

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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By David Reed

Today is Ian's 17th Birthday. If you talk to me about my sons you will find I am a proud Dad. Very proud and happy. I love my boys. It is just hard to believe at our very young age, we have a 17 year old. Happy Birthday Ian.

Later today we'll be thinking about birthday gifts. I'd like to share one with you! It's a gift God gives to many, if not all, believers. Have you ever received a gift you were not sure what to do with? Surprise! Likewise, in the beginning, this gift might not be what one considers a blessing. It is a transforming gift that explains much of why experiencing an intimate relationship with Jesus is not always, or even often, found when living is careless, smooth and easy.

In her book *Tramp for the Lord*, Corrie ten Boom tells the story of an old woman she met in Russia in the time of the Communist persecution of Christians during the Cold War:

The old woman was lying on a small sofa propped up by pillows. Her body was bent and twisted almost beyond recognition by the dread disease of multiple sclerosis. Her aged husband spent all his time caring for her since she was unable to move off the sofa ... The only part of her body she could control was her right hand. And with the index finger of that hand she had for many years glorified God by typing on a vintage typewriter beside her. All day and far into the night, she would type. She translated Christian books into Russian. Always using just that one finger—peck ... peck ... peck—she typed out the pages. Portions of the Bible, the books of Billy Graham ... and Corrie ten Boom ...

"Not only does she translate books," her husband said as he hovered close by during our conversation, "but she prays for these [people] every day while she types. Sometimes it takes a long time for her finger to hit the key, or for her to get the paper in the machine, but all the time she's praying for those whose books she's working on."

I looked at her wasted form on the sofa, her head pulled down and her feet curled under her body. "Oh Lord, why don't you heal her?" I cried inwardly.

Her husband, sensing my anguish of soul, gave the answer. "God has a purpose in her sickness. Every other Christian in the city is watched by the secret police. But because she has been sick so long, no one ever looks in on her. They leave us alone and she is the only person in all the city who can type quietly undetected by the police."

One day Corrie received a letter from that lady's husband that described the day she had gone home to be with the Lord. The husband explained that the woman had worked until midnight that very night of her death, typing with one finger to the glory of God.

Pastor Hershael York said: **“Has it ever occurred to you that the very thing you most want removed from your life might be the very thing God is using for his glory?”**

That was certainly the case in the life of the apostle Paul. What he tells us in 2 Corinthians 12 is that every believer should glory in his weaknesses far more than in his strengths, because it is in our weaknesses that Christ is most clearly revealed”. (The Strangest Gift: *It is in our weaknesses that Christ is most clearly revealed.* Hershael York. Preachingtoday.com)

Let's look at the last part of the passage again:

7 Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the **gift** of a handicap, [a thorn in my side] to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! **8** At first I didn't think of it as a **gift**, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, **9** and then he told me, My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the **gift**. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. **10** Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size - abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

The truth is we do not know what Paul's handicap or thorn in the side was. Many have speculated about malaria, eye-trouble, epilepsy, insomnia, migraine or sick-headache, etc , but it doesn't matter. What Paul said, and the truth of his experience for all followers of Jesus is this: first, this handicap came to be a gift from God that humbled Paul, and second, this weakness allowed God to have a stronger, clearer, more glorified place in Paul's life.

Finding God's strength where we are weak is part of the Christian life that distinguishes us from the world.

We have been watching The Truth Project on Wednesday nights. The author, Dr Tackett, shows how Biblical truths are always countered in the world with a lie. **The world tells us that to be whole we must be successful, able, strong, competent, confident, healthy, invulnerable, secure, on top, in control, untouchable, without debilitating weakness. This leads to complete personal sufficiency, and to God-less living.** Let's face it, dying to self so Christ would reign is not found in mainstream culture. Death is the opposite of the strength of man. We fail, fall, are often insecure, lack confidence, get sick, and have accidents. The Biblical TRUTH for followers of Jesus is the opposite of the world's reality. Our "Success" is defined by a Truth that does not follow the world's pattern. Success is allowing our weakness to become God's places of strength. For that to happen

we must deny ourselves, die to self and give Christ our lives as living sacrifices. Such an act allows the experiences of life to drive us deeper into God's grace.

Romans 12:1-2

1 So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. **2** Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

In these moments of truth there is always more than one possible response. Did you notice that Paul says his weakness, or handicap, or some versions say thorn was given to him by God AND he also calls it a messenger of Satan? It seems strange that it can be both. One event can be both truth and lie . . . it all depends on our perspective. **The event can be used by God to strengthen our faith and to reveal his power through us, or, it can be used by Satan to tempt us into believing a lie and to divert our hearts from God.** In this case the lie is that God is distant, uncaring and cruel so we must become strong and sufficient in ourselves.

Paul says clearly that at first his struggle was something he did not understand and he fought against it. He asked God to take it away. We can always choose ourselves and a lie rather than submitting to God's invitation to deeper intimacy. We can always say, "How can a loving God leave me to suffer or struggle this way?" Satan always wants to bring us down in any way that will damage our relationship with God. Satan will always challenge anything God has said is truth. The answer and the way to knowing God deeper is to submit, to find out what God is doing in allowing the struggle, and let Grace flow in. God promises us that we will become stronger as we submit.

Hershael York's question highlights what is at the core of this truth. **"Has it ever occurred to you that the very thing you most want removed from your life might be the very thing God is using for his glory?"**

While Paul's handicap is generally thought of as something physical we need not limit what God might use as a humbling agent. It might be a relationship – a person, maybe a job, an illness, a physical condition, a past experience, an emotional state, the consequences of a decision...

So what's bugging you? What has come along and is limiting your relationship with God? What do you feel is limiting your ability to serve God most effectively? Can you now begin to recognize this in your life? Is there a struggle that seems stronger than you are? And thus a choice is presented: a choice to go deeper into believing God and submitting

more of your heart and life to him, or a choice to believe a lie, stubbornly turn away and stand on your own strength.

Paul figured out something that a lot of Christians never understand: **you will learn a whole lot more about living for God through the struggles of life than in being swept to the heights of heaven.** Fourteen years ago he had an incredible experience where he actually went to heaven. Some think it was after he had been stoned and left for dead...that he really was dead but God sent him back from heaven. Maybe during one of the 5 times he was whipped with the 40 minus 1 lashes...40 lashes is a death penalty. Some say during one of those times God took his mind away and showed him heaven. Whatever it was something happened sometime afterward to bring him back to earth. He felt it got in the way of his ministry and for Paul, became greater than his strengths. Three times he asked God: "Lord, please get rid of this thing that reduces me. It makes me far less effective. If only I could get rid of this I could..."

Even though Paul was a man of great faith and had absolute conviction of God's power and ability to take this thing away, God said, "No."

Wouldn't you like to see one of these healers on TV put their hands on somebody and say, "Just a minute; God says you need this, you need to stay sick, you need this struggle to work out how to love this person, this job will lead you into greater dependence on your father, your emotional struggle because of your childhood is what God is using to make you strong." And in every one of our personal handicaps God is working out his glory

Here is arguably the greatest servant of the Lord Jesus who ever lived, and he's got some malady about which God says: I want you to keep it. I've *given* that to you. Rodolfo says, "God is never wrong" but we so often want to think *God doesn't have it right*. We want to get rid of the struggle, believing then that living for God will be better. To which God says instead..."Let me come into it, make you stronger, and I will be glorified in and through you because of it."

God's gift that keeps on giving is first counter to the world's wisdom and thinking. Second, it is given to open a deeper intimacy with God, and a greater dependency on God.

Finally, God intends our struggle to lead to his own glory, not ours.

Isaiah 43:7 and 42:8 we read **7** Bring to me all the people who are mine, **whom I made for my glory**, whom I formed and made." "I am the Lord. That is my name. **I will not give my glory to another**; I will not let idols take the praise that should be mine.

We are made for God's glory and God won't share that purpose. Not with us or any other. It should make us have greater confidence and trust in God! God won't yield his glory in us to anyone or anything.

We find a pattern in Paul's life that many of us follow. When events take place in life we often respond with self pride. So God intervenes with a controlling reminder; he allows a handicap, thorn, a stake in the flesh, that brings around a compliant response. It isn't a punishment as much as an invitation. Paul submitted to what God was doing. When that happens we experience intimacy with God and God receives the glory for what God is and has been doing—which is what he was after all along.

God responds by saying, "No, I'm not going to remove that struggle, but you will find that my grace is sufficient." When Paul understood that his own strength was perfected in weakness his attitude changed.

My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the *gift*. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. **10** Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size - abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

Paul realized that the very thing that had so troubled him was the thing that God used to move him into intimacy with Christ. Such intimacy creates strength not from dependency on ourselves but is the strength of Christ in us. If the instrument was weak, the power which is seen must have not been its power, but that of Christ. Jesus said apart from me you can do nothing, Paul realized that IN Christ all things are possible. Our weakness brings us into connection with the source of real truth, real strength in the living, present, active energy of Christ.

Through the struggles that God allows we are driven away from the world and deeper into Jesus, deeper into weakness, deeper into intimacy, deeper into a real faith, and the source of real strength. What Satan wants to use to bring us down is exactly what God uses to humble and strengthen us. What we hope to be over in our lives may be the very thing God is using for his greatest glory in you right now. If you want to see this at work, ask God to show you.

Romans 5:1-11; 1 Peter 13-9, 13-21