

A THORN IN MY FLESH

The Strange Power of Weakness

Vulnerable Series (Part 4)

Texts: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Growing Up in a Live Strong Culture

I want to think with you today on one amazing statement we find in today's scripture lesson. This statement was among the favorite Bible verses of our church's founding pastor. In fact, you can find it adorning the tribute Bible under Dr. DeKruyter's portrait in our church's Oak Room. The statement comes from the mouth of God to the Apostle Paul and it reads like this: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).**

I can think of few ideas more contrary to the spirit of our age than this strange notion that power may be found not so much when we are strong, as when we are weak. Honestly, how many of us were raised to view weakness as a pathway to power? I certainly wasn't. In fact, I recall a particularly instructive game I was taught as a little boy that involved wrestling on the lawn with an older relative. The object was to struggle with all my might to break free of his grasp. When I did manage to get away and run, he would reach out, swipe my legs from out under me, send me crashing to the ground, and entangle me again in his grasp. On one occasion, this cycle repeated so many times that – as much from frustration as from physical pain -- hot tears welled in my eyes, until my relative pointed at them and said: "Ahk. You're losing the game."

I wasn't very old, but I got the lesson. It was re-taught to me in many other ways as I grew up in an affluent suburb filled with world-beating people of many kinds: Tears are for losers. Winners show strength. You might hurt, but you don't let others see it. You might make mistakes, but you cover or spin them as fast as you can. You may have worries or doubts, but you need to suppress them. You may have flaws, but you keep up appearances. Rise above it. Tough it out. Never let them see you sweat. In other words, if you want to be powerful, don't be weak.

I learned those lessons really well. When a wave of death, divorce, and tragedy swept over our family in my late teens, I maintained a surface stoicism. Secretly, I was drinking and taking drugs to anaesthetize myself. Publicly, I was still getting A's, playing varsity sports, dating the cheerleader captain. My classmates named me, "Best Dressed Senior." But my closest friends wondered, "Why isn't Dan sharing with us what's really going on?" A girlfriend broke up with me, saying it was because I was: "Too smooth." "That's bad?" I asked,

completely confused. "Yes it is," she said. "You don't talk about your feelings, your fears or pains. You give me no cracks in your surface, so I can hold onto you." And I'm thinking, "But that would be weakness. I'd be losing the game."

God has done much to change my heart and perspective since those days, but I still wrestle with this tendency to slip back into that old Invulnerability Game. Maybe you do too. We come by it honestly. We live in a world that idolizes human strength and superheroes. Our magazines are filled with air-brushed images of perfect faces and figures. The Christmas letters and social media posts that come our way present these carefully chosen photographs and personal updates that highlight what is looking good and working well. We inhabit a LiveStrong Culture where it seems like a lot of people are winning the game and we could too, if we just bucked up and buckled down.

But into this world comes the voice of God who says: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).**

The Strong Apostle

I think that the writer of today's Scripture lesson probably struggled to get this idea himself, at least early on. Saul (as he was first known) grew up in Tarsus – the San Francisco of Asia-Minor -- home to the most prestigious university in the ancient world. By circumstances unknown, Saul's dad had been made an honorary "Citizen of Rome." It was like being made a Knight of the British Empire – a rare honor that opened doors everywhere.

When this credential was passed down to his eldest son, it likely ensured Saul's admission to law school in Jerusalem and the opportunity to study under Gamaliel, the most famous legal mind in the Jewish world. Emerging with an elite degree, Saul began rising within the Pharisee party – the party of perfectionism and moral strength in Israel. Saul gained fame as a ruthless prosecutor who put scores of criminals behind bars or even to death – including many members of the Jesus Cult.

And then came Saul's amazing encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road, followed by his conversion. With his name changed to Paul, the strong man from Tarsus now embarked on a whole NEW series of remarkable conquests. Paul travelled the breadth of the Roman world, founding church after church, writing some of Christianity's most brilliant theology and pastoral letters, and pouring all of his formidable gifts into building up the Body of Christ he had once sought to destroy.

At some point in this journey, God gave Paul a glimpse into the staggering glory of heaven itself. Paul writes modestly about this, as if it's the experience of some other person, but what he's really saying is: **"[I] was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is**

permitted to tell" (2 Cor 12:4). Imagine what Paul's Christmas letters or Facebook posts could have been like. "Would love to write more, but need to get back to exploring Paradise, writing most of the New Testament, and transforming the Roman Empire. Love, Paul." On every level – spiritually, intellectually, vocationally -- Paul seemed to be winning the game. It was like he had no weakness.

The Apostle of Weakness

But underneath, there was this nagging issue. Paul tells it like this: **"I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Cor 12:7).** Scholars have speculated for centuries as to what Paul meant by this "thorn in the flesh." Was it some physical ailment – eye trouble, malaria, epilepsy, or something else? Was it some form of spiritual harassment or moral temptation – maybe lust or chronic anxiety or a haunting guilt over past misdeeds. Could it have been persecution from his enemies that pierced Paul like a thorn? I guess you'll just have to ask him one day!

What we do know is that Paul believed God had permitted this thorn for his good purposes. Paul knew how God allowed Satan to test and refine his servant Job in the Old Testament. He had seen how, when Satan hindered Paul's traveling plans, the gospel was surprisingly spread to Berea, Athens, and Corinth. So Paul chooses to believe that even the most painful experiences can be made to serve God's purposes.

In this case, Paul is pretty sure he knows exactly why God has permitted this unnamed affliction. "I was given a thorn in my flesh, **"in order to keep me from being conceited" (2 Cor 12:7).** That's an amazing confession, isn't it? Paul is basically saying: "God, you know where I grew up and who my father was. You know where I went to school and how well I did there. You know what a successful Pharisee and lawyer I was and how influential I now am as an Apostle. God, you know I've got this pretty great mind and all those inexpressible insights from heaven. I could start to think, 'Look how I'm winning the game. Look how strong I am, especially compared to others.' My pride and my perfectionism could so easily run away with me, God. But this **thorn** keeps reminding me that I need you... I need your grace... because I'm a sinner in need of a savior... I'm a mortal in need of immortality... I'm vulnerable."

Don't miss this truth. It wasn't easy for Paul to get to that place of humility and acceptance. **"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [this thorn] away from me" (2 Cor 12:8),** says Paul. Does that sound familiar? Do you remember someone who pleaded three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me? And yet, just like Jesus, Paul's final affirmation is: If it advances your purposes in me or through me, let the thorns pierce my flesh. Thy will be done (Luke 22:41-43). To which God says:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

God's Power in Weakness

In light of those words, I want to take you back to that wrestling match on the lawn long ago, tie it to the text we've been studying, apply it to your life, then let you go.

Many of us grow up being taught that the goal of life is to be strong – and that's partially right. As we've explored in recent months, God's desire is that we develop an almost unbreakable resilience. To quote Charles Stanley, however: **"What the world views as being strong is [often] nothing more than weakness under wraps."** I didn't really learn to be strong in the fullest sense on that lawn during those wrestling matches. Oh, I learned how to develop a stiff upper lip. I began the process of building shields to hide my hurts and hopes and fears. I got smoother but not stronger in the deepest sense. I learned to defend myself and depend on myself, but I was missing out on that vastly greater strength I would one day find, when I dropped my shields and let in the grace of God and the love of his people.

What about you? The great Christian author, Madeleine L'Engle, once observed: **"When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable."** Until Christ renews all things, we're going to make mistakes. We're going to have our hearts broken. We're going to injure one another. We're going to have devastating days and hard years. And our bodies will eventually fail us. It's what we do with this vulnerability that makes all the difference. When we try to carry it alone, it becomes a terrible secret and burden. When we share it with God and others, it becomes a place where God meets us with his strength.

Have you ever considered, asks Steven Furtick, that: **"Your greatest weakness may actually be God's greatest platform for showing His power and glory in your life"**? Again, consider the Apostle Paul. As a Roman Citizen, Paul was raised to think of strength in terms of wealth and popularity and coercive power. As a Pharisee, Paul learned to think of salvation as something you earned by your moral perfection. Both of these attitudes were arrogant. They put far too much confidence in human performance to shape a good result. And this conceit was Paul's greatest weakness.

But Paul turned this vulnerability over to God and God made it his platform. Through Paul's weaknesses, God showed that there is no power for transformation greater than servant love and no power for salvation greater than the cross of Christ. At the time the Emperor Nero executed him, Rome regarded Paul as a lonely fool and failure. The Pharisees had rejected him as a

stupid sell-out to a cult that couldn't last. Today, however, we call our dogs "Nero" and the Romans name their cathedrals, "St. Paul." The message of God's grace that trumps radical Islam and every other Phariseeism remains the hope of the world.

What might God do with YOUR weaknesses if you turned them over to him? Is there some sin you need to confess to God so you can find the power of his forgiveness? Is there some pain or panic or pattern you've been hiding that you might share with someone else here so that you can experience the strength of the Body of Christ? Is there some thorn in your flesh for which you need to ask God's help in seeing its place in his perfect purpose? Don't be afraid of these vulnerabilities. Just give them to Him. **"My grace is sufficient for you,"** says the God of Salvation, **"for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).**

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Omanson and Ellington, Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, 221.
Kruse, The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, 206.