

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 ² 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. ³ And I know that this man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- ⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 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. ⁷ To 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. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ 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. 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.

“The Power of Grace”

I have often thought of writing a book about what to do while you are laid up in the hospital. There is hardly a more weak and vulnerable person than the hospital patient. In the hospital bed things like control of one's own life and dignity suddenly disappear. At all hours of the day and night people come into your room to “do things” to you. Often times, you need help just to have bodily functions. Then there are the hours after hours after hours of simply having nothing to do. How does one combat the uselessness?

The weakness of being a hospital patient is very difficult to cope with. We deal with it in many ways much like the Seven Dwarfs of Snow White fame. There's Doc, the person who diagnoses himself rather than listen to the doctors. There's Happy. Happy is weirdly optimistic about his prognosis believing a positive outlook is best for healing. There's also Grumpy, who barks and orders everybody around and is never satisfied with their treatment. Who can forget Sleepy? Sleepy possesses the unusual ability to sleep 24/7. Then there's Bashful, the meek little mouse of a person who doesn't want to be a bother to anyone and so he never asks for anything even when his lunch is forgotten. Sneezzy likes to share his symptoms in very tangible ways (“Look at the maggots the put into my abscess.”). Finally, the lovable, mute and clumsy Dopey has managed to convince his doctor that he needs a little of “Mama's secret helper” to get through the day.

I know I make light of a situation in life that none of us wants to go through. We do not like being in situations of weakness. And to add insult to injury, being laid up in the hospital is not necessarily what Paul means by weakness here in 2 Corinthians though I and he wouldn't exclude it. Paul's “weakness” was the result of suffering for Christ. He describes it just a few verses before in chapter 11 (not bankruptcy, but he certainly did go bust for Jesus on many occasions). “Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent

journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches." Jesus did not step into Paul's life and suddenly solve all of his problems like some of those TV preachers promise. Being quite honest, if we were to evaluate Paul's life according to the Western values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, Jesus mucked things up for Paul quite severely. According to Paul, the closer you draw to God the worse things get.

To say this a little differently, Paul, in a way odd to our modern ears, here describes the experience that he had on the road to Damascus where Jesus resurrected and in glory confronts him with the calling to be His disciple and the apostle to the Gentiles. According to our translation (NIV), Paul says he was caught up into the third heaven or, rather, into Paradise. The Greek word for "caught up" is actually a violent word if I may say that. It rather says that he was seized, taken by force out of reality as we experience it into God's perspective on reality. Normally, the way one gets to this Paradise is by means of death. Yet, from here in fallen reality, God has to take us by force to get us into his reality so that we can be part of his work in his creation. Therefore, the life of faithfulness is not a waltz down easy street where everything goes our way, so be it, amen. Rather, the life of faithfulness is exactly what it is; living life according to faith, living life according to God's purposes rather than our own. Faith requires that we be weak, that we relinquish our illusionary state of believing we have power to control our lives and the people in them and simply trust God.

Paul shares with us what Jesus said to him in response to asking him to take the thorn away. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In turn, Paul says to us, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." That is to say, we should embrace our times of weakness and cling to faith while in them because when we are weak, Christ is strong in us. If we examine what Paul is saying in the Greek in this passage, we find a bit of a paradox. For us to find ourselves near fully in the presence of God, God has to be seize us out of life as we know it into his own. That act of seizing is emotionally and physically difficult. Yet, the other side of that coin is an amazing contentment in the face of suffering where Jesus and his power, his capacity to act, "rests upon us" and witnesses to the people around us. Other translations say "dwells in us" or "lives in us". The Greek word creates a rather idyllic scene of a nomadic herder pitching his tent so that he can rest.

So, to put the lid on the cheese box, what Paul is saying is that when we are in our weak times, whether it be suffering because of life things or suffering on behalf of Jesus Christ as he did, Jesus is actively present with us working in and through us in such a way that we are one, content in the midst of our suffering and two, a living witness to Jesus Christ and his power to those around us. The only thing required of us is that we step into the tent, the tent of his presence and the power of grace that he has pitched on and in us. In the tent we find strength

to go on, strength that is not our own. In fact, it is the very strength, the very life-giving power of Jesus Christ our Lord. Somebody say, “Amen.”

Well, back to where I began. If I were to write a book on what to do while in the hospital or worse, wasting away because of an illness or just plain stuck in a low spot on a perpetual rainy day, this is what I would write, “Pray! Pray without ceasing!” Add to that, “Meditate on Scripture.” Not much of a book, eh? In my twelve plus years of ministry, I have yet to visit a Christian who is in a time of weakness and find her or him actively in that tent. It seems that when hard times hit us, we don’t turn to Christ to find his strength; we don’t seem even to know that there is a tent that we can step into and find his rest. Rather, we go with the reality of what the doctor or the expert says and resign ourselves to live with it amidst much anxiety. We hear this passage 2 Corinthians and say, “That’s Paul, the APOSTLE, experiencing something that only APOSTLE’S experience. Not to mention it sounds pretty weird – third heaven, come on, really. Who are we kidding here? Real life’s not like that.” Well, we may not get seized up into Paradise in this life (though some people do), but nevertheless we’re no different than Paul when it comes to the fact that Jesus Christ has pitched his tent on us and in us by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Entering that tent isn’t such a weird thing. When we are beset by weakness, the best way to deal with it is not to be one of the Dwarfs. Rather, prayer is our means. Time in the weak-bed is time to pray. You know, the further our lives go on the more we all have deal with the fact that we have thorns in the flesh that debilitate us. Paul’s was a very gross eye disease. We are to counter debilitation with the power of praying. Pray for everybody you know, pray for them that would be your enemies, and when you’re done or tired (prayer can be exhausting) rest in repeating to yourself a simple prayer like “Lord have mercy on me.” Also, the power of Jesus’ presence becomes evident to us when we read the Bible. Weak time is not only prayer time. It’s also Bible time. It is not weird, it’s normal that when we read a chapter or so of Scripture that a word or verse or image or feeling will get our attention. That’s just Jesus saying “here’s your verse for the day. Ponder it.” Meditating on Scripture is simply memorizing that passage and repeating it to yourself over and over again.

Jesus has pitched his tent in us and in that tent is the grace that is sufficient for us. Enter the tent and you will find what Paul is talking about. Moreover, you will unknowingly make Jesus visible to those around you. When we are weak, HE is strong. Amen.