

**Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 for 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
7.8.18 at St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church – Pastor Nate Scharf**

*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> 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. (NIV '11)*

Do you prefer to do things for yourself or to have people take care of you? Sometimes things happen so you can't take care of it yourself and you are forced to depend on others. A broken ankle, knee or hip and suddenly daily mundane tasks or regular functions become impossible to accomplish alone. But what about when you feel totally healthy and strong? There are things we think we can do, but can't, and try to do rather than ask for help. Toddler to cane this is true. The parent walks into the kitchen at breakfast time and finds their three year old standing in a gallon sized pool of milk because "I can pour the milk by myself." The son or daughter finds their elderly parent on the floor next to the bed, all amess. They thought they could do it but just didn't have the strength. Are we wise enough or strong enough?

In the weight room it is important to know this. In your spiritual life it is imperative. God trained the apostle Paul in this. It is not something we like to hear, nor often publicize in our lives, but it is a reality for all of us. God gives us crosses. We all have struggles. We are weak. Sure I may have a body that could bench 225 at one time in my life, but sometimes it's difficult just to get through the day without being a ball of stress. You may have a job that pays well, but lack of stewardship or a medical event has made it so that you worry about finances and providing for your family. On the outside you may be a model in every sense of the term to those around you, but inside it takes every ounce of strength to just make it. And "faking it until you make it" isn't a sustainable life plan. Are we strong enough?

If you just worried less, had less stress, didn't have the physical problems you do, or the temptations, or God would lay off just a little bit, think of the things you could do for God and for others or the parent, friend, mentor, coach, spouse, student, employer or employee you could be for others. Think of the work you

could do in God's kingdom! Paul learned a valuable lesson from Jesus, and today, we do to:

### **God's Strength is Perfect in Our Weakness**

*"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me."* Paul was gifted: classically trained by the most renowned teacher of his day, from the right tribe, right class, right temperament, and zealous. His conversion to the Way is unforgettable – once a persecutor, but forgiven, called and sent to preach around the globe. Jesus gave him visions, even a vision of heaven. These blessings and the sheer number of mission starts Paul could claim would give any of us reason to boast. God gave to Paul *"a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment him."* God humbled him and helped him see true strength.

What was Paul's *"thorn in the flesh?"* We don't know. Some think poor eyesight, a limp, flare-ups of malaria, internal struggles much like Martin Luther had, reoccurring guilt or temptations. Paul doesn't tell us what, but that he had this *"thorn in the flesh."* The devil wanted to use it to frustrate Paul and the ministry and to depress him and lead him to despair. God makes all things work for the good and used this thorn to help Paul recognize God's Grace for him and Christ's power that covered him.

It works better if you realize where the power is coming from. You ever been water skiing? My aunt Char taught us to ski. She said "Lean back with your knees up to your chest, smile, and let the boat do the work." Inevitably the first two rules were followed, but most of my siblings, myself included found out the hard way what she meant about "letting the boat do the work." The engine starts up and you feel the pull on the ski rope and you start moving. Immediately your reaction is to pull yourself up. And you pop up on the water. On your face is the biggest smile of victory, and as the boat starts to level out and you are too far ahead of yourself the look of victory becomes panic as you realize you are falling on your back and about to enjoy a water enema. Let the boat pull you up in its measured, powerful way, and enjoy the ride. Your skis don't have an engine on them for a reason. A rope is placed in your hands to keep you connected to the source of power. Without it, you go nowhere.

Paul's work was hard enough. He could do so much more if God sent the thorn away. Paul wanted to pull up on that ski rope and pop up out of the water. I chaff under difficulty or persecution. Someone doesn't agree that what they are

doing is sin even though the Bible is clear on it, and they are offended that I would tell them so. I either get angry or I worry about what they think of me. I proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ and what he has done for all people and the forgiveness he offers, and people don't come back, or they look uncomfortable and they leave the conversation. Should I just shut my mouth?

God doesn't seem to answer your prayer the way you need. You think he's silent. Tragedy strikes. Everything hits the fan, or so it seems to you and everyone else. You become jaded and get angry with God, or at least stop trusting him as much. No good deed goes unpunished. At times your life looks like one of those "Bozo Bop Bags" that keeps popping back up for more, except that you are not the boxer, but the "Bozo." And you wonder if this is worth it. Life becomes this joyless melancholy simmer underneath the surface of how life never turns out like it's supposed to, at least for you, a Christian. Why, God, why?

Paul asked God to take the thorn away from him. *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Our plans aren't always his plans, are they? Our plans may make sense to us and look good and godly, but his are perfect and tailor-made for you and me for a purpose. Paul prayed with fervor and good motive for this thorn to be sent away from him. Jesus prayed with good motive and trust in his Father for the cup to be taken from him. But God has his perfect plans for us and for others. So Jesus went to that cross and suffered the hell you and I deserved for our faithlessness, doubt, arrogance and guilt. Why? So God is just when he declared you and me forgiven. The sin that is so prevalent in our lives, in our struggle, does not stick to us, nor does it control us. We are washed clean and forgiven. Christ's righteous life is given to us to cover us so we can stand in God's presence. We are free because of God's plan for Christ Jesus. By his resurrection we see how God can make even the most impossible work out.

God did just what he wanted through Paul. If you look at the whole letter of 2 Corinthians Paul beats this drum that it is not our wisdom that drives or makes Christianity. It is not our conviction or inner strength and resolve that make us firm. We hold up not because of our ability to endure. No we despair if that is the case. We are given this treasure or Christ's righteousness, forgiveness, the message of the Gospel and all its promises by God's mercy and grace. Paul said, *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us"* (2 Corinthians 3:7). Jesus told Paul, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* When we

realize that all we have and all we are is a gift and that the only real power to accomplish anything of value and worth for others in this world only comes from God, then we've got it. It's not about me. It's about Him. It's about serving others.

*"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."* You've heard it said, "Everything I needed to know about life I learned in Kindergarten." A simple song you've learned has been trying to teach you this truth for many years: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. We are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so." We are weak, he is strong. And the song reminds us three times even in our trials and tribulations – "Yes, Jesus loves me."

Troubles, hardships and persecutions will come – sometimes only because you are Christians. Jesus reminds you, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven."* God has a purpose for everything in your life, especially the suffering, the hardships, the pain. He shows us we are weak. He spreads his power over us to do so much more than we will ever see or realize this side of eternity. His grace sustains us. **God's strength is perfect in our weakness.** Go and live. Go and serve. You are forgiven and loved. God is doing much for you and through you. Amen.