

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

WE ARE WEAK, BUT HE IS STRONG

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

2 I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. 3 And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. 5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

DIAGNOSIS: Insufficient Grace

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Power in the Flesh*

Anyone aspiring to power knows to avoid certain situations: weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and calamities (v. 10), for starters. Such circumstances risk the loss of power. Instead, wherever possible, power-seekers should associate themselves with strength, flattery, wealth, and good fortune. Not only are these more enviable conditions, but they further the cause of power. So, no wonder, when Paul's "friend" ("a person," v. 2) experiences the elation of heaven, he wants to boast. He has come into good fortune, and wants others to associate him with the marvel of his ecstatic experience. It's the stuff of testimonies, isn't it? ("Once I was nothing, and then I was given a vision of heaven." And the congregation gasps in awe.) Associating with the divine? Wow. The divine associating with a human? Even better.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Thorn in the Flesh*

Problem is, the experience doesn't last forever. Nor does the attention it receives. ("We've heard that testimony before.") And so the power-seeker is left with an old, worn-out testimonial that no one is particularly interested in. Or, worse yet, the power-seeker falls from power. Maybe he is his own undoing, and that would be sad enough. But what if, for some mysterious reason, the fall from power happens because of the idle hands of the divine (v. 7)? Wouldn't that fall be greater? No longer would the power-seeker be associated with power but its opposite: absolute weakness and humiliation.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Death in the Flesh*

Not only would he die of embarrassment, but he would actually suffer mortified flesh. He not only lacks power, but he personifies weakness. Worse, for seeking the power that was not his to grasp in the first place, he is dead to God. God alone is powerful. There is no room for more than one God. So the power-seeker is convicted: dead in the flesh. And no measly power he possesses is sufficient to save him from this sentence.

PROGNOSIS: Sufficient Grace

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Power in Weakness*

But what if the very Power that condemns him for aspiring to power, can offer the Power sufficient to save him? And, more perplexing, what if the weakness that the power-seeker sought to avoid, was the means by which he was saved? For that is precisely what God accomplishes in Jesus Christ. In the cross of Christ, God makes his power perfect in weakness. Through Jesus, who bore nails in the flesh (worse than thorns, I'd say), God turns dejection, humiliation, persecution, and hardship into power. And that compassionate power overturns the sentence of death for humanity, and brings us life.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Living with Thorns*

A thorn in the flesh makes its mark. We don't know what Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (v. 7) was. But we certainly know what they look like in our own lives. Paul's thorn and ours are reminders that we are people of flesh: that we are finite, susceptible, flawed human beings. But that isn't a sentence of death for those who believe. Instead, for us who trust Christ, it is the simple, humbling reality of life. But we do not put our trust in our finite, susceptible flesh. Instead, we trust Christ, who is powerful in weakness, who can overcome the weakness of our flesh. Christ's grace is sufficient for us. Joined to Christ, we are victorious—even in our weakest moments. That's what Paul

means when he says, “So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (v. 9).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *(True) Life in the Flesh*

Boasting in weakness? It’s hardly the stuff that power is made of. But we former power-seekers seek different things in faith. We seek what serves the neighbor, not what draws attention to us. And, more important, we seek to draw attention to Christ, so we boast only in our weakness, so that through us others will see the strength of Christ. After all, where we are weak he is strong.