

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 NIV

¹I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I 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. ³And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶Even 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. ⁷To 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. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰That 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.

Why does Paul spend so much time developing that idea of strength in weakness? Why do the Corinthian Christians need to hear that message? Well, it seems the Corinthians fancied themselves as especially strong. In 1 Corinthians 1, the Corinthians thought themselves strong in worldly wisdom. In 2 Cor. 8-9 we have indications that they're strong in cash. As a large, cosmopolitan port city, we know the Corinthians were strong in Mediterranean culture. Unfortunately, they were also strong in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:21). They seem to have spent too much time comparing themselves to other people rather than to God's holiness (2 Cor. 10:17), and they were plagued by the presence of "super-apostles" teaching a different gospel (2 Cor. 11-12).

Paul is also under attack in this passage. Paul planted the church of Corinth. As Paul was gone from the church of Corinth, other men came into the church and said Paul did not qualify to be the apostle to Corinth. He is defending his apostolic role. They cut him low when they said in 2 Corinthians 10:10 "For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." They simply said, "you are ugly in person and can't speak worth a flip." Ouch! How mean.

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been attacked by someone when you were doing the Lord's work?
2. Have the attacks ever been "cut-throat" and "below-the-belt?"
3. Are those easy or difficult for you to take?

Paul had to defend himself. How did Paul deal with these problems? Well, as always, he proclaims Jesus Christ first and foremost. Paul also does something that he doesn't often do: he holds himself up as an example of authority and power. As in the first letter, however, he lets the Corinthians know that true Christian strength comes through weakness, because in our weakness we learn to depend on God.

God chose the weak to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). Shame was an important word in Paul's day. Our culture today is all about money and fame, but in the first century everything revolved around honor and shame. Certain actions produce honor, which you wanted to get as much as you could, and others produced shame, which you wanted to avoid at all costs. An utterly radical element of the Kingdom of God is that God turns everything upside down (and still does, by the way). In weakness is strength. In dependence is power. In dying to ourselves is eternal life. Earthly power, worldly strength, and visual beauty have nothing to do with honor in the Kingdom of God. In fact, all those things can be an obstacle to true honor.

The wonderful fact is, our weakness doesn't have to discourage us, because we already have God's power. As Paul told the Ephesians, God "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). Jesus told us that when two or three are gathered in his name, he is with us (Mt. 18:20). That means we have his power with us—not simply in you, not in me, but in us, the church. That's why gathering together is so important: not only that you yourself won't be condemned, but so the church can be full of the power that God intends for us. I don't know about you, but I want to be part of that and to help others be a part of it.

So we already have God's power, but we still need to acknowledge it in order to put it into action. Doing that is really very simple — just back off trying to do things with our own power. It's as simple as the words of "Jesus Loves Me": "Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but he is strong." Isn't that encouraging? What? Could it really be that simple? Well, yes, it's very simple, although putting it into practice may not be easy if

we've spent our whole lives trying to be the strong ones. So how can we learn to live like little children before our loving Father?

All Christians are called to weakness before Almighty God. Some Christians are blessed with the ability to acknowledge this fact rather easily. Too often these are the Christians the rest of us look down upon, but they're the ones Jesus blesses in Mt. 5:3-11. But most of us, I think, find it very hard to let go of our own little power and submit ourselves to the overwhelming power of God.

Letting go of our own strength is nothing more than what Jesus himself did,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

As someone has said, the crucifixion isn't simply Jesus getting what we deserve (although of course he did); it's God the Father finally getting what he deserves. God deserves all of us, our whole lives. That's what Jesus calls Christians to do— give up ourselves to find eternal life. And here's the upside-down part: in doing so, we'll be exalted, too.

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. – 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NIV

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 NIV and answer the following questions:

- 1. Does God call the qualified or qualify the called?**
- 2. According to verse 26, what three characteristics were absent in those who were called by God? Why do you think these were absent?**
- 3. In verse 27-28, God chose the foolish, weak and lowly. Why would a powerful God choose to attach these titles to Himself?**
- 4. How does verse 29 sum up this passage?**

4 BASIC TYPES OF WEAKNESS

1. INABILITY

- 2 Timothy 4:11 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. What inabilities do you have that bother you?**
- 2. Do these inabilities keep you from doing what God wants you to do?**
- 3. How can you grow in these weaknesses?**

2. INIQUITY

- Philippians 3:4-6 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. What “confidences in the flesh” do you have that are holding you back from God's best?**
- 2. What continual sins do you have that are holding you back from God's best?**

3. INFIRMITY

- Galatians 4:13-15 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Are you suffering from an infirmity or sickness that has been holding you back in ministry?**
- 2. Can you name anyone else in the Bible besides Paul that suffered from an infirmity but still served God?**

4. INHERENT

- 2 Corinthians 12:7 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Do you think that there are weaknesses that God gives you?**
- 2. Only God is: omniscient – “all knowing”, omnipresent “ever present”, and omnipotent – “all powerful”. What are some reasons we are not these things?**

Genesis 3:1-5 NIV

John 15:1-4 NIV

4 WAYS TO DEAL WITH WEAKNESS

1. DEFEATED

John 5:1-15 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Have you ever felt like giving up because of your weaknesses?**
- 2. How do you overcome and move on in the Lord?**

2. DECEPTIVE

Matthew 23:27 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Have you ever tried to cover-up your weaknesses to make yourself seem stronger?**
- 2. How easy is it to spot a fake?**

3. DEFIANT

Genesis 4:8-9 NIV

QUESTIONS:

- 1. Have you ever rebelled against God because of your weaknesses?**
- 2. Who do you blame for weaknesses in your life?**

4. DIVINE

QUESTIONS:

- 1. According to what you've learned, what should you do with weaknesses?**
- 2. Will you ever get over all of your weaknesses?**
- 3. As you grow in the Lord, do you think you discover more or less weaknesses?**

Hebrews 4:14-16 NIV

Isaiah 40:28-31 NIV

Philippians 2:6-8 NIV

In 2 Corinthians 10:10 the false apostles tried to talk bad about Paul to discredit him. Paul was personally and viciously attacked. He had to respond. Our weaknesses become a target for the devil. Rather than try to hide his weaknesses, he reveals them. He said that when he was weak, then he was strong. He turns the whole thing around on them. He teaches us how to deal with weakness, rejection, condemnation.

Say this out loud:

When I am weak, then I am strong.

I thank God for my weaknesses.

We need to let God use our weaknesses so the devil cannot. The way we deal with our weaknesses predicts our success. If we don't deal with our weaknesses properly, our success will be short lived.

Have you ever wanted a magic wand to fix your weaknesses? What would be the problem with that? The biggest downfall to a magic wand is that we would fix everything that we think is broke. We would all wave the wand, fix our problems and push God to the side, nullifying our need for Him.

In Genesis 3:1-5 Satan came into garden and offered Adam and Eve a magic wand - he said they would be like God. They would have self-sufficient, independence from God. Our sin nature despises dependence. Our flesh desires independence.

God doesn't want us to be without. Weakness doesn't mean emptiness or an unfulfilling life. He doesn't want us to be sick. He wants us to be dependent on Him. He is the Father. He is God, and we are not. The bible says in Matthew 7:11 (NIV), *"If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him."*

While Paul had all four categories of weaknesses, he had something that set him apart from those not in Christ – grace. We all have grace. We all must operate in grace. Grace is free. When you need God the most, you deserve him the least. God freely gives us his grace which supercedes our weaknesses.

Have you ever thought about this: we are a great match for God. We are weak, He is strong. We are sick, He heals. Everything we lack, He possesses. He completes us and gives us worth. Paul was not rejected or ashamed. He said, "you will not make me feel bad about the weak areas of my life. i will not give up on my mission. I declare when i am weak, then i am strong"

I thank God for my weakness, for they make me depend upon Him.

John 15:1-5 NIV