

**WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?
GOD MAKES US WEAK TO MAKE US STRONG
2 Corinthians 12: 1-10**

Did you meet anyone new after last Sunday's worship service?

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Do you wish for a stronger faith? Why or why not? How would you know if you had a stronger faith?

Do you agree or disagree with this definition of faith from John Piper? "Faith is not simply believing that Jesus will do what he says. But it is believing that what Jesus promises is better than possessing the whole world. Faith is not merely an agreement with facts in the head; it is also an appetite for God in the heart."

According to Jesus in John 5:44 why do the religious leaders not have faith?

The human desire to be noticed and applauded by other humans prevents faith. This is usually called pride.

According to Hosea 13:6, what led to the unbelief of the nation Israel?

God's abundant provision for their worldly needs led them to be satisfied with worldly pleasures and to presume that they were the authors of their own happiness. So they forgot God and trusted in themselves and what they could (supposedly) provide for themselves. This too is pride.

Humans cannot take delight in, depend upon their own wealth, strength and wisdom and at the same time delight in, and depend upon God's kindness, justice and righteousness. To be proud is to depend upon your judgments, your abilities, your resources to provide for yourself what you determine is in your own best interest. All of us, by nature, are proud people. So God, in order to give us infinite happiness has to

make us humble. We are going to see today, in 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10 one of the ways that God makes us humble so that we will be strong in faith.

STUDY

1. In order to understand why Paul says what he says in vv. 1-10 we need to see the context. Read 11: 1-3. What is Paul's goal for the Corinthians? What is he afraid of?

He wants them to be saved. He wants them to have a relationship with Jesus that is like the relationship between a bride and groom on their wedding day. He is afraid that they are being deceived and led away from Christ and so are going to end up not being saved but go to hell.

2. Read through 11: 4-15, what appears to have happened to cause Paul to fear for them?

Paul is the one who planted the church in Corinth. He spent a year and a half preaching the gospel in Corinth and established this church. Men have come in behind him and are preaching a different Jesus than the one that Paul preached. These men have attempted to get the people to listen to them by comparing themselves to Paul. They are gifted preachers and have drawn attention to Paul's poor speaking style. They are healthy and good-looking and are paid well for their preaching. They have drawn attention to Paul's battered appearance, poor clothing and his preaching without demanding payment.

3. According to 11:12, what is Paul's goal?

He is trying to "cut the ground from under" these false, super-apostles. He is trying to discredit them so that the people will not listen to them and so abandon Christ and be lost.

4. According to 11:16-21 how does he feel about the tactic that the false teachers are using of boasting about their "credentials"?

He views this sort of behavior as the sort of thing that only fools would engage in. Boasting about your "credentials" is evidence that you are a fool and not a follower of Christ as far as he is concerned.

5. However Paul says that he is going to boast about himself in spite of the fact that doing so is becoming like a fool. Why does he do this (See Proverbs 26: 4-5)?

He does it because he is convinced that to not do so will simply be to let the false teachers get away with it. He acts like a fool by boasting in order to discredit the false teachers.

6. How is Paul's boasting in 11:21b-33 different from the boasting of the false teacher's? See especially v. 30 and 4:3.

Notice that whereas these men talk about their strengths as chief reasons for why they should be listened to, Paul talks about the things that reveal his weaknesses. Paul talks about his sufferings for the sake of the gospel in order to show that his authority does not come from any human abilities or connections. The Corinthians shouldn't listen to him because he is applauded everywhere he goes. Paul does not have the connections, the money, or the professional training in oration that these men have. All he has are the scars of suffering on his body, the clothing of poverty, the weariness of hard work and the anxiety of love. He has no friends in high places, in fact, from the very beginning of his life as a Christian, those in authority have been opposed to him. What Paul has is the gospel and that is the only reason he wants them to listen to him. His "credentials" are that he doesn't have any credentials except for the gospel.

7. When you read 12:1 what do you sense is Paul's attitude about what he is about to say next?

He knows that he must say what he is about to say for the sake of the Corinthians but he is not sure that it will really help. He very reluctantly and somewhat pessimistically says that he will go on to talk about visions and revelations. Presumably, the false teachers have talked about their visions and so Paul feels he must mention his.

8. Who is the man that had a vision 14 years prior to Paul's writing this letter? See vv6-7.

Clearly Paul is the man who had the vision.

9. But why does he talk about it in such a weird way? Why does he use the "third" person (he), instead of the first person (I), when talking about himself?

He wants them to know that he had a vision just like these false teachers but that the reason they should believe him is not because he had a vision but because he has told them the true gospel. Again, as he said back in chapter 4 he believes that the thing that is most persuasive and that bears the strongest evidence for his trustworthiness is the gospel itself, not him.

10. Consider these statements together: 4:3, 5-6, 7-15, 11:30 and the use of the third person in describing his vision. What does Paul believe humans need in order to have a strong faith? How necessary are miracles for a strong faith? How necessary are charismatic leaders and powerful spokesmen for the creation of people with strong faith?

The thing that is so striking in Paul's whole argument to persuade these people that they should listen to him and not these "super-apostles" is that he continually puts Christ forward and himself in the background. He wants people to be impressed with Jesus, not with him. The reason is because he is impressed with Jesus, not with himself. Paul wants people to trust in Christ because Christ is appealing to them, not because he, Paul, is so fascinating. Paul rejects appealing to people to embrace Christ because they are impressed with those who are spokespeople for Christ. He wants people to be attracted to Christ because they find Christ attractive. The kind of people who are best suited for pointing to the attractiveness of Christ are those who are weak, not the strong. The power of God is seen in and through human weakness, not in and through human strength or flashy miracles.

11. Do you trust Christ because you are impressed with Jesus and his saving work or because you are impressed with human arguments for the trustworthiness of Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus because you like other Christians or because you find him irresistible?

God aims to humble us so that we can be strong in faith by revealing the greatness of Christ to us.

Here is v. 7 from the NAS: “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 (beat, torment, torture) me—to keep me from exalting myself.”

12. What would be God’s purpose in giving Paul the great revelations that he did?

God meant these revelations to strengthen Paul’s faith, to cause him to love God and people more.

13. What effect does Paul think the heavenly vision could have on him?

He knew that rather than helping him love God these visions had just as much potential to make him an enemy of God. The revelations could cause him to become conceited, rather than motivate him to love Christ and people. Paul understands his own depravity quite well.

14. Use your imagination. How might these “surpassingly great revelations” have made him proud?

It would be easy for Paul to “pull rank” when someone began to dispute with him or question him. It would be very easy for him to look at others with disdain, especially when someone was trying to disagree with him about theological issues. “Don’t you know who you’re talking to? I’ve actually been to heaven and back again. How dare you question my authority, my interpretation.” Paul could become very unteachable, even towards God. “I’ve been to heaven, what more is there to learn?” He could become very impatient with the spiritual immaturity of others. “Why can’t you be like me, perfect in every way.” It would not be hard to imagine Paul viewing himself as among the spiritually elite, not made of quite the same stuff as ordinary humans and therefore deserving of extraordinary respect and admiration from others.

15. Have you ever become conceited because of some spiritual or moral accomplishment? What are some ways we express our “spiritual superiority” over others?

It is simply an amazing thing that when God is gracious to us and enables us to live a comfortable life or when he enables us to understand and love him we quickly turn it into an opportunity to flaunt our superiority over others. We regularly are amazed at how sinful people are and act as though we are so superior because we don’t do those things anymore. It is easy for those of us who have come to know Christ to act towards those who do not yet know him as if the reason we don’t live that way anymore is because we’re somehow better or more spiritual. When the simple fact is that if there is any goodness in me, any love for God, it is there not because of me, but because of God’s gracious work in me.

16. Who gave Paul the “thorn in the flesh”?

God gave Paul the thorn in the flesh. We know this for two reasons. First the purpose the thorn in the flesh was given was to keep Paul humble. Satan would never have that as a goal for a human being. Satan wants humans to be proud, not humble. Second, Paul asked God to take away the thorn that “was given”. He obviously thought that God had given it to him and God’s response shows that God did give it to him.

Satan also gave the thorn to Paul as it is called a “messenger of Satan”.

17. What purposes were behind the giving of the thorn?

God gave Paul the thorn for good purposes; to keep him from being proud, to prove that his grace was sufficient for Paul (and everyone who believes). Satan’s goal was to torment Paul. His goal was to get Paul to renounce Christ (Matthew 13:20-21). So we see here as we see all over the Bible, in the same action Satan has an evil will and God has a good will. Satan designs the thorn to torment Paul into renouncing Christ. God ordains the thorn to keep Paul from being proud and so becoming his enemy. It isn’t that Satan acted first and then God made the best of a bad situation. This is God’s will for Paul for his good and for God’s glory. Satan becomes God’s messenger boy, yet God is never guilty of doing evil.

18. We don’t know specifically to what the “thorn in the flesh” refers. What do we know about it?

We do know that it is something very painful to Paul. Aside from the metaphor of a thorn stuck in flesh Paul says it torments him. This is the word used to describe the torture that was done to Jesus by the Roman soldiers. Whatever it was, it was very painful. In addition, this is a chronic condition. He has been living with this thorn in the flesh for the past 14 years and God has told him that it is not ever going to be removed. Paul knows that it will be with him until the day he dies.

19. If you were a parent and your 8-year-old daughter came to you with a large thorn stuck in her hand and she was crying because it hurt so badly and she asked you to take it out, would you? Why doesn't God take away this "thorn"? Is it because he does not love Paul?

What God says is this; "I'm not going to take away this pain because I want to give you something better than a pain free life. I want to give you my grace. I want you to experience my power perfectly and that cannot happen to you unless you are weak and dependent. You cannot possess or experience the best thing I can give to you without this pain."

20. What is it that God wants Paul to have that is better than a pain free life on planet earth?

The experience of his grace and power. This grace that is sufficient for us is the knowledge of God in Christ given to us as a gift by the work of the Spirit, through faith. We are so delighted with being loved by God and knowing God that anything that helps us discover more of his sufficiency, the happier we are. God's power that is made perfect in our weakness is his ability to be our happiness when there is nothing else to be happy about. He shows his power by enabling us to be satisfied with him even when all earthly support, comfort and security is taken away. I love how John Piper defines God's love for us from this passage, "God's love is his doing whatever needs to be done, at whatever cost, so that we will see and be satisfied with the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Let me say it again. The love of God is his doing whatever needs to be done, at whatever cost to himself or to us, so that we will see and be satisfied by the love of God in Christ forever and ever."

21. How does Paul feel about God's dealings with him? How does he respond to God's not taking away the thorn in the flesh?

He is delighted with the thorn in the flesh and with all of his sufferings because they expose his weakness and so make him strong in grace and the power of God. NOTE: He is not delighted with the pain, but he is delighted with the weakness that the pain reveals, because it is only when he is weak that he experiences the strength and sufficiency of God. "Weakness" is when all human hope is gone and he has no ability to make himself happy in the circumstances of his life. He is strong then because he is rejoicing not in any worldly security or comfort but in Christ alone. Paul wants, above all else, the power of Christ to rest upon him so anything that causes him to stop trusting in his own power, that strips away his confidence in this world and forces him to depend upon Christ more is good. So he gladly boasts in poverty and persecution and insults and hardships because all these things strip away all hopes that are not centered in Christ.

22. Can you imagine "delighting in" insults and hardships? What would have to happen in your life for this to be the case?

God aims to humble us so that we can be strong in faith by revealing our weakness and by revealing his strength in our weakness.