

Warm-up Activity or Question

Choose one and pursue it as a group.

1. **Activity.** Take a minute of silence for each of you to decide – and then go around the group sharing the best meal or dish that you’ve had this year – and where you had it.
2. **Question.** How would you complete this sentence: One fact from my life that might surprise you is _____?

Can You Relate?

In the crowning verses of this week’s great Scripture we find that we only come to know the strength of Christ’s strong arms when we, in our weakness, rely on them. In our weakness, His strength is revealed.

1. **WHAT? A Visit to Heaven.** God led Paul on an extraordinary life; but the opening verses of this section reveal one of the most extraordinary episodes of that extraordinary life. Read aloud verses 1-6 (in the New Living Translation if you have it).
 - Stop and think:
 - If you had an actual experience of being taken up into heaven, what would come next? A NY Times bestseller? A movie deal? Social media stardom? A nationwide tour speaking at churches and Christian colleges and concerts?
 - Contrast that with Paul’s response.
 - Evidence suggests that he did not speak or write of it for fourteen years, until 2nd Corinthians 12 (it apparently occurred ~42-44 AD during the wilderness experience following his conversion).
 - What insight does that give you about the humility of Paul?
 - From where do you think that sort of humility comes?
 - Corinthian culture apparently did not value humility. Our culture does not value humility. Does that give you any insights or reflections on the character of Satan (the great Deceiver)?
 - Even in this 2 Cor. disclosure of the episode, Paul doesn’t reveal what he saw or heard.
 - Why would Paul not have mentioned it? (See vv. 6b-7a in various translations.)
 - Why would God compel him not to reveal what he saw/heard?
 - What is the peril of enticing seekers into the church through signs, wonders, revelations, and miracles?
 - Resulting question: How strong and simple is the Gospel?
 - Answer: Per 2nd Cor 12 – so strong and so simple that God generally chooses not to use wonders and revelations to draw wayward believers back to Himself; but only the Good News of the risen Christ Jesus.
 - Pause. Let that sink in. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you in this moment. How does that make you feel about what Christ did for you on the Cross?
 - Does God’s restraint on the use of wonders/revelations lead you to any insights or reflections on the character of your loving heavenly Father?- 2. **THAT HURTS!** Perhaps no other verse in Scripture more compellingly debunks the destructive distortion of the Gospel by faith healers who assure listeners that any affliction or suffering can be eliminated by those with enough faith. Read verse 8.

- In Christian circles we tend to ask about and share “praise reports” regarding answered prayer (nothing wrong with that!).
 - But is God’s response in not granting a prayer request any less loving than His response when He does? Discuss.
 - Paul shares in verse 9 a great good that God brought about through this ungranted, thrice-repeated, “pleading” the he requested of God.
 - Let’s take three minutes of silence. Think of a much prayed-over episode of pain or loss in your life that was not healed/cured/handled by God.
 - What was God up to in your life in that episode?
 - What good did He draw out of it?
3. **HIS STRENGTH > OUR WEAKNESS.** Math geeks, explain the formula. In two of the most profound verses of Scripture we find that it is only by the depth of our weakness, pain, and suffering that we plumb the depths of His strength. Read verses 9 and 10.
- Can it be that those of us who have suffered most know more intimately the strength of the loving arms of God that carry us through it? Is that true? Discuss.
 - How do those who largely have been spared suffering deepen their knowledge of the love of Christ?
 - Thought for the day: The healthy feel little love for their physician.
 - Slow down. Let that sink in. You are much more likely to feel a deep and abiding affection for the physician who saved your life, right?
 - Discuss: Does every failure, every tragedy, every loss in our lives plumb more deeply for us the unfailing love of God in Christ Jesus?
 - How can this reality shape how you embrace your most painful tragedies and losses?
 - Would you like us to pray?

Live It Out

Let’s take a moment and go around the group to identify what we want to take away from this discussion. Any quiet-time reflection required?

- SOAP quiet-time journaling is a great starting point for drawing closer to God. Consider pledging with someone in the group to do quiet time this week - and texting one another for support as you go through it.
- Try resolving to start each day pursuing in prayer the strength of God to carry you in your weakness. To carry you through your felt pain, suffering, or loss.
- **How?** This week, **before you get out of bed** (making God your first priority), pick up your phone or tablet and play *Strong* by Anne Wilson. **Try closing your eyes as you listen.** Absorb the lyrics (“I’m strong even when I’m weak, Cause the arms of my Savior are holding-on to me”). Play them back in your head through the day. Report next time on how that went. Here is a link to that song with lyrics: <https://youtu.be/iFk2iYq4Zjk>.

Encourage members of the group to commit time to praying for one another, encouraging and meeting one another’s needs, fellowshiping together, and interceding for the other members. Contact absent group members and encourage them to continue to meet and to return together at the next scheduled gathering.