

2 Corinthians 12-13

- 1) The implication in this chapter is that the super-apostles are performing signs and wonders and questioning whether Paul's up to their level. Now, clearly nothing miraculous can occur apart from God. So why doesn't God simply not grant miraculous power to the super-apostles? As Jesus said when his disciples complained of an outsider casting out demons in his name, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me" (Mk 9:39). If prayers are being answered, what's the problem?¹
- 2) Jewish authors made use of the "divine passive" to indicate God's action, as in the phrase, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find" (Mt 7:7). What divine passives are there in 2 Cor 12:1-13:4?
- 3) Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (12:7) was an ongoing affliction which helped prevent him from becoming proud. For the past two millennia Christians have speculated that it was an evil spirit (Tertullian); a physical malady (Fee) or recurrent disease (Wright) – say, headaches (Severian of Gabala). Others thought referred to the opponents to his spreading the gospel, like Alexander the Coppersmith (Chrysostom); or insults, attacks and riots he had to face (Theodoret of Cyr). Calvin had the novel theory that Paul's thorn was "that part of the soul which was not regenerated", which Satan was permitted to tempt, to remind Paul of his dependence on God.

For fun: what have you been taught Paul's thorn was? Do you suppose it was much different from some of the maladies of old age?
- 4) Paul's thorn is listed among the "weaknesses" though which God's power is made perfect, along with "insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ" (12:10; see also 1:9). Jesus suffered for the gospel long before Paul. Hebrews 5:8 tells us that "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." What "weaknesses" did Jesus suffer which made him reliant upon God? (Cf. 2 Cor 8:9, Phil 2, Isa 50:4-9, etc.) Did Jesus have a "thorn in the flesh"?
- 5) Do you think the super-apostles were not subject to the same sorts of "weaknesses" (adversity, suffering, etc.) Paul describes, or were they regarding that sort of weakness as a sign of... weakness?

¹ FWIW, 1 Cor 12:10, 28-29, like Rom 15:18-20, implies that miracles were "simply a matter of course" in the Corinthian church (Fee's Big Book, p. 355-356). Furthermore, in 12:12 Paul indicates that signs and wonders performed when the church was founded at least in part validated his authority.

- 6) Paul's revelation that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" brings to mind Gideon's defeat of the Midianites, when God pared down the Israelite force until victory could only be attributed to him:

The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" (Judges 7:2-3)

If this is a good parallel, then our "weaknesses" are those times when we are *unable* to accomplish our goals for the kingdom by our own power and must rely upon God's strength, manifest in prayer, the church, the work of the Spirit, etc.

Where do you find you are most driven to rely upon God, whether in your ministries or your personal life? Where do you see God's power most at work in your life? Are they the same?

- 7) If you never try anything hard in ministry you may minimize your need to rely upon God. On the other hand, if you start two new Bible studies, offer to chair a committee, join council, and quit your job to do street evangelism, God may not choose to make his "strength" your life support. In between these two extremes is the healthy (but still extreme) Christian life where Paul and the apostles lived. Is it fair to say, as a general guideline, that if you don't find yourself having to rely upon God very often you should ask where you do more for the kingdom? (I.e., is the frequency of heart-cries to God a measure of spiritual health and balance?) (And related: Did Paul *pursue* weakness in order to be open to God's power?)
- 8) God gave Paul a revelation of paradise, the third (highest) heaven, bringing to mind the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. It was so real, his senses so alive to the experience, that Paul doesn't even know whether it was a vision or whether he was transported in the flesh. For fourteen years Paul has remembered this experience, keeping it close to his chest. God surely knew it would so empower Paul as to more than balance Paul's "thorn."

God also gave Jesus a (literal) mountain-top experience before sending him south to Jerusalem and his death. Similarly, when they needed the strength to carry on, the first disciples needed only look back on their Easter days with the resurrected Jesus and the first Pentecost.

What mountain-top experiences bring you strength when the road seems long?

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Fun fact: "Jewish visionaries sometimes described their mystical experiences of heaven as being 'caught up'" as Paul does in 12:2. "The Jewish ascent stories sometimes emphasized the danger of the ascent, as in the case of the four rabbis, only one of whom reportedly escaped unscathed." (IVP BBC)