

Embracing Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

How many of you have ever heard of something called a triathlon?

It is where competitors start off swimming, followed by a bike ride, and finish with a run. There are different length events the longest and the most challenging being the ironman distance.

An ironman triathlon begins with a 3.9km swim, followed by a 180.2km bike ride, and finishes with a full marathon distance run of 42.2km.

Competitors are given 16-17 hours to complete the race and typically there are checkpoints along the way that must be met in order for the athletes to be permitted to continue the race.

Completing any one of those events, in my mind, is an incredible feat let alone doing all three back to back.

The sheer endurance required for such an event is amazing, which is what makes the story of Brent Pease so impressive.

Brent grew up in the Atlanta area and has been involved in athletics for most of his life. His brothers Evan and Kyle also share a love for sport, but on account of suffering from quadriplegia due to spastic Cerebral palsy Kyle cannot compete in the same way as his brothers.

Nevertheless, Kyle says that he always felt included and that his family always found a way to enable him to participate in sports.

Somehow Brent found his way into the world of triathlons and of course Kyle went to watch his brother race and complete his first Ironman.

After the race, Kyle asked Brent, “Can people in wheelchairs do IRONMAN?”

Brent’s response was, “Yes, absolutely!”

From that point on they began to figure out what they needed in terms of equipment to make it happen.

For the swim Brent would tow Kyle in what looks like a Kayak, after the swim Brent would carry Kyle to a bicycle that looks like a giant tricycle and pedal for 180km, and after the bike ride Brent pushes Kyle in a racing wheelchair for the 42.2km run.

After a lot of training and doing several 5k runs and some smaller triathlons on October 13th, 2018 they competed in the world championship Ironman in Hawaii and finished with a time of 14 hours and twenty nine minutes.

On their website it says they are planning to do it again this upcoming October.

It is just an incredible story of brotherly love and perseverance.

In order for Kyle to be in the race he has to endure a significant amount of physical discomfort and he has to completely entrust himself to his brother Brent.

If he isn't willing to embrace his weakness and rely on the strength of his brother then he can't be in the race.

[That, I think, is a good picture of what God has to teach us in our text for this morning **2Corinthians 12:1-10**. The apostle Paul, who writes these verses, knew that the Christian life in many ways is like an endurance race and he also knew that one of things that we need to do to be in the race and to finish the race is to embrace our weakness. I think if we are honest that is a hard thing for most of us to do. We tend to think we can make it on our own as human beings. We tend to want to think of ourselves as strong and capable and hide our weaknesses. This text pushes back against those ideas and gives us some important lessons about weakness. Here is the first...]

Point #1 – A glorious vision of God shows us our weakness. (Verses 1-4)

When we, by grace, can understand some of the glorious truths about the LORD, we will rightly feel small by comparison.

As Paul continues his lesson to these believers about the foolishness of making much of one's self, he begins to transition away from talking about what he has done and towards what has happened to him. (Verse 1)

At various times in history God has made Himself known to people in visible and very vivid ways.

In the Bible we find people to whom the Lord appears in dreams and there are others who experience the physical presence of God to varying degrees.

There is a supernatural experience in which God makes Himself known to a person or group of people.

That is the kind of thing he is going to tell us about here in **verses 2-3**.

Who is this man who had this experience?

A good number of scholars think it is Paul talking about himself in the third person.

There is some good reason to think that the strongest of which is his confidence that this really happened.

He “knows this man was caught up into paradise.”

So he either completely trusts another person's testimony or he experienced it himself.

What is the experience? It was being “caught up to the third heaven.”

In the bible the word heaven or heavens can refer to a few different things.

One way it is used is to refer to the sky above us where the birds fly.

It can also refer to outer space where the sun, moon, and stars reside.

Thirdly, it can refer to the place where God causes His presence to be visible, often displaying His glory seated upon a throne surrounded by angels.

It is this third heaven that this man is “caught up to.”

He says twice that he is not sure whether this happened “in the body or out of the body.”

Meaning this could have happened by his soul being separated from his body and taken into heaven or he when there in the entirety of his person.

The uncertainty shows this experience was clearly more than a dream.

There was a real tangible experience of the reality of the dwelling place of God.

He adds this to the experience in **verse 4**.

What does he mean by that?

He can either mean that the man was forbidden to speak of what he saw, or he could mean the experience was beyond the man’s ability to describe.

The way the end of the verse is worded makes me think that the latter is more likely the case.

Whatever he saw in heaven is beyond his ability to explain.

He is so small in comparison to what he saw that he can’t wrap his mind around it let alone make someone else understand.

[This is the common experience of people in the Bible who have similar kinds of experiences. Moses needs to be hidden in the side of a mountain to protect him from the glory of God. Isaiah has a vision of God’s throne and immediately thinks he has met his end because he is so very unworthy to be there. John in the book of Revelation falls face down before the majesty of the risen Christ. It is a place where pride melts in the face of reality.]

If we think highly of ourselves and our own strength and ability it is only because we think so little of God.

If you think of God like a nice old man in the sky who is just doing the best he can then you are probably going to think you a pretty good.

The Bible shows us that God is completely transcendent meaning He is totally separate in the degree of His greatness to everything else that exists including us.

Just think about the fact that God knows everything and He has always known everything into all eternity past.

How much do we know?

God exists in and of Himself. He needs nothing and sustains everything by His power. He cannot be affected or coerced in any way.

How silly is it to think He would change Who He is or any of His standard to placate us.

[No one will stand before God and plead his own case and prevail. No one will stand before God and think themselves strong and powerful, least of all the genuine Christian. No brothers and sisters the more we see the LORD rightly the more we will know that we are weak people in need of a Saviour. That is the only reasonable thing to do with the reality of our weakness, to embrace it. If we do that it will cure us of something, that is the second lesson of our text this morning that...]

Point #2 – Embracing weakness does away with self-promotion. (Verses 5-6)

When we come to terms with how limited we are we will see no purpose in trying to make ourselves appear to be more than we are for the sake of gaining favour with others.

Look with me at what the apostle writes in verse 5 and the first half of verse 6.

If Paul is in fact speaking in the third person about his vision then the way to understand verse 5 is that he sees the experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” as something of tremendous value, but he does not want to use it to call attention to himself.

He says the only thing people need to know about me is my weakness.

He then takes a quick moment to remind them that if he wanted to brag about himself he could.

Looking back into chapter eleven shows that he is right about that.

If you stop and think about the distances he traveled, the experiences he had, and the things he endured for the sake of the gospel it is staggering.

In the strictest sense he would not be a fool for talking about all those experiences because they all happened, he would simply be telling the truth.

Even so, he takes a different approach instead (Verse 6b).

He could put together a personal profile that makes him look awesome and that he could talk about wherever he goes, but instead he says, “I refrain from it”.

Why? So that no one will think any more of him than what is before their eyes and what they can hear with their ears.

What he has realized in his weakness is that talking about things that call attention to himself, even if they are true, doesn’t do anything to erase the reality of his weakness.

[How many of you have ever owned a rusty car? I have had a few over the years. There was a lot to like about those cars. If I wanted I could talk about all the good things about them. Take my first truck, for example, a 1995 GMC Sierra. There was a lot to like about that truck. It had a 350 engine, a full eight foot bed, cruise control, and a decent towing capacity. All those things were true but none of that could change the rusted out cab corners.]

The same thing is true of our weakness.

Isn't it true that one of the things that motivates self-promotion is the desire to hide our shortcomings?

Isn't that why the picture that people present of themselves online often fails to live up to reality?

Isn't that why we pretend to be one way in public when in reality we are another way behind closed doors?

Could that be one of the reasons we are so afraid to confess our sins to one another like the scriptures commands?

Because we don't want people to know we are weak?

[We have a hard time embracing weakness because we don't want people to know who we really are. But the reality is that talking ourselves up doesn't erase our weakness and so it is unhelpful at best and destructive at worst. Paul is suggesting that the opposite ought to be true. We ought to embrace our weaknesses and put aside self-promotion. That brings us to a third lesson about embracing weakness. Here is the lesson...]

Point #3 – God shows His sufficiency in our weakness. (Verses 7-9a)

One of the most gracious things the LORD can do in our lives is to show us the end of ourselves so that we might see that He has no end.

One of things we can easily underestimate as human beings is our capacity for pride.

The apostle Paul is no exception to that and he knows it.

From the list he gives here in chapter eleven and from what we see of him in the book of acts there is a great deal that takes place that would have been easy to take pride in.

Particularly, he mentions here in verse seven experiencing the “surpassing greatness of the revelations.”

He was part of a very select group of people God chose to speak to and through in incredible ways.

He saw the risen Lord Jesus on multiple occasions, in Galatians he says that Jesus taught him the mysteries of the gospel directly, God gave him the task of writing a substantial part of the New Testament, he saw many people converted to Jesus through his preaching, and the list could go on.

How easy would it be to become prideful with all of that?

What kept him from going down that road? He tells us in verse 7.

While we are not told specifically what Paul's 'thorn' is, since he calls it a 'thorn in the flesh' it seems most likely that it was some kind of physical ailment.

He says it is the result of a 'messenger of Satan', but he also says it is doing something good in him namely 'keeping [him] from becoming conceited.

Now Satan did not have Paul's best interest at heart, he simply wanted to cause the apostle to suffer.

This is one of a number examples in the bible where God uses the evil intentions of His enemies to serve His own Sovereign purposes.

Paul knows God has complete authority over Satan, so he knows that this demon can only afflict Him if God permits it, which leads him to the prayers that he describes for us in **verses 8-9ba** (end at 'weakness').

He 'pleads with the LORD'. Hearing that gives us a sense of the severity of the affliction.

This is more than a minor ache or pain, this is something that is likely dramatically affecting his ability to travel and do ministry.

What does God say in response? He says, "No!"

He doesn't say, "Sorry Paul I would love to help you but I don't have the power."

He has the power!

He says "No" for the good of his servant so that he would grow in his understanding of the sufficiency of the all-powerful God of the universe.

Paul was made weak so that God could display His power through weakness.

[The Lord does this all the time in the Bible. Remember Gideon? He is presented as a fearful man with little influence or power and God calls him to lead the people in battle against a huge army of Midianites. Gideon starts out with 32000 men for the battle which likely leaves him outnumbered by about 3 to 1. From a human perspective what is needed? More soldiers. God says, 'You have too many men.' Anybody who is afraid was told to go home. 10000 guys leave. God says, 'Still too many.' So they go down to the river to get some water and God selects 300 men who drink a certain way and sends the rest home. To say the least the odds are ridiculous and yet they prevail because God shows his power.]

It is no different here for Paul and it is no different for you and me.

We tend to despise weakness don't we?

Who wants to be limited in ability?

Who wants to suffer injury or pain?

No one does.

Wouldn't it be great if we delighted in God's sufficiency without that? I think it would.

At the same time if a momentary affliction or weakness is the best or only way to for us to see and enjoy the strength of the LORD is that not worth a 'thorn in the flesh'?

[Whatever this 'thorn' was for Paul it is of little importance in comparison with what it accomplished for the apostle. Though it was clearly unpleasant it served to teach him that weakness isn't something to be shunned, but it is something to be embraced because the LORD's power is displayed through our weakness. He sees it as a gift and then in the last verse and a half he broadens out the application of God's sufficiency and gives us one more lesson in the process. The lesson is that...]

Point #4 – Embracing weakness brings peace. (Verses 9b-10)

Trusting in the power of God to rule everything in our lives frees us from the delusions of our own abilities and allows us to rest in His good purposes for His people.

*Listen to what it says here in the middle of verse 9, it says, **verse 9b.***

Instead of despising weakness he wants to embrace it so that he might have a tangible sense of the power of Christ.

As I mentioned last week when we were looking at the long list of physical punishments Paul endured, it is hard to see a natural explanation for how he carried on in ministry.

His body would have been an absolute mess and the older he got the more he likely felt the after effects of those injuries.

We know from other epistles that he struggled with failing eyesight in his later years.

How did he carry on? The answer is the power of Christ carried him.

Knowing that power leads him to write this in **verse 10.**

What the ESV translates as 'content' other versions translate as 'delight'.

The idea is one of satisfaction.

That seems like a strange thing to say about weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

Why does he say this about such things?

He says that because he has come the trust God with things that he has no control over.

He knows that all of these things are under the mighty hand of God and not one thing happens to him apart from God's will; therefore, he can rest in the power of God.

[Some of you may know the name Joni Eareckson Tada. As a teen she dove into water not knowing how shallow it was and severely injured her spinal cord leaving her paralyzed from the neck down. Though she had dark days she learned to trust in the LORD and sought to be used by Him despite her physical limitations. I saw this quote from her the other day, she says, “*God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependency on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away.*”]

That is the point of what the apostle is saying in these verses.

Realizing and embracing our weaknesses leads us to depend on the LORD and the LORD is dependable in everything.

Isn't that exactly what we need to see in order to come to Christ for salvation?

Don't we need to see that we are powerless to do anything about all the offenses we have committed against the LORD?

Don't we need to see that we have no power to escape His wrath?

Don't we need to see that God has acted in His power through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to accomplish what we could never accomplish?

That is are only hope to be saved from what we deserve on account of our rebellion against God, to turn away from ourselves and towards the LORD resting in His power to save.

It is one of the great mercies of God for us to learn the lesson of our weakness.

One of the things we need to learn it is a glorious vision of who He is.

Any delusion of strength or power will quickly fade we begin to see the greatness of the LORD.

When we can see that we will better see the reality of our own weakness which will help us do away with self-promotion.

We don't need to tell people how great we are. We don't need to impress anyone with our strength or wisdom, we just need to strive to serve the LORD in humility.

When we stop despising weakness and embrace it we will see that the LORD is sufficient in all things and when we can trust in His sufficiency in all things we will know a peace that passes all understanding, the peace of Christ.

May God in his mercy show us our weakness so that we might see His strength.