

Paul almighty: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

## **Even with Paul's wish to serve, even with his good motives, the Lord does not answer his prayer as he asked or expected.**

by [Joanna M. Adams](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

In the blockbuster movie *Bruce Almighty*, a television newsman is given a set of divine powers, including the capacity to perform such miracles as the parting of a bowl of tomato soup, à la Moses' parting of the Red Sea. When God wants to communicate with Bruce, God displays a telephone number on Bruce's pager. In the weeks after the movie's release, anyone who shared God's seven-digit number was besieged with calls from cranks, practical jokers and a lot of people desperate to connect with God.

I remember a friend telling me about her sister-in-law who had found such a connection in a weekly prayer group, then became insufferable to the other members of the family. "We just can't be spiritual enough for Evelyn," my friend sighed. My friend stopped worrying about spiritual inadequacy, however, when she heard that the prayer group had prayed for a set of color-coordinated kitchen appliances for one of its members. Yes, the appliances arrived at the member's home. But they still needed to be paid for by means of an easy-payment plan.

Long ago, a group of Jewish-Christian missionaries came to Corinth, Greece, and claimed to have a special connection, or "easy line," to God. They criticized the apostle Paul and claimed to have more spiritual power than he had ever dreamed of.

Paul had one of the more extraordinary spiritual experiences a person could imagine, being "caught up in the third heaven," but he never considered praying for such a thing, and after it happened he kept it to himself. He could have impressed people if he had told them about his spectacular trip to paradise, where he was given a revelation of "things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat." Heavenly journeys were all the rage in Paul's day, but his lips remained

sealed for 14 years. When he finally felt compelled to speak of his experience to his erstwhile friends in Corinth, he used the third person, as if he were speaking of someone else.

Remembering Paul today, one wonders what in the world has happened to the perfectly respectable Christian value of humility. Indeed, much more than virtue is involved. The very nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake when those who claim to follow Jesus spend their energies boasting about how good they are, as opposed to the rest of us; how accessible the Almighty is to them, as opposed to the rest of us; how efficacious their prayer life is, as opposed to ours.

After Paul's unexpected ecstatic experience, something else happened that he had not expected or prayed for. A thorn in his flesh was given him by "a messenger of Satan." Why? Twice in one verse, Paul offers what is, to him, the obvious explanation: "To keep me from being too elated." If you get too carried away about yourself—if you impress yourself and want to impress others with your spiritual high-water marks—you are likely to get confused about who really has the power to save and how that power is released in the world. According to the original story, it was not so much in glorious spectacle but in suffering death. Foolishness in the eyes of the world.

So what was that dratted thorn? Oceans of ink have flowed with speculation about it. Was it a physical disability? A mental illness? A spiritual torment or a chronic temptation that Paul constantly had to wrestle to the ground but could never finally defeat? Presumably the Corinthians knew what it was, so he had no need to name it for them. Presumably every Corinthian had his or her own thorn to deal with. So do we. What does the old Joe South song say? "I beg your pardon. I never promised you a rose garden." But thorns we get. They are chronic. They cause pain.

For Paul, who wasn't one to complain much, the problem with the thorn and the reason he had asked the Lord to remove it three times was that he was worried that it might interfere with his purpose in life, which was to share the good news of Christ. No wonder he thought a messenger of Satan had delivered it to him!

Yet even with Paul's wish to serve, even with his good motives, the Lord did not answer his prayer as he had asked or expected. This instead was the answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Good-bye, Paul Almighty. Hello, servant, through whom the power of Christ can shine. Good-bye any

wish for perfection. Hello, hope for every long-suffering, imperfect, demon-fighting, disability-challenged, stage-frightened, anxiety-ridden, on-the-verge-of-a-pity-party servant of the gospel who ever lived. Don't worry about what you bring to the table. If you are called, God's grace will be sufficient for you.

Surely the sufficiency of grace was what lay behind Jesus' sending out his first 12 apostles without anything but a staff: "no bread, no bag, no money in their belts" (Mark 6:8). When those disciples hit the road, they had nothing to show for themselves but the power of Christ. As another friend of mine has put it, isn't it his power, finally, that gets the job done?

During the Civil War, a hastily written prayer was found in the pocket of a fatally wounded soldier. "I received nothing that I asked for, but all I had hoped," it read. "My prayers were answered." Our prayers will also be answered, in God's own time and God's own way, and when they are, I hope we won't brag about it, but rather be humbly grateful and give the glory to God Almighty.