Christ's Power is made Perfect in Weakness – 2 Cor. 12:1-10

From Difficulty – through Discovery – to Doxology (praise)

This is one of the most treasured passages of the writings of Paul. It is treasured by all believers who have experienced difficulties in their lives and long to find out why!

Several titles come to mind:

The Conflict in our Soul

The Concern of our Saviour

The Coming of our Song

It is the most intimate and revealing passage in all of Paul's letters. Here he briefly draws aside the veil of natural reserve and shares with us believers down through the ages one of those periods of spiritual crisis that are like milestones along our pilgrim way.

1. The Difficulty

It is easy to think that great Christian leaders, especially apostles, had no problems and that great spiritual giants have an easy time. They seem to know all the answers. Their lives seem to display an easy mastery in very difficult events. They speak their words with authority. They have vast experience. Their ministry has great quality and effectiveness. All this makes some of us – perhaps most of us – feel very amateurish and inadequate.

We see huge problems and we only have our feeble efforts to solve them. We look at others and say, "It's all very well for him/her".

Have you ever thought about Paul like this – it was all very well for him he had a vision of the Risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road! Well I hope this passage will help us realise how wrong we are in thinking this way; for here is Paul with a problem that seems to him to defy all solution – a pressure that is almost unbearable.

It seems that some of Paul's opponents –apparently he had many – were boasting about the visions and many wonderful spiritual experiences they were having. So Paul starts to boast! ***"I know a man in Christ who, 14 years ago, was caught up to the third heaven."*** (v. 2) He is clearly talking about himself. His vision was a fact. It wasn't so much that he saw the glorified Lord Jesus in heaven as John did in Revelation, but that the Lord Jesus enabled him to see some of His Glory now! And this vision was tied to "the thorn" in order to keep him humble because of ***"the surpassing great revelations"***. He is ashamed to boast about it, for he had no desire to be thought of as a 'superclass' Christian.

2 Corinthians was written about 55/56 A.D. so the vision happened ~14 years earlier around 40/42 A.D. It was at this time that Paul was on his very first evangelistic journey in the Roman province of Arabia (Syria/Jordan including Petra – see Gal. 1:17 ***"I went away into Arabia"***).

Luke doesn't record this period in Acts, but perhaps some of the floggings he received which he mentions in 1 Cor. 11 are from this period. Our knowledge of Paul is fairly fragmentary, but it is probable that it was during this period he was ***"caught up into heaven"***. (2 Cor. 12:2, 4) Of course heaven is the place of God's presence and the supreme goal of all who know Him, ***"caught up"*** suggests a rapid transfer. Paul doesn't know if he was "caught up" like Enoch, body and all or just in spirit leaving the body behind. But he was clearly comfortable with either. The vision was clearly passive and not at all self-induced. Paul saw, ***"Inexpressible things that a man is not permitted to tell"***.

Ezekiel summarised his first vision as follows, ***"This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord"***. (Ezek. 1:28)

So Paul saw things he couldn't explain. They were "inexpressible" and he heard things ***"that man is not permitted to tell"*** (2 Cor. 12:4) – i.e. they are private and not to be passed on to others but solely for his own benefit.

The Bible encourages us to see ourselves as a people in transit, but we are to live with eternity's values today – on the way to Paradise where God is.

Why was this vision given? He was going to endure staggering sufferings, very powerful opposition from the Sanhedrin in town after town and from the Roman government as well as many other incredible challenges. So the vision was to keep him going. The ***"God of all hope"*** (Rom 15:13) showed Paul a little more glory then most of us perceive, so that it would be an anchor for his mind and heart even in 'the roughest weather'.

Paul's response to the "surprising great revelations" (v. 5 and 6)

He wants to boast of his weakness! So far from parading his deepest spiritual experiences, he was practising what he preached, ***"Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord"***. (2 Cor. 10:17)

Why? He fears others will think too highly of him. (2 Cor. 12:6) Most of us spend our lives in fear that others will not think highly enough of us! So Paul refuses to let his reputation rest on unprovable claims – i.e. supernatural visions. Paul will only allow his **open** conduct – what he does and says – to be the basis of our assessment of him. Behaviour is a more reliable indicator than speech of how closely we follow the Lord Jesus.

So Paul doesn't want us to think highly of him. The focus is on the Good News about our Saviour the Lord Jesus the Messiah. It is never on the messenger. We will be most effective in our witness when our focus is on the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus and there is very little attention paid to ourselves. All the time we should be unafraid of enduring suffering, privation and disgrace.

So the hardest, most humiliating task for Paul, as a believer, is to learn obedience through the things he **suffers** and yet still go on faithfully preaching the Gospel whether people will hear it or not.

The nature of "the thorn"

In both Acts and 2 Corinthians Paul appears as a man of an exceptionally strong constitution and truly remarkable powers of physical endurance. So the "thorn" is unlikely to be a severe physical handicap. So what was it? We don't know! His words in Greek have been translated, ***"There was given to torture my body something comparable to a stake"*** or a spike driven through his body leading to the agonies of impalement.

So what was the "thorn/stake"? There have been many hypotheses:

- malaria
- a serious eye condition
- epilepsy
- Jewish persecution
- a marked speech defect
- a temptation to be fainthearted

There have been many plausible suggestions but none are able to be proved. But whatever it was, it came after ***"his surprisingly great revelations"*** and was a consequence of them – a messenger/agent of Satan sent to beat him, harass and assault him. Perhaps this is similar to what happened to Job: ***"So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job …"*** (Job 2:7)

The picture is of an implacable antagonist who was allowed to stand over Paul and keep hitting him with clenched fists – yet God allowed it! Perhaps it refers to people like Alexander the Coppersmith (2 Tim. 4:14) or Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17) and all his other adversaries like Elymas (Acts 13:10) who were doing Satan's business.

Paul's reaction to his "thorn"

Well, he prayed about it! The Lord Jesus prayed three times that the humiliation and suffering He knew He was about to endure on the Cross might be removed. So Paul prayed three times to his Risen Lord Jesus that his "thorn in the flesh" might depart. The answer was continued consoling power: ***"My grace is sufficient for you"***. (v. 9)

God never withdraws His care and love from His people until they have accomplished the work He has assigned them. Then He calls them home. So Paul learned that **only** in this poor state of pain would he be protected by the overshadowing power of the Lord Jesus. In v. 9 Paul says, ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me"***. That phrase, **"rest upon me"** literally means, **"may pitch his tent on me".** So the Lord may dwell in me, just as the Shekinah – the glory of God – dwelt in the Old Testament Tabernacle. (Ex. 40:34)

Here is one example of the power of the Lord Jesus resting in Paul. In Acts 14:5 we are told that in Lystra Paul and Barnabas were stoned and then Paul's body was dragged through the gate and left out in the country. (Acts 14:9) A few believers gathered around Paul's bruised and senseless body planning a reverent burial. But Paul stood up and went back into Lystra. (Acts 14:20) In Gal. 6:17 Paul wrote, ***"I bear on my body the marks of Jesus"***. It must have been a vivid recollection of Paul's part in the stoning to death of Stephen.

Whatever "the thorn" was, it seemed to be extremely unhelpful. The trouble was permanent. Paul felt humiliated as he preached the Gospel to people who persecuted him. He knew Satan was behind it in order to bring out the worst in Paul. The same is often true of us – our temper, our pride, our lust and our self-will. So the pressure of "the thorn" seemed very unhelpful and it was permanent.

A prayer that seemed unheard

Paul did what we all do about problems and pressures like this. He prayed about it and behind the prayer was a conviction that this "thing" had to go! He was clear in his mind! "The thorn" had to go!

Have you ever prayed about something or someone or some situation that God **had** to deal with – the thorn had to go or if not, then my life will be miserable and my usefulness will be ruined. But as Paul prayed, it seemed that the Lord Jesus wasn't listening. Three times he prayed. It isn't hard to imagine the intensity of Paul's prayers. Was there something of a complaint in those prayers?

Have you prayed often about problems and pressures in your life that seem to you so very unhelpful? But then Paul stopped praying about this issue! I wonder if God interrupted him. Does God sometimes want to interrupt us? But look at verse 9: ***" … and he said to me …."*** It is in the perfect tense meaning, 'He said to me and has been saying to me ever since'. So has God got to remind some of us of a need to listen instead of going on asking? What does God want to say to you? What will He go on saying to me?

The <u>Difficulty</u> here

It is easy for us to think that there are great Christian leaders who have no problems and no difficulties. We assume that these great people have an easy time. They appear to know all the answers. Their lives seem to display an easy mastery. They speak words of authority. Their work for God bears a quality and effectiveness that make makes our efforts seem poor and amateurish. Often we face huge problems with only weak confidence that God will answer.

2. But there is a <u>Discovery</u> here

As Paul listened, so he learned. When Paul stopped talking, God began to speak to him. He spoke to Paul about two things:

- **The unrecognised purpose of God** (v. 7)

"To keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations."
J.B. Phillips translates this, ***"To prevent my becoming absurdly conceited."***

Twice Paul writes this so clearly that we can see it was a lesson well learned. God knew that there was a danger that could destroy the ministry of this immensely effective man. Paul never sensed this danger, but God sensed it and now he shares it with Paul. What was the danger? Pride! If Paul became proud, he would become useless!

Spurgeon preached a great sermon on, ***"Supposing Him to be a Gardener"*** (John 20:15). My wife is the gardener in our family and gardeners know which soil suits which plant! The Lord Jesus is Our Gardener and sometimes He plants us in the soil of sorrow and suffering for a specific reason. God knew the danger to Paul and so He permitted the ***"messenger of Satan"*** to attack His servant Paul. Satan was permitted to achieve one purpose only – to keep Paul humble and therefore **usable as a believer**.

I don't know what may be the special area in your life that God knows to be in need of special care. Maybe there is something lacking in your character, something that could endanger your witness, something that needs preserving or renewing regularly. But remember always **behind** the pressure is the purpose of a God of perfect love, perfect wisdom and perfect power!

This poem is the prayer of a little three-year-old girl. She wrote it down in her teenage years:

A Prayer that Seemed Unheard

Just a tiny little child, three years old
And a mother with a heart all of gold.
Often did that mother say,
"Jesus hears us when we pray,
For He is never far away;
and He always answers."

Now that tiny little child had brown eyes
And she wanted blue instead, like blue skies;
For her mother's eyes were blue
Like for-get-me-nots. She knew
All her mother said was true.
Jesus always answered.

So she prayed for two blue eyes, said goodnight,
Went to sleep in deep content and delight.
Woke up early, climbed a chair
By a mirror – where! O where
Could the blue eyes be? Not there!
Jesus hadn't answered.

Hadn't answered her at all. Never more
Could she pray. Her eyes were brown, as before.
Did a little soft wind blow?
Came a whisper soft and low
Jesus answered. He said, "No".
Isn't "No" an answer?

That little girl of three years old with her brown eyes later came to know that God's purpose for her life lay in India. Her name was Amy Carmichael. She started the **Donavour Christian Children's Homes** in South India where she became the mother of thousands of unwanted temple children. She became a citizen of India. She needed those brown eyes and God knew it although at three years old she didn't! God had given her the eyes she needed – the unrecognised purpose of God.

- **The unrestricted fullness of grace**

What did God say to Paul and keep on saying to him? ***"My grace is sufficient for you."*** This is not a promise. It's a statement. ***"My grace*** (really) ***is sufficient for you"*** and so there is no need to escape from the pressure. Paul, you want this thorn to go, but not only would that be unwise, it would also be quite unnecessary! There is no need to escape when God's grace is so completely sufficient and so there is no room for excuse.

So often we make the presence of a persistent problem an excuse for lowering our standards. I say to myself, *"I need the patience of Job in order to keep my temper"*. But in fact, I don't need 'the patience of Job' when I have the patience of the Lord Jesus in my life. ***"My grace is sufficient."*** It is a statement in the present tense. You never experience God's grace before you need it, but the very moment you need it, it's there and it is always sufficient.

So First the <u>Difficulty</u> – the thorn

Second the <u>Discovery</u> – the grace of the Lord Jesus

3. Finally there is a <u>Doxology</u> here.

The pain of "the thorn" is transformed into a triumphant song of praise and worship. If this is to be our experience, we must learn two things:

- **Paul's attitude was changed and our attitude must change**

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses." (v. 9)

The New English Bible says simply, ***"I shall prefer …"*** What would Paul prefer? He is saying, *"I prefer that the thorn/stake stays!"* We have seen how Paul prayed that this "thing" might be taken away from him. Now he says, *"I would much rather it remains in me!"*

I don't know the pressures, "the thorns" that are in your lives – the things that seem so painful that you are desperate that they must go. But as you look at your "thorns" and consider the Lord Jesus, I want you to dare to say, *"I know something is involved in this being present in my life that is of great worth and value to the Lord Jesus and since this is so, I want it to stay, since I want to always experience God's grace."*

- **Paul's acceptance of the thorn is complete**

Paul said, ***"There was given to me …"*** A gift given to us by the Lord Jesus is always exactly what we need! But a gift has to be accepted.

There must never be a stoic submission to our circumstances. We must gladly accept "the gift" from the One who loves us the most and knows exactly what we need. As you accept this gift in the way that Paul accepted his gift, you will find that this is the way to experience the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus in everything.

"Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Another poem:

Accept it

Accept it. From Your hand, dear Lord, I take
This hurting thing and bear it for Your sake.
Nor bear it only, but in Your dear Name,
Your strength, Your power, to love it Lord, I claim.
To love it till from struggles, toil and tears,
The likeness of Your life in me appears.
Accept it. From your hand this thing I take,
Lord, make it glorious for Your Own Name's sake.

<u>Questions to Ponder</u>

1. **"It was easy for him/her to be a radiant, victorious believer!"**

Having considered Paul's experience, have we the right to say this of any believer. What inner ministry of grace in this believer's life has led to the outward victory and radiance?

2. Have you heard someone say, **"If only I could be rid of this problem?"**

But Paul says in Romans 8:37, ***"In all these things we are <u>more than conquerors</u> through Him who loved us."*** Think Paul's words through carefully. What do they show us of the environment, the scale and the source of the victory of which he felt so certain?

3. Would you like to share with some others "the thorns in your flesh" that you are aware of? Consider whether they are sent by Satan or by God and, if by God, how He can be glorified in them?