



August 18, 2024 West Valley Presbyterian

Last week we looked at what Paul had to say about generosity in sharing with fellow Christians who are very poor, in Chapters 8 and 9. I don't think any of us would disagree that we should give generously to support brothers and sisters in financial need. We are already a generous congregation, and I pray we will continue to be.

This week, we are moving on. In Chapters 10 and 11, Paul is defending himself and his ministry from other Christian leaders who are trying to take over the Corinthian congregation. He writes things like, "For some say, 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.'" Poor Paul! He had endured so much for the sake of the churches he started! And now they want to turn to others? In 11:23 he says, "I have worked much harder (than the competing leaders), been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again." He goes on to list the 5 times he's been flogged, 3 times beaten with rods, stoned once, three times shipwrecked, constant travel dangers, the times when he's worked so hard he got no sleep, the times he was hungry and thirsty and cold. Seems to me that all that physical abuse is likely to have damaged his health and his voice. Who knows, maybe the competing leaders were handsome and healthy, and the Corinthians thought that made them better.

So, to defend himself, Paul speaks about a very personal experience of Jesus, in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. Hear now the reading of God's holy word.

SLIDE 2-8

"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third

heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.<sup>3</sup> And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—<sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.<sup>5</sup> I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.<sup>6</sup> Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say,<sup>7</sup> or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

“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.”

Here ends the reading of God’s holy word. Join me in saying, Thanks be to God.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.” What does Paul mean by that? Well, let’s think about it. When would you say that you have been strong? Physically speaking, that was probably sometime in your twenties or thirties. Does that sound about right? At least, that’s how it was for me; physically, I was strongest in my early to mid twenties. I had lots of energy and could hike all day and go dancing at night. How about you? Early-to-mid-twenties also? Or a different point in your life? When I was physically strong, I didn’t go around saying things like, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” And I’m guessing that you didn’t either.

Now let’s think about Paul’s life. At what point in his life do you think he was physically the strongest? Probably that would have been when he was a young man, and was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus. Imagine the impact of being confronted by Jesus in all his glory! Paul was knocked to the ground and blinded besides! Temporarily! But now, when he’s writing this letter to the Corinthians, he’s probably somewhere in his 40s, and not as physically strong as he once was. All the hardships of travel and physical abuse would have seen to that! So when he says, “When I am weak, then I am strong,” he’s not talking about physical strength.

What about spiritual strength? We don’t know much about Paul’s inner life, because he mostly didn’t write about his own personal relationship with Jesus in his letters. This passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is an exception. It’s the only time he tells us something about what his connection with Jesus felt like. He’s referring to a spiritual experience that happened 14 years prior to him writing this letter. Yet the experience was so profound, and so deeply personal, that he still feels uncomfortable talking about it.

## SLIDE 9

So what does he say? Paul says that, 14 years ago, “a man in Christ” – that’s him expressing his discomfort about what he is going to say – “was caught up to the third heaven.” Wait, what? The third heaven? There’s only one heaven, right? But in the Jewish thinking of Paul’s day, there were

different levels of heaven; and the third heaven was the paradise where the faithful go when they die. Like when Jesus promised the thief beside him on the cross that “today you will be with me in paradise.” So Paul is saying that he was lifted up to paradise. And he can’t describe what that was like. He wasn’t dead; but he’s not clear if this was an in-body experience or an out-of-body experience. He can’t describe it. And, he says, he heard things that he is not allowed to speak about; presumably God is the one who won’t allow it. This was a profound personal experience for Paul, which he never forgot. They were, as he says, “surpassingly great revelations”, which strengthened him and encouraged him in the numerous times of suffering that he went through.

#### SLIDE 10

However, one of the dangers of “surpassingly great revelations” is spiritual pride – conceited, in our translation. In Luke 10:18, Jesus says that he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Christian theology teaches that it was spiritual pride that corrupted Satan and caused his fall and expulsion. So, says Paul, he received another gift – a thorn in his flesh – to keep him from becoming conceited. Some gift, huh? He describes the thorn as being a “messenger of Satan”, tormenting him. We don’t know what that thorn might have been. It might have been long-lasting consequences from all those injuries. It might have been speech impediments. It might have been human opposition. Paul doesn’t tell us what the thorn was, exactly; but whatever it was, it made Paul’s ministry very difficult.

#### SLIDE 11

Paul begged Jesus, repeatedly, to take that thorn away from him. And Jesus replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I hope, for Paul’s sake, that Jesus’ tone of voice was gentle when he said that! Jesus did not remove the thorn, whatever it was, because it was preventing Paul from being puffed up with spiritual pride. Ironically, that thorn was protecting him from what Satan was trying to do, because conceit makes one vulnerable to Satan’s corruption.

#### SLIDES 12-13

Judging from some of Paul’s other comments in his letter, apparently some of the Corinthians did think of Paul as weak; and Paul was defensive about that. For instance, in 2 Cor 10:10, Paul writes, “For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’ And in 2 Cor 11:5-6 Paul says, “I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super apostles’. I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge.”

#### SLIDE 14-15

And yet, at the same time that Paul feels weak, he also possesses substantial spiritual power. He says in 12:12, “I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.” What we see in Paul’s letter is that both weakness and spiritual power existed simultaneously in his life. As he says, “For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10).”

## SLIDE 16

Which makes sense; that's what we also see in Jesus' life on earth. Yes, Jesus did stupendous miracles, like raising someone from the dead – obviously something that only God can do. And, he also demonstrated human weakness: he got hungry, tired, and cold like all the rest of us. When he was beaten, he bled like any other man; when he was nailed to that cross, he died like all the other men the Romans crucified. His power to save us was perfectly expressed in his weakness. What he said to Paul is what he says to all of us as well: "My power is made perfect in weakness." Satan would never say such a thing; what Satan wants is power-over. Only Jesus would say what is true: "My power is made perfect in weakness." Jesus' power is not only present at the same time as weakness; it is made perfect through weakness. Power can never be made perfect through spiritual pride. Spiritual pride turns power into a channel for evil. But accepting and acknowledging our weaknesses can turn power into a channel for healing and salvation.

## SLIDE 17

That is why Paul says, "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." Christ's grace was sufficient for him, even in the midst of all the suffering he endured. He accepted that suffering for Jesus' sake, because it allowed him also to dwell in Jesus' power and strength. The letters he wrote have been considered as Scripture from the very early days of the church. The Holy Spirit inspired those letters, teaches us through those letters, and touches our hearts through those letters to this very day.

Jesus says that we are strongest when we accept that his grace is sufficient for us, whatever our particular thorns might be. And that's because we are strongest when his power is made perfect in us, not through our human strength but through our human weakness.

What might Jesus' power made perfect in weakness look like, here in America, nearly 2000 years later? As I thought about that, I was reminded of Abraham Lincoln. He most certainly had thorns in his life: formal schooling mostly wasn't available to him, and he was self-taught after long days of hard physical labor. His mother died while he was still a child. Two of his own children died in childhood. He suffered from severe depression at several points in his life. And of course, he bore the burden of being commander-in-chief of the terrible Civil War, that at first went very badly for the North.

And yet somehow, he eradicated slavery and defeated the secessionists. Somehow he preserved the nation. This is what Lincoln said, in his second inaugural address, about a month before he was assassinated: "With malice toward none; with charity toward all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds - to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations." As terrible as the Civil War was, its aftermath could have been much worse, had Lincoln not been magnanimous in victory. Both weakness and power existed simultaneously in his life; and

the power of Christ prevailed. I don't think it's entirely coincidental that Lincoln was shot in the head on Good Friday, 1865.

What about us? We have weaknesses, don't we? Physically, our bodies eventually wear out if we're fortunate enough to live that long. Emotionally, we all get defensive, angry, or discouraged from time to time. Spiritually, well, none of us are perfect. But here's the good news: Jesus is right here present with us. And he says the same thing to each one of us as he said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Maybe, like Paul, we can be glad that we have weaknesses, because our weaknesses give Jesus that much more opportunity for his power to be made perfect. Maybe we can stop thinking that it's our job to fix ourselves. Because that's not our job! Jesus' grace is sufficient for us, each and every one of us, whatever our weaknesses might be. We should just let Jesus' power be perfected within us. And, maybe we can also stop thinking that it's our job to fix other people. Again, that is not our job; that would be God's job. We should just remember that just as Christ's grace is sufficient for us, so his grace is also sufficient for others. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we thank you that you know us far better than we know ourselves. You know what we need, far better than we do. And we are amazed and grateful for the grace you have given each one of us through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lived on this earth for us, and died for us, and rose for us. You know our weaknesses far better than we do; and we are grateful that Jesus' power is made perfect in our weaknesses. Please, God, help us to let go of any conceit or spiritual pride, and thank you for the work that you are doing inside us and among us. Help us to see what you are doing in one another also, that we may rejoice and praise you all the more. Through Jesus our Savior we pray. Amen.