“When I Am Weak…”

(Paul R. Blake)

(I was recently asked for the meaning of 2 Corinthians 12:9 which states: “My strength is made perfect in weakness.” I was happy to respond, as it is a Bible principle dear to my heart.) You asked a good question. Keeping the passage in its context (2 Corinthians 12:1-10), Paul had just been given a wonderful revelation that had the potential to make him overly proud by thinking that God had singled him out as special. Such pride would hinder his effectiveness as a servant of the Lord. So, a limitation (not known exactly what it was) was given to him to remind him to be humble. Paul obviously chafed under the thorn and asked the Lord to remove it; perhaps he believed he would be more effective for the Lord without it. However, Jesus was clearly of a different opinion.

Paul himself had written that he understood his role for the Lord when he said, “we have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:6-7). He was talking about the gospel (treasure) entrusted to him and his fellow evangelists (jars of clay). When you put a treasure in a clay jar, the glory of the treasure stands out even more by virtue of the plain commonness of the simple pottery container. The clay jar does not distract attention away from the treasure; instead, it enhances the treasure by itself receding into the background unnoticed. The focus of the observer is drawn to the treasure and not the container.

So it is with the gospel given into the hands of ordinary (and sometimes flawed) men. The power of the gospel is clearly seen by the hearer who is not distracted by the appearance, talents, or splendor of the speaker. In fact, when the wonder of the gospel comes from an ordinary man, the hearer is more likely to think, “This man is an average Joe like me. This message is greater than the man; it must be from God.”

It is possible that Jesus is repeating this lesson to Paul by having him keep that limitation (thorn). When people hear Paul preaching the wonderful gospel in spite of the limitation (thorn, disability, etc.), they will know that it is of God and not from this flawed, weak man. In addition, it adds to the glory of the gospel for hearers to see that it had power in spite of the condition of the vessel that brings it. In short, for Paul to preach while bearing with the thorn made him a more effective servant of Christ. Jesus was stronger in the hearts and minds of the hearers because Paul, Jesus’ messenger, was weak.

It’s like the story of how the marathon began. A messenger sent from one Greek leader to another at a critical moment for the nation ran over 26 miles to carry his message. When he arrived dirty, sweaty, exhausted, he delivered his message and then died. The leader who received the message would not focus on the dirt and sweat and say his message can’t be worth much; rather, he would be impressed with the importance of the message that a man would go through so much to deliver it. So it was with Paul. The message must be important for a man so hindered by the thorn to deliver it in spite of the limitations he bore.

Let’s make an application of this. Suppose someone who has known of you and your trials over the years listens to you speak with them of the gospel and your hope of heaven, and they are aware of how much energy and will you must expend to do so. They are going to think, “This message must be important for her to make the effort to teach me. I must learn what it is about this gospel that enables her to do this.” Do you see how strong the Lord appears to others when magnified by one who has a thorn in the flesh?

In reality, we all have thorns to one degree or another (some have a whole thorn bush!). But we all work to overcome our thorns, we pray to have the Lord remove them, and when He says to bear with the thorn for now, we find a way to work His will with the thorn still in our flesh. It is one of the paradoxes of the Bible and it seems so counter intuitive to us, but how glorious is a Savior who can take flawed clay vessels and use them to magnify the treasure of the gospel! When I am weak, then He is strong.

It should not surprise us that this is the case. After all, Jesus had to descend into His weakest and most vulnerable condition in order to be an effective offering for our sins and to wrest the power over death away from Satan. He had to be rejected, beaten, die on the cross and enter the realm of death in order to do so. As the cross glorifies Jesus, so our thorns bring glory. We might even call our thorns “splinters from the cross.” I hope this helps. Thank you for asking!

**That We May Work the Works of God**

(Kent Heaton)

When Naaman the leper came to Elisha in 2 Kings 5 he was looking for a way to be healed of the certain death of leprosy. A captive maiden had told Naaman’s wife about a prophet in Israel that could heal Naaman of his leprosy. Standing at the door of the house of Elisha, Naaman is told what to do to be saved from this terrible disease. “Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh will be restored to you and you will be clean’” (2 Kings 5:10).

At first Naaman was furious about the instructions and refused to obey. After the admonition of his servants, Naaman “went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean” (2 Kings 5:14). The commander of the Syrian army was now free from the horrible consequences of leprosy because of two things: the grace of God and his own obedience to the will of God.

Salvation from sin (more horrible than leprosy) is cured in the same manner. The grace of God is abundant toward man through the offering of Jesus Christ (Titus 2:11-14). However, the grace of God is of no effect if we do not obey the will of God. This obedience is found in the implication to work fully the plan of salvation given to us by the grace of God (Philippians 2:12). Naaman was not saved simply by the grace of God nor when he believed in the grace of God. His salvation came about when he believed in the grace of God, embraced the message of the grace of God and acted upon the will of God by obedience in the Jordan River. There were no magic potions in the river but the obedience of Naaman to the instructions of the prophet of God is how he was saved. Was he saved by works? Obedience is works.

In John 6 the people asked Jesus, “What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:28-29). Remarkably, we find that belief itself is a work. Salvation can never be without works because belief is necessary for salvation (John 8:24).

Could Naaman have been cleansed by faith alone? No, he had to follow the pattern Paul wrote about in Philippians 2:12 – “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” This idea of “working out…salvation” is to ‘finish, cause to happen’ and fortifies the Biblical teaching of man’s necessity of obeying the will of God. Noah would not have been saved if he relied solely upon the grace of God (Genesis 6:7, 13, 14; Hebrews 11:7) and not built the ark (Genesis 6:22). Salvation by grace alone would have destroyed Noah and his family and Naaman would never have been cleansed from leprosy. “And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:27).

Ephesians 2 reminds us that our salvation is not based upon our own merit but God’s grace; but without works we are not justified. “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). Justified by works!