



POWER IN WEAKNESS AN IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL PRINCIPLE

Today's second reading from 2 Cor 12:7-10, is one of the most famous texts in all of scripture. Let me share it with you again.

Brothers and sisters: That I, Paul, might not become too elated, because of the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Commentary on text

Commenting on this text, **Patricia Sanches** writes: So many of the people we regard as great have had tremendous obstacles to overcome on their respective paths to greatness. John Milton was blind. Beethoven and Thomas Edison were deaf. Franklin D. Roosevelt was crippled. Abraham Lincoln failed in two businesses, had a nervous breakdown, was rejected from law school, lost four jobs and eight elections before he was elected President.

In this reading, Paul speaks about his own struggles. We cannot know for sure what he meant by the phrases "thorn in the flesh" and "an angel of Satan to beat me". While Paul could have had some inner psychological or physical problem, scholars tend to believe "the thorn in the flesh" was some *outer* problem Paul encountered in his opponents and critics. Whatever the problem, Paul prayed three times for the Lord to remove it (recall Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane for God to let his "cup of suffering" pass from him). We can presume Paul was reluctant to accept his "thorn in the flesh" not because he did not want to suffer, but because he saw it as an impediment to his ministry.

God's response to Paul was: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*" God wants to use Paul's crisis to keep him humble and dependent on God. Paul's supernatural visions and revelations could have led to spiritual pride. Gradually, Paul came

to see that he experienced divine power most when he was vulnerable, humble, and powerless before God. This experience leads Paul to boast or rejoice in his weakness or in the insults and hardships of his ministry because it was in those moments that he most of all experienced God's power, divine touch and sufficient grace.

Power at work in weakness

Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' could have been an *inner weakness* or an *outer obstacle* to his ministry. Either way, he came to a point of praising God for it ("I rejoice in my weakness"). In and through his thorn in the flesh he experienced God's power as never before. Hence the birth of the spiritual principle "power in weakness."

When we experience some inner weakness or outer 'thorn in the flesh' we want God to fix it. Few, if any of us, want God to say to us: "No, I am not going to remove this difficulty. Rather, I am going to use it to help you experience my power in a mighty way."

This is exactly what millions of people involved in AA programs experience. Their thorn in the flesh was their inability to manage alcohol (or any other addiction). For them to *experience* God's power in their weakness, they had to buy into or embrace the first three steps of AA's Twelve Step program. These steps are.

- *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
- *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore our sanity.*
- *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him.*

I think admitting our powerlessness over some area of our lives might be the biggest challenge. We are raised in an "I can do it" self-sufficiency culture. Hence most, if not all of us, would have a hard time admitting our need for God to help us cope with an area of our lives that is out of control.

Another example of power working in weakness

Agnes Sanford, a pioneer in the healing ministry writes the following story in her wonderful book *The Healing Light*.

Let us consider Paul's thorn in the flesh with an open mind and see if we can understand it. St. Paul had been miraculously healed more than once. He had shaken off

a deadly serpent and felt no sting whatever from its bite. He had been stoned and left for dead, and had risen from under a pile of stones and walked into the city. He had accomplished the most amazing of miracles, even the raising of the dead. Yet, toward the end of his ministry, he was troubled by a "thorn in the flesh." He prayed about this matter and God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

He did not receive an instantaneous healing. Instead of that, he received every day enough of the Grace of God for that day's needs. So do I. And if God's perfect strength accomplished through me as much as it did through St. Paul, I would be well content.

I was once called to a distant city to see a lady ill with a painful and "incurable" disease. She wrote me later that her pain was greater than ever, but that the inner voice of her Heavenly Father had directed her to rise from her bed and work. With unspeakable courage she did this. She went to her kitchen, after fifteen minutes of agonizing effort, she sat upon a stool before the sink and began to peel potatoes.

"I am peeling this potato in the strength of Almighty God," she would tell herself, while the sweat of desperate weakness dewed her face. "I can't exhaust His strength, because He is inexhaustible. So I will certainly and surely get this potato peeled, and for that, oh Lord, I do thank you."

When she had peeled one potato, she would drop into a chair and rest and then get up and peel another one. We had hoped that she would get well right away. But, like St. Paul, she did not. Instead, she was told that His strength was made perfect in weakness, and by peeling one potato after another in His strength, she found out that His grace was sufficient for her. Today her thorn in the flesh troubles her no more. They say that her recovery is miraculous, for doctors had long ago given her up. Yet, even today she would have little strength unless she fed continually on the every-flowing strength of God.

If she had been as old as St. Paul, and if she had already overcome as much as he, her healing might have been completed in the next life and not in this. That would be a matter of comparative unimportance. The important thing is that by learning to feed upon the life of God continually for the renewal of her strength, she received, like Job, a new vision of His holiness and power. She peeled potatoes in His strength, she made beds by His power, she swept her house to His glory, and finally she ventured forth to help others by His love. In doing so, she came to know Him so well and love Him so sincerely that she gave thanks for everything. In weakness, she gave thanks for His strength overcoming the weakness. In pain, she gave thanks for His healing

power working through the pain. At the gates of death, she gave thanks for His life in which she would forever live, both in this world and in the next.

She had interpreted "my strength is made perfect in weakness" to mean that in her weakness His strength would be made perfect. She does her own work, teaches classes, starts prayer groups, attends conferences, prays for the sick and comforts the sorrowing by renewing her strength through His strength every day. And to many she has become "as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

I close with the Serenity Prayer—the full version which we don't usually hear. It was written by Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian.

SERENITY PRAYER

God Grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time.
Accepting hardship as pathway to peace.
Taking, as Jesus did, this world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that you will make all things
right if I surrender to your will.
So that I may be reasonably happy in this
life and supremely happy with you
forever in the next. Amen.

Oh!

I nearly forgot an important point Paul made in his reading. He says that God gave him his 'thorn in the flesh' so that he 'might not become too elated'. His thorn in the flesh kept him humble and kept him aware of his daily need for God.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran