

The Last Word

Naturally, I have said a great deal about weakness. After all, that's what my book has been about. I have claimed that, as Paul argued in 2 Corinthians, admission of a sense of weakness is an essential for every believer. And I stand by that. But – and here's the point I want to stress in this last chapter – weakness, in itself, is not enough. Nor is the admission of weakness. That is not the main lesson which Paul had to learn and pass on to us. The ABSOLUTE lesson which Paul had to learn – and which Christ taught him by bitter experience – is something far more important than weakness. Let me quote, once again, the vital passage, the passage where Paul tells us what it was he had to learn, and why:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Here is the core section:

[Christ] 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

It stands out. What does? The apostle's heavy emphasis on Christ: He – Christ – said to me... My – that is Christ's – grace... My – that is Christ's – power... the power of Christ... Yes, weakness – Paul's – but the apostle rejoiced in his weakness because it drove him to Christ, because it gave him a greater sense of Christ's grace and power. It was not so much

The Last Word

the apostle's weakness, but the grace and power of Christ in him and for him; that is what Paul learned. And it came out in what he would later write:

To me to live is Christ (Phil. 1:21).

Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:11).

Let me illustrate by considering the weakness which comes with the passing years:

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Certainly, it is all too easy to look at our decline – and I speak from experience – but as believers we should look at and *look for* the eternal. In saying this, I have sadly to confess, I am preaching to myself, reproving myself. Christ is coming! The dead will be raised! The mortal will put on immortality! Indeed, Paul made that very point in the following context (2 Cor. 5:1-10). And Christ's appearing – not my outward decline – should be the focus of my attention. Peter was not whistling in the dark when he wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,

The Last Word

obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

It's all there: the believer's present affliction, but his concentration of what God has planned, accomplished and is applying and will apply to the child of God, looking to and waiting for the coming of Christ. Meanwhile:

Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory

To continue: I am not playing with words when I say that the fundamental point Paul had to grasp was this: the ABSOLUTE essential is that the believer, at all times, and under all circumstances, must focus on Christ, on Christ himself, on Christ alone. Paul could have been concerned with his opponents; and he was. He could have been concerned with the insults from his fellow-believers; and so he was. He could have been concerned with his afflictions, his pains; and he was. He could have been concerned with his experiences, his knowledge, his responsibilities; and he was. He could have been taken up with his ministry, his service for Christ; no doubt he was. But the thing he had to learn was that he must not look at circumstances, look at others, nor even look at himself, his works, his service – certainly, not at his ratings in the popularity stakes (1 Cor. 4:1-7): he must always look to Christ, and only Christ.

After all, how is a sinner saved? By looking to Christ. This is made explicit by Christ's use of the experience of Moses in the wilderness, after the Israelites had sinned. First, the Jewish experience:

And the Lord said to Moses: 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live'. So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live (Num. 21:8-9).

As Christ explained and drove home his application:

The Last Word

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God (John 3:14-18).

Yes, conversion involves looking to Christ, believing Christ, trusting Christ, and Christ alone, for salvation.

As, in the name of God, the prophet commanded his hearers and readers:

Look unto me, and be saved (Isa. 45:22).

What about the believer passing through affliction? He must learn from the Jews who, when they were under dire threat, prayed:

We are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you (2 Chron. 20:12).

Micah learnt the lesson. When all was against him:

But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me (Micah 7:7).

Here is the point: from first to last – from conversion, through his pilgrimage, through affliction, trials of every kind, ageing, loneliness, bereavement, and even death itself – the believer must always keep his eyes fixed on Christ and on Christ alone.

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus... (Heb. 3:1).

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the

The Last Word

cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1-2).¹

Take Peter's experience walking on the water. At Christ's command:

...Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out: 'Lord, save me'. Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him: 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' (Matt. 14:29-31).

The lesson is patent: as soon as Peter looked at his circumstances, he was doomed; the cure was looking to Christ, relying on Christ, trusting him.

I began this book talking about a paradox: 'When I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:10). As I finish, here is another: 'I am an ambassador in chains' (Eph. 6:20). Imagine it – an ambassador in chains! What a humiliation! What use can such an ambassador be? How can he represent his monarch or country? How can a believer glory in weakness? By looking to Christ. Realising that all is for Christ.

Above all, based on '[Christ] was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God' (2 Cor. 13:4), as I have noted, talk about seeming contradictions! Here, at the heart of the gospel, we have greatest paradox of the lot – Christ crucified in weakness but raised in power. The place and time of his lowest point is actually when the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished the propitiation of the wrath of God² and the salvation of all the elect! God works by contraries!

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May I finish with an open question, and leave you to ponder on it? If, as I have argued, and as I am totally convinced,

¹ Both written to believers: believers are to look to Christ.

² See my *Why?*

The Last Word

Christendom has ruined *ekklēsia* life, ruined the virtue of weakness by encouraging a kind of beauty contest in the clerical stakes, and much else, how can we be sure that it has not done the same with other matters – *including salvation itself*? Indeed, I fear that evangelicalism at present is allowing biblical salvation³ – from the work of Christ, through conversion, leading to transformation – to wither.⁴ Food for thought? And action?

³ See earlier – where I dealt with Acts 15:1.

⁴ I have tackled this in many of my works.