**CHRIST’S POWER MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS**

March 22, 2015

2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10

Key Verse 12:9 “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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

“Believe in yourself.” “Find your inner strength.” “God helps those who help themselves.” You’ve heard those sayings many times over. They are very common in commencement addresses, self-help books, and motivational speakers. They are the theme for movies, stories, and talk shows. But how contrary they are to what today’s passage says! They point us away from Christ’s power and direct us to our own strength. So today, rather than dwelling in our strengths, let’s join the Apostle Paul and boast of our weaknesses. For Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness. What people want is escape from weakness, not power in weakness. People want power to escape weakness, but Christianity offers power to endure weakness in love.

Let’s first clarify what Paul means by weaknesses. Paul is not talking about a kind of behavior--like we might say he has a weakness for lust; or she has a weakness for overeating. Paul is not talking about bad choices that we make. He is not saying, “The power of Christ is perfected in my bad choices. Or I will all the more gladly boast of my bad choices.” Paul is not praising the man who says, “I am such a weak Christian. I can’t help but give in to my sinful desires. Why bother fighting them? I might as well give in sooner rather than later. Doesn’t my weakness make God’s grace look even better by forgiving someone who sins as easily as I do?” That is abusing God’s forgiveness as a license for sin. Weaknesses here are not imperfect behaviors. They are not moral failures. They are circumstances and situations and experiences and wounds that make us look weak; things we would probably get rid of if we had the human strength. Weaknesses are not sins but experiences and situations and circumstances that are beyond our control.

Look at verse 12:10, “For Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses . . .” And now he gives examples of what he means by weaknesses: “. . . in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.” So the weaknesses include those things like hardships and difficulties that from a human perspective seem to get in the way of our serving Jesus and our neighbor. We gain a clearer understanding of weakness from 11:23-27. After Paul left Corinth, so-called “super-apostles” infiltrated the congregation masquerading as apostles of Christ. They boasted their strong credentials, their eloquence, their success, their high price. But they did not preach the same Jesus as Paul did. They did not preach Christ crucified for sinners. They had a different spirit, a different gospel, which was really no gospel at all. So to counter their boasting about their strength, Paul does some boasting of his own. He boasts of his weakness as he writes in 11:23-27, “I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”

If Paul had mighty strength, he would have called down fire on those who were persecuting him like Elijah and it would demonstrate that God was with him. If Paul had mighty strength, he would make his body like steel so that all the beatings may be nothing. If Paul had mighty strength, he would not have to eat many days and not feel hungry. If Paul had mighty strength, he would stay up many nights and not feel tired. But in reality we don’t have that kind of human strength.

Paul goes on to show just how un-heroic he is. He tells them about the time, just after he became a Christian, when he was lowered in a basket, in a very unflattering escape from Damascus, rather than risk death at the hands of the Jews. He is no hero. He is just an ordinary person like us, who, when the going gets tough, runs away. Paul could do nothing except depend on God and receive help from others. He seems to be a coward, and weak, like a bird in a cage. He became a basket case, or “basket Paul.” Paul wanted to show that Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness.

False apostles shared mysterious visions as the basis to claim spiritual authority. In order to silence them, Paul mentioned his own vision. Once, Paul was caught up to paradise. This could be a description of his experience on the road to Damascus. Or it could be something that happened in Arabia when he was searching the Scriptures to understand what he had experienced. But whatever it was, it involved an intense experience of God’s presence that took him outside himself in some way to experience things that are indescribable. But even then he is not going to boast about such an experience because to do so would make him a real fool. So why doesn’t he want to use this experience to convince the Corinthians? Because these sorts of experience can so easily be counterfeited. Many people would boast loudly and immediately about having such a vision, or even about a special dream. Some arrogant people sought direct revelation from God through isolated prayer, and after having some kind of experience, became cult leaders. In order to have sound faith, our faith should be based on obedience to the word of God, the Bible, as it is lived out in Christian community. So Paul didn’t boast about his experience, he spoke as if it happened to someone else (5-6).

How easy it would have been for Paul to think that he was already rising above the ordinary hardships and troubles of earthly life because he was given such a privilege. But verse 7 shows what actually happened: “To keep me from becoming conceited (a better translation would be “to keep me from exalting myself” NASB) because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” Now this thorn in the flesh (whether it was some physical problem or some relentless enemies) is one of the weaknesses he is talking about. We know this because when he prayed that God would take it away in verse 8 (“three times I pleaded with the Lord”) the Lord answers in verse 9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So the thorn in the flesh is one of the weaknesses we are talking about.

Why did God not take away the thorn? First, it was to keep Paul from becoming proud. God kept Paul in touch with his limitations. God did not give Paul his thorn. The thorn was a messenger of Satan. God allowed the devil to afflict Paul. Someone noted that at times both God and the Devil may want the same thing for opposite reasons. Satan wants us to give up on life and God, become bitter and cease living for God. God sometimes shapes his saints on Satan’s thorn. He wants us to triumph over our weaknesses and afflictions, and through them to become more compassionate and effective in encouraging others. Satan wanted to make Paul miserable and turn him away from the faith and the ministry and the value of the visions he had seen. But God wanted to make Paul humble and turn him away from self-exaltation. So God appointed the thorn of Satan for the work of salvation.

Second, God has a good purpose in his thorn. God says, “My power is made perfect in this weakness.” In other words, God is saying, “I have a purpose in what is happening to you.” Our weaknesses are designed by God for our good. What is the purpose of such weaknesses? Is there a goal or an aim for why the weaknesses come? Why insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles? Why can’t I find a job? Why am I trapped in this awful marriage? Why does my dad have cancer? Why do I have no friends? Why is nothing working in my life? What is that purpose?

God’s purpose in our weaknesses is to glorify the grace and power of his Son. This is the main point of verse 9. Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God’s design is to make you a showcase for Jesus’ power. But not necessarily the way people demand: not by getting rid of all our weaknesses; but by giving strength to endure and even rejoice in sufferings. We should let God be God. If he wills to show the perfection of his Son’s power in our weakness instead of by our escape from weakness, then he knows best, and we can trust him. Hebrews 11:34-37 is a good guide here. It says that by faith some escaped the edge of the sword (v. 34) and by faith some were killed by the sword (v. 37). By faith some stopped the mouths of lions, and by faith others were sawed in two. By faith some were mighty in war, and by faith others suffered chains and imprisonment. But their weakness was turned to strength. The ultimate purpose of God in our weakness is to reveal Christ’s power and glorify God. The deepest need that you and I have in weakness and adversity is not quick relief, but the well-grounded confidence that what is happening to us is part of the greatest purpose of God in the universe—the glorification of the grace and power of his Son—the grace and power that bore him to the cross and kept him there until the work of God was done. That is what God is building into our lives. That is the meaning of weakness, insults, hardships, and persecution.

Look at verse 12:10. “That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul’s point is that “whenever he is weak, then he is strong”; not “if he is weak, then he is strong.” Paul does not seek to suffer. He is not saying the weaker he is, the stronger he is. He is saying that Christ’s power is present in his suffering, whenever and wherever and however suffering should come his way. God’s power could have been displayed in two different ways: He could remove Paul’s thorn. He could give Paul the strength to endure the thorn. What was a greater encouragement to the Corinthians: To hear of Paul’s vision or to see Christ’s strength in Paul’s thorn? I believe it is the latter. The greatest example of strength in weakness is the cross. Through the utter weakness of the God-forsaken cross, Christ Jesus worked out his mighty act of salvation for us. Through the weakness of the cross he saved us. That grace will never fail us, no matter how weak or frail or despised our earthly life seems. For the weaker we appear to the world, the more clearly God’s power shows how great his grace in Christ is.

Charles Spurgeon was a great preacher from the 19th century England. He suffered much in his lifetime in serving God. First, Spurgeon knew the adversity of family pain. His wife, when she was 33 years old, became a virtual invalid, and he had to take care of his sickly wife for the next 27 years. Spurgeon also knew unbelievable physical suffering. He suffered from gout, rheumatism and Bright’s disease (inflammation of the kidneys). His first attack of gout came in at the age of 35. For over half his ministry Spurgeon dealt with ever increasingly recurrent pain in his joints that sometimes he had no strength even to stand at the pulpit. On top of the physical suffering, Spurgeon had to endure a lifetime of public ridicule and slander, sometimes of the most vicious kind. One newspaper said, “His style is that of the vulgar colloquial, varied by rant ... All the most solemn mysteries of our holy religion are by him rudely, roughly and impiously handled. Common sense is outraged and decency disgusted. His rantings are interspersed with coarse anecdotes.” His fellow ministers criticized him. One said, “I have—most solemnly have—my doubts as the Divine reality of his conversion.” Finally, he struggled with depression all his life. It is not easy to imagine the brilliant, full-of-energy Spurgeon suffer from depression. It happened for the first time when he was 24. He said, “My spirits were sunken so low that I could weep by the hour like a child, and yet I knew not what I wept for.” Not only that, he knew the frustration and disappointment from lukewarm members. He said, “Their remarks after a sermon are enough to stagger you ... You have been pleading as for life or death and they have been calculating how many seconds the sermon occupied, and grudging you the odd five minutes beyond the usual hour.” In spite of all these sufferings and persecutions Spurgeon endured to the end, and was able to preach mightily to around 10,000,000 people. He saw that his sufferings like depression functioned like Paul’s thorn to keep him humble lest he be lifted up in himself. Truly Christ’s power was made perfect in his weakness.

Let’s pray for Jesus to use our weaknesses—not the kind of weakness that stifles faith or promotes sin and spiritual laziness. Let’s pray that our weaknesses may display Christ’s power and the full sufficiency of his grace. Let’s pray for Jesus to use our weakness to keep us close to him, dependent on him, trusting only in him and his grace and power. For Christ’s power is made perfect in weakness.