

FINDING STRENGTH

2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 13:1-8

How important are credentials for a person who has to deal with various groups and individuals? For example, if we needed a lawyer, we would like to know that he or she graduated from a respectable law school, had passed the bar exam for the state and had a reasonable level of experience in dealing with cases that are similar to the one we might have. In such a situation, there are public records that should be available where we could find such information. We might also notice a framed diploma and certificate of license displayed in the office area. We might even find trophies and plaques for various professional achievements.

Can we apply similar criteria in deciding for whom to vote in elections for senator, governor, or president? It becomes a little more difficult in deciding what are the proper credentials as we have seen in any number of recent elections. What would be the most important strength that such a person should have to be elected? Would it be experience in holding previous elected positions? Maybe upstanding character and integrity would be high on the list. What about just plain, common sense? Obviously, we don't have a clue as to what is important in this area.

If we were considering credentials for a church leader, then we might think of someone such as the Apostle Paul as an ideal example. That's what history and good hindsight can do for us. When Paul was alive and actively involved in church leadership, he was often challenged by others regarding whether he was actually qualified and could be trusted to provide leadership. The church at Corinth comes to mind when we think about false teachers stirring people up about Paul's qualifications or credentials. I wonder what they will be told in the Judgment regarding their rebellion against God and the person He had chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Many Christians fail to realize that they will be held accountable for every idle word.

The critics of Paul looked for any picky thing that could be construed as a weakness or something they thought would disqualify Paul in the minds of those who didn't get the message about not viewing people according to carnal values. An example of the criticism is found in verse ten of chapter ten: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." Obviously, the world and those who are functioning from the principles of the ways of world value strength and despise weakness when considering qualifying credentials.

Since we know the background of Paul, his religious training, his association with the strict sect of Pharisees, his dogged determinism, and the confidence other leaders had in him prior to his conversion, we are confident that he had qualities that the world appreciated. After his conversion which started with Christ Jesus appearing to him and assigning Paul a specific ministry, Paul had experienced many situations of confirmation of the power of God operating in and through him. Paul had real life evidence of the kind of power that his critics had only heard about but had never experienced. Even beyond these happenings in his life, Paul had experienced something of the heavenly realm and was restored to life. However, he was forbidden to tell what he had experienced. We might be tempted to say that "Paul had died, gone to Heaven and lived to NOT tell about."

Paul's Weakness – 12:7-10

⁷ Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you,

for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 (NASB95)

Needless to say, not many people had experienced such a revelation of the spiritual realm as Paul had. When a person realizes that God is doing a great work in and through his or her life, there should be an overwhelming sense of humility. The sense of humility would come from recognizing the awesome responsibility that comes with such a blessing while realizing that we could bring shame upon the name of the Lord and the cause of Christ by failing to be “Christ like” in all that we do. There is also the possibility that realizing God is doing great things in and through us could cause pride to enter into the situation and that would certainly prove to be harmful to the work God has given the Church to do.

The work God was doing through Paul was so critically important to God’s overall objective in establishing and nurturing the Church that Paul was given a constant reminder of how important maintaining humility was for him. This reminder was described as a “thorn in the flesh” and a “messenger of Satan.” It is likely that both these phrases are idioms that refer to constant and reoccurring pains and problems that defy correction. Many commentators make a convincing argument that what Paul was experiencing was not something like a thorn on a rose bush but sometime far more harsh like a large stake upon which a person might be impaled. In other words, this was not a trivial matter with which Paul was dealing.

When we are faced with constant and reoccurring problems that will not go away, the logical thing for a Christian to do would be to pray for relief. Paul did pray and he asked three times and the “challenge” of continued suffering was not removed. This seems to be somewhat like that which Matthew described regarding Jesus’ prayer in the Garden in chapter 26, verses 39, 42, and 44. Jesus asked three times for the “cup” to be removed and Paul asked three times for the thorn to be removed and the answers they received were similar in that God was sufficient to see them through what needed to be done.

In Paul’s case, the Lord had told him that His grace was sufficient for whatever Paul was experiencing and that the Lord’s strength was perfected in weakness. The association of the “strength of the Lord” with weakness seems like a contradiction in terms; however, this is a significant truth that we usually overlook in the ways that God has dealt with humanity.

We typically think of the Lord’s strength in pictures of the Creation, the Great Flood, the Parting of the Red Sea, and the dark clouds and fire and earthquakes on Mt. Sinai. Those events are certainly indicative of a powerfully strong and omnipotent God. But let’s look carefully at what He told Paul – that His omnipotence was “perfected” or “completed” or “finished” in weakness. The word for “perfected” comes from the same Greek root word that Jesus spoke from the Cross when He said “It is finished.”

In a sense we could say that most of the Old Testament shows the omnipotence of God. We also could say that these Scriptures are the records of what God was doing that would lead to the culmination and consummation of His Plan of Salvation and revelation of Himself in the life, work, and death of Jesus. One of the first things that happened in the unfolding of “the plan” was what Paul described in Philippians 2:7-8 that God (the Son) laid aside his greatness and glory to take on human form and to come into the physical world as a helpless newborn child. This is a picture of weakness. He grew up in a common family (not a royal household) and associated with those who were powerless. Everything about His life relative to what is typically important in the ways of the world showed insignificance and weakness. According to the prophecy of Isaiah (He hath no form or comeliness that we should desire Him) His physical

appearance was at best ordinary and certainly not like that which drew people to Saul, the first king of Israel, who was head and shoulder above the people or like David who was described in positive physical appearance terms and certainly not like Solomon who had great wealth and power.

If we consider the teachings of Jesus, we see nothing that promotes or encourages worldly strength. He said “go the second mile, turn the other cheek, pray for those who abuse you, give a drink of water to your enemy.” We also see this weakness when Jesus rebuked James and John (the sons of thunder) in Luke 9:51-56 for wanting to call down fire and brimstone on a Samaritan city because the people disrespected Jesus and His disciples. Another good example of Jesus rejecting conventional strength involved the mother of James and John who wanted to secure a place of prominence and power for her sons in the “kingdom” that Jesus said was coming. We recall that He said that those who would be “great” must be a servant and those who would be “chief” must be a slave.

The perfection of the strength of God is seen in God’s weakness on the cross. The conventional perception of strength would have Jesus calling for twelve legions of angels. Instead what we find is the ultimate weakness of God in that “the judgment of God came upon God Himself on the cross.” We have a tendency to think that what happened on the cross was God the Father laid the sins of the world on His Son as if there was some sort of separation of the Triune God. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself. This was God in the weakness of humanity being forced on the cross to endure the judgment (and resulting punishment) that was prescribed for sinful man to make a way for salvation.

We like to sing the song “Our God Reigns” and in this we have the visions of the restoration of power and glory and might and we may be tempted to forget that in our freedom from slavery to sin and the way of the world that this authentic freedom demands weakness and vulnerability as seen in what Jesus experienced on the cross and as Paul described in 1 Corinthians chapter thirteen.

We may tend to think that such weakness will not be evident when we all get to heaven. For example, in John’s vision in which the book with seven seals needed to be opened and no one could be found to open it. The solution to this dilemma was found in the Lion of the tribe of Judah. John looked and he saw this powerful and awesome lion – oh, wait, it was not a powerful lion but a Lamb that had been slain. My strength is perfected in weakness.

If the way of weakness worked for Jesus and He said that His “way” is the way for us to walk, then Paul could logically conclude that he would (for Christ’s sake) embrace his weaknesses rather than boast about his worldly attributes that many consider to be strength. The real strength that brings about lasting changes is what works out from God working through and in spite of our problems and afflictions. It is difficult for us to accept the idea that it is “in weakness” that God and His people conquer and reign.

Christ’s Strength – 13:1-4

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. EVERY FACT IS TO BE CONFIRMED BY THE TESTIMONY OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES. ² I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, ³ since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. ⁴ For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we will live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you. 2 Corinthians 13:1-4 (NASB95)

While Christ’s strength is “perfected” or “completed” in weakness, it is demonstrated in the power of the Spirit as was witnessed by the Resurrection. It was also demonstrated in the

events of Pentecost and the success of the spread of the Gospel message throughout the regions of the Roman World in about four decades. We could say that the weakness of God that perfects His strength and the confirmation of that strength in mighty acts are two sides of the same coin.

We see this paradox in Paul promising to deal with those in the church at Corinth who were causing disunity in the church when he made his third visit to Corinth. The quotation from Deuteronomy about the need for two or three witnesses may be a reference to his three visits as being the three “witnesses” needed before declaring a verdict on the offenders. Some commentators suggest that Paul was saying that those who were finding fault with each other and making accusations among themselves would need to have two or three witnesses to confirm their claims. A third possibility is that Paul was referring to those false teachers who were speaking negatively against Paul would need to have some proof of their slanderous remarks.

Whatever the issues were that caused division and conflict, Paul was ready to get to the truth of the matter and get it resolved and the issues would not be ignored any longer. They had been given enough time to work out the differences and disagreement in the ways that Paul had been instructing them (the way that Jesus taught and so explicitly given in chapter thirteen of Paul’s first letter). Notice that Paul still referenced the weakness of what Christ had shown in the cross and he was intending to follow that same path to make sure that whatever disciplinary actions he took would be for constructive and not punitive purposes.

Our Choice – 13:5-8

⁵ Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test? ⁶ But I trust that you will realize that we ourselves do not fail the test. ⁷ Now we pray to God that you do no wrong; not that we ourselves may appear approved, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear unapproved. ⁸ For we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth. 2 Corinthians 13:5-8 (NASB95)

The various groups that were at odds with others in the church and those who were finding fault with Paul had been focusing on everyone except themselves. We try to teach that “it is not about me, it is not about us, but it is about others.” That is a good teaching EXCEPT when it comes to criticizing and find fault. The place to start when we get into the “business of judging” is with ourselves. When we judge and criticize others we are operating as the world does in exercising a superior stance that allows them to look down on others. When we refuse to do that but do a self examination, the world sees that as weakness.

“Test ourselves” simply means to turn the magnifying glass or the microscope on ourselves rather than on others. While some might try to make this mean that Paul was questioning whether or not they were saved (as in justified) and that raises the question of whether one could lose his or her salvation. Instead, it is more likely that Paul is trying to get them to examine their “behavior” to see if it was such that it would be in agreement with that expected of a person who was in the sanctification process of becoming more and more like Jesus. Are we functioning from a position of weakness (as the world thinks) or from a position of worldly credentials? Do we want to “lord it over other” or take on the role of a servant or even a slave?

What happens if we carry out such an inspection or examination and we find little or no evidence that sanctification (being transformed into the image of Christ) is underway in our lives? If that is the outcome of the test, the test was failed. Failing that test is a warning sign and then is the time to raise the question as to whether our initial faith was genuine and if we have actually experienced that initial sovereign grace of being justified by grace through faith. In other words, if a person has been justified by grace through faith, then Jesus Christ is in that

person. If Jesus Christ is in a person, then that person will show evidence that the process of sanctification is occurring.

It was Paul's prayer that those who had been examining Paul (and those who were trying to help the Corinthians) would come to the conclusion (after they had examined themselves) that Paul had not failed the test. Even if they did not reach that conclusion, then Paul made an appeal that the members of the church at Corinth would do what was right and be supportive of the actions that Paul would need to take when he came there on his third visit.