

7.26.09

Finding Strength in Weakness 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Extraordinary spiritual experiences often come at a personal cost. When Jacob wrestled with God, he hobbled away, limping for the rest of his life.

Paul reluctantly shares with the church in Corinth an experience he had of being caught up to Paradise, but to keep him from being too puffed up or spiritually condescending (which was an issue for a number of folks in that church), Paul says he was given “a thorn in his flesh.” Paul calls this thorn “a messenger of Satan to torment me.” Listen to verses 8-10,

“Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but The Lord said to me, **‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’** So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

In certain circles there appears to be a belief that it is God’s will that everyone should be healthy, happy, and have no problems or struggles and that if someone prays and is not healed it is because a person lacks faith. This inaccurate thinking runs contrary to Paul’s experience and to the experience of many faithful Christians including some of us or our loved ones. There is no doubt Paul had great faith, one could debate if anyone had more, nevertheless his repeated request for the removal of the thorn or stake was not answered by the thorn being removed.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the thorn or stake was for Paul. “*A stake in the flesh*” was a common figure of speech in Paul’s day for excruciating physical pain. The thorn could be physical such as epilepsy, migraines, malaria, a speech impediment, or a vision problem. We know that Paul, while able to withstand great physical hardships such as beatings, imprisonments, and a shipwreck, was not the picture of health. A couple passages hint at an issue with his eyes, Galatians 4:13-15 says, “*You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me...I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your own eyes and given them to me.*” Then at the Galatians 6:11, Paul writes himself, “*See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand.*” So it is possible Paul had vision troubles.

Reading his letters, others have guessed the thorn could be emotional, such as depression or hysteria. Perhaps the thorn is a figure of speech and is troublesome people, spiritual snares or temptations, or even persecution. Regardless of what the thorn is, Paul's prayer was not answered by the thorn being removed. This is like our own experience.

A loved one has cancer or Alzheimer's or diabetes or heart trouble and we pray and pray but the condition remains. We have addictions, arthritis, allergies, chronic pain, even shrapnel that remains in our body for life. There are many types of thorns including chronic unemployment or underemployment, loneliness, depression, family, marital, or relational issues - the list is long because **we all have thorns. Our thorns come in different sizes and shapes, some seem to have more barbs than others, but we all have them.**

At this point someone may be thinking, *"If God isn't going to remove our thorns when we pray for that to happen, what's the use? What's the use of praying? What's the use of God?"* I think the answer to that questioning begins by noting that it is correct that Paul's prayer for the thorn to be removed was not answered, but Paul's prayer was answered. The answer God gives is, **'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'**

I try not to get too much into grammar on a Sunday morning, but it is important to note that this phrase is in the perfect tense denoting finality, what the Lord said to Paul was not subject to change or revision. The perfect tense of the word indicates that Paul still heard him saying, **'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'** The Lord's promise is that whenever a thorn, whenever a messenger of Satan, afflicts us, The Lord will give us sufficient strength to bear up and to cope with what must be faced.

So Paul no longer prays for the removal of the thorn, the thorn is still with him, but he has the Lord's answer still ringing in his ears. If Paul had a ring tone on his cell phone, it might be that sentence set to music. **'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'**

When we pull back from Paul's life to the New Testament, we discover that the power of God that is demonstrated in and through Jesus, the power of God that raised Christ from the dead, is **power in weakness**. That is why Paul wrote in the previous chapter in 2 Corinthians 11:30, *"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."* That is a new model for macho, "Look how weak I am!" I think what Paul is

really getting at is that God's grace is most easily noticed in the awareness of our weakness and need. This is at the heart of the gospel.

Paul's ministry was marked by pain, hardships, and trial and was only possible through the power of God. He says elsewhere, *"But we have this treasure (meaning the gospel) in clay jars, so that it may be clear that this **extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.**"*

It is the all surpassing power of God that enables Paul's life and ministry.

That same power of God is available to us as well because like Paul we are cracked pots...clay jars, if you will, we have our thorns if you prefer – none of us is perfect. We all have things that are wrong with us. None of us is perfect. All of us are inadequate in one way or another. There is only one God and it is not you. And since you are not God, you're something less than God and God's God and you're you and that's that.

Perhaps we are made this way to help us learn to depend on the Lord. Where human strength abounds, the effects of divine power may be overlooked or forgotten. That is why the Israelites were strongly warned in Deuteronomy 8:18-19, about the temptation to pride and self-sufficiency especially in times of prosperity *"Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the Lord your God, **for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.**"* The whole practice of tithing and giving proportionally to the Lord is a reminder that it is God's power that enables us to have whatever we have. That trust gets tested in challenging times when bills and debts are up and income is down, and yet if we continue to put the Lord first and trust in him, we will see God act in ways to sustain and strengthen our faith.

Rather than fearing situations or tasks that seem to big for us to handle, we can actually thank the Lord for them because it is then that we have to fall back on God's grace and power and stop thinking or trying to do everything on our own strength. The Lord loves to pour grace out upon us when we are feeling overwhelmed or weak and turn to the Lord for help.

I do want to be clear that when Paul writes about God's power being made perfect in weakness he doesn't mean he is timid or lacking in resolve, weakness is his term for the *frailties* of human existence and the *adversities* he faces in living and sharing the good news of Jesus. What Paul discovered through his suffering is that the grace and power of God intersect with our lives at the point of our weakness and need.

Our afflictions may draw us closer and closer throughout our lives to the grace of Christ. Part of that means accepting that *in the present world* there is injustice, inequality, evil, and violence that must be struggled against and fought but which may not be fully overcome. Precious people are often casualties of this struggle as we saw this week. In the present world we may suffer from ill health or disease or personality disorders that neither intercession, counseling, or medication is able to overcome. What are Christians to do in these circumstances of pain and suffering – what we to do with these thorns?

Pray that the Lord will deliver us as Paul prayed. Maybe God will deliver us as God sometimes does, but we are mindful that all instances of deliverance in this life are partial. Something is going to get all of us eventually, no matter how strong our faith or how healthy our habits. If God doesn't deliver us, then what? It is all too easy to allow these things to eat away at our lives until we become embittered and wallowing in self-pity.

Those of us who are in Christ are to allow our thorns to pin us closer to Christ who gives grace to the suffering to bear the pain. That is why Paul wrote in Romans 5:3-6, *“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that **suffering produces endurance**, and endurance produces **character**, and character produces **hope**, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still **weak**, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”*

We still see this dynamic at work in the world today. More than 1,000 people gathered in Tennessee at the end of June to pay tribute to Christian aid worker Chris Leggett at his memorial service.

For six years, Chris Leggett lived and worked in the West African country of Mauritania. The 39-year-old teacher who worked with a foundation was shot and killed by Muslim extremists with links to Al-Qaeda.

"What he believed had a lot to do with why he died," longtime friend Stan Gibson said. The murderers claimed Leggett was trying to convert Muslims to Christianity.

"You know, a lot of just what Chris did was love people. He just helped them in practical, everyday things," Gibson added. "And so, a lot of times, certainly it's easy for us to think about things in eternity. But, you know, you see what Christ did, and a lot of times what he did, was he just met practical, felt needs in order to share his love."

Jay Leggett, Chris' father said his son did not die in vain.

"Our family's great hope has been that Chris will not have died in vain, but that through his physical death, thousands will continue to be challenged passionately to join him in demonstrating God's love," he said.

Leggett leaves behind a wife and four children. His family issued this statement.

"In a spirit of love, we express our forgiveness for those who took away the life of our remarkable son despite this terrible event. We harbor no ill will for the Mauritanian people. On a spiritual level, we forgive those responsible, asking only that justice be applied against those who killed our son."

At his son's funeral, Chris' dad fought back tears as uttered difficult, yet faith filled words of hope.

"To God be the glory. To God be the glory," he said. "Great things He has done and great things He will do."

God's power comes to its full strength in our weakness. A closing story: While serving with Operation Mobilization in India in 1967, tuberculosis forced Doug Nichols into a sanitarium for several months. He writes, "I did not yet speak the language, but I tried to give Christian literature written in their language to the patients, doctors, and nurses. Everyone politely refused. I sensed many weren't happy about a rich American (to them all Americans are rich) being in a free, government-run sanitarium. (They didn't know I was just as broke as they were!)

The first few nights I woke around 2:00 a.m. coughing. One morning during my coughing spell, I noticed one of the older and sicker patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit on the edge of the bed and try to stand, but in weakness would fall back into bed. I didn't understand what he was trying to do. He finally fell back into bed exhausted. I heard him crying softly.

The next morning I realized what the man had been trying to do. He had been trying to get up and walk to the bathroom! The stench in our ward was awful. Other patients yelled insults at the man. Angry nurses moved him roughly from side to side as they cleaned up the mess. One nurse even slapped him. The old man curled up in a ball and wept.

The next night I again woke up coughing. I noticed the man across the aisle sit up again and try to stand. Like the night before, he fell back whimpering. I don't like bad smells, and I didn't want to become involved, but I got out of bed and went over to him. When I touched his shoulder, his eyes opened wide with fear. I smiled, put my arms under him and picked him up. He was very light due to old age and advanced TB. I

carried him to the washroom, which was just a filthy small room with a hole in the floor. I stood behind him with my hands under his arm pits as he took care of himself. After he was finished, I picked him up, carried him back to his bed. As I laid him down, he kissed me on the cheek, smiled, and said something I couldn't understand.

The next morning another patient woke me and handed me a steaming cup of tea. He motioned with his hands that he wanted one of my Christian tracts. As the sun rose other patients approached and indicated they also wanted the booklets I had tried to distribute before. Throughout the day, nurses, interns, and doctors asked for literature. Weeks later an evangelist who spoke the language visited me, and as he talked with others he discovered that several had put their trust in Christ as Savior as a result of reading the literature. What did it take to reach these people with the gospel? **It wasn't health or strength or the ability to speak their language or a persuasive talk.** I simply took a trip to the bathroom.

Like the Apostle Paul, Doug Nichols wasn't healthy, strong or a persuasive speaker in India, but God's strength is power in weakness.

There is a God and you're not it and neither am I. There is a God who gives us grace to endure weakness, illness, insults, hardship, adversity, illness and even death because when we are weak, then the power God can be demonstrated in us and through us. We are all inadequate, and if you don't think so just ask someone who knows you, but we can praise the Lord who made us this way because God's got enough adequacy, power, and strength for you, me, and anyone who is willing to humble him or her self and ask for it. So go ahead. Ask. Because God's **grace is sufficient for you, for the Lord's power is made perfect in weakness.'**