

Strength in Weakness

“My power is made perfect in weakness”

Reflection 14 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Returning to our series on “The Last Great New Command,” drawn from Jesus’ command the night before he died that his followers must love one another, and in quest of church being a place that helps us and everyone else who comes to live a life of love, I go directly to 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. As Paul writes this text, he is under attack, pretty personalized attack. His critics in the church at Corinth are saying the most awful things about him. They say he’s timid, a coward really – yes, he writes strong letters, but in person he’s unimpressive, and his speaking amounts to nothing (10:1,10). They accuse him of being unreliable, of waffling (1:17-18). They say he’s arrogant, that he has an exaggerated opinion of himself (10:8), that often he acts like he’s out of his mind (5:13). He’s emotionally disturbed.

So Paul is on the defensive. He finds himself in the very uncomfortable position of justifying himself, even of boasting. He fears he’s going too far in his boasting (10:14). But he also fears being taken for a fool (11:16). And then he fears he’s speaking as a fool in his boasting (11:21). There are times when we’re defending ourselves and we’ve felt this – that we’re making our case too strongly, but we fear we may not be making it strongly enough, and then we wonder why we’re even bothering – why we don’t let others think whatever they want. And caught in this very human dilemma, Paul writes 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

The passage is intentionally oblique, but Paul seemingly tells of a time fourteen years ago when he was caught up to the third heaven. Perhaps it was an ecstatic trance. Paul doesn’t really know, but he does know he was caught up to paradise, to the garden of the Lord, to Eden itself. There he heard inexpressible things that no one is permitted to tell. What happened to him was incredible. He was given insight into what it is not for people on earth to know. And he had caught a glimpse of Paradise, the garden of the Lord.

But he would not be unscathed. Like Jacob wrestling with the stranger all night by the Jabbok brook, he would be left “with a limp.” To keep him from becoming conceited, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, “a messenger from Satan,” he also calls it. To destroy his pride, to keep him absolutely dependent on God, he was given this thorn in the flesh. The commentator Barclay says “stake in the flesh,” because thorn is too little. It’s some kind of stabbing physical ailment or handicap: perhaps a convulsive disorder; possibly severe, incapacitating headaches; maybe some kind of eye trouble. In his Galatian letter, he refers to an illness and the willingness of Galatian Christians to tear out their eyes and give them to him (4:15).

Whatever the exact thorn, Paul pleads with the Lord to take it away from him. But instead, he is taught life’s central lesson. The Lord says to him (v. 9), “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul learns that when he is weak, then he is strong. And that is, in fact, the central Christian truth – from first to last, that power is made perfect in weakness. It’s how the Beatitudes begin: “Blessed are the

poor in spirit.” It’s faith from first to last (Romans 1:17). It’s by grace we have been saved (Ephesians 2:5,8). It’s the truth embodied in baptism, this ritual burial in water, this trusting yourself to drowning, this form of dying. And it’s what we learn from Jesus’ excruciating death on the cross, that at the heart of the universe is this sacrificial, self-giving, self-emptying love. It all comes down to this: God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

We believe that, right? But it’s so un-American. It’s American to always come across as strong and sure of yourself, poised and utterly self-confident. The truth is we live in a Faustian Age. The story of Doctor Faustus used to be well known. Faustus was originally a sixteenth-century German magician. According to the growing legend, Faustus grew tired of being restricted by the laws of nature and by ethics. He wanted no limitations on what he could do or know. He wanted to no longer be held back by anything. So he sold his soul to the devil for the kind of knowledge and power that would allow him to live for twenty-four years like a god without limits. But at the end of the twenty-four years, he faced damnation. The story was told and retold (with variations) by Marlowe, Goethe, and Thomas Mann, reminding succeeding generations that there is a point past which we should not and cannot reach for the stars. But now this story is cultural heresy.

Now our entire culture is Faustian. It’s built upon the assumptions that: you should reach for all you can when you can; you should get ahead whatever you have to do, whoever else might be exploited, whoever else’s lives are torn apart and disrupted; you should be strong, taking nothing from nobody, strutting through life, imposing your way (if you can) on all others. Every American man, and now every American woman, is encouraged to live for twenty-four years like a god without limits. And for the lucky and the strong, for about twenty-four years it works. For about twenty-four years. The problem with such a life, or one problem with such a life, is that there is no space, no room, no time, for love. We have no space in our minds, and in our hearts, to really love others.

Meanwhile, the truth is – and it is healing truth – that the Lord’s grace is sufficient for us, that power is made perfect in weakness, and that when we are weak, then we are strong. It goes back to what Jesus said to Peter that night of the Passover moon when Peter drew his sword and slashed off Malchus’ ear (Matthew 26:52): “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” It’s not by force. That’s not the way. It’s not how you get results that last.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week