

My Grace is Enough

A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

How do you know whether you're dealing with the real thing—or with an impostor? You get a call from someone telling you there have been some suspicious withdrawals from your bank account: could you please confirm your date of birth and pin, so the bank can assure themselves that you've been targeted by a scammer? You're in hospital recovering from an operation and you awake to find someone in uniform beside you pressing a form into your hand and asking you to sign something. You thought you'd signed a contract for casual employment, but several months into the job you look back over your pay slips and start wondering whether you've been underpaid and just what it was you signed in the first place. The problem is acute enough when it's our money that's under threat, but what about when it's our spiritual integrity that's at stake? What happens when we begin to suspect that the person to whom we've entrusted our spiritual wellbeing is not everything that they seem?

That's the situation in which the Corinthians find themselves in chapters 10 to 13 of Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. They'd become Christian as a result of the preaching of a man called Paul, who claimed to be an apostle of the risen Lord Jesus, but Paul is now far away and another group of missionaries have arrived claiming that Paul is no such thing. And now the Corinthians find themselves asking: How can you tell a genuine apostle from a fake?

You can sense the kind of anxiety that might lurk beneath this question, because if Paul couldn't be considered a genuine apostle, how could the Corinthians know they were genuinely Christian? And for that matter, what *were* the marks of a genuine apostle? What *was* meant to go on an apostle's C.V.? The Corinthians, no doubt with some help from the new missionaries, have put together something of a list of qualities that they think should characterise any self-respecting apostle, and by the beginning of chapter 12, Paul is most of the way through responding to their list of desiderata. Only two criteria remain outstanding: visions and revelations.

What can Paul provide for them on that front? With almost painful self-consciousness, Paul responds to their request. In vv. 2-4 he relates for them a vision he experienced in which he was taken up to the third heaven, and this will form the basis of Part One of this sermon. In v. 9 he recounts a revelation he received from the risen Lord Jesus himself, and this will form the nucleus of the discussion in the second part of this morning's sermon. And in Part Three I'm going to look at the conclusion Paul draws from Jesus' words to him, namely, as he says in vv. 9 and 10, that he will boast not in visions and revelations but in his weaknesses, knowing that when he is weak, then he is strong. Let's dive in!—

PART ONE

Caught up to the Third Heaven

Read with me from v. 1 of chapter 12:—

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 and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

Paul tells the story of a peculiar event in a peculiar way. Let me begin by saying a few things about the content of Paul's vision, before honing in on the strangeness of the way Paul chooses to speak of it. Paul recounts an experience he had fourteen years earlier, that is, relatively soon after his conversion. In it he was taken up to heaven and was told things he was then forbidden from sharing with anyone on his return.

Some of the things in this account that seem strange to us would possibly have seemed less strange to Paul's readers. For example, Paul takes for granted a 'multi-storied' heaven common to much of the Judaism of his day. In reaching its third 'story' Paul arrives at Paradise, where God himself

dwells. Again, the theme of hearing things that one is not permitted to tell others, while strange to us, also appears in other Jewish accounts of raptures to heaven. Also, Paul's confusion as to whether he was taken up to heaven bodily (that is, 'in the body') or whether it was only in spirit that he travelled to heaven would also have made sense to his readers. People today relate the conscious part of themselves to the physical part of themselves in a number of different ways, but in the Ancient World it was much more common for people to think of the soul as being in principle able to be detached from their bodies.

The oddness of Paul's vision, for his first readers, at any rate, would have lain rather in the way Paul chose to relate it. In the first place, and most strikingly, it's really not obvious at all that Paul is in fact talking about himself. In fact, that Paul himself is the 'man in Christ' really only becomes clear from v. 6. The second oddity has to do with how he introduces his vision story in v. 1: he 'must' tell it—presumably because the Corinthians have asked him to—and yet it is not συμφέρον, that is, it 'serves no good purpose'. What are these two features of Paul's vision report trying to communicate to the Corinthians?

Essentially, Paul is telling the Corinthians that the reception of visions is not a necessary prerequisite for apostleship. Being an eyewitness of the risen Lord Jesus *does* seem to have had this value for Paul, but for this purpose he seems always to have relied on his vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. What is true for the apostle is also true for Christians in general. Despising visions or denigrating spiritual experiences that fall outside our own Christian experience is not something I think Paul would want us to do: rather, his point is that powerful supernatural experiences are not essential prerequisites for becoming Christian or for being thought suitable for Christian leadership.

Having considered visions, Paul now moves to the topic of revelations, and he does so by linking the particular example he chooses to give to the vision he's just related.

PART TWO

The Thorn in the Flesh and a Word from the Lord

Read with me from halfway through v. 7:

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited (that is, because of the surpassingly great revelations Paul had received, such as the one he has just told the Corinthians about), I was given 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.'

Paul has just implied that visions, wonderful as they are, of themselves are something that might be given to any Christian, and aren't a relevant criterion for assessing the legitimacy of a Christian apostle, or leader. He now goes on to say of his own vision that could well have had the effect of making him conceited, or puffed up with pride. Now, again, I don't think this is a problem with visions *per se*, but could occur as a result of any blessing, whether that's success in one's job, a fulfilling marriage, well-behaved children, or even good looks. God therefore sends Paul a thorn in his flesh (the passive 'I was given' is Paul's reverential, Jewish way of avoiding naming God directly).

Paul hides the nature of whatever it was that tormented him under a vivid metaphor: whatever it was, it was like getting a thorn stuck under your nail when you're pruning the roses late in winter. Paul could have been referring to a temptation to a particular sin, or to an ongoing experience of persecution, but it's most likely that beneath the metaphor of the thorn there lies the onset of an illness that refused to go away with time, or, as Paul says here, even though he begged God repeatedly to take it from him.

Many of us will know someone with exceptional talent and drive who, seemingly on the cusp of wild success, falls prey to a chronic illness that saps their ability to move forward in their chosen field. A musician develops RSI; a writer anxiety; a swimmer chronic fatigue. If a great deal of energy and time has gone into developing their particular talent, then being unable

to fulfil their potential can pose for such a person a threat to their very sense of self. If they can no longer play, or write, or swim, then who *are* they?

Paul's revelation from God arises out of his request that God take away his thorn. It's God's answer to that prayer, and it's so gently phrased that it's helpful to remember that it's actually God's way of refusing Paul's request. No, he will not take away the thorn, for which he gives the apostle two reasons.

The first is that his 'grace is sufficient for Paul'. Let's assume that Paul's thorn is a recurrent, debilitating, illness. Jesus' grace would then be his assurance to Paul that his love for him wasn't contingent upon his success as a missionary. He loved him when Paul was working at the peak of his form; he loved him when Paul was too weak even to lift pen to paper. Paul's acceptance would be independent of his performance.

The second reason Jesus gives Paul is that 'his power is made perfect in weakness'. Again, assuming that Paul's thorn refers to chronic illness, this would mean that Paul could trust that Jesus would be at work in those moments when Paul was unable to carry out his plans as well as at those times when he enjoyed good health. Seeing Jesus bringing new congregations into existence even when he himself was too weak to play his part in that work would also give Paul confidence that while Jesus was capable of building up the church on his own, even if it for the most part it was Jesus' will to work through frail human vessels, like Paul.

One of the things I like to do with Miriam and Julia is to work in the garden with them. The day often starts with a trip to the nursery. We choose our plants with scrupulous care. We get back home and pull out our tools from the shed, often with energetic discussion about who will get to use which tool. We dig the hole: dirt goes everywhere. We pop in the plants, and throw mulch about and get out the hose. Except that, normally at some point in that process, 'we' becomes 'me': the girls lose interest. They'll wander off to make a flower salad to feed Jeremy, or they'll be pulling

leaves off the hosta and pretending they're boats, or climbing on the railings and calling me over to admire the different positions they can get themselves into. And that's okay. I don't really mind if they lose interest halfway through, or if the flowers we've planted wind up being used in their games, or if they jump down on top of the lilies, that much. I actually just want them to grow to love gardens and gardening and, even more so, to enjoy working alongside me and just being totally absorbed in the beauty of the world God's placed them in, and they won't be able to do that if every time they get something wrong in the garden, I get cross.

God is inviting you to labour alongside of him. Every time you visit a sick friend, or call a distant relative, or lead a kids' church class, or share about Jesus with your parents when you visit them on holiday, or welcome people to church, or accept an invitation to sit on Parish Council, you're labouring alongside Jesus, because that's *his* work. If you don't do it perfectly, it won't be the end of the world; rather, he wants you to learn to love doing the things that he loves, and to love doing them with *him*. He knows you're weak; his power will be made perfect even in your weakness.

PART THREE

Power in Weakness: A Closer Look

I want to finish off this morning by teasing out some of the implications of the conclusion Paul draws from Jesus' words to him in the first half of v. 9. Read with me, then, from the second half of the verse:

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.

In the first place, you may be thinking that this stuff might work okay in church land, but that if you were to start showing weakness in your day job then you'd be stuffed! But I actually think Paul's point holds true for all our

life, not just the 'Christian' bits of it. Imagine you're a doctor, and you realise you've made a mistake. Do you tell someone about it? Do you draw attention to your 'weakness'? Yes, of course you do! The 'strongest' thing you can do in the situation is to draw the attention of your superior to the error you made in a moment of weakness. Now let's imagine that you're an academic giving a paper to colleagues. An intelligent question from an honours student reveals to you the fact that you've taken a wrong turn in your research. Do you make use of your seniority to pour cold water on the honours student's query, or do you engage with the substance of her question, trusting that it will lead to a stronger article upon publication? Here are two different scenarios where acknowledging one's weakness before others is basic to securing a stronger outcome, be it for a patient whose health you've compromised or with regard to a piece of research you're hoping one day to publish.

The second issue I want to touch on is this: What about those of you who have been squirming in your seats and thinking, 'Do I really have to *delight* in my weaknesses?' And others of you might be thinking, 'Isn't Paul being just a little bit masochistic here?' To anyone thinking this, here are some thoughts I hope are helpful. The first thing to remember that Paul whole tone in this chapter and the last is often fiercely ironic. Paul is taking Corinthian categories and subjecting them to the light of the gospel in a way that reveals a fundamental clash of values between much in Graeco-Roman culture and the message of the cross. Paul has been arguing that the Corinthians have been preoccupied with the wrong things: with elevated rhetoric, powerful spiritual experiences, ethnic heritage, forceful leadership. But Paul would rather they put all those things to one side and rejoice in Jesus. Talk about delighting in weaknesses is in part, I suspect, Paul's way of jolting the Corinthians into acknowledging the absurdity of the values they have absorbed from their surrounding culture. So, to draw the threads of my argument together, I would say that no, we don't need to delight in our weaknesses: what we need to delight in is Christ. And often it's in acknowledging our weaknesses that we begin to truly appreciate Christ's own distinctive sort of power.

The last thing I want to do today is to tease out some of the implications of these two verses for those of us who are just beginning on our Christian walk. In other words, these last words are for you—Dahoo, Becky and Bill! I want to come back to the question of authenticity with which we started this sermon. You'll remember that Corinthians were concerned that perhaps Paul was not a genuine apostle.

I want to finish this morning by flipping that question, and saying, 'How can we know that we are genuinely Christian?' Feeling like a fake is something most of us experience it from time to time, whether in our jobs, or in our parenting, or, perhaps most disconcertingly, in our lives as Christians. To reassure yourself that you're genuinely Christian, and not just faking it, you'll find yourself tempted to look inward, and to ask yourself questions such as these: 'Could anyone looking at my life from the outside tell that I'm following Jesus? Do I love God—really? Am I becoming more like Jesus?

Now I'm not going to say that we should never ask these questions of ourselves, but I am going to suggest that you don't make asking them the first thing you do whenever you begin to feel like a fake as a Christian. Rather, I'm going to suggest that you take these words of Paul in 2 Corinthians as your motto, and use them like this. 'No,' you might say to yourself, 'I think my life wouldn't seem particularly Christian to anyone looking at it from the outside, but Jesus died for people who know that their lives don't yet reflect his in the way they should. I am weak, but Jesus will be my strength.' Or you might say, 'Do I love God really? Yes, I do, but not with the passion I would like to love him with. But Jesus loves me with a love stronger than death. I am weak, but Jesus will be my strength.' Or you might say, 'Am I becoming more like Jesus? I don't know, I feel like I'm stuck in a rut. But every new day brings the day closer when I will be like him, because I will see him as he is. I am weak, but Jesus will be my strength. When I am weak, then I am strong.'

Let's pray:

Jesus, we thank you that when we are weak, then we are strong. Help us to boast only in you. Amen.