

Title: A Gospel Paradox
Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10)
Date: January 25, 2009
Immanuel Baptist Church
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The Gospel of Jesus is characterized by reversal and paradox. To lose life is to gain life, and to gain life is to lose life. The Messianic King does not wield power over others, but is the servant of all. We call “Lord” the one who told us not to call anyone Lord. We have to die before we can live. And the paradox our Scripture text is about today: We experience the strength and power of God through weakness and suffering.

In this part of his letter Paul is defending his ministry and message against the accusations of those he calls “false apostles.” He tells that he has been compelled to talk like a fool, that is, to “boast” in his apostolic credentials. He points sufferings as evidence of his apostolic calling. He says in 11:24ff:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

This is not the life of one who wants to gain personal advantage by preaching the good news. He says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

But then he says: “Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations.” Paul seems to be saying, “You have forced me to do what I despise doing—talk about myself. But if that is what I must do then let me tell you about my “visions and revelations.” Apparently the teachers that came to Corinth after he left, who are questioning Paul’s credentials, put a lot of stock in these kinds of experiences, and the Corinthians were being drawn in by them. So Paul talks about a visionary experience he had.

What Paul is dealing with at Corinth is very contemporary when you think about it. Pastor Thomas Tewell tells about visiting a church, a mega church that had no crosses on its campus. He kept looking for a cross but couldn’t find one. So he asked one of the pastors why there were no crosses. The pastor said, “We have discovered that the cross doesn’t go over well here.” There’s a lot in modern Christianity that’s intended to fascinate, entertain, and impress, but none of that has any real power to transform. In 1 Corinthians, Paul’s former correspondence with the church, he said, “*When I came to you, I did not come with*

eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2-3). Christ crucified, said Paul, is foolishness to the Gentiles and a stumbling block, a scandal to the Jews, but to those who receive the gospel it is the power of God and wisdom of God. Christ crucified speaks of weakness and suffering.

Here Paul deviates from that approach and talks about a visionary experience he had. He says that he was caught up to the “third heaven” which he also calls “paradise.” Heaven is by no means a simple concept in Scripture. The Jews believed in a plurality or levels of heavenly reality and Paul here is using traditional Jewish language. “Paradise” was a term used by many Jews to refer to the abode of the righteous dead. He doesn’t know whether it was an in the body or out of the body kind of experience. He says that he is not permitted to talk about what he heard. And that’s it, that’s all he says. He doesn’t linger here, because this is not what the gospel is about.

Next Paul talks about something that he regarded as a real impairment and hindrance to his ministry. He calls it a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment him. Scholars have speculated as to what this could have been. Some think it was some physical ailment like epilepsy or migraines or malaria. Others think that it may have been more mental or spiritual, like bouts of depression, or some addiction. We don’t know what it was, but what we do know is that it made his life and work very difficult, a real struggle. Three times, he claims, to have prayed very specifically that God would take it away, that God would remove this satanic impediment that is interfering with his ministry.

But God did not take it away. And Paul learned to cope with it, and in learning to cope with it he gained fresh insight into the paradoxical nature of the gospel. Robert Fulghum tells about an experience he had right out of college in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in Northern California. Fulghum worked as a night desk clerk in the lodge and he also helped out with the horse wrangling in the stables. Fulghum says that the owner/manager was Italian-Swiss, with European notions about conditions of employment. One week the employees had been served the same thing for lunch every single day: two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls. And the cost of the meals was deducted from their check. Fulghum was outraged. On Friday night he went into the kitchen to get something to eat and discovered that wieners and sauerkraut were on the employees menu for two more days. He went nuts.

The night auditor, Sigmund Wollman, had just come on duty and was in the kitchen and sat quietly on a stool, smoking a cigar, watching with sorrowful eyes as Fulghum pitched his fit and raved on and on. Sigmund was a German Jew and a three year survivor of Auschwitz.

He let Fulghum wind down and then said, “Lissen, Fulchum. Lissen me, lissen me. You know what’s wrong with you? It’s not wieners and kraut and it’s not the boss and it’s not

the chef and it's not this job. Fulchum, you think you know everything, but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem."

He said, "If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire—then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much. Good night."

And then in a gesture combining dismissal and blessing, he waved Fulghum off to bed. Fulghum says, "Seldom in my life have I been hit between the eyes with the truth so hard."

Paul, too, is hit between the eyes with the truth. He comes to a different way of seeing, a different perspective. What Paul experienced was nothing less than the power of the gospel he was called to preach and he discovered it not through the resolution of his problems or deliverance from his struggles, but in facing his problems and living through his struggles.

Whatever his thorn in the flesh, Paul came to see it as a way of keeping him humble, keeping him trusting in the power and grace of God. I do not believe God sends impediments and obstructions into our path. I do not see God as the cause and source of our hardships and struggles. I don't believe God interferes in our lives in these ways, but I do believe that every struggle, conflict, and obstacle constitutes a test of faith. Our response to the trials and tragedies, the disappointments and difficulties, will spiritually impact our lives and the lives of others that our life touches in significant ways.

Mark McMinn, in his book *"Making the Best of Stress"* tells about a summer afternoon when his family went to a nearby state park for a picnic. They played games and had contests in a large, grassy field. For one game they all lay down on their backs and had a leg-lifting contest. The rules were simple: hold your feet six inches in the air, without bending your knees, and see who can hold it the longest. Six year old Megan, his youngest daughter, won the contest twice. When he asked her, "How did you hold your legs up so long?" her response was, "It was easy once I figured out it was okay to hurt."

Paul discovered that it was not only okay to hurt, but that his hurt enabled him to experience the grace and power of the living Christ in a more dynamic way. Imagine a little boy on the sea shore with his sand bucket saying to himself, "I'd better not take too much water out of the ocean, I might drain it dry." Is there enough ocean? Is there enough grace? God's grace provides an inexhaustible well-spring of strength and endurance, and Paul's weakness kept him drawing from God's supply. Paul says, *"This is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

God's grace is God's every day, every hour, every minute saving and sustaining power that is most fully and completely present with us and in us when we are weak, when we are up against it and have come to the end of our rope. God's grace is the dynamic outpouring of God's renewing, energizing Spirit into our lives. If we are unable to

appropriate God's grace it is because our hands are too full of stuff—our minds too cluttered with our own concerns and agenda, and our hearts too clogged by other desires and interests. We must come with empty hands, with open minds and hearts, confessing our need for God's strength and power. The more we feel the effects of our weaknesses, the more we feel the frustration of our handicaps and the force of our failures, the more we are driven to trust in God's grace.

What Paul experienced was nothing less than the power of the gospel he was called to preach—and he experienced it in his weaknesses, his insults, his hardships, his persecutions and difficulties, not in his trip to paradise.

When Jordan was 12 I coached his Little League team. In the League tournament we had fought back out of the loser's bracket to compete in the championship game. That meant that we would have to win twice. We were winning 4 to 0 going into the bottom of the fourth inning. Jordan was pitching and doing well. Looking ahead I decided to make a pitching change so I could pitch him three innings in the next game. Not a good move. The other team came roaring back and before we knew it we were down 5 to 4, and that's how it ended.

Life is very much like that. You can be cruising along thinking everything is under control. All your carefully laid plans seem to be working out just the way you intended. The wind is at your back. Then the tide turns. The wind changes course. The storm hits. And suddenly you are down 5 to 4 going into the last inning with the bottom part of the batting order coming to the plate.

Your marriage bottoms out, your job is cut, a relationship falls apart, a child loses her way, an illness strikes, a loved one dies, a friend betrays your trust and you are left dazed wondering how this happened. You feel beaten and battered and bruised.

It is here, in our weakness, that we are most aware of our need and are most open to receive the redeeming, sustaining, transforming power of the living Christ. Of course, we can turn away. We can grumble and complain, we can allow resentment and anger to turn us against God and close our hearts to God's grace. And that would be a serious mistake.

Life is filled with many setbacks and obstacles, and all of us struggle with our own flaws and contradictions. We need grace. In Ephesians Paul says, "by grace are you saved (made whole, healed, rescued, liberated) through faith." Faith is an open mind and heart that trusts in God's strength and love. What the living Christ said to Paul he says to each one of us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made complete in weakness."

Our good God, create in our hearts a passion to know you and to know the strength and power of your grace that works in us as we face our failures, handicaps, and weaknesses. May we not scorn our struggles or grow bitter and resentful, but help us, rather, to seize this opportunity to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.