



2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Last time we were looking at how there is a difference between how the world measures success and how that differs from the way we should measure success in the work of God.

Paul had been challenged by false Jewish teachers who measured success in terms of followers they had and money they raised. Unlike Paul they stayed out of trouble and didn't have much compunction about how they obtained followers.

But was that real spiritual success? We find in the end of chapter 11 and beginning of chapter 12 that there are four things Paul measured his success against. They were his "boast". As he emphasises in tonight's reading, it was never his desire to point attention to himself in this way: *I will not boast about myself, except the things that show how weak I am. 6 If I wanted to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be telling the truth. But I will not boast, because I do not want any of you to have a higher opinion of me than you have as a result of what you have seen me do and heard me say.*

Paul was asking them to judge him by what they had seen of his ministry, not of any boasts he made about himself or of his previous exploits. So if he was going to feel obliged to "boast" it would be not of his strength, but how weak he was – how incapable he was to function without the power of God, hence this verse which anchors tonight's sermon: *"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak." I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me.*

In fact he was annoyed with them that he felt forced by the Corinthians' attitude to make the comparison between his successes and the "super apostles" - *I am acting like a fool--but you have made me do it. You are the ones who ought to show your approval of me. For even if I am nothing, I am in no way inferior to those very special "apostles" of yours. 12 The many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you with much patience.* The fact that God had worked through him in power should have been proof enough of his apostleship because the "super-apostles" did not have the power of God and could not do the same. They were all words and no action and the Corinthians should have known that.

This leads me nicely back to my list last week of Paul's measures of success.

- measured in terms of risk and sacrifice – is our faith important enough to lose our lives for?
- measured in terms of effort and commitment
- measured in terms of weakness
- measured in terms of living experience of God.

We did the first three last week so this week we deal with the last one: measured in terms of living experience of God.

The false teachers had their business skills, heavy shepherding, smooth words and the like. Many were also known to have ecstatic or prophetic experiences of God. There was quite a strong line at that time amongst Jews for visions and prophecy, but as we know from the Old Testament, false prophets also outnumbered true prophets many times to one. How did the people know the difference? Scripture gives two tests if someone comes claiming prophetic utterance. I don't have time to go back into them but they are: what is said must have a record of being true or has come to pass, and that what is said must be in accordance with scripture. They were two common-sense measures of prophecy that in a situation people make announcements of what God is saying to them, can be applied rationally.

So you can almost hear the sceptical Corinthians saying to Paul "what about your experience of God then?" So Paul relates his – or doesn't actually. He recalls an event 14 years previously. That places it at the start of his ministry. It's not clear whether this was the Damascus Road experience or when he spent time in

Arabia or whether it happened at some other time. Logically as he just referred to his escape from Damascus, it could be pointing us to that time frame. What is important about this is that this event was formative for Paul although – he didn't know whether it was a vision or whether he was actually there. It was quite a different thing to talk about than the mystical utterances of the “super-apostles”. There are very few people in the whole of scripture who get really close experiences of the glory of God of this nature. Who else? Isaiah, Moses, Peter, James & John, John again in Revelation.

You can almost here the Corinthians saying “what happened? Why haven't you been telling all about your wonderful visit to heaven? Tell us! Now.” He wasn't allowed to: 7 *But to keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud.* 8 *Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away.* 9 *But his answer was: "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak."*

The whole point of the vision was for his benefit, not to be used as a tool to impress – and he would have used it as a weapon to get a following rather than point people to Jesus. That's why he wouldn't even attribute the vision to himself by using the phrase “*I know a certain Christian man who fourteen years ago..*” Unfortunately it also then leaves us with more questions than answers about Paul's vision. What is the “highest heaven” or “third heaven” as Paul puts it. Most commentators suggest he was shown a vision of the very presence of God which as we know is something rarely shown to people in life as Paul says he “*heard things which cannot be put into words, things that human lips may not speak*”. The superlatives went beyond words. And these were words he was never going to speak – God made sure of that.

We all have testimonies. I encourage each of us to speak our story. Never feel uncomfortable that you don't have a dramatic testimony because you can always guarantee that they point people to God and don't bring attention to you.

It's also a great pointer to how we use a dramatic testimony. Some of us have had amazing experiences of God. Make sure God always gets the glory. If you can't do that, you can't use it.

Paul couldn't use his experience of the glory of God because God stopped him from doing so because he wouldn't use it properly. We have no idea what his “thorn in the flesh was”. Here's what he says: *I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud.* The GNB calls it a physical ailment which may be a bit forward. Other translations use the more enigmatic “thorn in the flesh” which is nearer the mark. Arguments have been put forth in favour of migraines, epilepsy, convulsions, poor eyesight, malaria, a speech impediment, rheumatism, fever, and even leprosy. Whatever it was, it was an unpleasant ailment which the Corinthians would have been all too aware of what he suffered from.

Why does Paul call this ailment “Satan's messenger (or angel of Satan)?” It's unclear whether this was an attack by Satan that had been allowed on Paul which left him with this ailment (as had happened to Job) or whether it was there as a reminder that Satan is the accuser of the brethren so he should never be proud. It was there to remind him of his weakness as a human being – even the great Paul was susceptible to the attack of Satan.

Of course, he didn't want it and asked for it to be removed three times. All he got was the famous answer: *"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak."* So Paul had a vision and he couldn't boast about it. The proof was in an ailment he had which was clearly obvious to them he suffered from and had probably been wondering why he suffered from it.

How would I know that? Look to verse 12 *12 The many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you with much patience.* What miracles? Healing miracles. How come an apostle was doing healing miracles when he clearly had one himself? It rather reminds me of the church notice that said “*tonight's Healing Meeting is cancelled due to the Minister's ill-health*”.

To conclude: the last three sermons have been about what made Paul's ministry successful. Paul's critics were false preachers who boasted about their strength – their money, their exploits, their supposed mystic utterances. The Corinthians were taken in by the whole thing. He was forced to use their method of “boasting” to commend his ministry. He was reluctant to do this: *I am acting like a fool--but you have made me do it.*

But actually all he could boast was weakness. This is what one commentator, William Loader says: *So Paul has a weak spot. He is fallible! He bursts his own balloon. Whatever he might have been referring to in*

reality, to say that he has a constant weakness ('an angel of Satan') is like blotching his CV. Why? Because "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak." So Paul rejoices in that by saying I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (verse 10)

The irony was that although he could not boast of his own living experience of God, the Corinthians had already experienced the power of God through his ministry: *The many miracles and wonders that prove that I am an apostle were performed among you with much patience.* That should have been enough for them.

So what I'll leave you with this evening is this. We have been reminded so much recently of our frailties as individuals and as a fellowship. There are some that see this as a sign of the fellowship not being "alive" and being spiritually weak. There is a huge streak of prosperity ministry around today. Money, signs and wonders, lively worship, are all seen as signs of spiritual health? Christians seek after them. But where do we see the power of God most revealed? When we must absolutely depend on it most. That was Paul's experience and that is why it was his boast. The very thing that people saw as negative was his very strength.

David Glendinning: *Paul was obliged to boast of his weaknesses, not because weakness itself was glorious, but because it was the arena in which Christ's power was most clearly displayed. "Therefore," Paul says, "I delight in sickness, insult, pressing needs, persecution, and distress." His final summation is without question one of the most quotable quotes in the Bible: "When I am weak (in myself), then I am strong (in the Lord)!"*

Great things happen when the people of God rely totally on Him. At this time when we feel called by God to move forward in extending His kingdom, but are concerned about our own weakness in being able to do that then: *"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak."*

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