

God's Grace in Our Weakness

DAVE BAST

Have you ever prayed about a problem you were having, asking God to give you a solution? Have you ever prayed for healing from a serious illness, either for yourself or for a loved one? Of course you have. And did God answer your prayers in the way you were hoping? He didn't? How did you react to that? That is exactly the experience Paul describes toward the end of his letter of II Corinthians, and the way he reacted to disappointment in prayer can speak volumes to us about the life of faith. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and today we are wrapping up a series that we have done. This is the sixth program on Paul's second letter, I should say, to the Corinthians. Today we are going to come to a beautiful passage near the end, in Chapter 12.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And all of this in II Corinthians is set against a rather painful backdrop for the Apostle Paul. At some point after he left Corinth... and we are going to talk a little bit about some other visits he had... but people came in who badmouthed Paul. They criticized Paul; they called him a little crazy; they called him ineffective; they criticized his preaching as being not very full of pizzazz; they called him shady, underhanded, playing emotional games with people; almost every bad thing you can imagine.

DAVE BAST

Even his personal appearance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes; they even criticized that. I mean, if you have ever been a leader of any program in a church or elsewhere, you know that these are the kinds of criticisms that keep you up at night. Paul was as human as the next person. This hurt; and so Paul is defending himself – defending his ministry – trying to convince the Corinthians: I am the real deal; I might be sometimes weak; I might be a little over-excited at times; but I am the real deal. God sent me to you. Please believe my message, not that of others.

DAVE BAST

To make matters worse, really, the motivation apparently of these opponents of Paul, or rivals I think we could call them – rivals to Paul – because they wanted to undermine the credibility of his message; of the very Gospel that he had proclaimed to the Corinthians, and that had been the beginning of the church there. Interestingly, in another letter written later near the end of his life, Philippians, Paul talks about other opponents who envy him and are rivals to him, but he says: They are preaching Christ, and you know, I rejoice in that. So, he didn't really care for himself whether he was attacked or criticized or not. That wasn't what was the issue. What he cared about is the basic Gospel on which the Church is founded. So if somebody was envious of Paul or a rival of Paul but they preached the authentic Gospel, Paul was okay with that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He was okay with that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, no big deal. I don't matter that much. But if the attacks were motivated by an alternative message that didn't focus on Christ and what He did as the savior of the world, then Paul would take up arms and defend himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul is going to talk about that, that he wants this message to get through; he wants the Corinthians to live authentic lives. So at the end of II Corinthians 12, and into the first couple verses of II Corinthians 13, Paul talks about the possibility of another – a third visit apparently – and here is how he begins at verse 19: Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? No, we have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. ²⁰For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be; and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.

DAVE BAST

²¹I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery in which they have indulged. ¹³^{1a}This will be my third visit to you... ²I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent. On my return, I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, ³since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So Paul here is basically saying: You know, I am the real deal. I have presented the true Gospel to you. Anybody who is preaching a more libertine message among you that doesn't take sin seriously, that has to be put down; that has got to be put down. You have to take this seriously, and I will do what I have to as Christ's ambassador (to use an image from earlier in II Corinthians, and from earlier in this series), that is what I have to do. I have to speak the truth, and I will, even if I have to couch this in almost like a warning, given what I am hearing.

DAVE BAST

Right. What we have here, really, that we have to wrestle with... and this is what makes this so relevant, I think, for the Church today, is rival claims to authority. Paul claimed authority; he claimed he was speaking for God; he claimed that Christ was speaking through him; that when he spoke to the Church, it was actually the Lord Jesus saying that. Well, clearly his opponents made that same counterclaim. Just as today, you know, people claim on the one hand to be proclaiming the Bible and others claim a totally different message and also say: We are the ones who are teaching the Bible. So you have these rival claims to authority. How do you know which one is real? How do you know which one is true? So Paul, in making an elaborate defense of himself here, is really pointing to the validity of his claim to be speaking authentically for God: This is the *real* voice of Christ; and apparently the Corinthians said to him: Well, prove it; prove it to us. So he is going to try to do that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are almost at the end of the letter here. We are not sure if Paul ever made that third visit, and we are not sure what other contact there was between Paul and the church at Corinth after what we now call II Corinthians. What we do know is Paul is bringing this letter in for a landing here in the 12th and 13th chapters of II Corinthians, and he is going to go for broke. We are going to see that in the upcoming segments of this program. He is going to do what he generally has not done much before, and that is, he is going to talk about himself, not because he wants to talk about himself, but because he is desperate to convince the Corinthians that he, not these super apostles, he is the real deal. So he is going to talk about

what he has endured, and nobody would endure what he endured if he weren't totally committed to God and Christ; and something that he has experienced, both good and bad, that is going to be his way to say: Look, this is sort of like my résumé. I am speaking God's truth to you. Please, please, please, please – for your sake, listen to me.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is a remarkable performance that he undertakes in Chapters 11 and 12. We will listen to it in just a bit.
Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and now we turn to Paul's more elaborate defense of himself and his ministry – his message – and he begins by doing something really odd if you are familiar with Paul's writing. He does it by boasting – boasting about himself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which all things being equal, Paul is generally against, and so are we, right? I mean, Christians are humble not proud. We talk about others and not ourselves; but again, Paul is kind of in a desperate phase here to shake the Corinthians. He wants to take them by the shoulders and shake them to get their attention because they are altogether too enthralled with these false teachers who are spreading, as you said, Dave, not just bad rumors about Paul, they are ruining the Gospel itself; and nothing concerns Paul more than that.

DAVE BAST

It is a counterfeit gospel that they are proclaiming; but you know, he says in I Corinthians Chapter 1, which is another great chapter... we haven't looked at I Corinthians... but he points out that God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – the things that are not – to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Therefore, as it is written: Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. And Paul himself followed that rule throughout his life: God forbid that I should boast save in the cross of Christ my Lord, as he exclaimed elsewhere. So, no, don't brag; don't talk about yourself; certainly don't be boastful; but now Paul says: I have to do a little boasting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Desperate times call for desperate measures; and so in Chapter 11 – just going back a little bit from Chapter 12 that we looked at in the first segment – here is what he says:

²¹Whatever anyone dares to boast about – now I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast about. ²²Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. ²³Are they servants of Christ – and I am out of my mind to talk like this – well, 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.

DAVE BAST

Here is where he gets really personal...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Really specific...

DAVE BAST

Yes, and this is the most we know... We would love to have all these experiences described, but even Acts doesn't describe them; but Paul writes:

²⁴Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. (That was a provision of the law, incidentally. They were not allowed to whip anybody more than forty times, so they stopped at 39 in case they miscounted. That happened to Paul five times. Imagine what his back looked like); and then he says: ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones; three times I was shipwrecked; I spent a night and a day in the open sea; ²⁶I have been constantly on the move; I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from gentiles... and he goes on and on and on and on: ^{27b}I have been cold and naked and gone without food; ²⁸and besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. As if to say: All that physical stuff is nothing compared to the mental anxiety I feel for *you* and the other churches. You know, what does it all add up to? Paul says: Listen, I paid the price. If you are a real apostle, if you are a real missionary, if you are a real servant of Christ, you are going to pay the price; and there will be a price.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know what? The implication here... we have said all through this series, Dave, that a good deal of what Paul's critics were accusing him of in Corinth we have to discern by reading between the lines a little bit. Paul makes allusions; you know, he makes some references to stuff that make us say: Ah, I know what they are saying about Paul. Well, so also subtly here Paul is saying: I have endured all of this – five times beatings, thirty nine lashes to my back – beatings with rods; what he is implying is: Tell you what! Those false teachers in Corinth? Wrap them on the knuckles with a ruler one time and they will be done.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They will abandon their message; and it reminds me of something Chuck Colson – Charles Colson – said; you know, the great prison minister...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But before that, went to jail for Watergate from Richard Nixon's White House; and Colson said that everybody in the Watergate cover-up agreed they would never tell the truth – they would never tell the truth about Watergate.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they would hang together – they would stick together...stick to the story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the moment the first one of them was threatened with six months in jail they cracked and they told the whole truth; and Colson says: This convinced me of the truth of the Gospel; these apostles, like Paul, and also Peter, James, John... all of them were persecuted; all of them were beaten; most of them were martyred; they wouldn't have gone through all of that if it were not true.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They were convicted to the core that Jesus was Lord; and that is the only reason you put up with that, and that is what Paul is saying here.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes: You claim I am not a real apostle, well...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who would put up with this if they weren't...?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. There is another thing, though, that he points to, and that is his spiritual experience. Apparently, again, the super apostles claim to have these great supernatural kinds of things: Visions from God and they claim to speak for God. You know, their reasoning, I guess, was: Well, if you are close to Jesus, you must have some really special relationship with Him. So Paul says: Well, you know what? I am going to go on boasting because I can talk about that, too. So he writes in Chapter 12:

¹I must go on boasting; although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (He is a little bit diffident about how he describes this; clearly it is him.) 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; ³and I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows; ⁴was caught up to Paradise and heard inexpressible things – things that no one is permitted to tell. So yes, Paul says, I have had those kinds of experiences, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, this is a great mystery, by the way, for anyone listening to this program and saying: What was that all about? I think the consensus of scholars is: Ah, we don't know exactly, but it was some vivid encounter that Paul had with the living God – with Jesus Christ Himself perhaps – I don't know what the third heaven is, but it was an intense personal experience...

DAVE BAST

Just a note probably though; probably not his conversion experience on the Damascus Road.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, probably not...

DAVE BAST

This was something else subsequent to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, yes; and so Paul is basically saying: Look, I endure all the physical trauma and the persecutions and the beatings because I am a true-blue believer; and one of the reasons I am a true-blue believer is because I have personally encountered Jesus more than once. He *could* go back to the Damascus Road conversion when Saul changed to Paul and Jesus spoke to him. You know: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? But he can also point to this, all of which is to say: Look, I know what I am talking about; and again, I am desperate. I like all those little parentheticals he throws in, like: I am crazy to talk this way; I am being a fool now, but I am so desperate to convince you. Please believe the Gospel I am preaching and not the one of the super apostles.

DAVE BAST

Right; and really, these two claims that Paul makes to the personal hardships that he has endured and the personal spiritual highs that he has been on reinforce each other; because it is easy to make claims. I mean, anyone can say: Oh, yes, I had a heavenly vision. I was caught up to heaven. I don't know if I was in my

body or if it was an out-of-the-body experience. Claims are easy to make. There is a character in Shakespeare who says: I can call spirits from the vasty deep; and somebody says: Well so can I; so can anyone; but will they come when you do call them?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, right.

DAVE BAST

So, Paul confirms the claims – the mystical claims – by reciting his personal history and experience that he has walked the walk as well as talked the talk; but really, there is something else he wants to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and typical of Paul, he is not going to leave it at this spiritual high point testimony. He is going to get back down to ground level and talk about something that is very well known from the New Testament, although it too is a bit of a mystery, next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork. So, we just noted, Scott, that Paul can speak of this incredible spiritual experience that was indescribable; he cannot even relate the details because it was so heavenly that he is not allowed. Somehow God won't allow him to speak in more detail, but immediately he goes on to say this:

^{12:7}Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited (In other words: so that I wouldn't get too high and mighty because I had this wonderful thing happen to me), I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, ⁹but 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. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties; for when I am weak then I am strong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The thorn in the flesh. This is a well-known part of the Bible to very many people, and it is a mystery in the Bible because we have no idea, and there is virtually no scholarly consensus I am aware of as to what that "thorn in the flesh" was. He calls it a "messenger of Satan," which only deepens the mystery. How could God allow that; or was that hyperbole on Paul's part – a little exaggeration to convey how bad it was? I don't know; but we sure don't know what it is. Lots of theories, of course. This is the stuff endless PhD dissertations are made of. You know, he had that blinding encounter on the Damascus Road; so did he suffer a stigmatism for the rest of his life?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Did he have bad eyesight?

DAVE BAST

Or migraine headaches, or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Malaria.

DAVE BAST

Recurring malaria... yeah, yeah. Lots of options – possibilities. It was some physical or emotional handicap. I mean, I think the messenger of Satan part maybe implies that it was the kind of thing that tempted him to doubt or despair, because three times he *pleaded* with God to take this from him. Now the next time you hear somebody say: All you gotta do is have the right kind of faith or enough faith and whatever you ask of God He will do for you, point...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Name it and claim it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; point them to II Corinthians Chapter 12:19ff, would you; because if Paul would go repeatedly before the throne of heaven and ask his Father to take this bad thing away from him, and God said no, that ought to help us all clarify when we experience that in prayer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, these are the mysteries of prayer, and I have often heard it said, and many of us in the Church have heard this, Dave: If you want to believe that God's answer to our prayers is sometimes, "No," there are two very famous examples: This is one, from God's beloved apostle, Paul. The other one would be from God's own Son in the Garden of Gethsemane saying: Please don't make Me go through this. So, it does happen that sometimes our prayers are not answered as *we* want them to be; but in this case, Paul is saying... now this is so interesting, right? He is trying to establish his credentials in front of the Corinthians, who have had people impugning Paul's character and raising doubts in their mind as to Paul's authenticity. So Paul now has just talked about this great spiritual vision, and that is important, and he is saying that that happened to me as a sign that indeed I am on God's side; but that is not what gives Paul strength – not that vision. No, what gives Paul strength is being taught to rely on God in this moment of weakness: For when I am weak then I am strong. Paul's strength doesn't come from heavenly visions, it comes from trusting God when there are no good answers. It comes from trusting God when He cannot do anything about this condition himself. It comes from trusting God when for some mysterious reason God is just not going to intervene the way Paul wants, and how many of us have not experienced that ourselves? How many of us don't know people in the church, people in our families, who are tremendously strong Christians, not because they are having ecstatic experiences every other week, but because they have lived for 30 years with chronic pain, with depression, with the grief in their heart from a child who died long ago, where they find their strength somehow paradoxically comes out of weakness; and again, there is something so redolent and full of the Gospel of that, right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How are we saved? Through Christ's strength? No, through His weakness – through His death on the cross. That is how we were saved.

DAVE BAST

Just a beautiful, beautiful passage that has spoken for so long to so many; and notice, too, we said God's answer to Paul's prayer was "No," but really, that wasn't the only thing God said. I mean, circumstances indicated no, but Paul said: What God told me is, "My grace is sufficient for you." In my grace, you have what you really need; and what you really need is the strength to endure this thorn, because for a while longer it will be with you. You know, ultimately Paul would be delivered – it would be removed – Satan would not have his way with Paul; but in the meantime, to learn to live by grace, to rely on Him... So, Paul ends by saying: You know, when I was boasting about my shipwreck and my suffering, and all that; that was stupid, and I did it intentionally, and told you I was being dumb; and when I boasted about my revelation, I am a

fool to talk like that, and I pointed that out to you; but here is what I really want to boast in: What I want to boast of is my weakness because I will boast about the insults and the persecutions and the suffering and the weakness because that is when the strength of Christ comes to fruition in me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is such an important...

DAVE BAST

What a beautiful thing, huh?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it is such an important testimony on Paul's part. I guess we should just say quickly, this is a word to come from the person who is suffering; it is not a word we should speak too quickly or glibly into someone else's pain. We see someone in church in pain and say: Oh, come on, God's grace will be sufficient for you, Joe. You know, God is going to show you His strength. No, no, be careful; be careful; you don't know all that is going on, but...

DAVE BAST

This is a personal testimony, not a little Sunday school message or lesson to give.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it is not just Paul's testimony, as we said. We have all met Christians... we ourselves could hardly imagine enduring what they have endured, right? People who have lived the life of Job; people who have deep, deep sorrows in their hearts and they seem to keep coming. I mean, I knew a wonderful woman in a church I served whose husband died, whose child died, whose grandchild died; and you sort of want to say to God: Enough! She has suffered enough. We don't understand why these things happen, but she herself was like Paul. She said: I cannot figure out how I have managed to go on. It is all God.

DAVE BAST

It is all grace, yes. I have a young friend right now who is walking through this experience of praying desperately for something that he needs and wants, and it would be right for God to do, it seems to us, and God hasn't done it yet; so yes, the struggle then to believe, to trust, to really confess that God's way is right and God's grace is made perfect in us when we are weak; but that is the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. Let us know how we can help you to dig deeper into the scriptures by visiting our website. It is groundworkonline.com, and there you will find a place to suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork shows.

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