



This Sunday we continued with our new topical series at Magdalen Road, looking at the counter-cultural 'shape' of the Christian life – especially that 'the way down is the way up'. Why is it that God says we must be weak to be strong, foolish to be wise, go through suffering to enjoy glory, be slaves to enjoy true freedom? We will, each week, be seeking to challenge our 'natural' thinking processes, asking God to help us to think more and more as he does – and trust him that what he says is best.

This week we jumped in halfway through Paul's lengthy defence of his ministry and his message to the church in Corinth. It seems that some 'super-apostles' as they are coined, have been whispering in the Corinthian ears saying that Paul is not legitimate because his ministry is so weak and fragile, and yet, rather than going up against them on their terms (which Paul says he could and he would win) he boasts in his weakness. The Lord had blessed Paul with a number of ecstatic spiritual experiences (v1-4) and so to stop him from becoming conceited he gives him / does not remove a thorn in his flesh. The verses we focused in on then, we're Paul exposition of why he had been made weak, as well as his response to that weakness and pain.

The Reason for your weakness (v7b-9a)

As we speak of the broken-ness of the world, it's key that we remember Paul is not a masochist. His weakness and his suffering is painful and he longs that it be removed (asking 3 times for the thorn to go). We do not know quite what the thorn is, we do know it came from Satan and he meant harm by it, but we also know that the Lord uses it for good – to keep Paul from becoming conceited and that his grace is sufficient - to remind us that the story is not about us, it is about him. The thorn, as with our sufferings had a purpose.

The Response to your weakness (v9b-10)

The horribly challenging part of this text though, is not simply that Paul saw the reason for his weakness and accepted it – but rather that he embraced it and learnt to rejoice in it, in that it showed him his insufficiency and God's sufficiency. Whereas our normal response to hardships is self-pity or moaning, Paul's was glad boasting!

In v10 Paul lists a number of aspects of our broken and fragile world, that all turn him back to God – some are broken-ness within, some are how others relate to him and some are

his relationship with a broken world. Whilst in one sense they are diverse, in another they are united in their ability to show him the power of God at work through his weakness.

We explored various aspects of what a verse like v10 might mean for us as a church, including an open-ness and honesty with each other, a change in how we perceive our weaknesses and hardships (not simply as negative and wanting them to be done away with), a call to respond to them by being brought back to God and the danger of not being humbled by hardships, but rather hardened.

Here are just a few questions that might get things going, please feel very free to ignore / adapt for your group:

What's the context of the letter?

Why is Paul talking about weakness here? Why do you think he catalogues his hardships in the previous chapter? (2 Cor 11v24-28)

In what ways does Paul react to the thorn in his flesh?

Why?

What does this teach us about God's sovereignty over evil?

How do we normally respond to hardships?

What language does Paul use of his response to hardships in his life?

Does this mean we should masochistically enjoy pain? Why? Why not?

How ought we to relate to sufferings etc then

How might v10 change...

- how we relate to one another?
- how we perceive hardships?
- how we pray about hardships?

Glancing ahead to the next chapter – 13v4. Why do you think Paul uses such similar language as he speaks of Christ?