

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“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 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” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

St. Paul appears to put his own story in the third person. Here, Paul speaks of another man who went up into heaven. But clearly, he is speaking of himself. Paul appears to be somewhat afraid to boast about this, because every time he has thought well of that experience, it seems that the devil sends him another “thorn” for him. It’s almost like he thinks that he might get jinxed by speaking positively about this experience.

He says, ***“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows”*** (2 Corinthians 12:2). Paul doesn’t really understand how – *was he dreaming? Was he bodily in heaven? Was he spiritually in heaven?* But it’s clear that he is talking about himself.

He is clearly talking about himself, because he speaks of the consequences and how those consequences have affected him. He speaks of a “thorn” in the flesh. He never speaks of what that “thorn” actually is, except that it was sent to him by a messenger of Satan to harass him. But that not knowing doesn’t keep us from guessing.

Some theologians believe this “thorn” must have been some kind of chronic physical problem. Others have said the “thorn” was malaria. Others still speculate this “thorn” to be vision problems, or a speech impediment.

The truth of the matter is that we do not know and will not know on this side of heaven what Paul’s “thorn” was. But what we can certainly infer is that this “thorn” was a sharp pain of some sort. We can infer that this was some sort of a reoccurring, nagging pain. This “thorn” in his flesh was certainly tormenting him.

Whatever the “thorn,” Paul prayed three times to the Lord to take it away from him. After these three times, the Lord answers his plea: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness”** (2 Corinthians 12:9a).

God answers prayer. Through His Word, He answers in His own time and in His own way. At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed three times for His cup of suffering to be removed. God the Father’s answer was not to remove the cup but to send angels to strengthen Jesus to drink it. Paul, too, prayed for his “thorn” in the flesh to be removed. The Lord’s answer to Paul was not to remove the “thorn” but to assure him that His strengthening grace would enable him to cope with it.

For both Jesus and Paul, God the Father brought positive good out of both situations. By drinking the cup – *His suffering and death on the cross*, Jesus paid the ransom price to win forgiveness for the world. God hung on the cross, but this is a God who chose to submit Himself for our sake. And by continuing to suffer with his “thorn,” Paul kept the spotlight shining on Jesus rather than himself. For Jesus said to him, **“My power is made perfect in weakness.”**

So, as people looked at and listened to the weak, frail, thorn-in-the-flesh Paul, they would be led to believe there must be a greater power behind this man to enable him to do all the things he is doing. Of course, this power was Jesus Christ, our Lord.

But even so, how many of us like to boast about our weaknesses? Who finds strength in weakness?

We would rather boast about our talents, our abilities, our attitudes, and our insights. Paul certainly had many strengths, and his greatest strengths were his missionary passion and his amazing perseverance. Paul sailed across the Mediterranean Sea and crossed Asia Minor into Europe to bring the message of Christ crucified and risen to countless peoples and places. And when his message was not received, he would just move on to the next place. Through it all, Paul persevered. He would not let any negativity keep him away from sharing the good news of Christ.

Like Paul, we also have many God-given strengths. The Psalmist King David writes about these God-given strengths: **“I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made”** (Psalm 139:14). So, each one of us has been gifted and talented to the glory of God.

However, even with all our God-given strengths, we remain sinful and unclean in thought, word, and deed. So, no matter how much talent and ability we have, that will not erase the effects of our sinful nature. So, we cannot rely on our abilities, our talents, our skills. Our abilities and strengths can never justify ourselves before God the Father. Just “being a good person” can never justify yourself before God.

True strength requires seeing our weaknesses. St. Paul says that he can only boast about his weakness. He says, “***On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses***” (2 Corinthians 12:5).

Paul would have us experience the weakness, experience the difficulty, experience the hardship. Whatever it may be. But then he would have us say, “That is not the last word! That is not the final say!”

As a first-year seminary student, I was blessed to receive a temporary “thorn” in my flesh known as a kidney stone. At first, I tried to ignore the pain. I thought, it would surely go away. And it did, but it would return with a vengeance. After I researched my pain on WebMD, the results came up that I was dying of some disease (which I did not have). So instead of dwelling on that result, I went to the hospital. I knew that I could not fix it alone. I prayed for relief. All I could do was put my faith in God to heal me. Thanks be to God that that “thorn” was only temporary, but for many people, your “thorn” may be reoccurring.

No matter what, Jesus uses our weaknesses to show us where true strength lies. If we are honest with ourselves, we all have to admit that there are certain things in life that don’t come along easy. And there are certain things that we have a hard time dealing with. These things may be physical afflictions, emotional trials, family challenges, stress at work. Like St. Paul, you may be “***pleading with the Lord***” to change or take away whatever afflicts you. But that affliction remains. It could be that it is a way for Jesus to demonstrate that His grace is sufficient for you.

By that “thorn” in your flesh, the Lord is attempting to draw you closer to Him. He is using that “thorn” to encourage you to lean on Him and to help you see that His grace is all sufficient. This grace is His undeserved mercy won on the cross and by the empty tomb. His grace is constant. His grace is with you now and forever.

When our weaknesses get overwhelming, you will discover the Lord and how much He has done and is doing for you in His uncompromising love.

You see, your true strength is none of your personal strengths, but in Christ.

Our daily lives bring us constant reminders of some of our greatest weaknesses – impatience, greed, selfishness, thanklessness, and on and on. All of these, and so many more, are only characteristics of our sinful nature. The effects of this fallen nature also weaken us. Our health is threatened. Our loved ones die. Communication breaks down in marriages. Our bills pile up faster than our financial resources. All of these are characteristics of this fallen sinful world that we live in.

We all embody life's weaknesses. As Christians, we ought to see everything through the cross. Remember, it was in this weak state that our Savior Jesus Christ became man, so that He could save us from the weakness of sin through His perfect life, His suffering, and His atoning death via crucifixion. In our weakness, Christ saved you and Christ saved me. In our weakness, Christ gave us mercy, love, forgiveness, peace, and certain hope.

While some of our weaknesses may never go away in this life, our true strength is found in Jesus Christ. ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin”*** (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus does not merely sympathize with our weaknesses; He has overcome them. So, we, like Paul, boast in the Lord.

Christ has overcome the power of sin, and He shares His victory with us in our weakness. Today, He comes to us through His Means of Grace – *Word and Sacrament* – to forgive our sins and strengthen our faith.

Our greatest weaknesses are God's greatest strength. Jesus has taken care of the greatest need that we will ever have – *our salvation*. His grace is sufficient. His power is made perfect in our weakness. So, live in God's grace, where you receive strength through weakness, for when you are weak, He makes you strong. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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