

## **“Growing strong in weaknesses” 2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**“I know a man 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. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What would you say if you were asked these questions: what do you expect from our God, what do you pray for, what do you wish for, what would a blessed Christian life look like according to your dreams and hopes?

I imagine that quite likely we would come up with some answers that more or less reflect general longings for all human beings. We all want to be appreciated, we want to matter, to be good and useful members of your communities, we want to be recognized for who we are and what we do.

We would like to have a good life, be treated well. Hopefully, as much as possible, to live without trials and tribulations, sufferings and pains. We would like to be more or less in control of circumstances in our lives, not just somehow hanging there. And with the Lord’s help, not to suffer persecution for our faith.

If someone has that sort of life, then we often think of such people as so blessed by God, so blessed to have it all together so well. On the other hand, when some fellow Christians don’t have it, what to make of that?

We may wonder that maybe that is somehow their fault, or that maybe we are loved and favoured by our God more than they, and perhaps, that’s because we are just a bit better and smarter, and so on.

Today’s reading teaches us a lesson. A lesson about that aspect of Christian life that we may not find that warm and fuzzy – about sufferings and weaknesses. The first thing that we can notice in this lesson is that our God is not like us.

He doesn’t think like us. His ways are not our ways. What He thinks is good for us may differ very, very much from what we would prefer. The life of Paul the apostle serves as this great illustration for us.

What did Paul's life look like as seen through the eyes of the flesh? The first part was quite good. It began quite well. Remember, he was born in a wealthy family in the famous city of Tarsus, Roman citizen from his birth.

Then he enjoyed the best education available, loving what he was doing, having great connections within Jewish government, fast-tracking in his career and then... the road to Damascus experience. That changed everything.

But, of course, we may think – for something better. The God of his fathers appeared to Paul and told that he will be His chosen emissary, that Paul will now work for the holy God and will help to rescue people from the domain of darkness and bring them into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son.

Sounds so impressive. A few may want to exchange their conventional careers for such an exciting opportunity. But what did Paul's service to Jesus look like? Comfy and highly respected, full of glory and recognition? Nothing like that!

It was marked by conflicts and opposition from the very beginning. You can read of Paul's journey in 2 Corinthians 11. That's quite a colourful resume. Imprisonments. Beatings. Shipwrecks. Dangers from gentiles and from false brothers. Toil. Hardship. Hunger and thirst. Sleepless nights. Cold and exposure. Anxiety for all the churches. And so on...

His own congregations turned against Paul one after another. And as if that wasn't enough, God gave him a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him... that's briefly the life story of Paul the apostle – the greatest missionary of all times.

When you next try to explain to someone how great it is to be a Christian, how good and peaceful life it brings, how many are God's blessings for His faithful followers – feel free to use Paul's life story as an illustration. Who knows, we may get people lining up at our doors – “yes, we want it too!”

But that's how it is, that's what following Jesus may look like. How many times Jesus warned that we will be reviled, rejected, despised, persecuted and hated by everyone for His name's sake. “Deny yourself, take up your crosses and follow me, and if you love anything more than me, you are not worthy of me.”

Now, we may wonder – but how could Paul endure all of that, more, how could he be content, optimistic and even cheerful in the midst of such challenges? The answer is – because someone, who loved Paul more than his own life, suffered similar fate and so much more for Paul. It was Jesus Christ, the son of God. He left everything, He left His divine glory and became poor for Paul's sake and for our sake. For you!

He emptied Himself, He set aside His divine power and humbled Himself “to the point of death, even death on a cross”. And when did He do that? When we, me and you, were still His enemies – ignorant, rebellious and spiteful.

What motivated Jesus, what empowered Him for such an incredible feat? It was love. His Father's love. His Father had loved Him from eternity to eternity. His Father had given everything to Jesus, all authority in heaven and on earth.

This eternal divine love motivated Jesus to love us to the cross and to give Himself up for us, and also to prepare for us something that as Paul said – cannot even be uttered. Something that no human eye has seen nor ear heard.

Paul had tasted this love. Jesus had revealed Himself to Paul. He had shown what He has prepared for Paul in the age to come, the third heavens, and this is why Paul could say it again and again – “the sufferings of this life are not even worth comparing to the surpassing greatness of the glory that is to be revealed”.

This love, this experience of God’s grace transformed Paul. It was similar to Job. Remember? Job lost everything. God allowed Satan to take everything from Job, and when Job cried out for answers the holy One came and finally spoke with Him.

It’s interesting, God Yahweh didn’t answer any of Job’s questions, instead He revealed Himself and gave Job a glimpse of what life in His presence is like. After that, in awe and amazement Job could only say – before he had heard about God, but now He has seen Him, He has experienced His gracious presence and His power and... now he rests his case, he is at peace.

A moment in the presence of the holy God outweighed everything... So, too with Paul. He was continually experiencing God’s grace and His powerful and overwhelming presence in the midst of all his challenges. That’s why he could say that he is fully content and even boasts about his trials and weaknesses.

Even more, he could be content with something that at first appears impossible. A messenger of Satan! This is one more similarity with Job. God had allowed Satan to harass Paul. Why, we may wonder? Why would He do that? Out of love...

First, whatever that thorn was, it was given to Paul to keep him humble. Yes, the apostle Paul was a sinner just as we are. He too was prone to become conceited because of the surpassing revelations that he had been blessed with.

A messenger of Satan was in God’s service, to protect Paul and also to help him to grow in his reliance and trust to the Lord Jesus. Paul had prayed that it be taken away, but no. The thorn remained to help Paul to experience God’s grace to the extent that otherwise he wouldn’t be able. God’s ways are not our ways...

Fine, but where does this leave us? Where does it leave you? The beautiful truth is that you are in the same situation as Paul. Someone, who loves you more than you can know, has given up His life for you. Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The same grace that He showed to Paul is now given to you, and the same power of God now rests with you, when we suffer for the sake of Christ. How can we experience God's grace and His power resting on us?

In our weaknesses for the sake of Christ. Growing in the way of forgiveness, in patience facing insults, in joy and peace when facing rejections, growing in graciousness when in persecutions. “What do you mean, Pastor?!” Let’s see.

We experience God's grace and His power growing in the way of forgiveness; you know how hard it can be to ask for forgiveness. It means admitting that we have failed, that we are not that good. But when the Holy Spirit reveals to you how much

you are loved by Jesus, and how He humbled Himself for you, we are transformed, we don't worry anymore about our self-image, about our self-righteousness, we are empowered to seek forgiveness, for we are loved and forgiven so much.

We experience God's grace and His power facing insults. How do people react, what do they do when they are insulted, or suffered injustice? Yes, we want to retaliate, to repay for what was done to us, to restore our good name, our honour, and bring our enemies down. But if the power of God's grace dwells in us, then we are powerful and content as we are. We are not worried about insults or injustices for the sake of Christ, for we know that we suffer together with Jesus, and that He suffers with us, we know that our God is with us and in us and He is our rock and our strengths.

We experience God's grace and His power facing rejection. What happens when we are rejected, or when others are hostile to us? We usually don't like those situations. We want to be accepted, we want to be recognized and appreciated. Too often our self-esteem and self-worth is based on how others treat us or what they think of us.

But when you experience God's grace, when you experience God's presence, when the Holy Spirit assures you of the Father's love and Jesus' affection to you, then our joy doesn't depend on the favour of others, but on our Lord Jesus. Then we are free to be at peace and to rejoice even when rejected for Jesus' sake.

We experience God's grace and His power growing gracious in persecutions. How can anyone be kind to his enemies? We can't, on our own. But when we begin to understand how gracious our God was to us, when we were still hostile to Him, then the power of God fills us, His grace transforms our hearts and our enemies ... they cease to be our enemies.

They become for us our fellows, who have been deceived by the devil, and are in need for our prayers. As Jesus prayed for His enemies, and for us, as Paul prayed for his persecutors, so we are empowered by the same Spirit to do the same.

When the power of God rests with us, when we are made strong in Christ by His Spirit indwelling in us, then we are able to grow stronger in our weaknesses. Then we can stand tall together with Jesus and do what is humanly impossible, for we know who we are – beloved and dearly cherished children of the Father.

We know our worth and significance – Jesus gave Himself up for you – and that fills us with courage and confidence of the Holy Spirit so that we can speak boldly the truth of the Gospel, not being afraid of what others may think of us, for we know how our Father and our brother Jesus cherish and value us.

Thus, for the world we Christians may seem weak when we are quick with forgiveness, humble when insulted, patient when rejected, gracious when persecuted for Jesus' sake. But in our hearts, we can rejoice and even boast in such weaknesses, because that is when our God's grace and power rest in us.

I pray today, that our Lord help us always to remember that the greatest joy and gain for us Christians is found nowhere else, but in God's grace towards us, as His power rests with us. I pray that the Holy Spirit would help us daily grow in our weaknesses for Christ's sake. "For when I am weak, then I am strong." Amen.