

Finding Strength
2 Corinthians 12.7b-10; 13.2-8
May 27

We hear a great deal about church conflict in churches today and surmise that this is a new phenomenon. The first-century church experienced numerous disputes from false teachers, personality conflicts. A dramatic transition occurs in 2 Corinthians 10 as Paul shifted from a message of conflict to address the infiltration of "so-called apostles" into the Corinthian church that opposed Paul. The apostle inferred that these infiltrators followed "another" Jesus, received a "different" spirit, and preached a "different" gospel (2 Cor. 11.4).

These leaders regarded themselves as "super-apostles" (2 Cor. 11.5,11) charged Paul with "behaving according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 10.2), claimed Paul was "weighty in his letters" but unimpressive in his physical appearance and speech (2 Cor. 10.10), and boasters. In response, Paul boasted of his weakness and gave a long catalog of humiliating, painful experiences from his apostolic career (2 Cor. 11.22-33).

How did Paul find strength in light of personal attacks and a church attracted to false leaders?

First, Paul boasted in his weaknesses rather than his strengths (2 Cor. 12.1-10). "If boasting is necessary, I will boast about my weaknesses" (2 Cor. 11.30). Evidently, Paul's opponents must have boasted of visionary experiences. In response, Paul described a vision he received probably during the time he returned to his home province of Cilicia before he engaged in his first mission trip as suggested by the time reference "fourteen years ago." Since Paul would only boast of his weaknesses, he described his personal experience regarding "I know a man." Paul was snatched up either bodily or through a vision into the "third heaven" or "paradise (2 Cor.12.2-3). Both "third heaven" and "paradise" describe the abode of God.

As a result of his vision or transportation to heaven, God gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh" to keep Paul humble. We do not know the exact nature of this "thorn," although the description seems so point to a physical ailment. Two verses in Galatians seem to imply that Paul suffered from an eye ailment (Gal. 4.14; 6.11). Satan attempted to use Paul's ailment for negative purposes; Paul understood his "thorn" as serving the positive purpose of humbling him. Paul prayed three times (reminiscent of Jesus' prayer in the garden) for the removal of the thorn. God did not remove the thorn; God gave Paul grace to endure the thorn.

Second, Paul warned that he had the strength of Christ to discipline the trouble-makers (2 Cor. 13.1-4). In 2 Corinthians 12.20-21, Paul highlighted two types of sins that tarnished the reputation of the church and the reputation of Jesus, namely, relational sins (2 Cor. 12.20) and sensual sins (2 Cor. 12.21). Paul cited the principle from Deuteronomy 19.15 of the necessity of two or three witnesses to an accusation to rule out of the legal preceding any personal grudges. It appears that the three witnesses comprise Paul's personal observations on three trips to Corinth. Paul warned the Corinthians not to think that Paul was too weak to deal with the situation. Paul is united with Christ ("in him") in the weakness of Christ, but the apostle lives in the strength of the resurrection. Paul, therefore, will deal with the Corinthians in the strength Christ provided.

Third, Paul challenged the Corinthians to examine their relationship with the Lord (2 Cor. 13.5-8). Paul commanded the Corinthians to examine and test themselves. The verbs describe continual process; that is, continually examine and continually test. "Test" means to seek to determine the validity of something. Is this real? Paul did not provide a spiritual test or checklist for the Corinthians. Throughout his letters to the Corinthians, he uplifted the importance of right doctrine, right behavior, and right relationships within the church. Right doctrine, right behavior, and right relationships, therefore, comprise the core means by which the Corinthians may examine and test themselves. Paul wants his readers to pass the examination and test (2 Cor. 13.8). Paul reminded his readers that he prayed for their "full maturity" (2 Cor. 13.9).