

The Gains in Our Losses

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

¹It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. ³And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. ⁵On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

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Last week at the car show one of the cars was a big SUV with large wheels and tires. The hood was open and on a piece of paper was written the quarter mile time and speed. As my son Christopher said, no there was boasting about car mileage.

Many of us enjoy telling the stories of our first car. Mine was a 69 Chevelle. It had a 350 hp v-8 and produced some 300 horsepower which was a lot for a 16 year old kid. My parents realized that and I sold the car two months after I bought it. It very well may be that I'm here today because of that one very hard decision of my parents to make me sell my dream car. I lament it to this day.

One of the best car stories I ever heard was shared by a son as he told me about his recently diseased father, a very quiet man. He had pestered his father about a car for months until finally he gave in. the adult son told me that his father bought him a 1950 Ford Crown Victoria...and had it towed into the back yard. That's right, the father bought the son a car that didn't run.

You might think it's a story about a father not giving in to a son, or outsmarting the boy, but its not. They worked on the car together over the summer until it ran in the fall.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was caught in what appeared to be a no-win game of boasting; only these were not car stories (the letter was written about A.D. 50) they were stories of the spiritual life. Some of the leaders in the Corinthian Church were “super apostles” who, as Paul said, commended themselves; they bolstered their standing among the Corinthian Christians by telling stories (boasting!) about their spiritual life. We don't have any quotes, but it appears to have been stories of what God was doing in their lives. And the stories were told to diminish Paul's authority with the Christian church he has established in Corinth.

Paul shows brilliance here, I believe, because he wrestles with the no win situation: he could boast, but the Gospel is not about him, it is about what God had done and is doing in Jesus. But his opponents had so carried the day with their stories, that if Paul didn't boast, people might dismiss him as a true Christian missionary and abandon the gospel that he had preached to them.

So what did he do? He told a story about a man he knew who had had a great spiritual experience. In reading the story, you eventually catch on that Paul is telling a story about himself and the spiritual meeting that God had with him. (brilliance, part 1)

But then Paul changes the direction of the argument (brilliance, part 2); he goes on to boast about a weakness, a thorn in the flesh. Paul described it metaphorically: something outside of Paul wounded Paul and caused him persistent pain for which he sought relief from God. Paul also described his suffering as caused by a messenger from Satan. There are different theories about what this thorn may have been (a physical ailment or handicap that Paul had, or the relentless opposition and persecution that Paul experienced in his ministry are just two theories). Someone said, if the exact nature of Paul's thorn were known, we probably would call similar problems "Paul's pain" or "the Pauline Syndrome". For us, the exact diagnosis of Paul's thorn remains hidden to us.

Evidently, everyone who knew Paul knew what he was talking about. The surprise for them came when Paul told them that this "messenger from Satan also carried a message from God": "my grace is sufficient for you." (For those of you who were raised with a red letter edition of the Bible with the words of Jesus highlighted by red print, these words are in red: "my grace is sufficient for you.")

This was one of Paul's unanswered prayers – well, unanswered in the way that Paul had prayed it, but answered by God clearly – my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Where have we heard that before? ...in the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, not on a stallion, but on a donkey, and we hear of it with the cross where Jesus was crucified and died. God's power shows up in times of weakness.

And what does it mean? ...Paul wrote, "when I am weak, then I am strong".¹ He went on – as preachers are wont to do – "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."²

Weakness makes us feel vulnerable and powerless. Who welcomes their loss of independence? From a human point of view, weakness is an experience to be denied, avoided and vanquished, but from a Christian perspective?

Strength has a way of turning us in on ourselves. Weaknesses – if we allow them! - open us to God at work in us and through us.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:10

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One Christian tells the story of struggling with regret. “I can turn minor matters into major regrets,”³ he writes. His thorn in his psyche helps him to be humble and it forces him to rely on Christ to help him order his life with care.

What does all of this mean?

Some heaven can come from some of the hell of our lives – Paul was clear that his thorn in his flesh was a messenger from Satan, but it also came with a message from God. We wrestle with the mystery of our sufferings that they can come from hell, but bear with them a bit of heaven.

Paul had discovered what generations of Christians have learned: in addition to the maturity that comes through our struggles, anything that

draws us close to God
keeps us close
helps us grow in our character

is a real gift.

God’s grace comes to us and is sufficient for our physical weariness: John Wesley rode 60-70 miles a day, traveled some 4,500 miles a year, preached some 42,000 sermons in his lifetime. He wrote in his journal “I am a wonder to myself. I am never tired, either with preaching, writing or traveling.”⁴

God’s grace is sufficient for physical pain. William Barclay writes of a man who visited a young woman who was dying with an incurable disease and took with him a book of encouragement. She was gracious but said that she already knew of the book. “Have you read it,” the man asked? She answered, “I wrote it.”⁵

Paul himself suffered greatly throughout his ministry and yet he persevered and could even write, “love is patient, love is kind”.

We are right to pray “God remove this from me” but when our “thorns” remain, we can understand that God will use them for our good and for others’ good. Rather than resent our “thorns” we can discover in them the motivation to turn to God, the desire to stay close to God and allow God’s good work to continue in us and through us.

Remember: there are gains in your losses.

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³ J. Ellsworth Kalas, Life from the Upside: Seeing God at Work in the World, Dimensions Books, Nashville, 2004, p. 104

⁴ William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, Revised Edition, 1975, p. 259

⁵ IBID