he'd been to Heaven, because people in the first century referred to it as the third heaven. First heaven was the earth's literal atmosphere. Second heaven was the realm of the moon and the stars. Third Heaven was God's dwelling place. Paul heard and saw things there he could not share with anyone else. It was too awesome, too holy, and too above and beyond human experience to describe adequately. What did he see and hear? Wouldn't you love to know? The Bible provides no answers. Whatever Paul experienced remains a mystery and will continue to be so until we get to Heaven.

Why did Paul even mention this vision here? Paul's enemies – he called them the "super apostles" - back at the church in Corinth apparently bragged and boasted about their visions. The members of the church were deeply impressed by the ecstatic experiences of these false teachers. Visions and supernatural manifestations were a big deal in pagan Greco-Roman religions and culture. These relatively new Christians likely assumed any spiritual leader should be able to report on having lots of personal visions. Paul had never mentioned his visions, so they assumed he hadn't had any. This made them wonder if Paul was an authentic apostle after all. And those false teachers were only too eager to cast any doubt they could on Paul's credentials and

credibility. Well, why hadn't Paul mentioned his vision before? Paul offered no explanation for why he'd remained silent until now. It was likely because Paul knew extraordinary visions had nothing to do with the Corinthians becoming followers of Jesus. Visions hadn't helped him to start or to build up the church there. Therefore, visions had nothing to do with proving if he was an apostle.

Here's the second mystery. What exactly was Paul's thorn in the flesh? "So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me." (2 Cor 12:7 NLT) All sorts of suggestions have been made by Bible scholars over the years. Some think Paul had some kind of eye disease. Others believe he had some kind of speech impediment. Maybe it was some kind of chronic illness or condition like epilepsy. The Bible never answers the question. It must have been something very humiliating and debilitating for this man of God. In fact, the word "thorn" isn't the best translation. The word is better understood as a "stake" in his flesh which connotes something far bigger and more painful than a mere thorn. Nevertheless, what it was exactly remains an unanswered question – a mystery – and will be until we get to Heaven. Actually, neither Paul's vision nor his thorn in the flesh is what makes this part of 2 Corinthians important for us today. Instead, the passage provides some powerful insights into three other matters of truly great importance today and every day. First of all, it provides...

INSIGHTS INTO MY WEAKNESSES.

It's a good thing we don't have specific information about Paul's thorn in the flesh. Why? It would be much harder to apply widely and personally if Paul's exact weakness didn't match our weakness. The fact we don't know what it was allows us to apply very important spiritual principles to a wide variety of human weaknesses. What did Paul mean by weaknesses? Was Paul thinking of some kind of sin in his life? I doubt it. Sin never glorifies God in any way and here it's suggested that weaknesses can glorify God. It might be a strong temptation towards a specific kind of sin, however. But I'm more inclined to think of it as some kind of disability. Many people have physical disabilities or suffer from chronic health conditions – blindness, deafness, paralysis, or some kind of chronic disease they always have to address. Other people suffer from psychological or emotional disabilities such as a learning disability, autism, anxiety, or depression. It might also refer to anything that holds you back or make you feel ashamed and inadequate. Maybe you were raised in a very dysfunctional family and your life is littered with broken relationships. Maybe you had a life experience of which you're deeply ashamed such as sexual abuse, time in prison, divorce, mental illness, or bankruptcy. Whatever the exact nature of your weakness, you'd be very happy to expel it from your life forever. You'd like God to remove it from your life today.

Here's a very important insight from our passage. God can work in and through any weakness, but He can only use a weakness surrendered to Him. Verses 9 and 10 are the key verses in our passage today and they kind of summarize 2 Corinthians as a whole. "But he (God) said to me (Paul), '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." (2 Cor 12:9-10 NLT) The word "surrender" is never used here, but the attitude of surrender is everywhere. But God's strength isn't present automatically in any and every weakness. No, that only happens when we give it up to God. That only happens when we say, "Father, I'd like You to remove this from my life, but if I have to keep on putting up with it, let Your grace be sufficient." That's surrender. Paul's surrender of his weakness to God was so complete he even got to the place where he welcomed it because it brought greater glory to God.

What else do we learn here about our weaknesses? Any weakness surrendered to God brings Him glory. How does it do that? Well, it displays God's power and it empowers God's mission. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:9 NLT) A proud, arrogant Paul would have hindered the message of Jesus, but a Paul well acquainted with humiliation and frailty somehow advanced Jesus' message. When we own our weaknesses and other people observe them or know about them – whatever they are – but then they see Jesus' power, grace, and love working in and through us, they conclude, "Wow, would you look at that? I thought their weakness would stop God from using that person, but it hasn't. I thought their weakness was more powerful than God, but it isn't. If God loves and is using that person for His glory with their weaknesses, maybe He can love and use me, too." Don't miss some wonderful, grace-filled paradoxes here! God turned Paul's weakness into an instrument of His power. What Satan used to pester and afflict Paul – his weakness - thinking it would make his ministry ineffective, God used to defeat Satan.

William Lane Craig has been called "Christian philosophy's boldest apostle." Craig has traveled the world debating many of the world's most articulate atheists. The atheist Sam Harris said, "Craig is the one Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into many of my fellow atheists"—which is probably why the atheist Richard Dawkins refuses to debate Craig. But the story of how Craig became a brilliant scholar and debater reveals how God works in the midst of our weaknesses and limitations. From birth he has suffered from Charcot-Marie-Tooth syndrome, a neuromuscular disease that causes atrophy in the extremities. He walks with a slight limp, and his hands often look as if they're gripping an invisible object. Growing up, he couldn't run normally. "My boyhood was difficult," Craig says, "Children can be very cruel." Since sports weren't an option, he joined his high school debate team. Initially, he wasn't interested in spiritual issues, but he started reading the Bible, and the Jesus he found there took hold of him. During college he continued debating and searching for his calling. Not until years later, though, after establishing himself as a philosopher, did he start to debate and defend his faith in Jesus in public settings. It came as a welcome surprise. He now says, "I was just thrilled to be able to [use debates] as a means of fulfilling this vision of sharing the gospel."

I hear another insight about my weaknesses here. Any weakness surrendered to God destroys my great enemy: pride. Paul became aware of something in his life that can become a problem for us just as easily. God's blessings can lead to spiritual pride **or**

arrogance unintentionally. The mighty vision Paul had experienced was a great blessing from God. Paul said of it, “Even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God....” (2 Cor 12:7 NLT) Whatever happened to Paul, it was a cherished, life-changing event for him. He didn’t mention it often because he was ashamed of it. No, instead, it was so precious and so wonderful he felt compelled to keep it private. But he recognized receiving such an incredible and powerful blessing from God might tempt him to become proud. “So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.” (2 Cor 12:7 NLT)

Paul might have concluded he himself was special for receiving the blessing of that vision rather than the fact God was special for giving it. Remember that when God blesses you in some wonderful way. It makes God special. It doesn’t make you or me special! Surrendered weaknesses do something else related to pride. They provide an opportunity to boast in the Lord not myself. Paul said here, “That experience is worth boasting about (his vision), but I’m not going to do it. I will boast only about my weaknesses.” (2 Cor 12:5 NLT) That thorn – whatever it was – prevented Paul from getting a bloated ego which would have crowded out God’s power in his life. Instead of boasting about visions, Paul boasted about the kind of weakness that better revealed God’s power in his life. And when you can boast about your weaknesses instead of your accomplishments, you’re really boasting in the Lord not yourself. When we can look at our weaknesses like this, we are becoming cruciform – cross-shaped. Our passage provides incredible insights into our weaknesses, but also amazing...

INSIGHTS INTO HOW I SHOULD PRAY.

What do we learn from Paul’s example? First, it’s appropriate to ask God to remove or change whatever is difficult in my life. It’s not wrong to ask God to rid your life of your weaknesses – the things you’re ashamed of, the things that hold you back, the things that make you sigh and cringe, the things you’d just long to leave behind. That just makes us human. Don’t miss what Paul said here about his weakness, “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away.” (2 Cor 12:8 NLT) God never rebuked Paul for praying something that ended up not being God’s will. Even Paul, this great man of God, didn’t immediately appreciate the significance of his weakness. Whatever it was, it wasn’t something he easily endured. He likely thought it was something that would damage his ministry, and so – of course - he asked and expected God to remove it. Bible scholars tell us Paul’s reference to “three times” can actually mean repeatedly or on many occasions. Even Jesus, our Lord and Savior, asked His Father three times in the garden of Gethsemane to remove the cross from His life. Don’t be ashamed to ask God repeatedly and often to remove your weaknesses.

But there’s another important insight about prayer here. It’s also appropriate to accept what is inescapable. Jesus accepted the cross after fervent and repeated prayer to be released from it. Paul eventually accepted God’s will regarding his “thorn,” and no longer asked Him to remove it. At times, we have to accept what is inescapable in our lives. Jesus learned He didn’t control His own life and destiny. Paul learned he didn’t

control his own life and destiny. You and I have to learn we don't control our own lives and destiny. There's a time to pray repeatedly and earnestly, but there's also a time to accept a different answer than the one we want. God is not always going to remove or change what's difficult. How do you know the difference? The Holy Spirit will let you know. It's about surrender. Through prayer, we come to a place of acceptance of God's will regarding what we've been praying about. It's not a resentful, pouting kind of acceptance either, but instead a willing acceptance. It's all about surrender.

When we offer up to God authentic prayer, we will come to this conclusion. It's appropriate to listen and to learn what God says is truly best for me. Jesus didn't think the cross was best for Him. But it was. Paul didn't think the thorn – or the stake - was best for him. But it was. Either audibly or through his inner spirit, the Lord communicated a message to Paul about his request. The answer was no. God was going to give him sufficient patience and perseverance to bear with and endure the continued affliction whatever it entailed. God answered Paul's prayer not by delivering him from the stake, but by receiving the necessary grace to bear it. Furthermore, God revealed that His power is best seen or is somehow perfected in the midst of our weaknesses and our imperfections not in their absence. We might well be mistaken about what's best for our lives, too. When we can prayer like this, we are becoming cruciform – cross-shaped. There's another group of insights provided in these verses,

INSIGHTS INTO GOD AND HOW HIS GRACE WORKS IN MY LIFE.

The first one might make you uncomfortable, but it's true. God sends or allows weakness in my life so I can experience His power. On the one hand, Paul said his thorn – his stake – was a messenger of Satan sent to torment Paul. On the other hand, God did not overrule Satan and remove this weakness from Paul's life. He allowed it. So, isn't it correct to say because Satan is subject to God and never His equal, God was the ultimate source of Paul's weakness whatever it was? If that's true – and I believe it is – we have to ask why God would do this. Paul eventually acknowledged the thorn kept his own pride and arrogance in check. He also acknowledged it gave God yet another opportunity to display and reveal His power in and through Paul. Perhaps those are the same reasons God allows thorns – weaknesses – in our lives. They keep pride in check and they allow God to reveal His power in and through our lives.

Here's another insight. What we discover in this passage is a new and enlarged understanding of grace. God's grace is a spiritual force that sustains me throughout my life. We usually think of grace as getting something we don't deserve – forgiveness of our sins, a restored relationship with God who becomes our Father and we become His children, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, escape from the damnation of Hell, and the gift of eternal life in Heaven. All true. But here we see another dimension of grace. It's God's strength and God's love enabling us to persevere and be faithful to God despite our weaknesses and limitations. God's grace carries us through. God's grace sustains us. God's grace encourages us. God's grace enables us.

Here's a final insight. God reveals His greatness and glory through my surrendered weaknesses. God's power resting upon humble, weak people and empowering them to be and do what only God could do is everywhere in the Bible. Abraham, the father of our faith, once said to God, "...even though I am but dust and ashes." (Gen 18:27 NLT) Moses, that great leader, said, "Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11 NLT) David, the greatest king of Israel, referred to himself as, "...a poor man from a humble family." (1 Sam 18:23 NLT) Even Paul, arguably the greatest Christian who has ever lived, wrote, "This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them all." (1 Tim 1:15 NLT) And yet God did things above and beyond anyone's imagination through these and many other weak and flawed people.

This is how God works. This is precisely how He defeats Satan and keeps on defeating him. We even see it in God's plan of redemption. There had to be weakness (Jesus' crucifixion) before there was power (Jesus' resurrection). This same pattern was now being lived out in and through the experience of Paul. And he was trying to get the Corinthians to understand this is a familiar pattern for all God's children. It's all about Jesus' death and life being reproduced over and over again in the lives of His people. If you're one of Jesus' followers, it's bound to show up in your life experience as well. It's part and parcel of being cruciform – being cross-shaped.

Author Tony Campolo tells of how he was a counselor at a Christian junior high camp years ago. He says he never met meaner kids in his life. They focused on an unfortunate kid named Billy who had cerebral palsy. His brain was unable to get proper control over his body or speech. The kids called him "spastic." Billy would walk across the grounds of the camp in his disjointed manner, and the others would line up behind him, imitating his every movement. Making fun of him. The meanness reached its lowest point when Billy's cabin had been assigned the morning devotions for those 150 kids. The boys voted for Billy to be the speaker. They knew he couldn't do it. They just wanted to get him up there so they could mock him and laugh at him. Little Billy got up out of his seat and limped his way to the platform. You could hear the titters of mocking laughter. But that didn't stop Billy. He took his place behind the podium and started to speak. It took him almost ten tortured minutes to say, "Je-sus loves meee! Je-Je-Je-sus loves meee! And I love Je-Je-Jesus." When Billy finished there was dead silence. There were boys trembling and crying all over the place. A revival broke out in that camp and many kids turned their lives over to Jesus. A host of boys committed their lives to Christian service. Tony Campolo wishes he had kept count of how many ministers he has met as he travels across the US who have told him how they gave their lives to Jesus because of the witness of a "spastic" kid named Billy.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, you are discovering God's power in and through your weakness. If God could use Billy with all of his limitations, what makes you think God can't use you to touch the lives of other people? If God can transform the lives of people through the likes of little Billy, don't you dare say God can't do great things through you!