

THE EMPOWERING OF THE SPIRIT

Zechariah 4:6 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

In 538 BC, the people of Israel began to return to the promised land after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. As they set their focus on rebuilding the temple, re-establishing worship in Jerusalem, and fulfilling God's plan for the nation, the Lord reminded their leader Zerubbabel that there is only one source of power for spiritual life.

"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, " says the Lord of hosts. (Zech. 4:6)

Growth in our ability to tap that power is always preceded by a deepened awareness of our own inadequacy. It is part of God's plan to show us just how weak we are on our own because not until we are overwhelmed by our weakness will we take hold of grace. And not until we learn to take hold of grace with every breath will we become a serious threat to the enemy.

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me--to keep me from exalting myself, concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

The entire book of 2 Corinthians is a defence of the ministry. It was written by Paul to defend not just himself, but every pastor-teacher who would ever teach the Word of God. Paul was under tremendous attack by the carnal, critical, judgmental Christians in Corinth, who were letting the things they did not find attractive about the apostle distract them from the message he carried. The theme running all the way through the book is that it is always the message--and never the man who delivers the message--that is the issue, that God has devised a way to use imperfect people as vehicles for a perfect message.

So important is this that Paul states it twice in verse seven with the phrase "to keep me from exalting myself." God knew that when He poured the power of His Word through Paul there would be a very great danger that Paul would be tempted to magnify his importance. After all, Paul had a tendency toward self-righteousness which he had exploited to the full as an unbelieving Pharisee.

So God allowed what was apparently a high-ranking demon to be assigned to the apostle to inflict bodily pain and damage on him. He calls it "a thorn in the flesh," but identifies it as an *aggelos*, a word usually translated "angel," of Satan. The Greek word translated "buffet" means "to beat to a pulp."

Under this intense pressure, Paul asked the Lord three times to take it away, and finally the Lord explained to Paul why He would not: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Grace is sufficient. Grace--not human ability, not human talents, not human intellect. God's grace plus our weakness equals power in ministry.

Paul's reaction to this news was to begin rejoicing because he had so many weaknesses. Once he oriented to the fact that grace works through weakness, he found that he always had something to celebrate. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that he agreed with their assessment that he was not perfect and that it was this very fact that made him eligible for grace and a fit carrier for God's message. o

Being able to celebrate our weaknesses is a key to contentment in the Christian life. Paul wrote in Philippians 4 that he had learned the secret of being content. How do we do that? We have to learn to accept ourselves as we are--weaknesses, cracks, flaws, and all. God does. God takes us as we are. When we learn to be thankful for our weaknesses and our adversities and for the things we are not strong enough to control, then we never run out of reasons to give thanks and to celebrate grace.

When Paul talks about the power of Christ dwelling in him, he uses a word that means "to tabernacle. In doing so, he conjures up images of the rough tent the children of Israel carted around in the wilderness in which dwelt the Shekinah Glory. Just as the tabernacle housed the Shekinah Glory then, we--frail and ragged tents that we are--house the power of the God today.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from our selves. (2 Cor. 4:7)

The treasure Paul is talking about here is "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). Jesus Christ is the reflection of divine glory. He, the only visibly revealed member of the Trinity, was the Shekinah Glory that illuminated the tabernacle; He was the glory of the presence of God in the midst of the nation of Israel.

Paul says that we carry this light in "earthen vessels, physical bodies as fragile as clay pots. And why does the glory of God rest in us? So that the source of the power in our lives will be evident to the world.

I am convinced that what Paul had in mind at this point was the story of Gideon from the book of Judges. Gideon is a great illustration of grace made perfect through weakness. He was a coward living in a time of warfare. But God needed someone He could turn into a hero, and Gideon was His man.

The story of Gideon begins in Judges 6 with a description of how "Israel was brought very low" because of raiding bands of Midianites who would regularly sweep over the land like locusts, destroying Israel's crops and livestock and devastating the land.

In Judges 6:11 young Gideon, who is so terrified of the enemy that he is hiding in a pit stomping out wheaties for his breakfast, looks up and sees Jesus Christ in His preincarnate state. And the Lord does to Gideon what He does to each one of us--He looks at Gideon not as what he is at this moment, but as what He was going to make of him. Jesus Christ sees us from the standpoint of what we will become in His plan. o

And the Lord looks down on Gideon and says, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior," and Gideon is at this point probably wondering, "Who in the world He is talking to? Can't be me. I'm scared to death." But Gideon is chosen anyway.

In Judges 7:2, after Gideon has gathered a force of 32,000 Israelites to attack a force of 135,000 Midianites, God says an amazing thing: "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'" The Lord is saying, "You are too strong, Gideon. My power only works in weakness.

Gideon is told to release any soldiers who are afraid and want to go home. Immediately he loses 22,000 men. Gideon was just as afraid as the 22,000 who left. The only difference between his fear and theirs is that their fear caused them to quit and his did not. That is the difference between heroes and cowards. They are all afraid, but heroes do not quit; they never give up.

But the Lord says the troops are still too many, so He has Gideon conduct a test of the men's alertness and eliminates all but 300. Now He has a team He can work with.

When Gideon's men heard their leader's battle plan, they must have wondered whether they shouldn't have turned back when the others did. With the Midianites and the Amalekites "lying in the valley as numerous as locusts ... their camels ... without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore," Gideon divides his men into three companies and gives each man a trumpet, an empty pitcher, and a torch. These are the weapons that the 300 will use against the 135,000.

Judges 7:21-22 tells us what happened when the three companies came to the outskirts of the enemy camp in the darkness and at Gideon's word blew the trumpets and smashed the

Pitchers that were in their hands: "Each stood in his place around the camp; and all the army ran, crying out as they fled. And when they blew 300 trumpets, the Lord set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled."

When the apostle Paul talks about treasure in earthen vessels, he is talking about torches and clay pots. We are the clay pots, the common, everyday vessels. The glory of Jesus Christ is the torch, the light of the world. We put the light inside the clay vessel and then blow the trumpet, which is the message of the gospel. And what happens? When the vessel is broken, the light shines through. And that is exactly what God is trying to do in our lives every day--break the vessel, so the light can shine out.

We are afflicted in every way. but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about: in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

Why do Christians have to suffer? It is the only way God's glory will be seen through us. If we are going to blow the trumpet, God is going to break the vessel. If we are not prepared to be broken, we had better just set our trumpets down and go home because we are not ready for the battle.

The battle that we face cannot be fought and won by our power or our strength. It has to be fought in weakness. That is how God displays His power--through the weakness of the missionaries, of the pastors, of the believers on the job every day who keep blowing the trumpet. Every time we blow the trumpet, the vessel is broken, and God routs the enemy.