

THE STRENGTH OF WEAK CREDENTIALS

In view of the extraordinary nature of these revelations, to stop me from getting too proud I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud! About this thing I have pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me, but he has said, My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.¹ So I shall be very happy to make my weaknesses my special boast so that the power of Christ may stay over me. That is why I am quite content with my weaknesses, and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and the agonies I go through for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

How is person's suitability for undertaking a job, role or ministry to be determined? Modern education and employment processes rightly value skills and qualifications. More generally society is interested in and actively promotes celebrity culture. It also stresses success as being crucial to happiness. How well does this match up with God's perspectives and yardstick? Scripture has a lot to say on this, and it is often at odds with worldly wisdom. Let us focus here on this passage from St Paul to gain some insights.

The context and structure of Paul's argument about his credentials
This passage comes at the end, and quite probably as the climax, of a section of the letter sometimes called Paul's apologia (Ch 10-12). Paul feels driven to defend himself and his credentials as an apostle. He is doing this to safeguard the Christian community at Corinth, which he founded, against others who have come in his absence and are seeking to get the believers to follow them. These are variously called 'super apostles' or 'false apostles' by Paul.

Paul is reluctant to draw attention to himself - something he feels these others who evidently have assumed the title of 'apostles' (not 'The Twelve' appointed by Jesus) have done, impressing the Corinthians with their human credentials, standing and skills. The true apostle, Paul argues, points to Christ - not himself - and his credentials should be discerned by spiritual criteria, not those of the world and what we might today call 'celebrity' culture. This is the difference between wisdom and folly.

Paul has tried to apply these criteria throughout the letter. At chapter 10 he feels he has to talk about himself though he regards this as folly. He describes his religious credentials, his calling by Christ, the extent of his labours, the altruism and the sacrifice and sufferings which have accompanied them. He refers to deep profound spiritual experiences and revelations he knows about though he is reluctant to explicitly identify himself as their recipient. Yet in all this he feels he may be falling into the trap of using the same method of self-promotion as that used by these super or false apostles who have made a strong impression on the Corinthians.

Divine grace and power finds its home in human weakness

Thus in the verses I began with he again brings everything back to reliance on the grace and power of Christ. At the heart of everything Paul does is his dependence on Christ. That is why he has all the more reason to preach Christ, not himself, and why he can extol his disciples 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ!' (1 Corinthians 11:1 and elsewhere). This is not egotistic since Christ is still the reference point and yardstick to determine the value to be given to Paul - or anyone else. And what keeps him in this state of 'spiritual poverty' and dependence on Christ? He indicates that God has made special provision for this, giving him a 'thorn in the flesh'. There has been much speculation amongst scholars as to what the nature of this is.

An illness, a moral flaw, a character defect, repeated strong temptation or a spiritual oppression, have all been suggested and variously dismissed too. Thus firm conclusions cannot easily be come to but perhaps that does not matter. For Paul himself, it is the spiritual state it has brought him to that counts and this is the real key and access point to many blessings. 'My grace is enough for you: my power is at its best in weakness.'

This confession of weakness becomes the climax of Paul's apologia, not the list of qualifications, achievements, or sufferings manfully endured. It brings the focus back on to Christ and his grace. Paul is clear that this is not just important as testimony but also to ensure that his ministry is rooted in Christ - and its fruitfulness is due to the power of Christ and not any human thinking and skills. He can thus have confidence that he in fact has a share in the ministry of Christ.

From the 1st to the 20th century: the challenge confronting each of us

What about us? At whatever level we 'serve', do we seek to point to Christ and to be Christ-like? Do we expect to be approved or vindicated in the eyes of the world and even the eyes of a sometimes 'worldly¹ church? Will we peacefully accept what looks like failure if it goes with loyalty to Christ? Whom do we seek to be dependent on? Our own skills, viewed autonomously? The criteria and skills valued and even honed by the world? Or, the grace of Christ? Such a set of starkly contrasted questions may

make the choices seem obvious. Even if this is so, living them out is not so easy. Our hearts may rise at first but our shoulder will then have to bend and bow under the weight of the cross that Christ gives us to carry each day.

Obedient service of God may not bring the worldly rewards our wounded hearts tend to crave. Beyond a lack of 'success', it may bring suspicion, controversy, rejection, false accusation and human condemnation; and also hardship, poverty and even death. Christ was only really vindicated after his death. In fact, that death, far from the weakness and failure which is what others generally saw it as at the time and which Jesus himself experienced at various levels, turned out to be the power of God at its most potent and salvifically decisive. Victory emerges from and accompanies failure. The one complements and even leads to the other.

And how do we regard weaknesses? Certainly we should seek to overcome them. Paul did - three times. But can we at times come to learn, like Paul, what God's deeper plans are - and what his spiritual priorities are? It was vital to God that Paul learned and remained in a state of humility thus overcoming or seriously tempering any tendency to pride. As far as God was concerned (and Paul once the matter had been made clear to him) this was more important than removing the thorn in the flesh - indeed it gave a superior positive reason for this to remain. Paul does not regard this thorn as good in itself but sees that God brings very important, even crucial, good out of it. Character formation is vital and deep spiritual humility, perseverance and integrity are part of this. And not just as past lessons but as ongoing realities. Are we ready for such lessons, the discipline of a loving father (cf Hebrews 12:7-11)? Living with such 'thorns' (and they are made personally for each of us) is not easy. They look like the opposite of health! Paul's account makes that clear. It is a struggle, even a dark night and really humiliating. But as we cry out to God, he can really touch and use us.

Our celebrity world avoids discomfort and advocates pleasure and success, providing human means to get them. They were temptations in Paul's day too and the super apostles and some Corinthians were distracted by them. How will we decide? What credentials do we want? It matters because it determines whom we point people to and whether Christ can really work in us to win people to him.

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