

## **“Super Christians”**

### **II Corinthians 12:2-10; Psalm 89:20-37**

Where I attended college we were on the quarter system instead of semesters. Consequently, our Christmas break began around December 8 and lasted until December 31. When I was a junior I consented to travel to California, over Christmas break, with a classmate, hitchhiking up and down the state speaking to church youth groups. You can now understand why I waited until my children were long gone to tell this story. I didn't want them to get any ideas.

My friend had travelled to California on a motorcycle the previous summer doing the same thing. So the idea was that my friend had contacts all up and down the state. Let me just say this is the last trip I have taken where I wasn't doing the planning. You haven't lived until you have sat on a suitcase on the side of a California freeway with the sun setting and wondering how in the world you will get a ride to the next town and if you do where you will sleep.

But one incident on the trip I still remember was attending a youth rally that featured a rock band. This was 1970, so long hair, bell bottom jeans and tie-dyed t-shirts were in abundance. As the band prepared to play, its members introduced themselves, gave short testimonies about their faith, and prepared the kids for a rockin' good time.

But as one of the guitarists presented himself to the audience, he said he considered not coming to the concert. That afternoon he had developed a terrible headache. “But,” he said, “if we really believe the Bible, we turn these things over to God. God will give us whatever we ask. And I'm here to tell you that I prayed for God to remove this headache — and hallelujah, it's gone!”

The young people all cheered this exuberant testimony of faith. But over forty years later I can still recall how I responded to his words. I felt inadequate. I didn't use God to heal headaches, I took aspirin. In fact, I couldn't recall one instance in my life where I knew God had immediately stepped in and cured an illness. With or without divine intervention, all my colds took at least ten days to go away. And yet, I still remember that while my mind disregarded this theology, my spirit wondered if he had something I didn't.

Whether watching the tears and supposed healing hands of a television evangelist, or the professions of religious ecstasy of a friend, all of us at some time have marveled at the claimed religious experiences of someone else while wondering why we have not attained those heights. In our scripture the Apostle Paul faced the same situation.

So called “super apostles” had invaded the Corinthian church. Brandishing their own brand of Christianity, they declared that Paul really wasn't all the Corinthians needed in a pastor. And one of the evidences of their superiority was the super apostles' claimed experiences of religious ecstasy. This, of course, tapped into the background of the Corinthians since they were former pagans. Their previous religions viewed revelations and visions as a sign of God's favor.

So, likely these “super apostles” were using their spiritual experiences as a way to credential themselves. In this letter Paul replies to this challenge by noting he, too, has experienced spiritual ecstasies.

Now, to tell you the truth, we don’t have a clue what Paul means here. When he talks of being caught up to Paradise and hearing things that are not to be told, we don’t know if these visions came in a dream, or what they mean. But Paul downplays their significance. And he says, just so I don’t get the big head I also have this thorn in the flesh that I have prayed for God to take from me, but God has not.

Almost 2000 years of scholarly speculation has brought us no closer to determining what was Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” Early commentary from church fathers like Tertullian and Jerome focused on severe, prostrating headaches. Others have postulated the “thorn” was eye trouble, malaria, epilepsy, stammering, or that Paul was physically ugly. Medieval writers believed Paul fought impure temptations of the flesh. Martin Luther guessed it was the opposition and persecution Paul faced. John Calvin thought his “thorn” consisted of spiritual temptations to doubt, to shirk the duties of the apostolic life.

The fact is we don’t have a clue. But what is helpful for us is to know that the faith’s greatest preacher, evangelist, and proponent struggled just like you and me. Everything was not hunky-dory for the Apostle Paul who, except for Jesus, and possibly Moses, probably was better connected to God than any human being who ever lived. Whether his thorn in the flesh was physical, mental, spiritual, or a combination of these three, the point is that it is not a mark of mature faith that God alleviates all our headaches.

You probably heard the story of the two elderly gentlemen sitting on a park bench feeding the pigeons and talking baseball. Abe turns to Sol and asks: “Do you think there’s baseball in heaven?” Sol thinks a minute and then says, “I dunno. But let’s make a deal: if I die first, I’ll come back and tell you if there’s baseball in heaven, and if you die first, you do the same.” A few months later, poor Abe passes on. One day soon afterword, Sol is sitting there feeding the pigeons when he hears a voice whisper: “Sol...Sol.” Sol responds, “Abe, is that you?” “Yes, it is Sol.” Taken aback, Sol still asks, “Well, is there baseball in heaven?” “Well,” Abe replies, “I have good news and bad news.” “Give me the good news first,” says Sol. Abe says, “Well, there’s baseball in heaven.” “That’s great!” exclaims Sol. “What news could be bad enough to ruin that?” Abe sighs and whispers, “You’re pitching Friday.”

The good news is that God works within our lives. The bad news is that God does that in the context of life’s trials and tribulations.

“...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” It comforts us to know Paul suffered, that the “health and wealth” gospel declaring if you are really Christian, God will make you healthy and wealthy was as bogus then as it is now. Yet, a strange tremor resonates within us from a declaration that strength is found

in weakness. Most of us spend our lives attempting to become stronger — physically, financially, even spiritually. So what did Paul mean when he said, “For whenever I am weak, then I am strong?”

Our weakness alerts us to our dependence on God. When we are strong, an enormous temptation arises to believe we have brought about the health and wealth we enjoy. Strength leads us to think we can do this by ourselves, that we don’t really need humor, or divine help. When we are strong, the focus easily shifts from God to us. But when we recognize, feel, the weakness within our bodies, or personalities, or situation, we witness how God’s Spirit works within us. Unlike the “super apostles” who boasted of their spiritual experiences, Paul did not brag because his weakness, whatever it was, alerted him to his total dependence on Christ.

When we think we know it all, are totally confident in our spiritual choices, then it becomes difficult for God to speak to us, to work within us. We become like the eye rolling teenager whose parent is attempting to explain anything. When we think we already know, we wall ourselves off from God. Paul’s weakness kept him humble, reminded him that though he may have done some good things, he had not arrived at the end of his spiritual journey. God wasn’t done with him yet.

Paul Jones, Dean of the Chapel at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky told about winning a grueling racquetball match after which his opponent asked him how he had developed such a strong backhand shot. Jones told him that several years ago he made a conscious decision to hit a solid return on every back hand shot, even if it meant losing the point. It occurred to Jones that because he was willing to lose, he was now in a better position to win. In Matthew 10:39, Jesus says, “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Through our weakness, whatever it is, if we cling to Jesus, that weakness will manifest our strength.

All of us would prefer not carrying weaknesses or suffering, even if they do make us stronger. Yet, we also realize our periods of adversity and illness do exactly that. Those who choose to be honest, fair, and moral in their business dealings may receive scorn or ridicule from colleagues, but in the end will be better people. Young people who refrain from drugs and alcohol build a framework of faith and security that will carry them all their lives. When we give sacrificially, really sacrificially of our resources, we are rewarded in countless spiritual ways. Making unpopular choices, looking weak to others, deciding to do what is right instead of what is popular push us to depend on God, which in turn makes us stronger ethically, morally, and spiritually.

Our weakness, our times of struggle and adversity become God’s opportunity to work within us. The pain of rejection or defeat makes us more willing to listen to God, reminds us how utterly dependent we are on God.

Through the realization of our own inadequacy, we turn to God and discover God's power to work His will within and around us. In our weakness, we find God's strength.

Kurt Schuermann, author of Ministry Is A High Calling (Aim Low), was once invited to attend an evening men's meeting at a church. The program consisted of slides taken by a commercial airline pilot from the cockpit of his plane. He projected the slides on a large screen and showed a beautiful collection of sunrises, sunsets, and cloud formations. The pilot narrated the slide show and detailed how the beauty and design captured in the pictures had informed and strengthened his faith in God. After his presentation, there was a brief time for questions. One man in the audience asked, "How do you live with the stress of being responsible for the lives of the passengers?" Schuermann thought the pilot's answer was remarkable. He said, "I find that if I just concentrate on getting myself there safely, when I look behind me, all the passengers are safe as well."

During times of struggle and adversity, weakness, if we turn to God and concentrate on God's will and guidance, when we look behind us, we will discover we have arrived safely at home.

#### "Super Christians"

Unlike Paul's adversaries, most of us don't see ourselves as super Christians. Saying we discover strength in our weakness sounds more like a contradiction to us. Yet, in our weakness we do meet God's strength. Realizing our inadequacy, we are thrust into the love and mercy of God. There we find power and ability beyond what we thought possible.

We don't know what was Paul's "thorn in the flesh." I think that is good, because it allows us to substitute our own weakness into the passage. For instance, talk to cancer survivors and almost to a person they will tell you the battle to defeat that disease was both the worst and best experience of their lives. They found a strength, a faith in God, that defied what they thought possible.

This morning, whatever our weakness, God stands ready to step in, reminding you and me of God's love and concern, promising that where you are weak, God will be strong.

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