

**Paul – walking in Weakness and Power**  
**#8 in series “Biblical Characters who walked with God”**  
**Text: 2 Cor 12:1-10**

Boasting. Do you ever do it? Do you find yourself boasting about your kids? Your work? Your achievements? Your favourite sporting side?

Boasting. You can tell a lot about a person from their boasting. Including how well they are going to get through life. Whether they are going to go through life underpowered, or with more than enough power to face any difficulty, to overcome any challenge. And that’s what we’re going to be exploring in this – the last sermon in our series of biblical characters who walked with God. We’re continuing with St Paul. Last week Ps David explored with us how Paul walked with passion and purpose. Today we’re going to see how he also walked with weakness and power.

So, boasting. What did St Paul boast about? Well, he could have boasted about his life experiences. Like the one he describes in vs 4 where he *“was caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.”*

How amazing that must have been. To actually have been in heaven. With God. And with the saints of all time. And to see – hear – them praising God in ways that were unspeakable. And to see heaven in all its splendour – so incredible, so magnificent that no human words could do it justice. And he got to see, to experience it all! *“That experience is worth boasting about”* vs 5a, he goes on to say.

And that’s not all he could boast about. Check out his resume. And – over the years as I’ve interviewed people for positions in schools and colleges – I’ve seen some pretty impressive resumes. But none as impressive as Paul’s. Open his up and you’ll find ample evidence of breathtaking vision, amazing courage, and spectacular success. Pioneering churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica and Philippi and, setting up regional churches in the province of Galatia, personally mentoring people like Timothy and Barnabas. How easy, how easy it would have been for him to trumpet his successes, to boast in his strengths. But he doesn’t! Vs 5 continues; *“That experience is worth boasting about, but I’m not going to do it. I will boast only about my weaknesses.”* And in Vs 10 he says; *“That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses.”*

Do you hear that? What Paul actually boasts about? Can I read it again. *“I will boast only about my weaknesses.”*

How can he say that? And I don’t think he’s just saying that – he actually believes it. How come? Because as he walked with God, Paul came to discover this truth of life – that boasting about self leads to pride. And pride is a killer of a strong, fruitful, abundant walk with God.

Let me illustrate it this way. The more a person focuses on or boasts in their own strengths and capabilities and experiences, the less likely they are to see the need to look to others for help and wisdom and strength. And the less open they are to accept any wisdom and help that others might be offering. That’s just the way it is, isn’t it. Pride puts this impenetrable barrier around them. They become the centre of their own universe – impervious to others. And impervious to God.

And hear what I’m not saying. I’m not saying that we’ve got to have this “false humility” where we totally deny our gifts and abilities and capabilities and things like that. That’s not what I’m saying. And it’s not what Paul is saying. People can be amazingly gifted. And resilient. And resourceful. But when compared with God and what he has to offer, we are so baby-like. So weak. So reliant. And as long as pride rules us, we are cutting ourselves off from so much that God offers us. His unlimited strength. His unfathomable wisdom. His illuminating insights. His peace that passes all human understanding. And more. So much more.

And that’s what St Paul came to understand – that boasting in himself would inevitably lead to pride, and pride would lead to under powering. That’s why Paul goes on to say in vs 7; *“So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.”*

We don’t know what that *“thorn in the flesh”* was. There is heaps of speculation: from a speech impediment to a chronic eye problem or malaria or migraines or epilepsy. But we do know for 100% sure why God gave it to him. Twice he says: *“To keep me from becoming proud.”*

And while Paul could later come to boast about his thorn in the flesh, to take pleasure in his weakness, he didn't always. In vs 8 he says; *"Three times I begged the Lord to take it away."*

*"Three times"*. That's a figure of speech Paul is using here. It's not "on 3 separate occasions", but "repeatedly, ongoing, persistently." And he's *"begging"* - he's pleading, imploring - for God to take it away.

What about you? Do you have a *"thorn in the flesh"* too? Something physical, or emotional, even spiritual. That causes you angst? Pain? Embarrassment? That you wish were gone. So that you could operate better. With more efficiency. With greater joy. Greater power?

Most of us have got at least one *"thorn in the flesh"*. I do. Mine is speaking in front of a group of people. Especially a group of people I don't know. I'm bad news beforehand. As anxious as anything. Always have been like that. Not so good for one whose job is to speak in front of crowds of people! And lots of times I've done my begging too – for the Lord to take it away. *"Surely"* – I reasoned to myself and to God – *"surely I'd be able to do a better job, a more effective job for the kingdom if this public speaking anxiety was gone!"*

And maybe you've done your begging to God too. And maybe along with me and with Paul – God has said *"no"*. It's staying. To keep you from getting proud. To keep you humble. To keep you looking to me for supernatural wisdom and power. So that your journey through life could be far more fulfilling, your relationships could be far richer and you - and your kingdom work – could be far more effective."

It puts a whole different perspective on the thorns – the things about you or your life that you wished were different - doesn't it. Instead of seeing them as things that are holding you back, you can start to see them as things that are allowing you to go forward. Instead of seeing them as things to curse, you can start to see them as things to thank God for, as his loving gifts to you. Just as Paul does. *"So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong."* Vs 9-10

*"For when I am weak, then I am strong."* That is one of the most powerful secrets to life that we can learn in the whole bible. That – paradoxically – strength can only come through weakness. That real strength can only come to you when pride in self is banished and humility reigns. Where you are only too aware of your gaps, your shortcomings and you know – if you're going to get through the challenges of life – you know you're going to need God's help. That's when strength comes! That's where God's amazing strength flows in to you. And not just in to you, but through you to others.

Which leads me to the final thing I want to say to you today. Or – more correctly – what God has to say to you today. Because they are his words. His words to St Paul. His words each time Paul begged him to take away that *"thorn in the flesh."* *"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness"* Vs9.

They're not just words spoken by God. That's actually a statement of fact. His promise to you. Something you can bank on.

*"But what about this huge mess that I'm going through right now? There doesn't seem to be a way out?"*

*"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."*

*"Well, what about this physical, this emotional, this spiritual challenge I'm facing? It just leaves me so fragile, so empty."*

*"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."*

*"And then there's the future. I've got no clue where things are going? Except that the road seems dark and with not much hope."*

*"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."*

So, back to boasting. What are you going to boast in? I hope it will be in your weakness, not in your strengths. So that you might be able to walk in weakness and power. And so that this red-letter promise may not just be Paul's experience, but yours too.