



## A sermon preached at St Andrew's Parish Church, Headington

By Rev Tim Howles

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

The church in Corinth was a source of continual worry for the Apostle Paul. It seems that the Christians there were in a bit of a mess. They'd forgotten much of what he'd taught them. They'd begun to squabble amongst themselves. Paul had gone back to see them once, but it had been "a painful visit" as he himself says earlier in the letter (2 Cor 2:1). Just recently some new teachers had come along. They claimed they could offer spiritual experiences of God. And yet they were twisting the meaning of the Christian faith. Sadly, many in the church began to follow them. They were in grave danger of falling way from their Christian lives.

And that's where we pick up our reading. How would Paul respond to this situation?

First of all, he does something that might seem a bit surprising. He talks up his own credentials. "I know a person in Christ", he writes, "who fourteen years ago was caught up into Paradise [...] and heard things that are too wonderful to be told" (12:2-4). The person he's talking about is, of course, himself. But why is Paul telling us this? Why is he, we might say, "boasting" of his own spiritual experiences?

Well, he's playing a little rhetorical game. These new teachers were claiming to offer experience of God. *If that's your criteria*, Paul says, *that's nothing compared to me. I've had an experience of God that trumps them all.*

But what's different about Paul is that as soon as he mentions this, he closes it down again. He doesn't want to talk about his impressive vision and experience of God. Because, for Paul, the true mark of a Christian is not to boast of one's strength, but to glory in one's weakness.

Here's the story Paul wants to talk about instead:

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I appealed to the Lord, that it would leave me, but He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness". (12:7-9)

Now, what was this “thorn in the flesh” that Paul was talking about?

We don’t really know. Some people have speculated it might have been a physical ailment of some sort. There’s some evidence that Paul had problems with his eyes, for example, and that he might have been going blind. Or perhaps it was a spiritual situation, some besetting sin that kept recurring in his life and that he couldn’t get rid of. We can’t be sure. But we can be sure that, whatever it was, it was a painful and challenging and perhaps even traumatic situation for Paul, because he describes it as a “torment”. Something came into Paul’s life that was painful and debilitating, and that served as a continual reminder of his weakness.

And the point Paul wants to make is that *this* is the mark of a true Christian, rather than those impressive visions and experiences.

Why? Because a Christian knows that God’s grace is most manifest in our weakness, rather than in our strength.

Let me explain what I mean. At the heart of the message of Christianity is the rather challenging idea that, however good we are, however moral and upright, however deserving, there’s nothing we can contribute to justify ourselves before God. “It is by grace you have been saved”, says Paul in Ephesians chapter 2, “through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). A Christian is someone who knows with full confidence that they are a child of God. But a Christian is *also* someone who knows that they could never have earned this status for themselves; it was given to them as a gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And Paul’s point is that it’s in our moments of suffering and vulnerability that we are most reminded of this. It’s in our moments of suffering and vulnerability that we remember that our salvation comes to us from the outside; it is not something we could ever have done for ourselves.

Now, I don’t want to make light of the experience of suffering. I know that some of us here in this room have been through a lot recently. Some here have lost loved ones recently. Some have been ill and in pain. Some have received news about a diagnosis they weren’t expecting and that has impacted their lives in ways they never imagined. Some have had disappointments. Some are finding work hard to find. Some are living far from their families. For some of us, the daily grind of life is a struggle. For others, there is a sin or addiction that has taken over our lives and that we can’t control. Where is God in all this? We might be tempted to echo the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins: “why do sinners’ ways prosper?/ and why must disappointment all I endeavour end?”

Our suffering is real, very real. And I would never want to make light of it. But I do want us to remember that this does not mean that God has abandoned us. Oh no, not at all. In fact, it’s quite the opposite: in our moments of suffering and weakness and vulnerability God is teaching us a valuable lesson, that our strength comes from Him and nowhere else. That’s why Paul is able to say: “when I am weak, it is then that I am strong”.

Let me illustrate what I mean. All of us in this room (or most of us) use Email. And so we know what it means to receive an Email message with a document attached. Well, we can think about suffering in those terms. What matters is not so much the suffering is, but the message that is attached to it.

- When suffering comes, will we receive it as a “message from Satan” (to use Paul’s words)? That is to say, we experience suffering and we interpret it as a message that God doesn’t care for me, that He has abandoned me, that He doesn’t intend the best for me, etc.
- Or, when suffering comes, will we receive it as a “message from God”? That is to say, we experience suffering and we hear in it a call to trust Him more, to lean on His provision more, to sing His praises more?

The Apostle Paul came to understand that the mark of a true Christian is not to boast of our power, but to exalt Christ in and through our weakness. And when we do that, it is an eloquent testimony to the grace of God that has come into our lives even though we did nothing to deserve it. I know that is the case because I’ve seen that in many of you who have faced suffering and trials of different sorts, but have sought to give glory to the God who is with you in your weakness.

May I finish with a story?

The great Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a minister and preacher at Westminster Chapel in London in the middle of the last century. One day, a congregation member came to his office in tears and shared with him the news that she’d recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. Lloyd-Jones listened to her and sympathised with her and prayed for her. And after a while, the meeting was over and the lady got up to leave. And just as she got to the door, Lloyd-Jones called out to her softly: “Mary, don’t waste your cancer”. Well, those words must have stuck in that lady’s mind. And she went back to her job and tried to witness to the love of Christ in and through her illness. Now, as it happened, she was a member of staff at Buckingham Palace, which was just down the road from Lloyd-Jones’ church. Some weeks later, there was a distinguished visitor to Westminster Chapel. Queen Elizabeth herself came one Sunday morning to hear Lloyd-Jones preach. She met him on many occasions after that and I think it’s likely the case that he has been an influence on her own Christian faith and understanding over the years.

God does not desire any evil upon His people. But if we let Him, He can use the suffering and weakness in our lives to remind us of His inestimable grace, for our good, and for the blessing of all those with whom we come into contact. May it always be so for us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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