

## 22. Learning to Be Strengthened in Weakness

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our children learn to rejoice even when they may suffer for Christ. We saw that we help them learn to rejoice in suffering as we give them an example to follow by the way that we respond when we suffer for sharing the Gospel with others. Because the false teachers had boasted about what they did in their own strength, Paul had chosen to answer what they had said by boasting also. However, Paul chose to boast about his weakness instead of his strength. As a result, we are going to see in our topic today how to show our children how to receive the strength of the Lord at the very time that they are experiencing weakness.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, Paul wrote, “It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows--how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Paul had received a number of visions from the Lord. In fact, six of those visions are recorded in the book of Acts.

The first vision is recorded in Acts 9:11-12 where the Lord spoke to Ananias and told him about the vision that Saul had seen. Those verses say, “So the Lord *said* to him, ‘Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting *his* hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.’” God had given Paul a vision that Ananias would come and restore his sight to him. Since six visions are recorded, it is possible that Paul had several others as well.

Paul also received various revelations from the Lord. In Galatians 1:12, Paul said that he received his message by revelation. That revelation is explained in Galatians 1:15-18 where we read, “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.” Paul spent three years in Arabia where he received by revelation the message that he was to preach among the Gentiles.

As a result, Paul could have boasted about many different visions and revelations. However, he chose to talk about the one that God had specifically spoken in inexpressible words that it was not lawful for man to speak. That particular vision had happened fourteen years earlier. Many people think that Paul may have had this vision at the time that he was stoned in Acts 14:19 where we read, “Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul *and* dragged *him* out of the city, supposing him to be dead.” Whether at that time or some other, that vision is recorded here in 2 Corinthians.

Paul explains this vision as one seen by a man fourteen years earlier. That man could have been

in his body or he could have been taken out of his body. Since Paul knew the man had been stoned and those who stoned him thought he had died, that is why many think that Paul speaks the way that he speaks here. Paul said that the person was caught up into the third heaven: the first heaven is the atmosphere above us where the birds fly; the second heaven is where the sun, moon and stars are located; the third heaven is where the throne of God is located. Notice that the third heaven is also called Paradise. There, the man heard words that he was not allowed to tell anyone. As a result, Paul does not tell what that man learned at that time or boast about what he had heard.

Instead, 2 Corinthians 12:5-6 says, “Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me.” Here, we see that Paul said that the only thing that he would boast about was his infirmities. His desire was not to boast but only to speak the truth that Christ had told him to speak. Here, we see that Paul had no desire to bring glory to himself because he wanted all of the glory to go to God.

Paul went on to write about his infirmities. The word that is translated “infirmities” usually speaks of weakness in the body or the soul. That is the way it was used in the previous chapter. That is also the way it was used in 1 Corinthians 2:3 where we read, “I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.” Then, Romans 8:26 says, “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” Paul made it clear that he would only talk about his weaknesses. He did not want to say anything that would exalt himself. He understood what it meant to have physical fears. He also understood that he did not always know how to pray for others. These things spoke of the weakness of his body and soul. Paul knew that everything in his life of any value came from the Lord.

That is why Paul went on to say in 2 Corinthians 12:7-8, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.” Paul had received much revelation from the Lord. In fact, most of the things in the books of the New Testament that he wrote had probably been received by revelation. At the same time, the Lord chose to keep him dependent upon the Lord so that he would not be tempted to boast in his own strength. As a result, the Lord gave him a thorn in the flesh so that he would be constantly dependent upon the Lord.

The word that is translated “messenger” is the word that is nearly always translated “angel”. We see that one-third of the angels followed Satan and became fallen angels. As a result, this was probably a demon that God allowed to buffet Paul similar to the way that Satan was allowed to buffet Job. The word “buffet” means *to strike with the fist or to mistreat in other ways*. In the case of Job, Satan was allowed to touch the possessions, the family and the health of Job but not his life. We know that Paul had certain physical infirmities. Galatians 4:13-15 says, “You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, *even* as Christ

Jesus. What then was the blessing you *enjoyed*? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.” Here, we see that he had some kind of physical infirmity that greatly affected his eyes. In addition, this demon may also have buffeted him in other ways.

Paul prayed on three different occasions asking the Lord to remove this thorn in the flesh from his life. We see the answer of the Lord and the response of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 where we read, “And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Instead of removing the thorn in the flesh, the Lord told Paul that His grace would be sufficient for Paul.

The Lord told Paul that the Lord’s strength is best revealed when it is revealed through the life of a person that has to depend on the Lord for strength because his or her life is controlled by weakness. The word that is translated “weakness” is the word that was translated by the word “infirmities” in verse five and twice more in these verses. We saw in verse five that the word that is translated “infirmities” usually speaks of weakness in the body or the soul. Paul certainly experienced much weakness of both body and soul as we see the way that he suffered both physically and emotionally in chapter eleven.

As a result of the fact that the Lord told Paul that His grace was sufficient for Paul, we see that Paul said that he was very glad to boast in his infirmities because it was a constant reminder to him that the power of Christ was resting on him. In fact, Paul was well-pleased to experience other things in his life in addition to infirmities because of the fact that the grace of God was sufficient. The word that is translated “reproaches” spoke of the insults that came from the pride of those who were false teachers. The word that is translated “needs” speaks of the calamities that it was necessary for Paul to go through to carry out the ministry that the Lord had given to him. Paul was also glad to experience any persecution that came into his life as he carried out the ministry that the Lord had given to him. Paul was even willing to go through the extreme affliction that he experienced for the sake of Christ.

Paul gave us the key to experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit working through our lives in these verses. He said that when he was weak, then he was strong. We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand that our own weakness is what causes us to depend totally on the Lord for His strength. When we serve the Lord in His strength, instead of our own weakness, then the Lord is able to do much more than we could ever imagine through our lives. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children how to serve in the strength of the Lord instead of in your own weakness.