

Powerful

a sermon

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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Every so often, I find that I'm running low.

To be clear, I'm not saying that I'm hungry. Not that kind of "running low."

I don't happen to be a diabetic. Not that kind of "running low."

I'm not performing poorly in some race. Not that kind of "running low."

I am not rushing through a short tunnel.

No, by "running low," I mean that my cell phone battery is about to give up the last of its power. And I left my charger at home.

Batteries are amazing things, aren't they? They power devices big and small, with energy that is stored, conveniently, packaged for travel, so you can run whatever it is wherever you are.

They are used in all sorts of things, from the very big to the very small. So many everyday gadgets run off them, so many in fact that we might forget that they're there, powering the convenient tools on which we depend.

Until the blasted thing won't work.

Some of my cell-phone-using friends have gotten smart. They carry along with them these little portable chargers. These things are great. If your cell phone starts to complain, insisting that it be fed *right now, I don't care if there's no wall outlet in this restaurant!* — all you have to do is connect it to one of these power banks. Soon, your cell phone will be happy, ready to serve without complaint. And you'll likely have plenty of power left in the pack to charge *my* cell phone, too, because I'm too dumb to carry one of those around.

I like how these chargers are so small, yet they can do so much. I like that they hold inside themselves the potential to do great things. Powerful things.

Power, of course, is not just about electronics. It's not just an engineering concept. Extended, elaborated, assumed, it's a social concept. It's about human interactions,

human needs,
human joys,
human fears.

Power unites and it divides.

Power opens doors for some, and closes doors for others.

Power heals, power rescues. And power also wounds, it enslaves, it kills.

Human history is in great part the story of the use and abuse of power. We may not know this history well, but we sure have learned it's biggest lesson: to make your way in the world you've got to navigate its intricate web of power-relations.

For many people, power is about control. The powerful can exercise their will over other people. They can force and coerce. And those without power just have to take it.

Sure, “power” can be a morally neutral term. There are good and bad types of power. For good reason we have very different reactions to a powerful song and to a powerful stench.

And yet the typical and reflexive expectations of power and what it means to be powerful tend so readily toward force, coercion, and control, making power so corrupting. For many, *these* are what it means to have power and to be powerful.



In the scripture passage I read, the Apostle Paul tells a powerful story. It goes something like this:

“I know someone who was caught up into the third heaven. And I know that this person was taken up into Paradise and heard things, amazing things, things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

Wow, that’s pretty impressive. Who is that “someone,” Paul? Well, soon it becomes clear: Paul is talking about himself. *He* is the one

who was caught up into some higher spiritual realm,
who had this remarkable spiritual experience,
who was lifted up to a spiritual plane
to see and hear the indescribable.

Isn’t that impressive? Isn’t that powerful?

Now, it would be natural to think that this was just about boasting. Because that’s the typical reason for telling this kind of story: to make an impression. And let’s be honest: to our modern ears, Paul so often sounds proud, a bit boastful, kind of a control freak.

And if what Paul wanted to do was to impress people, we could hardly blame him. After all, if any of us were to have such an experience as he had, wouldn’t we want to brag about it, just a little?

Besides, Paul’s friends, the ones to whom he was writing, they were the kind who ate this stuff up. Sure, maybe not all of them, but a number of those Christians in the city of Corinth were quite enamored with some real superstars, spiritual giants with powerful stories of faith. These were the Christian rock stars of their generation, the ones who brought in the crowds to pack the sanctuaries for the blessing of their accounts of spiritual power,

of victorious and abundant faith,
of miracles and the miraculous,
of profound and lofty spiritual experiences.

Powerful!

The people loved this stuff. So much did they love it that it really affected them, in some pretty deep ways. Soon, they began to think that *this* was the mark of a *true* Christian.

True Christians should have powerful experiences of faith.
True Christians should be able to do powerful things.
True Christians should *be* powerful.

But especially those Christians who would lead them and teach them and speak authoritatively to them. Like Paul.

Ah, yes. Paul. Remember him? Well, he wasn't so impressive, now, was he? He wasn't such a powerhouse, was he? What powerful experiences did *he* have, hmm? He wasn't like these others who had regaled us with stories of dramatic faith, of visions, of prophecies, of miracles. He was, well, he wasn't all that, was he?

What was going on here was about power. What I mean is that these spiritual powerhouses in Corinth were throwing their weight around. They had power, and they used it. And in using their power they intended to knock Paul down a few pegs, so they could take his place as the spiritual leaders of the church in Corinth.

Now, Paul doesn't want to take the bait. He doesn't want to get into a tit-for-tat of powerful spiritual experiences. But, it's almost like he can't help himself — and who could blame him? So he tells his friends in Corinth, both the supporters and the doubters, that he, too, had his story of powerful faith. "I know someone (yeah, it's me) who was caught up into the third heaven" He tells them this, or rather he *begins* to tell them, but then ...he stops. Abruptly. Knowing that they want to hear more, they want to hear it all. But he doesn't give them all, he doesn't tell them the whole story. But he stops, as if to say, "I know you want to hear more, I know that your ears are itching for the powerful story of spiritual power. But I can't tell you."

And then he tells them a different story, and yet the same story, a story no longer in heaven but on earth, a story not about triumph but about affliction. It's the same story, because he tells them, "I had this remarkable vision, and yet, to keep me from being too elated, to keep me humble, to keep me where God wanted me to be, God gave me ...a thorn in the flesh."

Now, we don't know exactly what this "thorn in the flesh" was. Sure, when we talk about a thorn in the flesh, we might mean a troublesome co-worker, or a difficult relative, or the neighbor nobody likes, some *person* who makes our lives difficult. We say about such a person, "Oh, he's my thorn in the flesh."

There's almost no way that's what Paul meant by his thorn in the flesh. For him, it was almost certainly a physical malady, a medical condition, a problem in his body that bothered him so much that he begged God to be rid of it.

And yet, God does not remove the problem, but straight out tells Paul, "No." That's right, "No." No, God would not take away the thorn in the flesh. No, it would remain, even as it appeared to make Paul's work, his Good News-spreading, Jesus-following, God-glorifying work more difficult. And God's reason, the simply stated and yet profoundly beautiful reason, is this:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Now, Paul wasn't giving some general truth, like a proverb out of Poor Richard's Almanac or what you might find inside a fortune cookie. For what sense does that make, that power, all power, power in general, is made perfect and complete ...in *weakness*?

No, Paul was not talking about power in general. He was really talking about *God's* power,

the power of the Father revealed in the Son,
the divine power to reconcile and reunite and make whole,
the power that was perfected and completed in Jesus.

And for Paul, the supreme demonstration of that power, the center of that power, the place where our eyes should be drawn if we want to see that power, is the cross.

This can be tough to grasp. It can be hard to accept.
How can the cross, the death of Jesus, be about power?

Isn't the cross about suffering and death?
Isn't it about sadness and despair?

Isn't the cross overcome by the empty tomb?
Isn't the *death* of Jesus erased by the *resurrection* of Jesus?

Yet Paul would insist that the cross is at the very heart of what God accomplished. You see, in the cross, in that very point where God appeared weakest, in those moments when Jesus was totally stripped of power, it was there and then that God was truly at work, truly effective, truly powerful.

And so, all this could never be about Paul. It was about Jesus. And if Paul was to serve Jesus, then it could not be about Paul, how strong he was, how eloquent he was, how powerful he was. It had to be about Jesus:

his authority,
his reality,
his presence,
...*his* power.

God's power is made known in weakness, in the weakness of the cross. Paul's life would testify to the good news of Jesus Christ, the power of God that through the cross overturns the corrupt exercise of power known to the world. And even Paul's weakness,

his illness,
his infirmity,
his lack of power,

these would not secure God's power but simply declare it.



My friends, being a Christian is powerful. It truly is.

But it is not *our* power.

It's the power of Jesus within you.

It's the power of Jesus, in spite of you.

We are weak, and the lamb that was slain is strong.

We don't protect the honor of God by exerting our power. We don't advance the cause of Christ by playing the same power games that people have played in every age and time. We don't reflect the Good News by focusing

on size
or wealth
or age
or influence
or relevance
or popularity
or likability.

In the cross of Jesus, we hear the good news that we are made right with God

not by the strength of numbers,
not by the power of dollars,

but by Christ's self-giving, God's power made known in weakness.
And that is powerful.