

## Suffering into Strength

2 Corinthians 12:2-10  
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First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson

“... Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” When it comes to weakness and strength, writer B. M. Launderville looks to the mighty oak tree and a delicate vine, saying, “The vine clings to the oak during the fiercest of storms. Although the violence of nature may uproot the oak, (the) twining tendrils (of the vine) still cling to it. If the vine is on the side opposite the wind, the great oak is its protection; if it is on the exposed side, the tempest only presses it closer to the trunk.”<sup>1</sup>

In some storms of life, God intervenes and shelters us. In others, God allows us to be exposed so that we will be pressed more closely to him.

This is what the Apostle Paul is getting at when it comes to weakness and strength, low times and high times. Paul looks back on his life and recalls his greatest moment – being “caught up into Paradise,” what he calls the third heaven – and hearing amazing “things ... that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

Paul juxtaposes this highest moment of his life with his most difficult struggle – what he refers to as a thorn in the flesh. No one knows what Paul is referring to; only that it tormented him so much that he repeatedly prayed to the Lord that it would leave him. And the answer he got? “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”

Thanks, Jesus. “Power is made perfect in weakness.” This means that we all have to suffer great difficulties in life, which we know. But it also means that somehow God’s power is made perfect in our weakness, in our struggle. How can that be? Why would that be? It seems so cruel, doesn’t it?

Yes, perhaps from one point of view, it does – from our limited point of view. I mean, why does God allow suffering?

That’s a tough question. It’s a question that will never be answered to our complete satisfaction – at least not on this side of the cross.

And yet, Paul does shed some light on why suffering is allowed to exist, or at least what happens with us in the midst of suffering that gives it some redeeming qualities

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<sup>1</sup> B. M. Launderville in Tan, P. L. (1996). Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times (p. 1511). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

Suffering exists. That's a fact. Theologically speaking, we suffer because we defy God's will. But that still doesn't explain why God answers some people's prayers with healing and deliverance, while for others, the suffering goes on and on.

We can't know why that is. But we can stand sure in God's love for us – even amid our suffering. And certain of God's love, we can look for God to redeem our suffering and give it purpose.

There's nothing worse than senseless suffering, and yet, for God's faithful, there is no suffering that is beyond God's soothing, comforting and uplifting embrace. Relying on God's grace means turning to God and those he sends our way in the midst of our pain and suffering, our weakness and limitations.

Take Paul for example. For Paul, God used his physical limitations to draw him closer to the Lord. Remember, before he came to know the Lord, Paul had been a Pharisee, an all powerful religious leader single-mindedly persecuting Christians. And he was proud of it, boasting of his plans to completely eradicate the Christian faith. Paul sought to build himself up by tearing others down.

"Therefore," says Paul, "to keep me from being too elated as an Apostle, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated." That's twice in one sentence Paul says he's prone to being overly elated with himself. By nature, Paul is boastful and self-aggrandizing, and that never goes well for anyone when it comes to the Lord.

Take for instance Harold and Jane. Harold and Jane were not a very religious couple but they tried their best; still they only went to church once a year. As they were leaving the church, the minister said, "Harold, it sure would be nice to see you and Jane here more than once a year."

"I know," replied Harold. "We're very busy people, leading active lives but at least we keep the Ten Commandments."

"That's great," said the minister. "I'm glad to hear that you keep the Commandments."

"Yes, we do," Harold said proudly. "Jane keeps six of them, and I keep the other four."

Think about it. With anyone that boastful, that full of himself, that self-assured is there any room for the Lord? No, for individuals like that, it's all about them and their plans, unless and until they have a come-to-Jesus moment.

Thankfully for Paul, that's just what happened to him; he had a come-to-Jesus moment. And that's when Paul discovered and came to know in his heart – in the depth of his being – that it's not about Paul and his plans; it's about Jesus and the world he envisions.

If you were to consider any suffering you may be enduring, any weakness that's keeping you down and then look for what God is doing in the midst of it, what might you see or discover?

Could it be that God is ready to meet your suffering with a warm embrace, a comforting word, an outstretched hand? Could it be that God is ready to swoop in under your weakness and lift you up to even greater heights, as you rely more and more – not on yourself - but on the Lord? Yeah. Of course he is.

Look, it's OK to pray for relief from pain and suffering, weakness and limitation. But in that prayer, we have to be open to God's response, and confident in God's love for us, God's love for you, and for our world.

The power that's made perfect in our weakness is not the power to be in charge, it's not the power to control people and to orchestrate outcomes. No, it's the power to be who God created you to be – someone who praises God and relies on the Lord in all things.

What better way to display the power of God than to rely on God – trust in God – even and especially in your most troubling and difficult moments.

This is why Paul says in the end, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ..." And then he adds this, saying, "For whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

At his weakest moments, in his times of greatest suffering, Paul relies on the strength of the Lord, and this sees him through; the Lord never fails him. So ask yourself, at such moments in your life, whose strength are you relying on – your own, or the Lords?

When we ask that question with an open and receptive heart, that's when we truly learn to trust in and rely upon the strength of the Lord, which never fails, and which can turn all things to God's good purpose. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, we have come together in your name today as your people, your children. It is in your name that we ask for your work in the life of our nation, bringing unity and civility, even and especially in our national politics – in both parties and among both presidential campaigns and their supports – and unity and civility, O Lord, also in our homes, among our friends, and on our social media.

Let us not be the instigators of any hateful or misguided speech or actions, or even participants in such dangerous and un-American, un-Christian thoughts and actions.

We pray for Former President Donald Trump, for his political allies, for his family and friends. We pray for the family of the event-goer killed during the assassination attempt, and for those injured and traumatized. We pray for the family of the shooter who was killed, and the communities impacted by this act of political violence.

We pray for our nation and for our world, Lord. Guide us, protect us, and help us to raise to our best selves, in your Spirit of wisdom, peace and unity.

And for us and those we love, Lord, we ask for your comfort and peace, health and wellbeing, hope and joy. We ask that you give us your strength, because we know that we are nothing without you.

We pray this especially for those who are grieving. We ask your Spirit of healing and health for those dealing with illness and disease and injury.

We pray all this in the sure knowledge that your love for us never lets us go, even and especially when we stumble and fall.

We pray with confidence as your children, joining in the prayer of the one whom we serve, the Lord's Prayer, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;**

**and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**