

When I Am Weak

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The apostle Paul said, “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Paul had just described his translation to heaven, what he had seen, and the “inexpressible” words which he heard. But even the great apostle needed a thorn in his flesh to keep him humble in light of such a great experience. He asked the Lord three times to remove the thorn because he thought such a handicap was a great hinderance to an effective ministry. No! Just the opposite, the Lord explained, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (vs. 9).

By all human standards Paul was one of the strongest Christians who ever lived. He was not only naturally intelligent but as an apostle he displayed “signs and wonders and mighty deeds” (vs. 12). His writing was inspired and “bold” (10:2). His preaching was in “power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much confidence” (1 Thes. 1:5). So why did Paul want to change things? Paul thought that his infirmity in the flesh was a purely human or natural affliction and that without it he would have a more appealing appearance. But God doesn’t deal in divine eugenics. He has made us for His own purpose and if we have infirmities in our flesh, it is something God has chosen to use for His own glory. In fact, we are stronger for having to rely on God.

Some good men believe that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was his numerous persecutions and afflictions (especially described in 11:23-33). Others believe Paul had a physical malady, probably poor eyesight and an unappealing physical appearance (see 10:1 and Gal. 4:15). Either way, and I hold to the latter, Paul prayed that the thorn would be removed so he could be a better minister. As an older man myself, I can identify with both discouragements. Age takes its toll on me and I wish my body could operate as it did when I was younger. My mental capacity is still there (well, mostly) but my bodily presence is weaker. I also feel the impatience and tiring of our culture with older age. So I could pray that the Lord would make my life more appealing to those around me. Rather, I hear Him say, “These are the things that make

you strong. What you think is weakness makes my strength perfect.”

Paul’s reaction to the Lord’s reminder was, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (vs. 9). The word for “most gladly” (*edeōs*) appears five times in the NT and in this chapter again in vs. 15, “I will very gladly spend and be spent for you.” When he realized that his physical infirmities were actually an asset, Paul said he would most gladly “boast” about them rather than ask for their removal.

What does this mean to us as senior saints? Aren’t we supposed to grow older in life? Doesn’t the Bible say that older age is to be honored? Shouldn’t we become more mature and have a closer walk with Christ in our later years? It is not only that we are closer to heaven because we are older, and for that I rejoice, I will “most gladly” accept my older age because it forces me to accept God’s power in my weakness; it enhances godliness in my life as a treasured thing; it highlights my priorities because I am over my wasted years; and it makes walking with God what I really want and not just what I need. My prayers are more fervent; my church life is more enjoyable; my witness is more bold; my thoughts are more of God. When I am older, though it seems I am weaker, I find in many ways that I am stronger.

God forced Paul to admit these priorities 14 years before he wrote 2 Corinthians (vs. 2), that is, before he went on his first missionary journey! But with this new found strength Paul became that great servant of God. Hudson Taylor once said, “When God wants to do His great works He trains somebody to be quiet enough and little enough, then He uses that person.” Oh, that we could come to this understanding when we are young, and not have to wait until our older age forces it upon us! But thank God it does. It makes the time of our sojourning here be in fear, and it lets goodness and mercy follow us for the rest of our lives.