

Sunday School Lesson #1 Paul's Weakness

Submitted by Michael Kelley 2006-07

Introduction: I wish to offer a series of short Sunday School lessons which can be conveniently taught in one or two meetings. The first lesson is about Paul's Weakness which will indirectly tie in with the following lessons regarding the differences between the two "Sermons on the Mount" as taught in the Bible and Book of Mormon.

Lesson #1 Paul's Weakness: In 2 Corinthians 12: 7-9 Paul speaks of a "Thorn in the Flesh", a "Weakness" or "Infirmity" that plagued him which he sought the Lord three times to have it removed.

*2 Corinthians 12:7-9 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a **thorn in the flesh**, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. 9 And he said unto me, **My grace is sufficient** for thee: for my **strength is made perfect in weakness**. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my **infirmities**, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

I've read and heard of several theories as to what this weakness could be and how it may apply to troubles we face in our own lives. Some theories state that Paul's weakness may have been some sort of disease, handicap or affliction. I've wondered if it could have been some sort of a spiritual problem, yielding to some sort of temptation like having a short temper or impatience however other scriptures causes me to rethink that theory.

James 1:13-14 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: 14 But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.

Mosiah 1:119 For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been, from the fall of Adam, and will be, for ever and ever.

While it is indeed a weakness of the natural man to yield unto temptation this is not like Paul's weakness or infirmity that God allows or wishes for us to retain in order to keep us humble. Other theories about Paul's Weakness state that we are not supposed to know what it is, that it is supposed to be some kind of a mystery, however with the aid of the Book of Mormon perhaps a different perspective may be obtained.

*1Nephi 5:229-231 Nevertheless, I do not **write** anything upon plates, save it be that I think it be sacred. 230 And now, if I do err, even did they err of old. 231 Not that I would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the **weakness** which is in me, **according to the flesh**, I would excuse myself.*

*Ether 5:26-28 Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we can not write them; wherefore, when we write, we behold our **weakness**, and stumble because of the **placing of our words**; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall **mock at our words**. 27 And when I had said this, the Lord spake unto me, saying, Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness; and if men come unto me, I will shew unto them their weakness. 28 I give unto men weakness, that they may be humble; and **my grace is sufficient** for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then I will make **weak things become strong** unto them.*

*2Nephi 2:43 And the **weakness of their words** will I make strong in their faith; unto the remembering of my covenant which I made unto thy fathers.*

*2Nephi 15:5 And the things which I have **written in weakness**, will he make strong unto them; for it persuadeth them to do good; it maketh known unto them of their fathers; and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth men to believe in him, and endure to the end, which is life eternal.*

In Ether 5 Moroni is spoken to in much the same language as Paul was... “my grace is sufficient” etc. however for Nephi and Moroni their weaknesses were not diseases or handicaps, but weaknesses in talents... the inability to write eloquently, especially with the limitations of Reformed Egyptian. Since the Nephites seem to rely on writing (see next Lesson #2) as their primary method of teaching this could indeed be a serious concern. On the other hand the Jews typically used word of mouth, public speaking, to teach their people... could God’s ministers to the Jews have a weakness in this talent... their inability to speak with much eloquence?

*Exodus 4:10 And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but **I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue**.*

*Isaiah 28:10-11 For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: 11 For with **stammering lips** and another tongue will he speak to this people.*

What of Paul himself... could his weakness be more related to being able to speak with eloquence? Isaiah 28 seems to foretell of a mighty and strong one who will be preaching to apostate Israel and teach them line upon line with stammering lips.

*1Corr. 2:4 And my **speech** and my **preaching** was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*

*2Corr. 10:9-10 That I may not seem as if I would terrify you by letters. 10 For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his **bodily presence is weak**, and his **speech contemptible**.*

As we see in this last passage Paul had the ability to write powerfully but his appearance was weak and his speech contemptible. Since Paul was very learned and a well schooled Pharisee, I can’t imagine his speech being contemptible because of ignorance or poor education. Rather it seems, according to Paul’s own writings, that he had a speech impediment... perhaps like Moses in being slow of speech, or stuttered as was prophesied in Isaiah. There is another passage alluding to the same thing:

*Galatians 4:13-14 Ye know how through **infirmity of the flesh I preached** the gospel unto you at the first. 14 And my **temptation which was in my flesh** ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.*

This passage would not make any sense if it read something like: “Ye know how through **my blind eyes I preached** the gospel unto you at the first. And my **withered leg** ye despised not, nor rejected. On the other hand if Paul’s weakness was indeed a speech impediment then the passage would make much more sense with: “Ye know how through **my speech impediment I preached** the gospel unto you at the first. And my **weakness in speech** ye despised not, nor rejected;

I am sure much of the reason why Paul wanted this infirmity removed was not for selfish reasons. Imagine trying to minister the gospel unto others with a speech impediment... some might mock or reject his words and lose their salvation! Paul suffered numerous severe beatings and abuses, primarily due to the message he was giving, but also possibly because his speech and appearance was not very charismatic causing some to mock. Sometimes God sends the truth through those whom we would be least likely to respect, so that only God is glorified.

*1 Corinthians 1:27-29 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the **weak** things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; 28 And base things of the world, and things which are **despised**, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: 29 That **no flesh should glory** in his presence.*