

Graced by God

Have you ever had a vision or a revelation from God? If you had, would you want to boast about it? Would you feel graced by God in some way?

Let me share about one I heard about once. (Wink, wink! ☺) I know a person who around twenty years ago was at Camp Menno'scah with his high school youth from church. And one night this person couldn't sleep, so he got up and went for a walk beneath a starry sky. And he began to hear God talking to him. Whether it was an actual, audible voice, or only quiet thoughts in his own head, I do not know; God knows. But he says that he had a "conversation" with God. A conversation in which he heard God respond to his questions and doubts. Whether the conversation was real or imaginary, I do not know; God knows. But this conversation was very formative for him, he says. Life changing, even. So what do you think? If that had been your revelation, would you boast about it, or feel graced by God?

The Apostle Paul is something else, isn't he? In verse 5, he says: "*On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.*" Okay, so he sounds pretty humble there, right? He says he doesn't want to boast or intend to boast. At least, not about himself. But in verse 6, he continues, "*But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth.*" It's like he's saying, I'm not going to boast . . . but I could if I want to." It's the epitome of false humility. No wonder his letters so often make people mad.

There's no question that the revelation from God "this person" had had was a powerful one. No question that he had experienced God's presence in a very personal and special way. Wow. Kind of makes us envious, doesn't it? Don't we wish we were that special to God?

But then what seems even more important to Paul is that we know all the hardships Paul has faced, and continues to face. In the previous chapter, he gives us a list. Listen to this (starting in the middle of verse 11:21):

"But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant."

What do you think? Is Paul boasting? What does he want from us, his readers? Why does he tell us all this? Does he want us to be impressed? ("Wow, that Paul was amazing!") Does he want us to feel sorry for him? ("Oh poor Paul!")? Or does he want something else entirely?

There's no question that life can be unfair. That sometimes things simply stink. One thing right after another. What would our list of hardships look like?

But sometimes we have to ask, if we're at all honest or self-aware, "am I being punished for no good reason? Or am I somehow the cause of all this? Am I a victim? Or am I in fact a sinner who deserves his hardships?" Elsewhere in his letters, Paul is honest about his sins. But is he being so here? Is he saying that he deserved his hardships? Or conversely, that he didn't deserve them? Or, is he saying something else entirely?

He goes on in verse 7 to talk about this vague and mysterious "thorn in the flesh": *Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh,* It kinda sounds painful, doesn't it? Have you ever had a thorn stuck in your flesh? One of those really long "hawthorns," maybe? You ever step on one?

The Greek word is *skolops*, which is kinda fun to say, but is clearly not something fun to have. The word *skolops* can be translated as either a "thorn" (like we have in this translation) or as a "splinter" (which we have all had and which we know can be seriously annoying if not painful); or a *skolops* can be a "pointed stake." Think, a stake that has been sharpened with a knife. A stake so sharp that you could literally be stabbed in the heart with it. Or a stake that is placed in the bottom of a hole, its point upward, along with a bunch of others, so that anyone or anything falling into that hole would be in serious trouble. (In bible times that was sometimes done in warfare.)

So what was Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (if not a literal stake in the heart)? (12:7 - *even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh*). Scholars have speculated about this for centuries. Paul says it was "given me," but he doesn't say by whom. A good guess would be God. But why would God do this? Paul says at the outset that it was to keep him from being too "elated." Other translations say "too conceited," or to keep him from "exalting himself." (Like, talking about the "exceptional character of [his] revelations" from God?)

But let's come back to this "thorn in the flesh." What might Paul be talking about? Scholarly guesses have varied widely. Some say Paul might have been referring to a serious impairment of some kind. Perhaps one caused by an injury; or, a disease of some kind. Or, an impairment one was born with. A malformed leg, some have suggested. Blindness, others have proposed. Or a speech impairment of some kind. (We know from Paul's letters that he was sometimes criticized for his speaking.)

Some have speculated that this thorn might even be something to do with a moral failure. A sexual sin of some kind. (Might Paul have been a homosexual?)

Whatever that thorn was, it was clearly painful. It was debilitating in some way. It kept him from being too elated. Conceited. Exalted.

Would God do this? Cause it to happen? Allow it to happen? Paul also refers to a "messenger of Satan": *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.*] What role did it play? Was Satan ultimately to blame for Paul's hardships? The word "torment" connotes torture or cruel punishment, such as one might experience in hell.

Three times, Paul asked God to remove it [12:8—*Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,*]. And apparently, God declined. God said this instead: [12:9—*but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."*] "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (If there's

a better bumper sticker, or refrigerator magnet, or saying to put on one's bulletin board, or even a tattoo , I don't know what it is. ☺)

We've been talking about grace a lot in recent months. Back in February I started a sermon series about grace, which I called "Shades of Grace." Each sermon was based on a different story or passage from the Bible that illustrates in some way what grace is. Some of the different shades we discovered are: *grace wrestles with us; grace leaves us with a limp; grace asks us to remember; grace helps us reframe the past; grace is forgiveness; grace is liberation; grace is God's free gift; grace cannot be earned or bought, it can only be humbly received.*

And here, in this morning's passage, God says to Paul, "my grace is sufficient for you." Grace is enough, God is saying. It's sufficient for you, all you need. Grace is my power, when you have none. Grace is my strength, when you are weak. (Hence my sermon title, "Graced by God.")

The Apostle Paul was a great man. No doubt about it. He was tireless. He was fearless. He was determined. He was the founder of the Christian faith, doing more for it than anyone, except of course Jesus himself.

In fact, Paul ended up modeling his life after Christ. He suffered willingly, like Christ. He gave up his life, like Christ. And in doing so, in giving up his life, Paul knew that he would gain it back again.

"Power is made perfect in weakness," God told Paul. One of the most powerful paradoxes of the Christian faith. Was Paul weak? In some ways at least, he apparently was. He had this hateful "thorn in the flesh." He was criticized and ridiculed by others. He wasn't as strong of a speaker as some others. And yes, he had done some horrible things. He was as great a sinner as anyone, if not more so.

But maybe the most important thing that Paul ever did was to allow himself to be weak. And just look at what God did through him. No wonder Paul said, [12:9] *"I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."*

There are times, of course, when you have to be strong. When it is important to be strong. When you need to be strong.

But sometimes, at least, if not all the time, our job is to be weak. Let me say that again. "Our job is to be weak." Why? So that God can be strong through us.

Grace is the power of God.

Amen.