

PENTECOST 6

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II Corinthians 12:-2-10

We Are Weak but He Is Strong

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

The Apostle Paul was **the most famous preacher and evangelist in the early church**. Much of the New Testament consists of letters from Paul to members of the churches he started.

So we might expect that God would have kept this important servant in top physical and mental condition at all times, so that nothing would distract him from his important ministry.

But the last half of today's lesson from II Corinthians shows us that this clearly wasn't the case. Instead, we read that,

"... to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me... Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

"...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."

Paul had a, quote, "thorn in the flesh". And ever since this was written, Christians have speculated about what exactly this might have referred to. But we'll never know, and that's okay. Because that makes it **easier to relate Paul's experience** to whatever "thorn in the flesh" you or I might be afflicted with.

Whatever the problem, Paul, like any good Christian, knows that he should *"take it to the Lord in prayer."*

And so he does. In fact, he has prayed three times to God to remove the thorn, but it's still with him.

It would've been easy for Paul to think that God doesn't care, or that he doesn't really listen to prayers.

But Paul saw it differently. He knew that the Lord had answered his prayers. It just wasn't the answer he wanted.

The Lord said to Paul, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Paul hears these words, and is able to be content with his hardships. Because he knows, *"whenever I am weak, then I am strong."* In other words, **when I am weak, then the grace of Christ is able to enter my life and be my strength.**

This is **the paradox of the cross**. The power of God is revealed not through human strength, but rather through weakness.

If you pay attention to the Gospel's, you'll see that it's **not** the Jesus who turns water into wine, or the Jesus who feeds 5,000 who draws all people unto himself.

It is **rather the Jesus on the cross, rejected, a failure, weak** – it is this Jesus who, down through the ages, has drawn people to salvation.

Through the cross, a symbol of weakness and powerlessness, God has chosen to reveal the power of his redeeming love.

"When I am weak, then I am strong. For Christ's power is made perfect in weakness." But how does this work out in the real world? Human wisdom demands that we **try to hide our weaknesses**, so we can get ahead in a world dominated by competition.

But **this denial of our true condition, this refusal to see our own weakness**, can become a **barrier to living within the grace of God**. Because **when I am strong – when I am self-sufficient – I don't much need God's grace, do I?**

Oh sure, I'll still go to church and call myself a Christian, but **my faith won't be much more than window-dressing. It's not really important to me..**

It's easy to think we're in control of our lives when things are going well. We think we can take care of everything ourselves. And then the thorn in the flesh crops up. It might be a sudden pain in the chest, a lump on the neck, financial worries, relationship struggles, or the loss of a job.

Whatever it might be, these thorns can **bring our human vulnerability and frailty crashing in on us**.

But here's a surprising truth: it's often **just at this point** that we experience a **true growth in our faith, and a strengthening of our relationship with Christ**.

It is when we come face to face with our own powerlessness, that we can move towards complete reliance on Christ.

Then we can truly hear these words, *"My grace is sufficient for you."*

Friends, the reality is, **we all have some sort of thorn in our lives**. None of us can sail through life very long without these **reminders of our mortality and our powerlessness**.

What our Corinthians text tells us this morning is, *"Don't ignore or deny the thorn in your life. Don't pretend that you can go it alone. Don't pretend that 'everything is fine, thank you'."* Instead, recognize the thorn. Admit your weakness to Christ.

And then you too will **experience the truth of the paradox**, that **"Christ's power is made perfect in weakness."** Then you too will know, **with your heart as well as with your head**, that **God's grace is always sufficient for you**.

But I believe that there is a **deeper, more profound way** to think about this thorn in the flesh.

You see, there is a sense in which all of us **live our whole lives with a nagging thorn, and that is the thorn of sin**.

And **this is the one thorn that most people**, including probably most Christians, **would rather ignore, or at least minimize**. But we Lutherans just can't ignore this particular thorn. It's so central to our

faith, and **recognizing the thorn of sin is absolutely crucial if we are to experience the joy of God's salvation.**

It's become popular to caricature all Lutherans, and especially Scandinavian Lutherans, as **gloomy and guilt-burdened.** We're criticized for being **too hung-up on sin** and **too sorry about being sinners.**

No doubt many Lutherans over the generations have overdone the outward manifestations of a sense of guilt, with **postures that scream "low self-esteem"**, and so we've been easy targets for humor.

☺ *You know how you can tell which one's the outgoing Lutheran at coffee hour? He's the one who's looking down at the other person's shoes when talking.*

Garrison Keillor plays this stereotype to the hilt, and he never fails to get a laugh. Even we Scandinavian Lutherans enjoy the joke. *"Yeah, we're really gloomy and uptight, aren't we?"*

Like most stereotypes, this one grows from a kernel of truth. You see, hand in hand with Martin Luther's **re-discovery of the RADICAL NATURE OF GRACE** was his **re-emphasis of the RADICAL NATURE OF OUR SINFULNESS.**

As we say on Sunday morning, *"We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves."* Our self-understanding must always start here:

We are sinners! Hopelessly trapped in sin!

We aren't just weak.... We are, in fact, powerless over our own eternal fate. There's absolutely nothing we can do to make God accept us. Nothing!

It's this realization – it's this confession – that acknowledges our **absolute dependence on God's grace** and **sends us running to the foot of the cross, there to throw ourselves on the mercy of God.**

But, **here's an important thing to remember.**

This theology of ours **doesn't mean that we continue to wallow in self-loathing or guilt.**

We don't **spend our whole life wringing our hands in helplessness**, as if Christ's death on the cross didn't really take away my sin.

So in that sense, the stereotype of the gloomy, depressed Lutheran is false, or at least, it should be.

Yes, it's true that we begin from the fact of our sinfulness and powerlessness. But **then we lift our gaze from our own weakness** and **behold the marvelous power of Christ working within us.**

And that puts a smile on our faces and a spring in our steps.

It's precisely because we **begin with a view of ourselves and all people as sinful** – it's because we **don't play around with ideas of Christianity as a self-improvement project** – it's **because of this recognition of our true condition** that we can **move beyond all of that into joyful service in the world.**

Am I unworthy of God's grace?

Yes.

Am I captive to sin and unable to free myself?

Absolutely. But God's grace is sufficient, even for me. And God's grace has made me a new creation. So how can I be gloomy about life?

Or, in the words of a hymn, "*How can I keep from Singing?*"

Only when I admit my weakness can the **mighty, saving grace of God** come flooding in to my life, **bringing with it a deep and abiding joy.**

And you know, God's grace is so wonderful that **sometimes He chooses to simply blow away my stubborn resistance, my childish sense of self-sufficiency and show me my weakness so that his grace can enter in.**

And when that happens, then **Paul's experience can become our experience.**

Then we, too, can grow to be content with our weaknesses, hardships, and calamities for the sake of Christ.

Confident about God's strength, we can be humble about our own, knowing that "*whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*"

You see, the children's song has it right, and not only for children: "*they are weak but He is strong.*"

When we can **see our own weakness**, when we **acknowledge our total dependence on the savior**, then THE POWER OF CHRIST WILL DWELL WITHIN US.

Then we too will **hear the savior say to each of us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** Amen