

Sunday Sermon: February 17, 2019

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Sermon Theme: It is God who Makes Me Strong

⁷To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰That 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.

People talk about getting strong mentally, physically and emotionally. We might go to the gym to get physically strong through a cardio or weight training class. We might challenge ourselves with a new hobby or even a class to sharpen our mental skills. We might go to a psychologist to help us with our psychological strength.

What happens when we do all those things and it doesn't make us as strong as we want to be? What do we do then?

One of my biggest fears, something I am not strong with, is the fear of heights. It's not really a fear of heights as it is a fear of falling, hitting the ground and the pain that goes along with breaking body parts. No matter what I do to overcome that fear, I can't seem to overcome it.

Sometimes we think of fears as weaknesses. My fear of heights keeps me from doing some fun things that other people do. I can't rock climb or walk over a high bridge. People laugh at me when I struggle to walk down the aisle on the third level of the Smith Center or the Upper Deck of a baseball or basketball game. When people laugh, it really seems like a weakness.

In God's Word this morning the apostle Paul says something about weakness that seems backwards to what we expect. He tells us that God works through weakness to do something amazing. This morning we will see that God works through weakness to make us strong.

There are a few times in his letters where Paul gets very personal. Paul got personal with Timothy, telling him that he was the chief of sinners. He got personal with the Philippians by telling them about he had once taken pride in persecuting Christians, thinking that his own good works would get him to heaven. He admits to the Philippians that while he thought these actions were gaining him heaven, they were really gaining him hell. All of those things he once considered important, he now considered garbage because he had something more powerful than his own works to rely on; he had an all-powerful, all perfect Savior.

Paul gets personal here in 2 Corinthians as well. He shows the Corinthians a part of himself that none of us might show. He shows the Corinthians his weakness.

⁷To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰That 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.

If anyone tells you they know what Paul's thorn is, they are lying to you. We simply don't know exactly what he is talking about. What we can say is that this thorn was something that was there for a time and it was something that affected his body in some way.

There was one other thing that we know about this weakness, this thorn, that we know about. Paul tells us that God gave it to him for a reason so that he would not fall into the sin of arrogance, pride and conceit. God gave this weakness to Paul to make him strong.

It's hard for us to think about Paul as a sinner and not as the one who had all of the great accomplishments. This was the apostle Paul, the greatest missionary of the Bible, the one who started many churches, who wrote 13 books of the Bible. Yet, he was also a sinner who struggled with temptation as we do. God gave him this weakness for a reason: to keep him from viewing his own works with too much pride and

falling into that sin once again. This weakness was given to humble him so that he would continue to trust in God.

The sin of pride is one that we fall into so easily. We slip into it without knowing it because we want to think of ourselves as better than others. We want to be the best and have everyone tell us that we are the best. We like to look at our accomplishments and be proud of what we have done, all the while never giving God the glory he deserves.

The sin of pride is one of those sins that many of us have, but don't recognize for the sin it is. Sometimes God sends us weaknesses so that we recognize the danger we are in so that we can cling to him.

When I am up high somewhere where I am afraid, I look for something to hold onto. When we were changing lights in this sanctuary with that boom lift, I clung to basket railing so tightly that my fingers were sore for a few days. When I am walking down the stairs of the upper deck at the game I make sure that I am clinging to the hand railing of the stairs.

A fear or a weakness can often make us look for something to hold onto. When we have the unexpected diagnosis from the doctor, our world slows down, we need something to cling to. When we get the call that there was the accident in the family, we need something to hold onto. When death touches our life, we need to cling to something that gives us hope.

In his weakness, Paul needed something to cling to. Whatever his thorn was, it caused him trouble and trial. When Paul needed something to cling to, he turned to God. Paul did not just pray, he pleaded with the Lord, not just once or twice. He prayed 3 times that God would take this from him.

When we have a trouble or weakness that causes us to fear, we may try to cling to many things. We may try self-help books, doctors, or even people. But what we really need is to cling to the one who has the power to take care of our problems. What we really need is to turn to the God who promises that where there is weakness, he can and does strengthen us.

Paul's thorn, his weakness, drove him to God. Through that weakness he shows us another amazing truth: God has a plan to strengthen us in faith through those weaknesses. **9 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.**

Paul prayed three times that God would take this weakness away from him. When we pray to God, what answer do we expect God to give? It wouldn't be important to us if we didn't pray about it, so we expect a yes. What would happen if God actually spoke to us, and didn't just say no, but said as he said to Paul, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness."** What if God told us to deal with our problems and our struggles because they are exactly what we needed?

There are many times that God allows these struggles and problems to be a part of our life. It is not because he doesn't love us. It is because he wants us to remain near to him, in faith. It is because he wants us not to rely on our own power, but on his power.

It is when I realize the limitations of my human strength, especially when it comes to temptation, that a Savior means all the more to me. It is when I realize my own human weaknesses and limitations that the strength of God becomes even more important. My human weakness of sickness and frailty makes God's promise and power to heal and keep healthy all the more powerful. When I see my human weakness of wisdom, knowledge and understanding, God's wisdom and knowledge are all the more powerful. When I see my human weakness when it comes to sin, Jesus perfect life is all the more powerful. When I see my inability to do the little things right this makes the plan of salvation that Jesus completed for me, even better. When I see my utter failure in being able to save myself, that's when I thank God for the grace and mercy of my Savior which saves me.

It is not our strengths that drive us to our knees in prayer. We often take credit for the things that go well and forget to thank God.

When things are going well we often forget to have our devotions or even come to church. When things are going well that we might not even think about God all that much.

It is often our weakness that drives us to our knees in prayer asking God to be with us. It is often the times of trouble when we call out to God for his help and mercy. It is often our weakness that brings us to realize that we need a God of strength to not only help us make it through this world, but to the world to come.

When Paul wrote this section he was being very personal about his own weakness and trouble and God's answer to him, but his opening verse, **to keep me from becoming conceited**, might be a verse that would fit all of us. We don't know where our pride might lead us, but God does. He doesn't want our pride, or anything else, to lead us away from him. He lovingly gives us what we need, even weaknesses and frailties, to keep us trusting in him and not in ourselves.