

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 8, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 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, 7 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. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 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.

"Strength in Weakness"

What is the secret to your success? A few years ago I ran into a friend and neighboring pastor I hadn't seen in a few months. I took one look at him and said "wow!" He came from a family with a lot of other pastors, but all of them on top of their theologically substantial nature also had a physically substantial nature. After he told me how much weight he had lost, my next question, of course, was "what's your secret?" That's what we convince ourselves. Some mysterious plan or method kept under wraps. And if we just found out this undercover information we could find a way to be happier and healthier, become better parents and better spouses, get along with our coworkers and develop deeper friendships. Just tell us the secret.

Belief in some secret cure is probably a little too simple. But we do have the chance to uncover some surprising truths in God's Word that will give us practical help for struggles in our lives. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12 Paul shares some intimate details about his personal life. He opens up about a thorn in his flesh. But Paul doesn't just teach us about his own weaknesses. He provides a pathway for handling problems as a Christian. His humility in the face of weakness highlights God's grace. And God's grace is the key for finding strength when we are weak. It's not really a secret. And it's definitely not an easy solution to all our problems. But it's God's way of giving us strength in weakness.

There is some surprising background to this chapter. The Apostle Paul had already written at least one letter to the Christians in the city of Corinth. He had to address some serious problems that popped up. Among some other concerns, now Paul is forced to defend himself as God's apostle. Other spiritual leaders were claiming they were superior to Paul, even calling themselves "super-apostles." So, in order to defend himself against these personal attacks on his ministry, Paul uses some unusual tactics. He describes in the first verses of 2 Corinthians chapter 12 how he was given an extraordinary revelation by God, actually taken up into the dwelling place of God. You would think Paul would use this experience to put his critics in their places. But he actually does the opposite. He says: **"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, or because of these surpassingly great revelations..” (2 Corinthians 12:6,7) Instead, he talks about his struggles: **“Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”** (2 Corinthians 12:7) Paul is defending himself by pointing out his weakness.

Maybe this isn't all that shocking to you. Everyone faces discouragement. Especially when it comes to our spiritual lives. A theologian claimed the problem is when we are never discouraged or always discouraged. If we are always discouraged, then we are losing sight of the big picture of God's power and care. If we are never discouraged, it's probably because we stop caring.

Everyone gets discouraged. Even Martin Luther. In fact, at one phase in his life Martin Luther not only got so disgusted and fed up with the people he was preaching to that he wanted to quit, he actually did quit. From January 1530 until February of the next year, he stayed out of the pulpit in Wittenberg. What happened? He had threatened the congregation that if they didn't show more fruit of the gospel, he would stop wasting his time on them. So when they kept on getting drunk and giving into lustful thoughts, when they behaved like swine in his descriptions, he kept his word and stopped preaching. Don't test a stubborn German.

Discouragement comes in many forms. We aren't really even sure what Paul's thorn was. It was something sharp and painful sticking with him so that it couldn't be removed. One commentator summarizes various theories. Some believe the thorn was spiritual, causing terrible thoughts or giving him strong temptations in the flesh or torturing his conscience over sins in his past. Some people suggest the thorn may have been some opponents who were particularly persistent and vicious enemies. Then there's the whole category of physical problems like headaches or severe eye troubles, a disease like malaria or leprosy, episodes of epilepsy or bouts of depression, even a possible speech impediment.

But Paul never tells us what his thorn actually is. And here's my theory on that. Paul intentionally avoids identifying his thorn so we can relate our weaknesses to his. Your thorn could be a physical craving for an addictive substance. Your thorn could be your default mode of getting angry easily. Maybe you naturally get disappointed or frustrated by the bad behavior of others. Maybe you get this irritating hostility welling up inside you when things don't go your way. Your thorn could be a feeling that you can never be truly happy or content until you get everything you're after. Your thorn might be the way your children never quite measure up or the way your spouse never lives up to your expectations. Your pain, your struggles, that's your thorn.

I don't know about you, but this is really surprising to me that one of God's greatest apostles and missionaries, a remarkably strong Christian we put up on a pedestal would be this open and honest about a weakness. He tells us how he dealt with it: **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”** (2 Corinthians 12:8) And here's the shocking thing. God said “No!” God refused to take that thorn away from him. Paul eventually understood there was a purpose behind this weakness: **“Therefore, in order to**

keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (2 Corinthians 12:7) God was using it for his good.

So why would Paul admit to a really frustrating, personally discouraging weakness? And then why would he talk about his failed attempts to get rid of it? This is the kind of thing a leader who wants to be respected and revered would keep private and reveal to no one, much less publicly, voluntarily disclose without being put under oath. Paul doesn't give us all the details. Maybe he never got the exact answers he was looking for. But he does tell us God's reason: **“to keep me from being conceited.”** (2 Corinthians 12:7) Literally so he wouldn't exact himself or lift himself up.

This reminds me of one of the most memorable scenes from one of the biggest movie franchises in history. Toward the end of Return of the Jedi, Darth Vader becomes Anakin Skywalker again. Vader asks Luke to take off his mask. Luke responds, “But you'll die.” Darth Vader then says, “Nothing can stop that now. Just for once, let me look on you with my own eyes.” For most of his life Anakin has been looking at the world through his mask and forced everyone else to see him through this tough, intimidating exterior. His dark, cold mask makes him look stronger than he really is since underneath is a fragile and sad old man in desperate need of love.¹ Why reveal our vulnerabilities? God already knows who we are. He sees us as we really are. Thorns in our lives help us to see God without our masks. For whatever reason God allowed Paul to struggle for years and years with this painful thorn in the flesh. Even when Paul prayed and prayed and prayed, God decided to let that thorn to remain. He had one bigger purpose in mind: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** (2 Corinthians 12:9) God wanted Paul to see his grace.

Grace is God's powerful antidote to every message the world is sending us. Paul describes the real danger from the thorn wasn't the pain or suffering itself. The real scary part about the thorn came from the “messenger of Satan.” You are plenty familiar with this even if you've never used this term. You have physical suffering from a medical issue that you just can't quite shake. The message you hear whispered in your ear is that you are getting what you deserve. You should have been more careful. You aren't satisfied with the transformation you are praying about. The message that keeps repeating in your mind is that you must not be asking God hard enough or your prayers must not be genuine enough or you haven't made big enough sacrifices for God for him to notice. You are trying to get rid of the anger or bitterness, disappointment or irritation that comes so naturally to you. And the message that won't shake itself from your heart is that you are never going to be the kind of person God wants you to be. You are aren't the kind of person who will ever reach that level of spiritual improvement. You struggle with your cravings and powerful addictions. The voice you keep hearing tells you that you are worthless and unloveable and disqualified from being part of God's family.

And grace gives you a very different message. Grace says, of course you won't. God knows who you are. God knows you can't be that kind of person. And that's exactly the point of grace. What you can't be, God makes you. What you can't achieve on your own, God gives

¹ Matthew C. Schneider, The Mockingbird Devotional, p. 235.

you. All your life, all your work, all your suffering, especially your thorn point you to God's powerful grace. When you are brought to utter weakness and helplessness, then grace is seen for what it really is. Grace is more than someone cutting you some slack when you've had a rough day or getting your coffee paid for by the personal ahead of you at the drive through. Grace is God's undeserved love for you in Christ Jesus. Grace gives you God's peace when you deserve hostility. Grace gives you support and deliverance when you've gotten yourself into a mess. Grace is God's comfort when you see only anxiety. Grace is assurance when you have only doubt. Grace is hope and joy that rests in Christ's finished work for you instead of what you have done for God. Grace is the strength of Christ's finished victory in the face of your defeat. The grace message is the perfect response to the message of Satan, because in your weakness you get Christ's strength.

Do you know what happened with Martin Luther? In 1531 he was back to preaching 180 sermons, one every two days.² And when he traveled, he always agreed to preach as a guest. He continued to preach the gospel, not because he became a starry-eyed optimist about people or his hopes for the world. But because he realized the gospel was the only thing that mattered. The gospel shows us Jesus who had very real thorns. Jesus was tortured by Satan's messengers on multiple occasions to take the easy way out. Jesus was beaten and attacked, experiencing pain and suffering we will never be able to comprehend. Jesus got a "no" answer to his prayer to have the cup of suffering taken away from him so God could say "yes" to bringing you into heaven. Jesus did that all for you and me and for our world. He did it so we will never experience the kind of pain and suffering we deserve. He did it to turn our understanding of struggles and discouragement in this world upside down.

When God calls you, he is calling you to carry out the things that really matter with his strength. For your marriage and your family, for your friendships and work relationships, for your physical struggles and personal battles, God's grace is enough. Only when we are aware of our weaknesses will we realize the world's symbols of strength mean nothing even if we have them all. Only when we find our strength in Christ can we be strong for Christ. Our thorns just spotlight the radical power of God's grace.

This is the secret we learn from Paul that is ours to freely use and share and dispense. Our thorns drive us back to God's grace. Our persistent prayers for relief build in us a deeper trust in God's grace. Thorns that are removed and thorns that remain just help us to see God's strength in his grace. The secret is we don't find our identity in our struggles or our successes. We find our ultimate identity his God's grace. In our weakness we find His strength. Amen.

² Fred W. Meuser. Luther the Preacher, 34.