

When God Does His Most Perfect Work

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Introduction.

- 1) There is a serious sickness that runs rampant in our culture which has now infiltrated the church, seducing and deceiving God's people. I call it "Christian Rock-Star Syndrome," "Christian Superstar Obsession," or "Christian Celebrity Infatuation." This disease is no respecter of persons. It has infected men and women, young and old. It runs the gambit theologically from the lunacy and bizarre world of the charismatic Word-Faith movement all the way to staunchly Reformed circles. Sam Storms is most certainly correct when he says, "Mega-church pastors, health-and-wealth advocates, and best-selling authors are promoted and praised as if they are in better standing with the Lord than the faithful but unacknowledged housewife or the quiet pastor who tends a flock of less than a hundred folk in rural Alabama." ("Superstar-less Christianity," 9-18-06).
- 2) In many instances these powerful personalities use their platform not to build the body of Christ but to gut it. They strut sitting down, use and abuse simple and naïve persons for their own agendas and personal kingdom building. They are like the hireling of whom Jesus warned in John 10 "does not care about the sheep" (10:13). They know nothing of honesty and integrity, humility and sincerity.
- 3) Still others, perhaps unwittingly, have bought into a kind of Christian humanism that gives more credence to experience than Scripture, to triumphs and successes, than they do to the cross and passion of a Suffering Servant Savior. As my colleague Jim Smyrl says, "Experience determines which text is publicly read. The authority of the sermon is relegated to the experience of the sermonizer."

4) All of this is really nothing new. The Church today is not much different than the Church at Corinth in A.D. 55. Spiritual elitism was popular and on the rise. Those Paul designates as “super-apostles” (*huperlian apostolon*; 11:5) were boasting about who they were, where they had been, what they knew and what they had done. They glorified themselves and talked about their superior, spiritual experiences, the fact that they lived perpetually on the mountaintop and that this demonstrated beyond question that God’s favor rested on them.

5) Paul, however, countered this pseudo-spirituality with one telling blow: this is not when God does His most perfect work. God displays His glory and cultivates our good through suffering and pain, through trails and difficulties, by giving us a thorn not a throne, a cross not a crown.

Transition.

Confronted with so many options and opinions as to what constitutes true and genuine spirituality, Paul would direct us to 3 controlling truths to guide us in the right direction.

I. Spiritual Maturity Teaches Us the Wisdom of Consistency 12:1-6

Our text is the heart of the third major section of 2 Cor., chs. 10-13. This section of 2 Corinthians is dripping with irony and sarcasm. Paul has agreed to play “the fool” (11:16-17) like the spiritual superstars who are attacking his apostleship and spiritual status. Like them he will “boast” (19 times in chapters 10-13; 5 times in 12:1-9) though he recognizes there is no value, nothing profitable, “nothing to be gained” (*NIV*) by doing so. It may be necessary, but it is not what he wants to do. Why?

1). Boasting about a personal experience from God is foolish. 12:1-5

- They boast about the incredible things God has done in them, for them, and thru them. OK. Listen to this. [Read vs. 2-4] “I know (7 times, vs. 2-3) a man in Christ...not lawful for a man to utter [vs.2-4].”
- Paul uses the third person though he most certainly is talking about himself.
- It happened as a result of His relationship to Christ, “a man in Christ.”
- He is agnostic about much of the experience, though it was visionary and revelatory and it was given “from” the Lord. God gave it. He did not seek it.
- Paul received this remarkable experience 14 years earlier, c. A.D. 41-42, perhaps when he was commissioned at Antioch as apostle to the Gentiles and immediately before his first missionary journey. Certainty as to when, however, is not made available in the text. Paul did not believe it was necessary.
- It was personal, intense and mystifying. He is not sure if he was in the body (Jewish expectation) or out of the body (Hellenistic expectation). He did not know and did not care. Actually, it did not matter.
- What he knows is it happened, and it took him to the third heaven (v. 2) to Paradise (v.4). The words are synonymous. Several points of exegetical interest are worth noting:
 - 1) The third heaven is where God is present, above the first heaven where the birds fly and the clouds float, above the second heaven where the moon, sun and stars have their place.

- 2) The third heaven is also Paradise, a Persian word that referred to a beautiful walled or enclosed garden. The word occurs only 3 times in the NT: 1) Luke 23:43; 2) here; and 3) Rev. 2:7.
 - 3) Paul was caught up, “raptured” (Gr. *harpazo*) into the very presence of God. Again, this was a completely sovereign act of a sovereign God.
 - 4) While there he heard inexpressible words, “things that cannot be told” (*ESV*), words which it is not lawful (appropriate) for a man to speak.
- In other words Paul will tell us nothing about what he saw and next to nothing about what he heard. Why? Because boasting about a personal experience in your prayer closet, on a spiritual retreat, during your quiet time or any other time is foolish. Paul had the experience. Indeed of such a one he says with irony in v.5, “I will boast.” However, shifting now for rhetorical effect to the first person, Paul says of myself, as for me, I will boast, not in an ecstatic experience, but in my infirmities (*NIV, ESV*, “weaknesses”).
 - God did not give this experience to Paul because he was special, but because he was “in Christ.” God gave this experience to Paul for Paul and no one else. Further Paul had never talked about this until now and he would say nothing more about it because it
 - 1) had no value for the Church and
 - 2) it is no indication of one’s spiritual maturity and walk with God.
 To believe it to be so is foolish, immature, an evidence of your misunderstanding of the true nature of the Christian life.

Transition.

You ask then, what is the evidence of a godly believer, a mature Christian? What is it that I should pursue?

2). Setting a public example for God is wise.

12:6

- Paul acknowledges that pride tempts him to brag about this experience, but he will not play the fool, even if it is the truth. Interesting: sometimes you can talk truth and still be a fool!
- Paul says no, “I refrain.” No one should think of me, judge me, evaluate me, lit. “reckon, give an account” above or beyond what he sees (present tense) and hears (present tense) from me.
- Present performance public and visible to all is the criteria by which to judge spiritual maturity, not past experience.
 - You led hundreds to Christ in the past: What are you doing today?
 - You had a glorious prayer closet experience. What are you doing today?
Why talk about it or anything else like it today?
- Paul says examine my walk and words now, today. Look carefully at my life today! Anything beyond this matters little. Anything other than this counts for nothing.

Transition:

Spiritual maturity teaches us the wisdom of consistency (not ecstasy).

II. Personal difficulty guides us to the wisdom of dependency.

12:7-9

Paul received a wonderful education in the school of Christ. The lesson he learned, however, was not gained from the throne of heaven but by a thorn in his flesh. It is here that he learned when and how God accomplishes His most perfect work. What would Paul have us learn from this lesson from our Lord?

1). See God's purpose.

12:7

- Paul was aware of the fact that theological knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1), as well as spiritual experiences, can puff us up, feed our ego, make us proud. “Because of the abundance” or better “surpassing greatness” (*ESV*) of the revelations that could cause Paul to have an inflated opinion of himself, he was given by God (divine passive) what is called 1) a thorn in the flesh, and 2) a messenger of Satan (*aggelus Satana*). The purpose of the thorn is made explicit: to continually (present tense) buffet (beat; *NASV* “torment”; *ESV* “harass”) me so that I would not be exalted above measure (note the inclusio).
- Paul is abused, “slapped around” continually and persistently (cf. Matt. 26:67 and note the same word is used of the “blows” given to Jesus) by God’s adversary who now becomes God’s proxy, God’s tool.
- The thorn in the flesh has received much attention.

Psychological	Physical	Spiritual	Oppositional
*Speech impediment	*Acute opthalmia	*Sexual lust	*His persecutors
*Inability to deal with criticism	*Frequent headaches	(Roman Catholic)	(Chrysotom)
*Hysteria	*Malaria	*All his different kind of trials	*Literal demon opposition
*Remorse for past sins (torture of the Christians)	*Epilepsy	(Calvin, Luther)	*Rejection as an apostle
	*Tuberculosis	*Doubt	
	*Nervous disorder	*Fear	
	*Gallstones		
	*Gout		
	*Rheumatism		
	*Gastritis		
	*Leprosy		
	*Lice in the head		
	*Deafness		
	*Dental infection		

Regardless of the precise nature of the thorn, this *skolops*, this stake, God's purpose is clear: to keep us, to keep Paul, humble.

2). Seek God in prayer.

12:8

- The thorn delivered Paul from pride and drove him to prayer. Drawing on the example of the Lord Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, Paul asked the Lord 3

times that this messenger from Satan, this thorn, might depart. Literally it reads “three time the Lord I pleaded...”

- That Paul would draw on the passion of our Lord is remarkable but not surprising.

The parallels are numerous.

Parallels between Jesus in the Garden and Paul in affliction

<u>Jesus</u>	<u>Paul</u>
Jesus faced a cross (instrument of death)	Paul faced a stake (instrument of distress)
3 times Jesus prayed	3 times Paul prayed
Jesus receives an answer different than his initial request	Paul receives an answer different than his request
Jesus is crucified	Paul receives no healing
Jesus was rejected by his own	Paul at this point has been rejected by the church at Corinth
Jesus was raised from the dead by God’s power	Paul will live by God’s power
Jesus was rejected as Messiah	Paul was rejected as an apostle
Jesus is the Suffering Servant	Paul was a suffering servant
God saved a world through Christ	God touched a world through Paul

- Paul’s thorn was debilitating and humiliating. It knocked him down, laid him out, showed him his weakness, drove him to his knees.

3). Submit to God’s plan.

12:9

- God revealed Himself to Paul. Oh, not in Paradise but in prayer. Not on a throne but on his knees. Not in pride but in pain. Not with a yes but with a no explained.

“He said to me” is in the perfect tense. The answer received then is still the answer that stands today.

- “My grace is (present tense) sufficient for you, for My strength (*dunamis*, ESV “power”) is made perfect in weakness. Philip Hughes says, “This is the summit of the epistle, the lofty peak from which the whole is viewed in true proportion” (p. 441). David Garland notes the chiasmic arrangement of these words places the emphasis squarely on “My grace, My power.” God’s grace and power are supremely revealed in a bloody cross. God’s grace and power will be supremely revealed when He is great and we are small, when He is strong and we are weak.
- These are the only recorded words of the risen Lord Jesus in Paul’s letters. They are not the only ones he ever heard. They are the ones that made the deepest and most permanent impression on his life and ministry. He could never forget them. He could never escape them. They would accompany him and sustain him throughout the remainder of his ministry. One thing is certain: he would need them.

4). Speak of God’s power.

12:9

- Now Paul understood: “his weakness plus Christ’s power equals God’s grace and Christ’s presence.”
- He tells us he has stopped praying for the thorn to be taken away. Why would he ask God to remove the very thing that taught him the greatest spiritual lesson he would ever learn? Because of God’s answer to his prayer he will most gladly (NIV, “all the more gladly”) boast (last use of the word in 2 Corinthians) in his

weaknesses. Why? “That the power (*dunamis*) of Christ may rest (tabernacle), pitch His tent, upon me.

- Paul has learned the “power-in-weakness principle.” Paul has discovered the wisdom of a “weakness Christology.” The omnipotent Son of God comes down on His people in their need, in their weakness. Here is where God does His most perfect work. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 1:27-31?
 - “But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” 1 Cor. 1:27-31, NASB.

III. Supernatural sufficiency drives us to the wisdom of humility. 12:10

This paragraph ends with a memorable pithy saying: “when I am weak then I am strong.”

To expand it and catch exactly what he means we might say: “When I am weak in me then I am strong in Him.” Herein is the wisdom of humility. Herein is the solid foundation for faithful service for a Suffering Savior.

1). Serve for Christ’s sake.

Brothers and sisters, it is all about Christ and nothing about us. Who we are, where we’ve been, what we’ve done, means nothing. Paul again gives us a hardship list or catalogue of suffering (cf. 11:23-29). He says as for me, I am well-pleased (*NIV*,

“delight”) in infirmities (weaknesses), in reproaches (insults), in needs, in persecutions and distresses (difficulties) for Christ’s sake (*huper Christou*). I serve for His sake not mine, his praise not mine.

- Any preacher, any evangelist, any conference speaker, any missionary, anyone who talks more about themselves than they do Christ is talking about the wrong person. It should never be that we make much of us. It should never be that men and women would make much of us. It should always be that we, that they, make much of Jesus.

2). **Serve in Christ’s strength.**

- When I am weak He tabernacles over me. When I am weak His grace pours over me. When I am weak He is strong.
- Question: in whose strength would you rather serve, yours or His?
 - Yours is finite, His is infinite.
 - You are impotent, He is omnipotent.
 - You can do some things, but He can do anything.
 - When I am weak, then I am strong.

Conclusion:

What I Asked/What I Received

“I asked the Lord to make me strong that I might achieve,
But He made me weak that I might learn to humbly receive.

I asked the Lord for health that I might do greater things,

But He gave me pain that I might do better things.

I asked the Lord for wealth that I might be happy,

But He gave me poverty that I might be wise.

I asked the Lord for greatness that I might have the praise of men,

But He gave me weakness that I might feel the need of Him.

I asked the Lord for all things that I might enjoy life,

But Jesus gave me life that all things I might enjoy.

I got nothing that I asked for,

But everything I had hoped for...

God took me down that He might lift me up.

Despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

Who I ask, could be more blessed than me?"