

Women's Bible Study
Shared Lives: Shared Strength in Christ
2 Corinthians 11:16--12:10
April 23, 2008
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What a delight it is to see all your smiling faces!! I have really missed you these past 3 months. We have kept up on the news from Rochester and all the snow and cold you've experienced. I commend you for your hearty endurance of this long winter!!! By contrast, our winter in Green Valley, AZ was somewhat warmer than usual. As you can see by the screen, here are my flower boxes full of pansies and petunias. I've had my first spring planting and now I'm ready for spring in MN to get out in our yards and begin planting here.

I also want to thank you for all the beautiful cards and notes of encouragement that you sent to me when my mother passed away in February. It was so special to hear from you and I felt like each card was a "personal hug" and blessed my heart.

Recently we watched the Master's Golf Tournament in Augusta, GA. It is THE tournament of the year. Bob loves to watch the golfers and the game, but I watch to look at all the beautiful flowers. Almost every hole has azaleas and other flowers amongst lush greenery. I find all that green so energizing, especially in MN when our spring is slow in arriving.

The winner this year was Trevor Immelman from South Africa. His story of his struggles and the love and sacrifices of his parents reminded me in a way of the love Paul had for the Corinthians. Trevor showed a real gift in the area of golf at an early age. As he progressed in golf his parents were willing to make great sacrifices in order for him to play in the right tournaments. They even moved from South Africa to the US so he could play here for more opportunities, and took out second mortgages to enable him further. It was such a joy to see them gathered around him when he won---their sacrifices had paid off.

As we pick up our study of 2 Corinthians 11 where Jann left off last week Paul is like a loving parent concerned for his children and anguishing over their willingness to listen and believe the false teaching of the Judaizers. He is warning them to be discerning in recognizing the truth. In our lesson today we will see Paul's great sacrifices for Christ to make these truths known.

SIGHTING DECEPTIVE TEACHING ----2 Corinthians 11:16-22

I'm dividing this second half of chapter 11 into two parts---Paul first discusses the deceptive boasting of the Judaizers and then his sufferings for Christ. What concerned him the most and caused him the greatest heartache was the burden for the church. His trials and sufferings were external----this concern was internal, constant and always on his mind.

2 Corinthians 11:16-21

"I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast, You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise ! In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that !

In the whole passage for today's lesson 2 Corinthians 11:16—12:10 the word boast or boasting is mentioned 12 times in 27 verses. The word means to praise oneself or brag about something one has done. We can imagine how hard it must have been for Paul to have to stoop to this level to prove his credibility as a true apostle.

In the beginning of this chapter Paul apologizes for his boasting, and then he repeats this sentiment in verses 16 and 17. Paul did not like boasting about himself because it is the opposite of humility and being Christ-like. He had no trouble boasting about Christ and telling of His sufferings. (2 Cor 10:17 "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord").

When Paul used his experiences as examples in boasting to convince the Corinthians (vs 17), he said he was being very unlike the Lord in meekness and gentleness, as you studied earlier in chapter 10:1 It was because of the immature and unspiritual attitude of the Corinthians that Paul was forced to use this method of argument. Since they persisted in looking at things from the world's point of view, he would accommodate himself to their perspective. He would play "their game" on their level----much like Proverbs 26:5

Proverbs 26:5 "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."

As Jann mentioned last week, the point in all of Paul's boasting was "to direct his listeners to an awesome God". In verse 20, Paul points out the various ways the Judaizers were taking advantage of the Corinthians in their teaching and actions.

There was :

- ◆ Enslavement---teaching a message of legalism that was opposite of the Gospel of grace.
- ◆ Exploiting the Corinthians----preying on their relationship to receive financial support.
- ◆ Exalting themselves---(pushed themselves forward) they loved to be honored and treated as great leaders instead of exalting Jesus Christ.
- ◆ Embarrassing the Corinthians---(slaps you in the face) verbally, or possibly physically, attacking them in public.

(In the first century, it was common for religious authorities to slap the face of a person who blasphemed. Acts 23:2--Apparently these false teachers had concentrated their power in Corinth, so much so that they had the audacity to slap those who opposed them.)

Life Application Bible Commentary---1 & 2 Corinthians. Pg.440

Paul in speaking this way is encouraging the Corinthians to come to their senses and realize they had acted foolishly in accepting these false teachers as apostles. In verse 21, he says that he and his company were “too weak for that”. They could not participate in such deceptive activities.

Paul goes on in verses 21b-22 to continue to reluctantly “boast” in comparing his qualifications to those of the Judaizers.

“What anyone else dares to boast about ----I am speaking as a fool---I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.”

Paul’s credentials were far above those of who dared to criticize him. He had a strong Jewish heritage, was trained by a highly respected Pharisee of that day, Gammaliel, and was himself an expert in the Hebrew laws and Scriptures. Paul goes on to expose these false teachers by listing all the trials he suffered for Christ. Could his opponents who boasted in achievements, accomplishments, and credentials produce an even more extensive list of suffering and persecution for Christ’s name? Were they willing to take up their crosses daily for Christ (Matt 10:38)?

Paul so loved these Corinthians and all the churches that he was shepherding. Like a father, he was willing to make extreme sacrifices so he could warn, protect, and keep them growing in Christ. May each of us be grateful for the sacrifices others have made so that we might be spiritually blessed.

**SHARING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL REQUIRES
OBEDIENCE AND SACRIFICE.**

Personal Application: As you consider the people in your sphere of influence---family, friends, neighbors, and fellow-workers what sacrifices would you be willing to make to be a shepherd to them, to set aside time from your busy schedule to answer their questions from the Scriptures? Like Paul, would you be willing to be ridiculed and look foolish in the eyes of the world for Christ's sake, so they would know the truths of the gospel?

John's declaration in 3 John 8 is one Paul and all of us who have "spiritual children" would desire.

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in truth."

Now let's look at Paul's suffering and service for Christ.

SUFFERING AND SERVICE FOR CHRIST----2 Corinthians 11:23-29

"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

As you read this portion of Scripture enumerating Paul's suffering and trials I think we find it hard to equate any suffering we may experience to his. From this list it would seem Paul was always in danger of some sort. God did not shield him from risky situations, but the Lord was always with him. He was able to endure because his strength was in the Lord.

Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

Paul knew from the beginning of his ministry that he would suffer for Jesus' sake. In Acts 9:15-16 "The Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'" Paul who had caused others to suffer for their faith, himself had to suffer for his faith.

Servant Heart---Throughout this passage we see Paul's servant heart. He is willing to do whatever the Lord requires of him---even suffering.

Philippians 1:21 "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Philippians 3:8 & 10 " I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings."

Boasting in weakness----Paul finishes this passage by explaining that if he must continue in boasting, he would boast about his weakness. He shares the humbling experience of having to escape from the authorities by being lowered through a window in the wall hidden in a basket. In view of Paul's strong personality and willingness to confront any situation, having to flee in this way would seem cowardly to him.

2 Corinthians 11:30-33

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, Knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands."

All of Paul's experiences of suffering, trials and ridicule left its mark on him strengthening and building his character and demonstrating his faith. Suffering in our lives can produce different outcomes. We can be overwhelmed and turn away from God or we can turn to the Lord and use our suffering for His glory.

GOD USES SUFFERING TO DRAW US TO HIMSELF

Personal Application: How have you responded to suffering in your life?

Have you been able to give it to the Lord and allowed Him to use it for His glory? How has your suffering drawn you closer to the Lord?

Have you been strengthened and built up in your faith in the process?

SUFFERING PRODUCES PERSEVERANCE, CHARACTER, AND HOPE THROUGH THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. Romans 5:3

SPECIAL REVELATION ---2 Corinthians 12:1-6

"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ

who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know---God knows. And I know that this man---whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows---was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.”

As Paul continues in this passage that it was necessary that he go on “boasting”, though it was not profitable. The Greeks believed that those who truly represented the gods would experience mystical visions and these false apostles had no doubt claimed visions and revelations of their own. The Corinthians had been swept away by their phony claims so Paul found it necessary (even though he was reluctant) to relate his own genuine vision. He used this experience here only to invalidate the claims of his opponents.

Paul had received many visions in his life----six of them are recorded in Acts. He also received the gospel he preached by revelation (Gal 1:11-12). This vision he was about to describe was the most amazing of all of them. He relates this revelation very humbly by writing it in the third person----“I know a man in Christ”. By verse 7 it is evident that this man was Paul himself.

This event happened 14 years earlier before the writing of 2 Corinthians, which was late in A.D. 55 or early A.D. 56, sometime between his return from Tarsus to Jerusalem and his commissioning by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3). Not much is known about this period of Paul’s life and ministry. “God may have granted him this personal experience to steel him against the suffering he would experience on his missionary journeys. Having been given a glimpse of the heaven that awaited him, he could face the most relentless and severe suffering that dogged every day of his life.”

MacArthur New Testament Commentary; John MacArthur; 2 Corinthians; pg 395.

It appears that Paul had never shared this experience before. It was very special and a gift from the Lord and as he says, much of it was “inexpressible”. This experience was so wonderful Paul wasn’t quite sure whether God had taken him bodily to heaven, or whether his spirit had left his body. Verse 2 and 4 speak of being “caught up to the third heaven or to paradise”---. According to the footnote in the NIV study Bible, “The third heaven designates a place beyond the immediate heaven of the earth’s atmosphere and beyond the further heaven of outer space and its constellations into the presence of God himself. Paradise is synonymous

with the third heaven, where believers who have died are even now 'at home with the Lord' (2 Cor 5:8).

Paul gave no detailed description of what he saw, he only mentioned what he heard---"inexpressible words, that man is not permitted to tell". What he heard was most likely in words and language completely different from anything on earth. He could understand these divine secrets but there were no human words to translate them. Like so often when someone who knows another language tries to translate a word into English and will have difficulty getting the same meaning that they want to express.

No doubt this vision of meeting the Lord in heaven and seeing His glory was a sustaining power in Paul's life and ministry. No matter what happened to him or where he was ----in prison, shipwrecked at sea, in danger and suffering----he knew that God was with him and that all was well.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF TO STRENGTHEN US FOR HIS GLORY

Personal Application Has the Lord ever given you a revelation or insight through the Scriptures or a particular experience that encouraged your faith and possibly prepared you for a future event?

A number of years ago the Lord gave me a couple of experiences that were "supernatural" in nature. One was an eye-opening spiritual insight into my heart attitude and the other was the revelation of two Scriptures that were the call of leadership in ministry for my life. Both of these experiences were used by the Lord to encourage me and prepare me for a year of changes, trials, difficulties, and health issues involving our family and extended family.

The Lord has a plan for each of our lives. He goes before us and prepares the way because He knows just what we need and when we will need it. Whatever you are going through today trust Him to be your "Jehovah Jireh" ----the Lord who provides.

Philippians 4:19 "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

I'm sure many of you here today have had some interesting experiences of God using His Word to speak to your heart to strengthen you in the Lord and give you encouragement. I hope you are jotting these down in a journal or on a page you can slip into your Bible so that you will

have them handy to refer to when you face difficulties and discouragement in the future.

Paul finishes off this section by drawing attention away from his vision to his weaknesses so that no one would “think more highly of him than what they could actually see in his life and his message.” In other words, he wanted the Corinthians and all those who heard him to judge his message on its own merits and on the way in which the Holy Spirit was using the message to transform people’s lives (I Corinthians 2:3-4 “I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”) Paul proceeds in this passage to tell about the “thorn in the flesh” given him to keep him from becoming proud and conceited in verse 7 and the sufficiency of God’s grace in verse 9.

SUFFICIENCY OF GOD’S GRACE----2 Corinthians 12:7-10

“To keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

God had given Paul the privilege of this heavenly vision----and as we would describe it in modern day terms---“it was out of this world”! Knowing that this experience had the potential to ruin his ministry, God in His goodness permitted Satan to buffet Paul in order to keep him from becoming proud. Other places in Scripture we see God allowing Satan to work in people’s lives----for instance in Job 1 -2. God is sovereign over all creation and will use even the forces of the kingdom of darkness to accomplish His righteous purposes.

Paul refers to “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” given to torment him. There has been much speculation by commentators as to what this affliction was. Some believe it had to do with his eyes because of the blinding light at his conversion, while others think it might have been recurring bouts with malaria causing excruciating headaches. The very fact that Paul did not describe or define this affliction is a blessing to all believers. If he had defined it, anyone not having that affliction could easily dismiss Paul’s experience as remote from their own and not go on to

experience that human weaknesses (physical, emotional, and spiritual) and divine grace go hand in hand. Therefore, Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is by its very lack of definition----a type of every Christian's "thorn in the flesh"----not with regard to external suffering but by its spiritual significance.

Paul says he pleaded with the Lord three times to take away this thorn---much as the Lord Himself prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane to His Father, "take this cup to from me". God answered Paul and said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul prayed that God would remove his pain and substitute health and deliverance. Instead God was going to transform this affliction through His grace for His glory.

When Paul prayed about this problem, God gave him a deeper insight to show him that this "thorn in the flesh" was really a gift. When Paul accepted his affliction as a gift from God, this made it possible for God's grace to work in his life. God did not remove the thorn, but promised that His grace would be more than enough to sustain Paul, and his weakness would be transformed into strength.

Paul says, "therefore I will boast more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me." As one commentator said, "The word "rest" means "to spread a tent over". Paul saw his body as a frail tent (2 Cor 5:1), but the glory of God had come into that tent and transformed it into a holy tabernacle. Paul was able to take pleasure in these trials and problems because he knew he was suffering for Christ's sake and that he was glorifying God by the way he accepted and handled the difficult experiences of life." BE ENCOURAGED; Warren W. Wiersbe; pp 140-141.

Paul's strength was not in himself but in Christ ----through God's grace. One of my favorite verses when I am feeling weak is Isaiah 40:31 "Those who hope (trust in) the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not faint."

The word "renew" means to **EXCHANGE**. I can exchange my weakness for God's strength and empowering for whatever I'm going through. The verb is like that in changing clothes---to take off weakness and put on Christ's strength. I'm sure all of you have your favorite verses on "strength in the Lord" and how you have experienced it.

In the questions you were asked to name some instances when you experienced God's grace in a unique way in discouragement, trials, pain, or suffering. I wish I could be in each of your small groups and hear the many ways God proved the "sufficiency of His grace" in your situation. I'd like to

share with you my experience of His grace when my mother died this past February. It's always hard to lose a loved one, especially a parent. I mentioned to you in last fall's lecture that my mother, Eunice, was 98 years old, had been a widow over 30 years and was in a nursing home in Nebraska. We had a very nice visit with her the first of January on our way to Arizona. Three weeks later she suffered a stroke. In our Arizona Women's Bible Study a few days later, we were studying about Moses and the Tabernacle. In the teaching lecture the verses we were reading were Exodus 33:14-18, where God is speaking to Moses and answering his questions. The Lord used those verses to speak to my heart and prepare me for the days ahead. Verse 14 says, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Verse 17, "And the Lord said to Moses I will do the very thing you have asked because you have found favor, and I know you by name."

As I read those verses tears came to my eyes and I knew God was speaking to me, telling me that His very Presence would be with me moment by moment, giving me rest, and that all the thoughts and prayers in my heart that had not yet even been formulated into words, He would answer and take care of, because He knew me by name. I was experiencing God's grace in a new and very real way. His words so encouraged me and prepared me for my mother's death two days later, and for making arrangements to go back to Nebraska between snowstorms.

**GOD USES OUR WEAKNESS, SUFFERING,
AND TRIALS TO DISPLAY HIS GRACE.**

Personal Application How is God displaying His grace in your life today? Are you finding His grace sufficient?

I'm sure a great number of you here today are experiencing trials and difficulties of some kind ----health issues, family problems (children, spouses, or extended family), financial concerns, discouragement and others. Whatever you are going through----remember that God said. "My grace is sufficient"--- for any need great or small. I think you will find the words of this old hymn says it all.

HE GIVETH MORE GRACE

Words by Annie J. Flint (1866-1932) Public Domain
from James 4:6 "He giveth us more grace."

He giveth more grace when the burden grows greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
to multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance;
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Chorus:

His love has no limit; His grace has no measure;
His power has no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus.
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

Discussion Questions for Shared Strength

1. Paul was willing to make great sacrifices to spread the Gospel, to shepherd and counsel believers. As you reflect on your life, who has made sacrifices so that you might be spiritually blessed?
2. What are some negative and positive responses to suffering? How can God's power be perfected in our weakness, and how does this bring Him glory?
3. In suffering, what benefits do believers receive as they look to the Lord? Share some of your favorite verses of "strength in the Lord".
4. God encouraged Paul with the promise, "My grace is sufficient". Can you name some instances when you experienced God's "sufficient grace" in a unique way in discouragement, trials, pain, or suffering?

Intensive Study Questions for Shared Strength

1. In his love for the Corinthian church Paul points out (vs 20) ways that the Judaizers were taking advantage of them. Compare Paul's ministry with theirs.
2. Paul was willing to make great sacrifices to spread the Gospel, to shepherd and counsel the believers. What kind of sacrifices might God be calling you to make to shepherd or mentor someone?
3. Why did Paul tell the Corinthians of his heavenly vision? Why do you think he told it in the third person? How might this vision have affected his life and ministry?
4. Why was Paul given a "thorn in the flesh"? What similarities do you see in the experiences of Paul and Job?
5. What are some positive and negative responses of suffering?
6. In the suffering of believers, what benefits do they receive as they look to the Lord? List some Scripture references.
7. How can God's power be perfected in weakness? Share some of your favorite verses on "strength in the Lord".
8. Name some instances when you experienced God's grace in a unique way in discouragement, trials, pain, or suffering.

WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY
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