

# When I am Weak, I am Strong

## 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Online Sermon: [http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

Does being surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses help or hinder our spiritual walk with Jesus? While certainly the perseverance of Moses to free the children of Israel, Joseph to do what was right in God's sight despite his dire circumstances, Josiah to purify the land and the temple of Israel, or Paul's perseverance to run the race to win the crowns of righteousness can spur us on towards becoming more like Jesus; their witness can also be used as an excuse for whom amongst us could ever attain their "superior" attitudes or service? After all, when we examine our own lives only to find misery and pain, are we not right to conclude that their "greatness" and our "weakness" are signs that all we have fallen short of the glory of He who only does good to those who love Him? If we were granted a small measure of their "greatness" how would we ever keep such an honor from overwhelming and destroying us with pride? And if God told us the only way to successfully serve in His kingdom was with a debilitating thorn of daily misery and pain would we truly be willing to accept such an offer and if so how could us "weaklings" ever survive? The following sermon is going to answer these questions by redefining spiritual "success" not as a by-product of one's strength and abilities but the demonstration of God's might and power to work in and through the weak to accomplish more than they could ever ask or imagine!

### Great Cloud of Witnesses

The great cloud of witnesses presented to us in the Bible should not hinder but encourage



our service to God! When we read about their great accomplishments there is a tendency to use their perceived "super-human being" and our sinful, "inferior" status' as excuses to not serve or aspire to achieve their perceived level of holiness.<sup>1</sup> While many of the witnesses in the Bible such as Moses, David and Paul unquestionably accomplished great acts of service in God's kingdom they too were sinners just like us! While Moses performed the miracles of the plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7-10) and the crossing of the Red Sea (14) let's not forget he killed an Egyptian (2:11-

13). While David slayed Goliath (1 Samuel 17) and became the king of all of Israel (2 Samuel

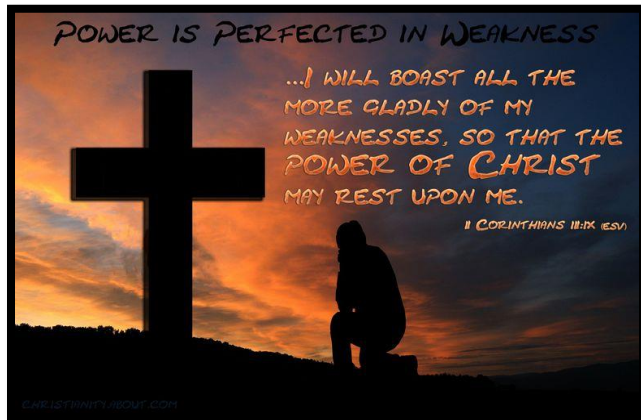
<sup>1</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh.](#)" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 673.

2-5), let's not forget he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah executed (11). And while apostle Paul became a great missionary and wrote most of the New Testament, he described himself as the chief of all sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) whom before his encounter with Christ on the road of Damascus uttered murderous threats and imprisoned those who followed Jesus (Acts 9:1-2). These clouds of witnesses should not provoke us to feel unqualified to serve but on the contrary should ignite passion and hope that He who saved a wretch like me (John 3:16) will empower and enable me to do more than I can ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20)!

### Danger of Pride when God allows us to Serve in His Kingdom (2 Corinthians 2:1-5)

**I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—<sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses**

Even though Paul was the “chief” of all sinners God chose him to be His hands and feet to accomplish great things in His kingdom.



To the “super-apostles” and the people of Corinth Paul wanted them to know that just because he was an “untrained speaker” whom took no support from the church<sup>2</sup> did not mean that he was an inferior apostle.<sup>3</sup> To make his point Paul told them that 14 years ago he was caught up in the third heaven where he was given “astounding revelations of heavenly truth.”<sup>4</sup> While Paul could have cited the “general reluctance in Jewish mystical and apocalyptic literature”<sup>5</sup> to speak of

such a vision, Paul stated the reason why he left out the details of said experience was due to having heard such profound, divine secrets<sup>6</sup> that he was forbidden to speak of them! So instead

<sup>2</sup> James M. Scott, [2 Corinthians](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 206.

<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Seifrid, [The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Second Letter to the Corinthians](#), ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.; England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2014), 412.

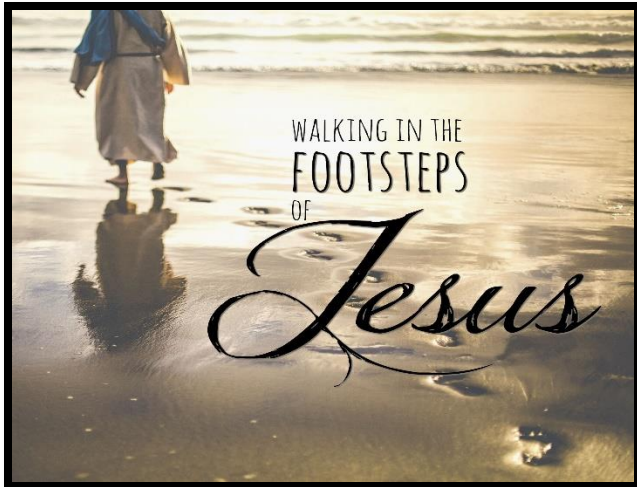
<sup>4</sup> C. K. Barrett, [The Second Epistle to the Corinthians](#), Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1973), 314.

<sup>5</sup> James M. Scott, [2 Corinthians](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 225.

<sup>6</sup> C. K. Barrett, [The Second Epistle to the Corinthians](#), Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1973), 311.

of even “whispering in the ears of the unpurified men”<sup>7</sup> Paul simply boasted in his weaknesses and of God’s grace!

From the “super-apostles” we learn of the dangers of comparing one’s own spiritual walk with that of other believers. While such comparisons could yield the benefits of identifying spiritual deficiencies or complacency in our own lives, rarely do we ever choose a “holy” person



as the benchmarks of our righteousness! Instead we choose the “babies in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:2; 1 Peter 2:2) or worse yet non-believers as the yardstick of spiritual maturity in order to promote our perceived holiness. Furthermore, there is great danger relying on one’s own ability to discern spiritual maturity. As in the case of the “super-apostles,” our perceptions of holiness are seriously flawed by our own sin (Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8). When comparing with others we simply cannot rightly see the “planks” in our or the other person’s eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). Since only the Spirit of God can

truly know the inner life of a person (1 Corinthians 2:11-16) it is best, we should leave judging words, thoughts and deeds to He whom knows His creation fully (Psalms 139)! So, if any comparison is to be made between ourselves and that of another it should be with Christ whom is sinless (1 Peter 2:22) and grants to those who call on His name the power to rightly discern how far they are missing His mark of righteousness!



From Apostle Paul we learn of the dangers of boasting and attributing ministry success to self rather than to God. While the Corinthians may have thought Paul to be justified to boast about going to heaven and hearing things too divine for other human ears,<sup>8</sup> he refrains from doing so for he knows in his heart that should he “exalt himself he will never exalt the Savior”<sup>9</sup> and therefore would not be able to lead people to Christ. He also knew to combat any pride he needed to remember that he was a mere man whom had been

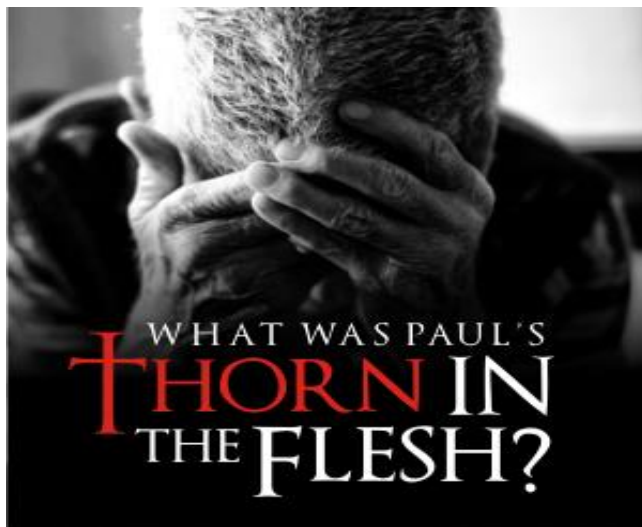
<sup>7</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Thorn in the Flesh](#),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 674.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Scott, [2 Corinthians](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 225.

<sup>9</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, “[The Thorn in the Flesh](#),” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 678.

bought Him at a price (1 Corinthians 6:20) and freed him from sin and death (Romans 8:2)! The reason why we were created in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:10) was that our light might shine not to glorify self in the eyes of others (Galatians 1:10; John 12:43) but to point to the glory of God the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). If Paul were to attain equal standing with the super-apostles in the eyes of the Corinthian church it would not be from boasting in revelations or superior spiritual gifting but in the strength and supremacy of God's power to work in and through a "weak" life such as his!<sup>10</sup> The only way to keep ministry success from making one proud or haughty in spirit<sup>11</sup> is to constantly acknowledge that despite the wretched, sinful person I am (Romans 7:24) Jesus chose me to be His hands and feet!

### What to do when you Receive a Thorn (2 Corinthians 2:6-?)



**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,<sup>7</sup> or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.<sup>9</sup> 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.**

Instead of making money out of his revelatory experience like the super-apostles had<sup>12</sup> Paul boasts of how God kept him from becoming conceited by giving him a messenger from Satan to torment him.<sup>13</sup> Spurgeon defined "thorn" as "a sharp thing, which pricks, pierces, irritates, lacerates, festers, and causes endless pain and inconvenience" but not "a killing trial — not a huge, crushing, overwhelming affliction, but a common matter; none the less painful."<sup>14</sup> Suggestions for what Paul's thorn might have been fall into three categories: psychological

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<sup>10</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1973), 312.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 678.

<sup>12</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 8, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 198.

<sup>13</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 851.

<sup>14</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," 679.



anxiety over Israel's suborn disbelief,<sup>15</sup> Jewish persecution,<sup>16</sup> or some form of reoccurring physical malady such as weak eyesight, a stammering tongue, reoccurring earache,<sup>17</sup> malaria, migraine headaches or epilepsy.<sup>18</sup> While no one can know for certain what was Paul's thorn what can be known is that despite having prayed three times to have it removed God's response was no because "when he was weak, then Christ, by His strength, would make Paul spiritually strong."<sup>19</sup> While the super-apostles saw his thorn as an impediment to ministry success, Paul boasts that it was a gift from God<sup>20</sup> for it was precisely in his trial and infirmities that God's power was best seen and glorified!<sup>21</sup>

From Paul's life we learn that those whom God chooses to be great in His kingdom often receive Satan's thorn! While Satan pays little attention to the carnal, spiritual babe in Christ, lest he jar them free from complacency, he is quick to persecute those Christians whom choose to



use their spiritual gifts to serve the Lord! The moment Moses agreed to be God's emissary was he not kicked out of the easy life of Pharaoh's palace only to spend 40 years listening to grumbling Israelite people in a desert (Numbers 32)? The moment David said yes to God's call to be king did he not spend the next 15 to 20 years fleeing from Saul who sought his life (1 Samuel 16:13; 2 Samuel 5:4)? Deciding to do God's will invites a battle with spiritual forces of evil wearing not just with the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness or shield of faith but also with wearing a thorn

that makes us weak so that Christ's power will make us strong!<sup>22</sup> If God thought Paul needed a thorn to keep him from becoming conceited and chaos reigning in his life<sup>23</sup> how much more do we need one as well? Perseverance of trials and tribulations then is not only the key to spiritual maturity (James 1:2-3) but also the key to seeing the power of God demonstrated in one's life!

<sup>15</sup> Douglas J. Moo, "[The Letters and Revelation](#)," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2377.

<sup>16</sup> Murray J. Harris, "[2 Corinthians](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 396.

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 680.

<sup>18</sup> David K. Lowery, "[2 Corinthians](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 583.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 313.

<sup>21</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," 679.

<sup>22</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 681.

<sup>23</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[The Thorn in the Flesh](#)," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 681.

## Conclusion (2 Corinthians 12:10)

**10 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.**

Paul concluded this passage by stating for Christ's sake he delighted in his weaknesses for without them he would not have known what it was like to have Christ's power rest on him.<sup>24</sup> What keeps many Christians from accomplishing what God has empowered them to do is not a lack of opportunity but simply an unwillingness to pay the cost of being His disciple. Jesus will not ask one to suffer for suffering sake but will ask those he bought at a price to embrace their thorns as necessary to not only keep them from pride but also to have their light shine so brightly that others will see their deeds in weakness and glorify God the Father in heaven. "Man's extremity is God's opportunity; man's security, Satan's opportunity."<sup>25</sup> While God could remove one's thorn He chooses not to because He knows His power "neither displaces our weakness nor overcomes it, it comes to full strength in it!"<sup>26</sup> Since success in ministry is attainable only by God then the only thing holding one back in realizing spiritual greatness is not the holiness of others but our lack of desire to pay the price!

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<sup>24</sup> James M. Scott, [\*2 Corinthians\*](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 230.

<sup>25</sup> David Brown, A. R. Fausset, and Robert Jamieson, [\*A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Acts–Revelation\*](#), vol. VI (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 368.

<sup>26</sup> Linda L. Belleville, [\*2 Corinthians\*](#), vol. 8, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 2 Co 12:7.