

St. Michael's Church
 Charleston, SC
 Preacher: The Rev. Randy Shirley
 8 July 2018

Strength in Weakness
 2 Corinthians 12:2-10
 Mark 6:1-6

Our readings today, prompt me to say a word about weakness – as a path to strength. And I find Paul's letter to the Corinthians helping us to better understand this. So please open your bibles to our first reading this morning, 2 Corinthians, Chapter 12, verses 2-10.

This is one of those remarkable passages in the Bible where Paul gives us a personal glimpse into what it was really like for him to serve the Lord. It's an insight into his own life and into his ministry. In verse 10 of Chapter 12, Paul gives us this wonderful awareness into a principle that he has discovered as a follower of Jesus Christ. Paul says: When I am weak, then I am strong. In my life, I have found these to be eight of the most profound words in the Bible. When I am weak, then I am strong. Now how is that possible?

You see, I grew up seeing weakness as something to be discouraged and even joked about. Some of you may remember the comic strip of the 97-pound weakling getting sand kicked in his face. Yes, I'm speaking of Charles Atlas and his Bodybuilding ad... found in practically every magazine printed between the 1940s and 80s. No one wants to be the 97-pound weakling when we are convinced that the stronger we are... the better we become... believing that might makes right. But, what does Paul mean when he talks of weakness? And how can it possibly be that our experience of weakness would actually be the point of our greatest spiritual strength?

So, let's focus in on this together to hear Paul's life and ministry where he discovered that his experience of weakness is the most spiritually useful thing in all his life. I find this to be most encouraging. Because in my life, I have weakness. And like me, is it possible...that you too...have weakness in your life? So, it's important for us to understand what this experience of weakness is, and not to be afraid of it, but rather seek to discover God's purpose through it... Let's look into our text to better understand three points about biblical weakness by answering three questions:

First; What is weakness;

Secondly, Where does weakness come from; and,

Finally, What is the purpose of weakness?

What is weakness? What is weakness to a man like Paul? A man of great strength, courage, and stamina. Paul knew more about enduring physical pain than most of us will ever know. Just glance back at chapter 11, verses 24 and 25. Paul tells us of some: Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was ship-wrecked: a night and a day I was adrift at sea. A man who

endures all this and presses on in life and ministry has my attention. So what does this man mean when he talks about weakness?

The weakness Paul refers to, he identifies in verse 10 as: insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. As I think back on the insults, the nasty ways that people have remark on my faith, my lifestyle; the hardships where I felt trapped; the persecutions from others because of my professed Christian identity; and the calamities, those difficult and troubles times that overcome me with stress and tension; I find that I am Weak.

So now we know what Paul means by weakness, but where does such weakness come from? Let's take Paul's thorn in the flesh as an example to find his answer to this question. In verses 1–4, Paul describes what amazing revelations of God's glory he had been given — he was caught up into paradise and heard things that cannot be told on earth. 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 Paul from becoming conceited by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given to him in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to annoy him. Now this thorn in the flesh, we don't know what it was. Whether it was some physical problem or some relentless enemy.... we do not know.

But what we do know... it is one of the weaknesses he is talking about. Insults, hardships, persecution, calamities; whatever the thorn, in Paul's life, it is painful. But where does this weakness, this pain, come from? Paul calls it a "messenger of Satan;" given to harass him. So, one clear answer is that some weaknesses come from Satan. His aim is destruction and death and misery. But it's not that simple is it? One of my favorite Theologians, John Piper puts it this way. Satan is not the only one at work here. God is at work. This thorn is not just the work of Satan to destroy. It is the work of God to save. You see, Paul's revelations in paradise made him vulnerable to pride. So, God uses the destructive intentions of Satan for Paul's holiness.

By answering where weakness comes from we found the answer for the purpose of weakness. My friends, where Satan wants to make Paul resentful and turn him away from the faith, and the ministry, and the value of the visions he had seen; God uses weakness to make Paul humble and turn him away from pride. This painful thorn in Paul's flesh becomes a sanctifying effect in his life. Paul is stating that this weakness, the effect of what God gave in his life was for the purpose of moving him forward into the likeness of Jesus.

I get it... I know what weakness is, where it comes from and what its purpose... But for me, the difficulty has been applying this teaching to my life... you see, it's hard for me at times to see how Satan can be involved in something that is given by God. When I find myself in difficult circumstances, I find by instinct, I'm looking for a simple explanation as to why this is happening. If God is at work sanctifying me than I can thank him for my weakness and I can embrace what he's doing.

Or, if Satan is attacking me, I can put on the full armor of God as Paul tells us in Ephesians and take my stand against the devil's schemes. You see, when I am weak, I find myself asking the question of what is going on? Am I under spiritual attack – am I being tested?

There never seems to be a simple answer. Let me put this in perspective. A few years ago, I was preparing for a men's hike with my previous parish. As a hike leader on past hikes, I was again ready to give testimonies and teachings only to be taken out days before the hike for a hernia operation. During my recovery, I had several faithful friends come to visit. Some would

say, this is a spiritual attack; how the enemy was at work to keep me from God's work on the hike. And then the next visit, there would be those who would say, What a blessing to have the rest from work, and the time to spend at home recovering with family. Whenever we seek simplistic explanations for difficult events we end up with doubtful interpretations.

Just two weeks ago, Father David preached on Job. We found Satan's hand behind all of the suffering and lost in Job's life. Then we find that behind it all, the hand of God is at work leading Job into the most profound encounter with the Creator Almighty. Or, think of Joseph and his brothers who sold him into slavery, and yet God's hand again is in it for a much wider purpose than Joseph could ever imagine.

How amazing that Joseph looks his brothers in the eyes and says, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And when we think about the cross, Jesus beaten and nailed to the wood, the work of wicked men, Jesus crying out at the ninth hour, My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me? And yet we find that God has planned His redemption of all creation since the beginning of time, and that is the reason why Jesus came into the world. So, let's keep this in mind when it comes to pain within our own lives. And let's not give simplistic explanations... but rather look again to Paul, in verse 8. Paul says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, about this weakness, that it should leave me."

And how does the Lord respond?... The Lord answers in verse 9, "My power is made perfect in weakness." Not what Paul expected... This is why the truth of God's sovereign grace is so precious in the midst of our weakness, and why Paul points us to do two things:

First, Seek God in Prayer for relief. That's what Paul did until he got word from the Lord. God does not delight in your suffering. Satan does, and he must be resisted. Seeking God in prayer with our total reliance on His grace gives power and strength in weakness. In addition to prayer we must Trust God. God's purpose in our weaknesses is to glorify the grace and power of his Son. This is the main point of verses 9–10. 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's power.

In closing: I want us to imagine the power of the Apostle Paul pouring himself out in prayer. And that God did not give Paul what he asked for. You know, Jesus has been there. More so than the insults and persecutions He received from those in his hometown as heard in our gospel reading. You see, in Hebrews, Chapter 2, we are told that Jesus was made perfect through suffering.

Jesus was tested and tempted in every way just as we are; yet he was without sin. When I read of Paul praying, pleading, three times with the Lord to take the thorn away, his pain, his weakness; it makes me think of Jesus pleading three times in the garden of Gethsemane for the Father to take His cup from Him. The cup was not taken from Jesus.

Instead of a Thorn in His Flesh, Jesus received a crown of thorns. And, God's purpose was accomplished. Imagine all that was accomplished through suffering, it's how Jesus became Savior; it's how Paul had the ministry he had. Let's never underestimate what God may accomplish through our weakness. When I am Weak, Then I am Strong.