

Power in Weakness

By David Feddes

The Bible reading today is from 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. The apostle Paul says: "I must go on boasting" (2 Corinthians 12:1). He's been defending his ministry to some people who were doubtful about it and preferred other kinds of leaders.

He says: "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ"—and here Paul is talking about himself but speaking a little bit indirectly so as not to be too braggy—"who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:1–2). The third heaven is not the atmosphere, not space and the stars, but heaven itself.

"Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. On behalf of such a man will I boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except about my weaknesses. 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" (2 Corinthians 12:3–6).

Paul has been to heaven and back again, and he says, I'm not going to talk about that because I don't want you to overestimate me. I want you to go by what you see and what you hear from me, not by the fact that I saw the risen Lord Jesus Christ when I first was converted and I've been to heaven and back and I can't tell you about that. But he doesn't want them to think of him too highly, and he doesn't want that to be the main thing they think about when they see God's power at work in Paul.

"To 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. 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.' 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" (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

"God will never send you anything you can't handle"—that's a fairly common cliché that goes around. "God will never send you something you can't handle." I'm here to tell you: yes, he will. And he does. A lot. With a lot of different people. He will send you many things that you can't handle, that overwhelm you, that crush you, that weigh you down, and you wonder whether you're going to be able to make it through the next day. God will send you things that you cannot handle.

And you will find, if you belong to Jesus, that he sends grace and that he sends strength so that even in your weakness he will carry you. But don't ever believe that he's going to send you just a nice, well-modulated little life that you can pretty much handle because you're a pretty smart,

together, strong sort of person. God sends things that are overwhelming for us, and he often then supplies that grace so that we can say with the apostle that God's grace is sufficient, that in our weakness we've found a greater strength (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

Now, when you read this passage about Paul's thorn in the flesh, there are a number of thorny questions that come up. The first is simply this: what was it? There have been many educated guesses on what the thorn in the flesh was. None is certain, and Paul himself doesn't say. So I'm not going to try to say either.

There are some who speak of the possibility of it being a physical affliction, or something that terribly affected his eyes—because there are some indications in the Bible that he had serious eye problems (Galatians 4:13–15)—and there may have been other health conditions. There are some who think it was the ferocious opposition that he continually faced (2 Corinthians 11:23–27). Many other possibilities could be mentioned, but if Paul doesn't tell us, it might be wisest that we don't spend too much time guessing and just say, I think there's a reason he didn't tell us.

Paul was a pastor and a great leader of people, and he knew that they would also be dealing with very difficult things in their life. If he told them exactly what his thorn was, they might be tempted to say, “That's different from what I've gone through.” But his thorn in the flesh was something very painful and very difficult, and something that was chronic. It wouldn't go away.

Who sent him that thorn? The first thing Paul says is, “It was given me” (2 Corinthians 12:7). And he uses the passive tense: “It was given me.” Often in the Bible, “it is given” or “it is done” is called the divine passive. God is the one at work when something “is given.”

But in the very next breath, Paul calls it “a messenger of Satan” (2 Corinthians 12:7). So who sends that thorn to Paul? Is it God or is it Satan? It obviously can't be both. But it is. It is both. The thorn comes from Satan, and it comes from God. Satan's intent in sending the thorn is very different than God's intent for that thorn. But both God and Satan are involved in ways that we're not going to be able to get all figured out and tidy up in a nice system.

It's not the only time in the Bible where Satan is involved and God is also involved. Think back to the book of Job. Satan goes around looking and finding someone to target, and he notices Job. And Job is the best guy in the world. And Satan says, yeah, he's only good because you pay him well. And God allows Satan to afflict Job (Job 1:6–12; Job 2:1–7). And at the end of it all, it is proven that Job will hold on to God no matter what. He says, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (Job 13:15).

Job is never told that Satan was involved. At the end, he has a tremendous encounter with God, and God reveals his greatness to Job, and he never breathes a word about the fact, “Hey Job, it wasn't really me at all—it was Satan.” God never uses the Satan excuse. Because the fact is, Job knew very well that if something came into his life, ultimately God was involved. Satan might have been the direct cause, but God was the one who arranged Job's life the way it was. And God had different purposes than Satan did. Satan was going to show Job to be a phony. God was going to give Job a greater encounter with himself than he had ever experienced. And at the end

of the book, Job says, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). God's intent was to bring him into a deeper encounter with himself than ever he had had before.

Or take another example—the supreme example—of Satan being involved and God being involved. Satan entered into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus Christ (Luke 22:3). And Satan was at work in the mob and in the wicked leaders of the people who murdered and crucified Jesus (John 13:27; Acts 2:23). And the Bible says it all happened by God's plan and purpose (Acts 4:27–28). Both Satan and God. The crucifixion is the work of the devil, and it is the greatest revelation of God's love and the greatest act of God in saving his people (Romans 5:8; John 3:16).

Martin Luther once said, "Satan is still God's devil." Even though he's in rebellion, even though he's very wicked, he cannot go beyond the bounds of God's permission. And when Satan is up to something in the life of one of God's people, God is working, and God is going to bring about wonderful things.

Eho sends that thorn? It is a messenger of Satan, and it is from God, in order to keep Paul from being conceited and to carry out God's purposes in Paul's life (2 Corinthians 12:7).

That may give you a headache—so be it. If you want your faith to be something that fits on a bumper sticker—"God will never send you anything you can't handle," or "If something bad happens, it's never anything to do with God, must have been the devil"—well, yeah, the devil may well have been involved. But even if he was, it does not mean that God is not in the picture and that God's purposes are not being carried out.

Another question that comes up when you read this passage is: how in the world are we supposed to pray when something comes along that is very painful, that we don't want, that we wish were gone?

Well, pray the way Paul did. "Lord, get rid of it." That's the first thing. When we're praying and dealing with an affliction, we pray that it go away, that God remove it. Even if it came by God's arrangement and plan, that doesn't mean it's his will and intent to leave us with it. It may well be that he wants to remove it. So pray that it be removed. Pray that we be healed. Pray that this season of affliction will be lifted and go away. We're reading about a passage where a request wasn't answered the way hoped for (2 Corinthians 12:8–9), but that does not mean that therefore you read such a passage and say, "Yeah, always go to God and kind of say, 'I know God's probably not going to answer this prayer anyway, but I'll ask because you're supposed to.'"

No. We should go to God expecting that God is interested in our situation. God's normal approach is going to be to remove the afflictions that come into our life. Healing is the work of Jesus Christ, and he is the great healer still today. We can come to him and ask him for healing, for strength, and come expectantly, come with anticipation of what he's going to do. This kind of passage is not meant to throw a wet blanket on all prayer and all expectation that God is going to answer prayer in wonderful ways.

Well, when should we stop requesting? If we're meant to ask for removal of the affliction, or healing of the illness, or removal of whatever problem we're facing, when do we stop? Because Paul did stop. He stopped when he knew that God was not going to remove it, because God told him so (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Now, there's a couple ways to think about that. One is, after you request several times and it hasn't come about, you say, "Well, I guess it's not God's will to answer in the way I was hoping, and so now I simply accept it as God's will, and I learn to live with it."

Another way of looking at it might be this: Paul prayed for it, but then he received a direct revelation from Jesus Christ himself that it wasn't going to be removed, and that God was going to supply sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). So if God doesn't give me a strong and direct sense and revelation that it's not his will that it be removed, I'm going to keep praying that it gets removed until it is—or until I have a very strong indication from God that he's not going to.

And so I think that when we stop requesting is when we know what God's will is in the matter. If we don't know what God's will is in the matter, I'd say: keep on praying. If you've been afflicted with something for years, that doesn't necessarily mean you say, "Well, I guess it's not meant to be." It's still okay to keep praying if you haven't received a strong and clear message from the Lord that that's his will—that you're going to just keep living in that.

We shouldn't always assume that an affliction is meant to be ongoing without end just because it's been going on for quite a while. It may well be that God will lift it in a different season. So pray and keep on praying till you know that God doesn't want you to pray about that anymore.

Why would a thorn not be removed? That may be one of the hardest of all the thorny questions that come out of a passage like this. Why would it not be removed? Why wasn't Paul healed of that thorn in the flesh—whatever it was (2 Corinthians 12:7–9)?

Well, there's a variety of reasons why a prayer might not be answered in the way we were hoping, or why we're not rescued from a predicament. The Bible gives a number of them. They don't all apply at the same time to the same situation, but here's a variety of the kinds of possibilities that are out there.

One is failure to ask. James says, "You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:2). He's talking to a particular audience of people, and they just haven't bothered to pray. They haven't bothered to talk to God about it. So if you have a situation in your life that you wish were different, but you've never gone to God with it in urgent prayer—then ask.

Sometimes people are not delivered or healed because of a lack of faith. That's not always the case. Some turn one kind of teaching or one kind of event in the Bible into a whole system and say, "If you're not healed, or if an affliction is not lifted, that means you didn't have enough faith, because we know that everybody with enough faith is always healed." Well, that's baloney. But there are times where lack of faith is a problem, and where presence of faith is what brings God's blessing.

You remember many times Jesus would say to someone when he healed them, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (Mark 5:34). Sometimes *shalom*, or peace, means health. “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace. Go in health.” Faith is an important element in receiving answers from God.

And you also see the opposite. You even see it described so strongly in Mark—it says that in one place Jesus “could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:5–6). That’s a very strange phrasing: “Jesus was not able.” But that’s how Mark puts it. Jesus was not able to do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

So “your faith has healed you,” “couldn’t do much over there because of a total lack of faith”—faith obviously has an important part to play in receiving God’s healing. But faith is not always simply believing that I’m going to get what I ask for. Faith is believing that God is sufficient, and that God is able, and that Jesus is a mighty healer.

One guy came to Jesus and said, “Lord, please help me. If you’re willing, I know you can heal me” (Mark 1:40). Well, Jesus took that as faith. The man didn’t know if Jesus wanted to heal him, but he knew that if he wanted to, he sure could. So sometimes faith is taken to mean, “I know what the outcome is going to be, I know what Jesus is going to do.” But in this case, the man said, “I know that if you want to heal me, you sure can.” And Jesus said, “I am willing. Be healed” (Mark 1:41). So faith is simply trusting in God and trusting in the power of Jesus to rescue, to save, to heal, to deliver.

Sometimes healing or rescue didn’t come because of a lack of repentance. The apostle James speaks of this: “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:14–16). It seems that sometimes, at least, there can be an unconfessed, unrepented sin in a person’s life that is blocking God’s blessing from coming into that person’s life.

I’ll take an example from a different area. The apostle Peter at one point tells husbands: “Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect... so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7). So if you’re a jerk of a husband and you’re treating your wife like dirt, and then you’re saying, “Lord, pour on the blessings,” it might not happen. Peter says, “so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Sometimes living in sin and refusing to repent can be a block.

Sometimes, whatever we might be telling ourselves, there may be the danger of not really wanting our situation to change. It sounds very strange, but sometimes, once you get into a situation where you can go on as a victim—where you can go on as the person who’s just in this muddle—do you really want to be back on your feet in great health?

There’s a situation where Jesus came to a man who’d been crippled for many years, and Jesus said to him: “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6) What kind of question is that? You say,

“The man’s been unable to walk for years and years and years. Why would he even be asked, ‘Do you want to be healed?’” The man did say yes, “I want to be healed” (John 5:7), but the very fact the question was asked does indicate that there may be times where we don’t really have a deep desire to have the kind of health and strength and fullness that would enable us to live responsible lives. We might rather be in a situation where we always get to be the victim and where somebody else is the one who has to take care of us.

Another example of why some people continue in difficult circumstances is the work of the demonic, and it’s not been dealt with. There was a woman who for 18 years had been bent over by sickness, and Jesus said that this woman had been bound by Satan for all those years (Luke 13:10–16). Even in our passage, of course, there’s an element of demonic attack and activity that Paul has to face (2 Corinthians 12:7).

So those are some of the reasons why a person sometimes remains in affliction, remains in a predicament, and doesn’t get delivered from it: didn’t ask, or didn’t have faith in God’s power to save and rescue, or lives with unconfessed, unrepented sin, or maybe simply doesn’t want a change of situation, or hasn’t dealt with powers of evil that are afflicting.

Having said all that, those are not the only reasons to consider when we haven’t been rescued or healed. Above all, God has divine purposes. And you might be a person who has asked, and you asked in faith, and you asked with all of your sins repented and laid at the foot of the cross, and you really do want the blessing that God has promised, and you really are free from a demonic attack—and still you don’t get the deliverance. You still don’t get the healing.

Why not?

Well, God very often is up to something. And before I get on to what God might be up to, it’s important to just realize again that we don’t use this little list I’ve just given as a means of attacking other people and saying, “Well, I know why this isn’t happening to you.” Because that’s all too easy. And there are some very bad theologies that latch onto one or another of these, and they’ve got the instant explanation for why you aren’t healed: “If you would just shape up and have a little more faith, or repent of this, or deal with the demon of the common cold, all would be well.”

So these kinds of things in the Bible, as I said, if they’re turned into a system or used as a means of explaining everybody else’s problems for them, they cause far more damage than good. But we do need to realize that the Bible does talk about these things. And so when we’re going through things, we do want to—without inflicting additional burdens on ourselves—be open to these possibilities.

“Lord, am I living in faith? Have I been praying for it? Am I repenting of all known sin?” And so on. So we take these as possibilities to help us walk through a season of affliction, so that just in case it is one of these things, we’re not going through a self-inflicted problem.

But there may well be divine purposes, and we need to think about what those might be.

As we get into those divine purposes and God's power for us in weakness, let me just expand again on those various thorns in our life. Paul doesn't define what his thorn in the flesh was (2 Corinthians 12:7), but let me just mention some of the possibilities that come into our own life as afflictions.

Sometimes it's being ill. It can be chronic pain that just doesn't go away. It can be ongoing fatigue and weariness—literal weakness. It can be something that just sticks with you and bothers you and you wish were different.

It might be the way you look. You weren't blessed with those fabulous looks of somebody else and you wish you were, but you're just a little plainer than some. You might be painfully shy, and just have a hard time talking to people. It makes it hard for you in your work life or in some of your relationships because you just can't come out with it.

You might be a person who's uneducated, and you feel kind of ill-equipped when it gets into difficult conversations, or when all those smarter people get to yak, and you kind of zip it because you feel kind of dumb around others.

You might just be unpopular. People don't take to you the way they do to other people. You might be poor. You just don't have a whole lot of money. You can't meet the basic needs and pay all the bills that are coming your way. Your employment situation might be very bad. You might be without a job entirely.

A thorn in the flesh might be just fragile emotions, mental illness, a vulnerability. And you might look over there and think, "Boy, those other people—they seem to have it together. They've got the energy, they've got the happiness it seems, and I just seem to be stuck."

Sometimes it's just circumstances—overwhelming ones—where you start feeling more and more powerless. I think of the last couple of weeks. Just in the circle of people that we know: Scott Reese preached here on Sunday, and Monday found out that the bladder cancer was back. My sister-in-law had surgery for cancer. Another person I know well was diagnosed with cancer. And my grandson ended up in the intensive care unit, where he still is after a week.

And those are just the events. Then there are the chronic things that just keep going and going that people have had to bear for months and even years on end. And those things are all the difficulties that weigh on us—sometimes with a weight greater than we feel able to bear.

Sometimes that thorn in the flesh or that weakness is just aging. It happens to everybody. You say, "Well, you should just get used to it. We get older." Well, yeah, that's easy to say. But when your memory starts slipping, when your health starts weakening, you can't do much about it, and it happens to you.

It may be a disability. It may be straying kids. You see other people's kids, and they seem to be on a great track, and you've got one or more children that are breaking your heart. And you've prayed about it for years on end, and the situation still hasn't changed.

So there are a lot of different forms that weakness can take. And we need to—we need to know—now, what could God be up to as I go through that kind of stuff?

Each of you, as you reflect on your own situation and on your own life, will be able to identify seasons—at least—where you felt something was too much. What is God doing?

Well, we know what he was doing in this particular case with the apostle Paul. Paul says it was given to him so that he would not become puffed up, so that he wouldn't become proud (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul was still a person vulnerable to sin, and God knew it. He knew that somebody who's been to heaven and back, who's been in paradise and then comes back to this earth, might be in some danger—not just might be. I mean, Paul's heart was completely known to God.

So when he had this tremendous revelation, the God who gave him the revelation also gave him the thorn, so that the revelation would have its purpose in Paul's life, but so that it would not inflate his pride.

Sometimes we might say to ourselves, “You know what, if only God would give me a more spectacular experience. If he would take me to heaven and then put me back again, or give me some other tremendous experience of himself, then at last I would be the kind of person God wants me to be. If I just knew with greater certainty, if I just had the fantastic joy that comes from that kind of experience—then, oh, would I be somebody to make a difference in the world.”

But maybe not.

Maybe what we most need to become more like Jesus is not simply the spectacular revelation but the carrying of the cross, the walking of the path that we didn't want to walk, and walking it because we're faithful to God.

Paul was protected from pride. For a good many of us, it may be that the affliction that comes into our life indicates to us: I'm not as strong as I thought I was. I thought I had things together. I am helpless in the face of what can be thrown at me.

It may come and tell us: I'm not as virtuous as I thought I was. I thought I was a person of quite a bit of faith. I was pretty strong. And when that came along, I felt paralyzed. I felt like I couldn't go another step. I felt like God had betrayed me. I got really mad at God.

And all of that is not a pleasant thing to go through, but it has a way of humbling you and saying, “I'm not one of these great and mighty heroes of the faith. If God doesn't help me—and help me soon—I'm not going to have any faith at all.” And that could be kind of depressing—to say, “Boy, my faith is pathetic. My faith cruises along pretty well when life is going smoothly, but when life gets really hard, my faith goes pfft.” You say, “Man, God should make life better for people so that it would be easier for them to have faith.”

Well, you know, we all have good suggestions for God on how to be God. But the God who knows us also wants us to know ourselves. Sometimes you know yourself when the avalanche

comes on you and you find out how you handle it. And maybe you didn't handle it very well. And you say, "Boy, it had the opposite effect that God wanted it to have. He just made me a wreck, and made me bitter, and made me feel like I didn't even want to serve the Lord anymore." You know what? That's not all bad. It's not all bad to realize: that's who you are unless there is a tremendous outpouring of grace for today—to realize that I am helpless unless God comes through.

We'd like to kind of live on a built-up supply of savings and capital and have God give us enough grace for the next 40 years till we, presto, show up in glory. God has a habit of doing it one day at a time, where last week's grace isn't going to get me through this week. It's just not going to. I can't say, "Well, thanks for that heavy payment of grace, Lord. I think I've got enough to get me through the next month." That's just not how it works. And the sooner we realize that, the better—that we are helpless and weak apart from God's grace.

And we develop then faith in God's sufficient grace. Paul heard Jesus say to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). It was in his weakness that he became more and more the mighty man of God that God wanted him to be. It was not the visit to heaven so much—although God had purposes for that—but it was in the weakness that he became more and more the man God wanted him to be.

Earlier in 2 Corinthians he says: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:8–9). When you feel like you're left for dead, when everything is a wreck and a ruin, you only have one option: count on God who raises the dead. We'd like to get through life and feel like we've kind of got it under control. But at the end, when we hit the real end, all we've got left is faith in God who raises the dead, faith in God's sufficient grace for each day, faith in God who raises the dead. And Paul says that was so "we would not rely on ourselves but on God" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

And don't forget what he said in this first letter to the Corinthians, right at the beginning: "The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25).

And so God's sufficient grace—though it's mysterious, though it's downright weird at times—is going to turn out to give us what we need in our time of need.

Another thing that comes through—and that is God's purpose in weakness—is a closer union with Jesus Christ himself. Again, to quote from 2 Corinthians, this time chapter 4: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body" (2 Corinthians 4:10–11).

We want the life of Jesus. We want the energy of Jesus, the joy of Jesus, the strength of Jesus. And we can have that. But we don't get to have union with the life and the joy and the strength of Jesus apart from participation in the suffering of Jesus.

The triumph—the resurrection—does not come without the anguish and the crucifixion. So in our union with Christ, when we're united with him in his death, then we're united with him in his resurrection. The Bible says: "We are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:17). And one of the joys of going through hard times is a closer union and identification with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another blessing and benefit is that your inner being—your inner self, your inner human—is strengthened. The apostle speaks in 2 Corinthians again: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

And he says: "We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16–18).

He says our inner self is being renewed day by day. And he says that's being renewed even though the outer self is wasting. Our body, our energies, our ability to do things—that might all be wasting away. And yet the real you—the you that God is concerned about, not just the you that's going to be able to do something useful next week, but the you that's going to be around for eternity—that inner self is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). There are some people who, as they age, begin losing physical capacities and yet become mightier and mightier in their walk with the Lord and in their closeness to him. The inner self is strengthened.

The apostle Peter wrote the same way: "These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7).

The apostle James said: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4).

The maturing of a person happens through the valley of trial. We may wish it were not so, but it is so. Think of your own life. For some of you, maybe there were tremendous times of growth in a worship service of great joy and celebration, or a special retreat where you felt especially close to the Lord and God did wonderful things in times of joy and in spiritual highs. But for many, it will be those low times—the times of anguish—where you matured more than at any other point in your life. You might not have chosen that affliction for yourself, but when it came, it made you more the person God wanted you to be. The strengthening of your inner self occurs.

Another way God's power is made perfect in weakness is in the ability to comfort others—to minister to others. Let's go back to the very beginning of 2 Corinthians. The apostle says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the

comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Corinthians 1:3–5).

He continues: “If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:6–7).

To become a channel of God's comfort—the greatest channel—is when you yourself have gone through that hard time and then found God's presence encouraging you and comforting you. Let me just ask again: who is the greatest comfort to you when you're going through a hard time? The person who is smiling 24/7 and has never had a problem? Are they?

Sometimes it is nice to be around cheery people. I like being around cheery people. But when you're going through troubles, you're often helped the most by those who have been through something really, really tough. They know what it's like. They know where you're at.

And that might not be the full explanation of why you're going through what you're going through, but it may be one good thing that comes out of it. It may not be the whole explanation, but it is a good thing—when you have gone through something hard and then you share with others going through something hard the comfort that you have received from Christ.

This past week, it was hard not to think back 35 years. I mentioned that 35 years ago I was ordained to the ministry of the Word. A few weeks after I was ordained to the ministry of the Word, Wendy went into the hospital, and she remained in the hospital for many weeks. Then she gave birth to twins, and those twins were in terrible danger for a very long time. Rebekah and Rachel were on respirators and received all kinds of treatment. Rachel eventually got better, and Rebekah—after nine times off and on the respirator—died.

We were part of a congregation of over 500 people. There were almost no deaths in that congregation during the entire three years I was there. Our baby died on May 12. And another couple in our congregation lost their baby the same day. And there was one old guy. Those were the three deaths in our whole congregation during those years. Why did our baby die the very day somebody else's baby died? I don't know. I don't know. And I wouldn't say that it was a great thing—“Oh boy, it's good she died so I could be empathetic to somebody else.” But that is part of it. We can't avoid what the Bible teaches us, even when it hurts. Whatever God's purposes are that I don't understand, I do know that the other couple who lost the baby had a pretty good notion that their pastor knew what they were going through.

When we go through things like that—and each of you has had your own trials, some worse than I have ever faced—but when we go through these things, we again realize how weak we are, how little we are able to make it through these times without help from beyond ourselves.

And so when I see my little grandson lying there in an intensive care unit this week, and his mother—whom I remember 34 years ago lying in the very same condition, only one-third his weight—I remember that. Rachel doesn't remember any of that, of course. But I do.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Sam Storms has written a wonderful set of meditations on 2 Corinthians. He says when we go through something hard, we often ask, “Why me?” He says sometimes it might be helpful to ask, “Who else?” Because we’re not the only ones going through a hard time. And when we think not just about the “Why me?” but also the “Who else?” then we’re starting to ask, “How?” How can I be a comfort to somebody else? How can I receive the sufficient grace of God and overflow with that sufficient grace for somebody else?

And when we go through all of this, we need to remember what Paul says again: “God’s 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... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

You know, we heard a testimony last week—“I can’t do the things I used to do. These hands, they just won’t do it.” But do you think doing nice things with your hands brings more blessing than what’s gone on in your heart? That great heart of love and courage and faith—God is at work. Of course, we pray that the affliction will be lifted—in that case, and in so many others. But in the meantime, let us not block ourselves off from the comfort that flows to us from God and that he then gives to other people.

Ultimately, in all of this, God’s purpose is that we may rejoice in his glory and that he may be glorified. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Just that mouthful with which Paul opens this letter—he’s the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The many things we don’t understand, we understand this: he is the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who sent him into the world to bear burdens that nobody else could bear, to endure sufferings that nobody else could endure. Because he’s the God and Father of Jesus Christ and the Savior of his people.

He’s the Father of all mercies, the Father of all compassion. What a wonderful title to give to God—the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort, the God of encouragement.

Paul had been through all of this, and so how does he describe God? “God is the mean person who puts me through stuff I can’t stand”? No. He says, based on his own experience, that he is “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Paul had tasted that comfort. He had received that encouragement. God had sent him something he couldn’t handle—and then he found out that God’s comfort was greater than what he had gone through. And because of that, then he can glorify God.

And when we go through life, and when we're crushed, and when our strength is not able to avail, then God gets the glory when good things happen and we don't get the glory.

The Bible speaks of that tremendous revelation where: "God... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). What a treasure. That's kind of comparable to that visit Paul had to heaven—where God gives us a revelation of himself. And then the very next thing Paul says is: "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 4:7). There's this tremendous treasure—and it's plopped right into a crackpot. Just a jar that's not all that fancy, very vulnerable to getting smashed. But the treasure is there. And why does God do it that way? To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The apostle Peter says: "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13). And, "The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10–11). So, in receiving encouragement and receiving power from God in the midst of these terrible trials that we face as his people, God is glorified.

Our own strength has failed. Our own wisdom has failed to figure it out. But Christ crucified and risen, and the daily grace of God, turns out to be enough—and more than enough.

God will not send you things you can handle all the time. But he will send you things that he can handle. And he will receive the glory when he does.

I invite you, as we close this message, just to listen to God and then confess with the apostle Paul: "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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

Prayer

Father, show yourself again in our own lives to be the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. You know the weakness. You know the agony and the sorrow over prayers that have not gotten the answer that we hoped for, or the seasons of affliction we've gone through before things got better again. You know it all. May our experience may be that of the apostle—that your grace is sufficient and far more than sufficient for our need. Let your grace be so great that we may be channels of comfort to others who need it, that we may comfort one another in your love. In our own brokenness and struggles, help us realize that we're not alone, but that we have each other, and above all, we have you. As a community, weak and yet powerful in you, may your comfort overflow from us so that when we relate to others who don't yet know you, they'll experience us not as know-it-alls, not as those people who seem to have it all together or are too good for those around them, but instead, Lord, as those who are just ordinary people—clay pots—but filled with your treasure. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Power in Weakness

By David Feddes

Slide Contents

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² 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. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ 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.

Thorny questions

- What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh?
- Who sent the thorn to Paul?
- How should we pray in affliction?
- When should we stop requesting?
- Why would a thorn not be removed?

Why not healed?

- Failure to ask
- Lack of faith
- Refusal to repent
- Don’t want health
- Bound by demon
- **Divine purposes**

Power in weakness

- Protection from pride
- Faith in sufficient grace
- Closer union with Christ
- Stronger inner self

- Able to comfort others
- Giving all glory to God

Power in weakness

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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me... For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10)