

STRENGTH in WEAKNESS!

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[0:00] This morning, I want us to give some consideration to the passage of Scripture which we read earlier, 2 Corinthians 12, verses 1-10.

! In particular, I want to focus on the words that Jesus spoke to Paul in verse 9.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

If I were to give the sermon a title, it would be Strength in Weakness. And we're going to open this up under three headings, Paul's weakness, our weakness, and Christ's weakness.

First of all, Paul's weakness. In this passage of Scripture, Paul tells the story of a great vision which God gave him.

[1:15] He says, I know a man who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Now, he speaks about it in the third person.

I know a man who experienced that. But when we get to verse 7, it becomes clear that he's talking about himself.

Paul says, So, Paul had this vision when he was caught up, as he says, to the third heaven.

Or as he later puts it, caught up to paradise. He tells us that he heard inexpressible things.

Things that man is not permitted to tell. In many ways, it sounds similar to the vision that was given to John, which led to the book of Revelation.

[2:33] Clearly, this was an astonishing supernatural experience, which lifted Paul up from all normal experience into the very presence of God, where he saw things and heard things that most human beings never see or hear.

Paul says that he could boast about that. But he doesn't. He says, instead, he will only boast about this weakness.

He goes on to explain that having had this great vision in which he was caught up to paradise, he was brought down to earth quickly and perhaps painfully.

He describes what happened. Now, we're not told what this thorn in the flesh was, but it was clearly some physical ailment or illness which affected his body.

The evil one was allowed to torment Paul in some way, similar to what we find in the first two chapters of the book of Job.

[4:13] Now, what he describes is a situation with which we might be familiar. It often seems like after a mountaintop experience, we are brought crashing down afterwards.

Perhaps we've experienced the highs of the presence of God in some great spiritual experience, and then we're brought down to the lows of our frail human existence.

In verse 8, Paul tells us that three times he asked God to take away that thorn in the flesh, to take away that illness or ailment or whatever it was, but God refused to take it away.

And it's in that context that we come to the theme that I want to focus on. Listen to verses 9 and 10. Now, this is after Paul has asked for the thorn in the flesh to be taken away, and God said no, and then we read this.

But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[5:45] Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

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. Notice what Christ says.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

And Paul says, When I am weak, then I am strong. What does that mean? What does that mean? [6:46] Well, I think it means that when we are strong and healthy, and everything in our lives is going well, we are inclined to depend upon ourselves.

But when we are weak, or sick, or afraid, or in trouble, we suddenly realize how dependent we are on God.

I have heard many people say to me over the years as a minister, that it was only when they were at the end of themselves and their own strength, whether sick, or weak, or overwhelmed, it was only when they reached that point that they realized that the Lord was near and that he would give them the strength they needed to see things through.

When we are weak, then in Christ we are strong. When we know that there is nothing in ourselves to help us, we are more likely to turn to the Lord and find help from Him.

Perhaps you know something of that experience in your own lives or in the lives of others. The second point is our weakness.

[8:25] Like Paul, we are often in difficulty, not least because, like Paul, we have an enemy, the devil.

As believers, we should not expect always an easy passage through life because, as we read in Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 12, our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

In our Christian lives, we are subject to spiritual weakness and also to physical weakness. Let me say a word about each of those.

First of all, we are subject to spiritual weakness because the corruption of our nature because of sin leaves us weak.

We are often tempted. Sometimes we fall into sin. Even the most dedicated men and women find themselves in that same position.

[9:54] Even the greatest of Christian believers struggle with sin and temptation and often fall. I wonder if you remember when Paul was writing in his letter to the Romans in chapter 7, he said this, for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

For what I do is not the good I want to do. No, the evil I don't want to do, this I keep on doing. You see the situation?

When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? death. I'm sure we can recognize what Paul is writing about, the struggle against sin.

We face every day what the writer to the Hebrews called the sin that so easily entangles. In our lives, we face difficult choices, and sometimes we make the wrong choices.

[11:34] We face temptations, and sometimes we give in to them. We are faced with choices on the way to live our lives, and sometimes we stay on that narrow road that leads to life, and sometimes we follow the broad road that leads to destruction.

We know that experience. It is the experience of every Christian. person. But then second, we are also subject to physical weakness, the weakness of our bodies.

We are human beings living in a fallen world, and we face illness just like everyone else. We are not excluded from that because we are Christians.

We have the same sickness, and one day we will die just like every other human being. And during those times, we feel our weakness most keenly.

Now, God sometimes delivers us from physical weakness and heals us because He answers prayer, and sometimes God heals us, but sometimes He doesn't.

[12:58] Just as when Paul had his thorn in the flesh, God did not heal him. God left him with his thorn in the flesh, whatever that was, and left him to suffer, but promised that he would be with him and give him the strength he needs.

our sufficiency and our strength comes from God, especially at times of greatest weakness. And why does that happen? Well, as Paul says, it's to do with the grace of God, the unmerited favor of God.

God, we can do nothing apart from God's grace and apart from the strength that we have in Christ. If we try to build our lives on our own strength and our own ability and all the rest of it, then ultimately we will fail.

As the psalmist says, unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

[14:17] The power of Christ works in and through us in our weakness. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4, God made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

This theme is there in the Old Testament too. Isaiah 40, he gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint. You see, the grace of God comes to us in our weakness and enables us as we need help.

[15:37] And so, like Paul, we must recognize our weakness and see it as a strength because when we are weak in ourselves, we can be strong in Christ.

And our weakness should not prevent us from coming to Christ. Some people think that because of their sin, because of what they've done earlier in their lives, because of their failures, that God does not want them to come to Christ.

And that's just not true. No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter the sins of the past, Christ calls us to come to Him and to find in Him full and free forgiveness by the grace of God. You remember there was a time the Pharisees accused Jesus of spending time with sinners and He said it's the sick who need a doctor, not those who are well.

You might say as Paul did that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Sinners just like every one of us.

[17:11] But there is one glorious thing to remember. Weakness is only for this world. We are weak now, but one day all weakness will be gone.

We sin now, but one day we will be put beyond the place where we can sin. And the Lord will see us safely home.

The psalmist says in Psalm 73, you guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me into glory.

That's the Christian hope. God will take us into glory and earth has nothing I desire besides you. God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. And that brings me to my third and final point, Christ's weakness.

[18:15] I don't want to say very much on this, but I think it's instructive because when we think about the Lord Jesus Christ, we don't think about weakness usually, but I think we should.

At the incarnation, Christ left the glory of heaven in all its perfection and became a human being. He experienced the weakness of the flesh in hunger and thirst, in pain and suffering and finally in death.

he experienced everything that human beings experience except he did not sin but he experienced all the frailties of humanity and he experienced the pain of abandonment by his disciples.

He chose the path of weakness so that he could act on our behalf and bring us to salvation. He even experienced his father turning away from him.

[19:37] In that moment on the cross when he cries out my God my God why have you forsaken me? It was because the father was pouring out upon Christ the punishment due to us for our sins but Christ took it so that we would not have to.

It's expressed very well in one of the Stuart Townend hymns. How deep the father's love for us how vast beyond all measure that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure.

How great the pain of searing loss the father turns his face away as wounds which mar the chosen one bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross my sin upon his shoulders ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers it was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished his dying breath has brought me life I know that it is finished Christ chose the way of weakness in his divine nature he was strong but in his human nature he was just like us he was crucified in weakness says Paul yet lives by God's power so in conclusion the teaching of scripture is that by the grace of God we are at our strongest when we are weak my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness may

God help us to trust in God especially in those times when we are afraid when we are sick when we are feeling weak or abandoned or whatever when we are at our lowest remember that in those situations we can be strong in Christ through the grace of God amen let us pray our heavenly father we thank you for these scriptures and for all that they teach us but above all we thank you for your love that reaches out to us and helps us at our very lowest and raises us up with Christ until the day when we stand before you in glory thank you father in

[22:55] Jesus name amen