God's Strength in Our Weakness

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[0:00] I must go on boasting, though there is nothing to be gained by it.! I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven.

Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise.
Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And he heard things that cannot be told. Which man may not utter.
On behalf of this man, I will boast. But on my own behalf, I will not boast. Except for my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool.
For I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it. So that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.
[1:13] So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh. A messenger of Satan to harass me.

To keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this. That it should leave me. 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.
For when I am weak, then, I am strong. This ends the reading of the word. Amen.
[2:26] And good morning, everyone. As I considered this morning's message, I thought about what a gift it is for us to be a part of a local church.

To have a people that can come together at a place where we might be enriched together, encouraged together, and reminded of God's grace.
And we really shouldn't take that for granted. We have this privilege of just gathering Sunday after Sunday to just hear God's word preached to us.
To encourage one another. So that we might be enriched and reminded of God's grace.
Let's take a moment to look to the Lord in prayer. Father, what a privilege you bestow upon us in this moment.
[3:53] Lord, we need your help to understand, to cast light upon your word.

A prayer, O Lord, is that your word would wash our spirits. that it would be as a mirror before us so that we might see ourselves clearly and we might adjust ourselves.
We know, O Lord, that even with our best efforts, we will fail in that regard. We need your Holy Spirit.
And so, O Lord, we ask that you would do a walk that only you can do, but cause the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart to be acceptable to you.
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. We come to this somewhat familiar passage that we're going to be able to do very, at times, controversial, but I think at all times, very encouraging.
[5:20] And I want to just reread four verses beginning at verse 7 because that is where we're going to spend the bulk of our time.

verse 7 of chapter 12, 2 Corinthians chapter 12, beginning at verse 7, Paul writes, So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.
And we see that word again, twice used in the same verse. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.
But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

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Then Paul writes, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
[6:49] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. I want to read that verse again, just for emphasis. In verse 10, Paul says, For the sake of Christ, then.
For the sake of Christ, then. Why? Because Christ's power is made perfect in weakness. He says, I am content with weaknesses. I am content with insults.
I am content with hardships, with persecution, and I am content with calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
Brothers and sisters, there are two things, really, that Paul, perhaps many things, but two that I wish to commend to you, that Paul is saying to us.
[8:00] Paul is writing to us in these verses that God's grace is sufficient. His grace is sufficient in our weaknesses.

And he's writing to us also that when we are weak, indeed, as believers, we can be strong.
What comforting thoughts, what comforting words for believers. What comforting words that we hear on this Sunday morning as we gather as believers.
But in this fallen world, that as we encounter challenges, that as we encounter things that disappoint us, that as we encounter insults and calamities, and we consider our weaknesses, we can say like the Apostle Paul, God's grace is sufficient.
When I am weak, I'm strong. Comforting words to us today.
[9:19] the text we come to has many implications and applications. I think one of the first things that immediately jumps out to me as I consider this text is that it argues against the core message of those who spread the prosperity gospel.

Those who say you gotta, everything is perfect all the time and you name it and claim it. Second thing that I think this text helps us to see is that it reminds us that sometimes God says no to our requests.
It also demonstrates God's awareness of and concerns of the believer's challenges. challenges.
This text helps us to see that it helps us to see that God is not distant from our challenges.
He knew the Apostle Paul's weaknesses intimately. This text makes clear where the power truly lies.
this text provides comfort in times of grief, times of disappointment, loss, and challenges.
[11:16] It calls us, believers, friends, brothers and sisters, this text calls us to have a godly perspective in the midst of life's challenges challenges.

And how many of you know that those challenges will come? And perhaps right now you are walking through a season of challenge, something that is severe, that you did not anticipate, and certainly did not invite.
These words of the Apostle Paul, what I commend to you today. The text we read might be summarized like this.
God's power is made perfect in our weakness. Our goal in preaching today will be achieved if we are more determined to grab hold of the truth now and into the future and also if we are encouraged by the amazing benefits we enjoy as believers.
I've organized thoughts around two points, our weaknesses and God's power. Our weaknesses and God's power.
[12:59] Paul writes to the church at Corinth, the church that he started, and Paul, you all know this, Paul was a great apostle.

Paul wrote much of the New Testament Testament. It is amazing therefore that this man who revealed so much about the gospel, about Christ, who connected the Old Testament, the Old Covenant to the New, who started so many churches, who was beaten so many times, shipwrecked, was used by God to, as an instrument of miracles.
It's amazing that this man would come to this place and would be so transparent. Paul opens the wound of his life for us to gaze into it so that we might benefit from it.
Paul is displaying tremendous humility that we don't often see from men of his stature.
Paul says, listen, I've done all of these things for the Lord. I've got a problem.

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[14:50] You don't hear that. Paul says, I've got a weakness. Paul writes to this church and he says, I've got this problem. And here is the thing that Paul is really arguing with them in a way.

Because this church that Paul had started and he had written to, they were saying about him, you know, one of the things they said about him is that, you know what, he writes like he's a big, bad bully.
But when he comes and he preaches to us, you look at him and he just doesn't look the part. He doesn't look like someone of authority. it's weak.
It's not eloquent. And Paul says to them, Paul says in much of this book, Paul tries to defend himself.
And one of the things Paul says is that some 14 years ago, Paul says that I had a vision, that I went to a place that I don't know anyone else who has been, any human has been, and I saw some things, heard some things that I can't even write about.
[16:19] But he says, God did something to me, because otherwise I would be arrogant, and I want you to, I want us to hear this about ourselves, brothers and sisters.

Paul says, lest I become conceited, lest I become too proud, lest I become besides myself.
God gave me what he described as a thorn in the flesh. It is within, here's what Paul says again in verses seven and eight, so to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.
Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. Brothers and sisters, I don't know why it is you have a weakness.
I don't know why my weaknesses exist. I don't know what the trials and tribulations are intended to reveal or to prevent.
[18:05] But what I do know is that God knows. But here's this question that many have asked, what is, what was this thorn in Paul's flesh?

what I can say is that we all have some weakness, something that we believe, that you and I believe, humanly speaking, is holding us back from achieving something, perhaps achieving a goal, maybe you think a goal of happiness, of financial security, holding us back from good health, from social acceptance, from popularity, and the list goes on and on, perhaps.
Man, if I were not like this, if I didn't have a bodily image, if I didn't have an illness, if I spoke better, if I was taller, if I was shorter, if I was a different color, I could do this, or I could do that, I could conquer the world.
What are these weaknesses that Paul is talking about? I think we've got to get this right, because to get it wrong is to miss the point of the passage.
three times in these verses, Paul refers to weaknesses. The Lord says, my power is made perfect in weakness.
[19:56] Second time, Paul says, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, and then he says, I am content with weaknesses. Paul is not here talking about sin.

Let's be certain of that. John Piper offers a great explanation, I think, about these weaknesses.
Listen to what he says. Paul is not talking here 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 that the power of Christ is perfected by bad choices, or I will all the more gladly boast of my bad choices.
We get that. I hope we understand that. Paul is not talking about sin. And then he goes on to say, weaknesses here are not imperfect choices.
[21:19] 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.

It did. Paul actually gives us! Paul actually a list, not an exhaustive list.
Paul talks about this list insults and weaknesses and hardship and persecution, calamities. But what weaknesses do you have?
Is it economic weakness? Is it a communication weakness? weakness? Is it a physical weakness? Is it an interpersonal weakness?
Are you going, are you in a period of some sort of challenge or the other? believer? I told you brothers and sisters, this is an amazing oasis to come to on a Sunday morning for a believer.
[22:38] What a blessing. What a blessing to hear God speak to us right where we are.

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there are many who say believers should not have weaknesses and should certainly not talk about them.
Paul writes a contrary view to this point. His weakness had produced in him a sense of humility. Otherwise, he writes, he would be puffed up.
If you're like me, you can think of at least one weakness that you have that you say, boy, if such and such were not the case, I would likely be full of pride.
I can think of myself that way. If such and such were not the case, I would be full of pride. And as the truth be told, as I examine the entirety of my life, I can see God keeping me from myself.
[23:54] It is God's grace, brothers and sisters, I say to us, that we don't have everything that we want. Notice, though, how Paul responded to his weakness.

Paul writes this man who, of faith, who has written most of the New Testament, Paul writes to us, three times, I pleaded with the Lord for this weakness to go away.
This is what he writes three times. He pleaded with the Lord. And I don't know whether, when Paul says three times, whether that is to be taken literally, or he just meant that he prayed it, he said it often, I'm not certain.
But clearly, the fact that he writes, he pleaded with the Lord, and he did so more than once, suggests to us that this was a weakness that was undesirable, and he asked the Lord passionately, earnestly, Lord, remove this from me.
But here is what God, how God responded to him. This leads me to my second point.
[25:39] God's power. Brothers and sisters, the Lord's response to Paul was, my grace is sufficient for you.

you've got a weakness, my grace is sufficient for you. Therefore, Paul says, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
for the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities.
Brothers and sisters, for when I am weak, then I am strong. The Lord's response to Paul was, no! Paul prayed and asked the Lord to remove this weakness and the Lord said, no.
What do you do when the Lord says no? What do you do when the Lord does not answer in the way you would wish?
[27:07] Let's see how Paul navigates through this and see if we might. if it might help us in some way. The Lord says to Paul, no, my grace is sufficient.

When I consider these words of the Lord's, no, my grace is sufficient, there are three questions that come to mind.
What is grace? grace? What do we mean by it? What is it sufficient to do? And finally, why is it sufficient?
What is grace? The Lord says to Paul, this man who has seen so much, who has worked so hard doing the Lord's walk, beaten five times near death.
And he prayed to the Lord, and the Lord says no. Perhaps you might say, listen, I understand the Lord say no to me, but say no to Paul. Paul, God says to him, as he often says to us, no, grace is sufficient.
[28:47] God's grace is the undeserved, honored favor that only he can give. Grace is his power.

God's gift to us that brings us closer to him.
grace is God's engagement in our affairs. Grace, brothers and sisters, is God stepping in on our behalf.
Let's take a brief look at what Paul says in chapter one. of 2nd Corinthians.
Chapter one of 2nd Corinthians, beginning at verse 8, Paul writes, for we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.
[30:24] for we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.

Then he writes, listen to what he says, indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, but that was to make us rely not on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.
What's Paul telling us here? And how is this connected? Paul is telling us here that he had been in a situation that was so severe, he had been brought to the point where he couldn't do anything to save himself.
death. And as far as he was concerned, it was a sentence of death. But he says, brothers and sisters, this is what Paul says, he says, but these circumstances were intended so that we may not

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rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead.
Brothers and sisters, what a place for us to be at and to not only to be at, but to more importantly to embrace.
[32:00] Where we find ourselves in an impossible situation. And only grace can rescue us.

only grace can rescue us. Paul says, but that was to make us, to make us, to force us.
Brothers and sisters, how many of you know that we don't, even in the physical world, we don't get stronger without resistance. Paul helps us to see that it is calamitous situations.
it is those times of testing and trial when we cry out to the Lord and say, Lord, come see about me. And we rest on the Lord himself. Brothers and sisters, how many times you and I find ourselves in these situations, like I found myself the other day, and we just let it blow by, and we don't embrace it.
[33:09] And rather than acting in a way that brings glory to God, we do everything but. Paul writes, and he answers the question for us, this question, what is grace sufficient to do?

In a sentence, Paul says, grace is the antidote to our weaknesses. You have weaknesses, then seek God's grace.
Charles Spurgeon wrote, this sufficiency is declared without any limiting words. grace. Therefore, I understand the passage to mean that the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient to uphold thee, sufficient to strengthen thee, sufficient to comfort thee, sufficient to make thy trouble useful to thee, sufficient to enable thee to triumph over it, sufficient to bring thee out of it, sufficient to bring thee home to heaven.
Yes, brothers and sisters, God's grace is sufficient to bear you up when the weight of the world seems too much to carry.
His grace is sufficient to give you peace in the midst of trying circumstances to to and to lose hope.
[35:04] His grace is sufficient to give you hope for tomorrow when the prognosis from the doctor is not what you expect.

His grace is sufficient when the finances don't add up. His grace is even sufficient in times of sadness.
His grace is sufficient to bring you joy. In times of persecution, His grace is sufficient to comfort you. All for His glory. Brothers and sisters, all for His glory. glory. It is instructive for us to know. Paul writes that His grace not was sufficient or will be sufficient.
He says of His grace it is sufficient. It is sufficient. Why is God's grace sufficient?
[36:11] Why is His grace sufficient? Why is there is a promise that accompanies the sufficiency of God's grace?

And it is this. God's power is made perfect in our weakness. More often than not, we want to get rid of our weakness, but the Lord is saying, my power is made perfect in your weakness.
Why? Because your weakness brings you to a place of humility. See what Paul writes. Paul says God would rather you be humble and operating under His power.
Brothers and sisters, humble and operating under the power of God as compared to being arrogant and operating under your own power.
Paul realizes this. My power is made perfect in your weakness. Why? Because the world sees our weaknesses and sees that we're not buried by them.
[37:34] Guess what? Jesus gets the glory. God would rather Jesus be glorified than us. Brothers and sisters, God's grace is sufficient.

His power is made perfect in our weakness because in our weaknesses the world sees our weaknesses and sees that we're not buried by our weaknesses.
Sees that we are not buried by insults. Sees that we don't trade one for the other.
My power is made perfect in your weakness. Why? Because it draws us closer to God. Given all of that, Paul says, therefore, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness.
He says, I'm going to boast of my weaknesses. Can you believe this? I mean, Paul says, therefore, because of the response that gets from the Lord, Paul says, I'm going to boast about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
[39:20] Paul says, I've been places, I've seen things, I've done this and that, yet the grounds upon which I am prepared to boast is my weaknesses.

Paul says, I am prepared to boast upon my weaknesses. Why? Because they point to God. Why? Because others can see Christ in me. Paul had come to a place where he was more reliant on the

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grace of God than his own strength.
Brothers and sisters, that is the point for us today. To be more reliant on God's grace than our own strength. Paul understood the frailty!
of the human body. He understood the deception of the human mind. So he could not rely on his strength or his looks.
He knew well that charm and personality are soon lost with familiarity. He must have known money was fleeting and power easily diminished.
[40:42] But God's grace grace is eternal. Brothers and sisters, Paul's point is this.

Because I know that God's power is made perfect in weaknesses. I'm content knowing that I'm actually stronger than if I had my own way.
In other words, Paul is content to have faith in God. Faith is in God. His confidence is in God.
And that is the message that we want to share this morning. not in ourselves, not in our own wisdom.
Faith is in God. You and I need to come to the point, like Paul, where we take our weaknesses to the Lord, and we be contented with the results.
[41:59] where we are able to say like the apostle Paul, I'd rather have the Lord's strength. I'd rather have the Lord's power than my own.

I'd rather rely on him than on me. Brothers and sisters, can I just say something to you real practically? It's not in my text here, but can I just say this to us?
The reality is that people outside of the church have weaknesses too. Okay?
They have weaknesses as well. That they spend a lifetime trying to get rid of. I never do. Well, here's what we've got.
We've got something better. We've got weaknesses like them, but we can take our weaknesses and turn our weaknesses over to the Lord. And the Lord says to us that his grace will step in.
[43:08] And when we do that, he says that his power steps in. We operate under the power and under the influence of God himself.

I'd rather have the Lord's strength than my own. I'd rather rely on him than on me. So, brothers and sisters, when I am weak, then I am strong, for I know his power is made perfect in my weakness.
Philip Hodges, commenting on this, these verses wrote, so with the apostle, what seems to be an incapacitating conquest by Satan's messenger, is transformed into a triumph of grace and vindication of the sovereignty of almighty God.
The God that you and I would live our lives this day to bring him glory, grace and vindication of the sovereignty of the almighty God.
So, as we conclude today, we must be sure of two things. That the place of contentment, in spite of weaknesses, is arrived at through humility, prayer, and faith.
[44:49] Let me say that again. That our place of contentment, in spite of weaknesses, to be arrived at, must be arrived at, through humility, prayer, and faith.

Otherwise, it's questionable. We aren't saying that, we aren't asking you to fake it. That's the point. We're saying to take it to the Lord, and to allow the Lord to do a work in us.
To allow the Lord to do a work in us. The second point is that contentment, in spite of weaknesses, must be evidenced by our attitude and behavior.
Gotta have some evidence for it. You cannot claim contentment if you're always complaining and grumbling. The evidence must be that Jesus Christ is glorified.
God's So what is your weakness? What is your weakness? Are you saying that you've come to this place of contentment, but you're still complaining about it?
[46:09] You're still grumbling about it? That's not evidence. His grace, brothers and sisters, is it sufficient?

It's sufficient to place us in right standing with God. If that is the case, then it must be sufficient for life's challenges.
Brothers and sisters, at all times, but especially during times of weakness, say like the apostle Paul, his grace is sufficient.
sickness, sickness, in insults, and you've got to prepare for it. If you are there now, prepare for it, because it come in. Like they say, come in.
In sickness, in insults, in hardships, in persecution, in calamities, grace is sufficient.

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[47:19] Grace is sufficient. This is what I'm saying to us, I'm saying to all of us, and I'm saying to myself, grace is sufficient. When I am weak, I'm strong, because, not because of me, but rather because he holds me up, gives me power to endure.

this really is where the power is. The power is in him. It's not in us. That's really the essence of these verses.
This is what Paul is trying to help us to see. Contrary to what many preach, that it is he who wants to be glorified.
When we are weak, he is strong. If you are a believer today, you can readily embrace these words, and you will know that there was a time in our history.
When it seemed like the weakest event in history was occurring, Jesus Christ hung on a cross.
[48:59] Weakest time in human history. God was able to, God used that event to extend grace to you and to me.

What a God we serve. What a God we serve. Yes, we can point to instances of when he used men and women and even children who were weak.
And he used them for their glory. Consider David the little boy that he used. Consider Moses who had a speech impediment. Consider Peter and so many others despite their various weaknesses.
But there was nothing as weak as what we saw on the cross. And he used that event for his glory and for our good.
But today perhaps you're listening to us and you're not a believer. I pray as we stand here today that the Lord would open your eyes to the truth of the gospel.
[50:34] That he would rescue you from the pit of destruction. I pray for all of us, all of us, that God would cause us to embrace these truths that we talked about.

Indeed, let's pray together right now. Father, Lord, we thank you for your word. What a delight it is for us to be reminded again and again of this truth, O Lord.
For we live in a fallen world, Lord, where things so often do not go our way. There is disappointment, there's hardship, things that we do not desire.
O Lord, grant to us grace to take our burdens to you and to leave them there.
Lord, remind us that you are a God of grace, that you are a God of power, that nothing escapes you.
[51:48] O Lord, you were concerned about the weakness of Paul. Your word says that you're not a respecter of persons.

So, Lord, if you were concerned about him, we know, O Lord, that you're concerned about us. So, Lord, whatever that situation is, or those situations might be, we pray, O Lord, that you would grant to us grace to bring them to you.
Grace, O Lord, to recognize, O Lord, that your grace is sufficient. Grace, O Lord, to embrace the truth that your power is made perfect in our weakness.
In Jesus' name, amen.

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