

Power made perfect in weakness

Psalm 123 - 2 Corinthians 12:2-10- Mark 6:1-13

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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. 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.
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Intro

In the epistle of St Paul that we have read, we heard him say that he delights in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. This is an attitude that, I think we all agree, is not too common these days. How often have you said to a friend, or to your spouse: 'I am so glad that I am weak... that I have problems...'

We rather celebrate success. This week, the British school that my daughters attend in Qattameia, organized its annual 'Celebration of Success'. I am proud that both of my daughters were successful; one successfully finished high school, the other one was awarded for her high grades. How would I have responded if they were failures in school?

Sure, I would love them just as much, but well, honestly, I rather like to see them being successful as well.

St Paul being criticized in Corinth

The apostle Paul was criticized severely by the Church in the Greek city of Corinth for not being a very successful apostle. The very center of the problem was that Paul came across as a weak man, according many Christians in Corinth.

There were some new apostles in the church, some super performers, who came across as strong leaders, and compared to them, what was Paul?

* Some of these new apostles claimed to be great miracle workers, and Paul looked rather, well, common compared to them. He certainly did not pride himself in his spiritual accomplishments.

* And also, Paul was not the sophisticated preacher that these newcomers were. Paul refused to make use of the most dramatic Greek styles of public speech. He was not sophisticated enough, that is, he did not follow the style of the Greek Sophist school of philosophy that was popular in those days.

* On top of all this, Paul was also regularly persecuted; he suffered from nights without sleep, from hunger and thirst, and much more. So it was easy to suggest that God did not bless him...

'Does God not bless those who do good, and punish evildoers? Well, look at the life of Paul, God certainly does not bless him, does he? A man in so many troubles...'. It seems clear to me, that Paul would also be strongly criticized had he lived in our time.

For many Christians nowadays, *the television-evangelists* and the *pastors of mega-churches* seem to be the criterion for good Christian leadership and for how to be a true servant of God.

There is no doubt that our image of an effective and successful Christian can easily be influenced by what we see on TV. It is so easy to be tempted into thinking that what matters most is appearance, eloquence, communications skills, and business and management skills.

This view of what 'real Christian leaders' should look like combines easily with the so-called *prosperity gospel*.

Let me quote just one of those modern 'apostolic servants of God':

God wants YOU to have more! That's right! God does want you to have more. He wants you to live the abundant life. And he wants you to NOT limit Him in what He can do for YOU.

For many years I separated wealth from the "Christian" lifestyle. Somehow I thought that living a godly life meant living a life without material wealth. It wasn't until someone showed me in the Bible that it was the will of God for ALL of his children to be prosperous and healthy.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul answers the biting criticism that was directed at him, and for us, this is very helpful, as it shows us the heart of what the apostle considered true Christian leadership, and Christian living. He is answering those successful prophets of a prosperity gospel.

Paul's response

How does Paul answer his critics?

It would have been very human of him to counter them by pointing to his many accomplishments. The many churches he founded, the numbers in the pews that became Christians through his ministry.

He himself was the founder of the Church in Corinth! Paul could have said: 'do you not see all this, do you not see that I am quite successful?'

He could speak of signs and miracles that followed his ministry, and that he had testified to the Gospel of Jesus Christ even to rulers in the Roman Empire. And he could speak of his spirituality, and the visions that God gave him.

But he does nothing of that. Nothing.

What he does is the opposite. A few times in his letter he gives a rather impressive list – of his misery. Of his misery, not of his successes.

Let me read one of those to you, from 2 Corinthians 11:21-30, that is the part that just precedes what we read earlier. Paul here compares himself with the self-appointed super apostles, the preachers of *health and wealth* in Corinth:

Are they servants of Christ? I am more.

How does Paul prove this?

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. [...] If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

How does Paul commend himself as a servant of God? By mentioning weakness and problems and persecutions as the actual sign of true apostleship.

With this description of the Apostle Paul in mind, how lame, how sad, how upsetting are the words of those who nowadays promise Christians *health and wealth* as a sort of God-given right.

Interestingly, the list of miserable problems that Paul gives, is very much like the lists that the Greek moral philosophers used to impress their pagan audiences with.

These Greek philosophers would show how awful their circumstances were, but also, that they were not influenced by these circumstances whatsoever. They would show that they were so detached from that awful reality, as a proof that the gods were truly present in them. A sort of Buddhist negation of the pains of reality.

Paul is not detached at all. He does not say that his outward circumstances are irrelevant for him. They *are* very relevant and real, and he does not deny that the difficulties do press him down. He prayed actually regularly that God would take some of those problems away, we have read this.

Elsewhere in this letter Paul describes how down and depressed he was at a certain point *because* of the troubles he was facing. Depression and feeling low can also be part of normal Christian life, and if we feel deep down and low, this does not mean we have been left by God.

Paul clarifies that these circumstances are part and parcel of being attached to Jesus Christ. Since our life is bound up with Christ's, there is no way to avoid such weaknesses. For those who want to follow Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord, suffering in life does not come as something unexpected.

So models of the Christian life or Christian service that try to avoid weaknesses or minimize its place in our daily experience are simply untrue. I think they are at depth the result of an insufficient view of the sufferings of God in Jesus Christ.

This does not mean of course that in the Christian life everything is gloom and doom; it is great to be a Christian – and even in our daily life we reap many benefits of being followers of Christ. In our family-life, in a healthier lifestyle, in the many great friends we have, in people who support us in times of need. And what is also true, upon our prayer, God often DOES change our situations for the better.

But to preach that God will always make our life easy and comfortable is simply wrong. It is untrue, and it also contains the suggestion that suffering and problems do not serve any positive goal. But for the Christian, they do serve positive goals.

Power is made perfect in weakness

St Paul uses an enigmatic statement in this context. He says that *power is made perfect in weakness*. Power is made perfect in weakness. What does he mean with this? It is clear from the context that St Paul speaks about *his own* weaknesses, and about the *power of Christ*. Paul is glad

with his weaknesses, because when he is weak, the power of Christ can work in his life.

Our problems are a test for our spirituality, for our faith. The Old Testament prophet Job was advised by his wife to say farewell to God because his life was so miserable. Instead, Job continued to put his faith in God. The adversity we experience in life has this refining impact. It forces us to know who we are as Christians and what truly matters.

And our problems drive us Godward; they make us more prayerful, and they invite Him anew into our life. This makes his presence in our life much more tangible, very visible. Because he gives us stamina in our circumstances.

As Christians we must face up to this paradox, that weakness is a prerequisite, an essential precondition, for God's power to be displayed in our lives.

Being at the end of your human resources does not mean the end of God's. When we are weak and in need of help, then we are open to receive God's help in our life.

And this display of God's power does not necessarily mean that the difficulties are taken away from us. This is exactly what Paul was saying in the passage we read. He prayed that God would change his circumstances, but that did not happen. God did not intervene to make his life pleasant and easy.

St Origin, a theologian of Alexandria, one of our own early Egyptian Church Fathers, who lived from about 185-254 AD, he said in this context:

God saves us from our afflictions *not* by taking us out of them, but by ensuring that they will not crush us.

Elsewhere in his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul compares himself with a fragile mud vase, with a jar of clay. That is not a very flattering comparison actually, but the concept is similar:

You do not need to be a superstar; God can use you if you are a fragile jar. Just being a mud pot is enough.

Paul may actually refer to the Corinthian lamps here. These were known throughout the Roman Empire: the more fragile they were, the more light they would let through. When the lamp was at its weakest, the light would shine best. When we are at our wits end, He is there. His light in our life becomes visible when we are fragile.

The church in Corinth was urgently in need of this new framework for understanding what it means to be an apostle of God and a Christian in general:

Human weakness is not a barrier for the plans of God. It is the channel He has chosen to use. First in our Lord Jesus Christ – dying on a cross - but also in His followers.

We are here to serve God. God is not here to serve me with outward success and by giving me all things of my wish-list.

Being attached to Jesus Christ, that is real success for God.

External prosperity, and health, and success, these are not proofs of being blessed by God; the proof of his blessing is that we know Jesus Christ and his Gospel, that we have the privilege of being part of his new Kingdom, and that in times of need, we hold on to him and He is with us.

The grace of God is visible in Christians who think and do as Gods Word teaches, and who in the midst of miserable circumstances, of problems, continue to live as Christians.

That is not only true discipleship of Jesus, but that is also evangelistic; it opens the hearts of people around us for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Non-Christians may respect the high moral standards of their Christian neighbors and be somewhat impressed by their lifestyle.

But seeing the Christian neighbor who shares the same human frailties, faces the same fears and frustrations, struggles with the same temptations, *yet* possesses an inner power that proves that he has another di-

mension working in his life, it is *this* witness that can open the unbelieving heart to the Gospel.

Paul decided to accept his problems as a positive force in his life; not because problems in themselves are nice, but because they enable us to learn and to see God at work in a deeper manner than we would ever experience if we would always live on Cloud 7.

What a different approach to sickness, weakness and suffering than people who have no hope in God!

Popular western philosophy teaches: 'Let us today eat, drink and watch television, for tomorrow we diet.'

It seems that our western culture is so focused on the maximization of present positive experiences, on enjoyment today, that it does not know how to deal with the reality of today, the actuality of suffering.

If we have no hope beyond this life, then all desires we have must of course be fulfilled in this life – otherwise this life is not worthwhile.

St Cyprian was a bishop of Carthage in what is now Tunisia. He lived in the same period as Origen of Alexandria; in his comment on the text we have read from Paul he said:

This finally is the difference between us and the others who do not know God, that they complain and murmur in adversity, while adversity does not turn us from the truth of virtue and faith but proves us in suffering. [On Mortality 13]

St Cyprian came from a wealthy background, but he gave his possessions away, and he eventually died, on 14 September 258 AD, as a martyr in his own city.

Conclusion

What comfort do the 'super apostles' in Corinth, and *health and wealth* preachers in our day, have for suffering people? For people in sickness, and poverty? When we get unemployed, or when we lose our investments? When we face family-problems?

They cannot offer comfort, I fear, because in the end, they will tell us that misery in life must be resisted at all cost and that it only shows that God is not blessing us.

But we cannot avoid major problems in our life, the suggestion is a lie. We will all, at one time or another, face major crises!

And God *is* blessing us – right in the midst of crisis.

St Paul's approach, to see adversity as a possibility for God to show his presence in our life, is not only more true, it is also more pastoral. God's purpose in our life is not to help us escape from all difficulties but to transform us into being more attached to him. He uses those events to expose our complete inadequacy and to demonstrate his complete reliability - in times of need we run to him.

If we do not learn these lessons, then the real tragedy of Christian suffering is the wasted opportunity.

Our God is the Father of all comfort. He comes near to us, exactly when we are in those circumstances where we need Him most, in our moments of greatest need. That is where we should expect God to be most present, most visible. In our weakness, his power becomes visible.

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit -
Amen