

# The Power of Weakness

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm going to invite one of our elders, Hamish Alexander, to come and to read to us from the Scriptures from 2 Corinthians chapter 12. 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. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

Though if it should be wished to boast, I would not be as 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.

So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn has given me in the flesh. A messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being conceited.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[ 1 : 40 ] Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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. Amen. Amen. It's great to be with you this morning.

A little disorienting being up high like this. I was talking with someone on the way in. It seems like preaching from down there is more of a Corey problem. Maybe I should be down there since I'm a little taller.

But, you know, speaking of which, we're talking today about power and weakness. And it's amazing how, like, the lengths that we will go to to avoid weakness or avoiding appearing weak.

For instance, we went to a movie yesterday at the cinema, and there was a time where I almost fell asleep. And, you know, that person who can't admit that they fell asleep during the cinema or whatever, it's like, they're trying to deny their weakness, right?

[ 2 : 54 ] Or maybe it's trying to cover up a mistake or telling a half-truth. Or maybe you've been in the gym and haven't been able to complete a set like you thought you would.

And you got up and you were, like, looking around to see if anyone noticed that you weren't actually as strong as you thought you were. Or maybe you've even seen someone on the football pitch faking an injury in order to excuse a failure that has happened.

And just recently, we were in Greece with some friends, and Kelly handed me a tin of beans to open up. She's like, I can't get this open. Can you open it up?

And I'm like, I can't get it open. So we handed it to our friend, and she opened it right up. And, of course, I said, I must have loosened it for you, right? Because we don't like to appear weak.

The message that we pick up early in life is weakness is bad. I can't show my weakness. I must hide it. So we will appeal to our strengths in order to prove ourselves or our trustworthiness or our dependability.

[ 3 : 58 ] And which is actually proving your strength is actually the passage or the context for our passage today in 2 Corinthians. The theme of the whole letter of 2 Corinthians is that through Paul's weakness and suffering, the believers there have been comforted, and the gospel has been spread.

However, there were some false apostles that had come through, and they were claiming to be superior to Paul and why you should listen to them instead of Paul. So they're boasting in how bold they are, how much authority they have, how gifted they are, how they should be respected.

And Paul sarcastically calls them the super apostles. He refers to them as that in a couple of verses. So when Paul's coming to this passage, and I don't know if you picked up on it, but there were a few times he talked about boasting, about boasting in the Lord or boasting in strengths or

boasting in weaknesses.

And what he's saying as he's coming to the passage, he's like, it's foolish that I should have to do this. Like, I really don't like the thought of boasting. It's ridiculous that I'm having to go there. But if we're going to talk about who can boast, I'm going to be honest with you, and I will speak plainly with you.

And he goes on and describes an event. And at first he says, a man in Christ. He didn't say it was himself until later on. But he goes on to describe an event where he was called up into the presence of God.

[ 5 : 19 ] This happened about 14 years earlier before Paul had any influence in the church. And so he's kind of like a nobody at this point when it happened, but he also hasn't spoken to people about it.

But ultimately, this event, instead of pushing him into an arrogance or trying to claim, hey, I've been in the presence of God. Look how much authority I have as a prophet or whatever.

Instead, he keeps it to himself and comes to our passage and starts talking about how this actually pushed him into weakness. So this morning, what we're going to talk about is the power of weakness.

And since Corey's not here, and I thought I would honor him by having three points. The first point is we can't avoid weakness. The second point is we shouldn't try to avoid weakness.

And the third point is we must embrace weakness. And you may be like, those sound very similar. They are. But let's dive in. The first thing, we can't avoid weakness.

[ 6 : 19 ] One of the things that we understand from reading the whole of Scripture is that we were actually created to be dependent on God and interdependent with each other.

So from the very beginning, we lacked strength and ability to do everything on our own. It was God's intention as his creation for us to be in a state of dependence.

In fact, in Genesis 2, verse 18, we have that verse we've probably all heard. It says, Then the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make a helper fit for him.

This word helper actually means one who supplies strength in the area that is lacking in the one that is helped. In other words, Adam needed help right away.

And so God created someone who would compliment him that they would be interdependent with one another. So weakness actually comes before the fall.

[ 7 : 21 ] Weakness is not sinful or necessarily a result of sin. That dependence on God and interdependence with one another was meant from the beginning. And if we think about weakness, we can imagine some scenarios where good things come from weakness.

I mentioned working out in the gym. If you work out in the gym, you may know that reaching the point of failure, is the way they talk about it, is when the real work is beginning to happen, when muscle is being built.

But it comes after facing weakness. I mentioned earlier, but in this letter, Paul is talking about that it's our weakness that allowed us to be comforted by God.

This is chapter one. And then since we were comforted by God, we can then comfort one another. So through weakness, God uses us to minister to one another.

And as we know, the heart of the Bible's message has to do with weakness. How Christ let go of his authority, of his glory, and embraced weakness to become a man so that he could die for our sins.

[ 8 : 29 ] He rejected power and became the Lamb of God so that we could have life. It's literally how we become a follower of Christ. Romans 5, 6 says, for while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

A great hymn that we sing sometimes, Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy. It says, all the fitness he requires is to feel your need of him. It is in weakness that we find life.

It is in weakness that we find strength. We see that throughout the whole of the Bible. But yet, we still try to avoid weakness. So the first point, we can't avoid weakness.

The second point, we shouldn't try to avoid weakness. Again, this is very similar, but if you look throughout all of redemption history, you see how God has chosen the weak things in order to accomplish his purposes and to show his strength.

God usually didn't choose the big powerful person or the big powerful tribe, country, nation. In fact, when he says he chose Israel is because they were least among all the nations.

[ 9 : 40 ] Whether it was Abraham, Jacob, Moses, whoever, God was working through weakness. We know stories of Gideon where in fighting the Midianites, God kind of trimmed down the army from 32,000 to 300 so that God's perfect strength could be made known.

We see in David and Goliath, that famous story we all know, that David battles, battles a battle-tested, hardened giant. And he says, this battle belongs to the Lord and defeats him with a sling.

Obviously, we've mentioned this, but the ultimate example of not avoiding weakness was Jesus, where he says in Matthew 20, verses 26-28, it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave. Even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. That's one of the themes of Jesus' message on earth was, hey, as I have served you, so you must serve one another.

You must let go of what you think is your strength in order to follow me. And then Paul says in the next chapter of the book that we're looking at, chapter 13, verse 4, that Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.

[ 11 : 04 ] This is a theme that we see throughout the whole Bible. We know this. I'm not telling you anything new if you've grown up in church or familiar at all with Scripture, but yet we still try to avoid weakness.

So we shouldn't try to avoid weakness. And that leads to the third point, and this is where we'll camp out, is we must embrace weakness. If it's true that we are created dependent, we're going to be weak, why is it that we spend so much time, so much energy, so much thought, avoiding weakness.

And now, I'm not advocating that you should go back to your CV and start, you know, trying to demonstrate to a potential employer of how weak and undependable you are, anything like that. I'm not saying we glorify weakness so that it's like, man, being weak is the best, you know. I'm not saying anything like that. But what I'm saying is, it is God's intention for us to understand how to live from His strength through our weakness.

So, let's look at our passage today. In verse 7, He says, to keep me from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations.

[ 12 : 22 ] He actually says this twice, to keep me from being conceited. And I think we just need, because He repeats this, I think we need to stop really quickly and just understand and acknowledge there is a reality where knowledge about Jesus or an experience with Him might lead us to arrogance, to pride.

That's the opposite effect it's supposed to have, but we do see that because of our sin we often become judgmental or overly critical or feel superior to others.

Arrogant instead of humble because of knowledge about Jesus. Or maybe it's an experience we had with Jesus. So there is a danger. I mean, even His own disciples were arguing about who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom.

I mean, you read that and you're like, are you paying attention at all to what Jesus is saying? But yet, that is the inclination of our hearts to avoid weakness to which ultimately causes us to avoid strength.

But throughout church history, we know there have been those who have used Jesus to try to gain power. And this should not be. The glories of Christ should humble us, but sin in us is strong.

[ 13 : 36 ] So we must fight against this. So he says, to keep me from becoming conceited because of this great experience I had in the heavens, a thorn was given to me in the flesh.

Now we've heard, probably heard about this, a thorn in the flesh. And the reality is we don't know what this is. Many think it might be a physical ailment. After having some back problems a week ago, I'm like, it could be a back problem.

That was really bad. That was hard. Some think it might be eyesight, a bad eyesight because of some things that are said in some other letters. Could it have been migraines, some have suggested.

Some think it's a physical ailment, but then some have suggested because of all the stress he talks about and different things, it might have been a psychological ailment. Whatever it was, it was a big struggle.

And because he doesn't tell us exactly what it is, we can kind of fill in the blank there and say, okay, I understand what you're talking about. I know what it's like to have a thorn in the flesh.

[14:36] That thing that makes me feel weak and vulnerable and makes me feel really frustrated. Something that we've asked the Lord to take away and he has yet to do that. We can understand that because Paul doesn't describe specifically what he's talking about.

Now we might look at verse 10 and where he says, for the sake of Christ, then I'm content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities. You know, we might say, okay, it might fit into one of those categories.

When you start looking at what some of these words mean, like the word calamities, it means to be in a narrow space. We would use the phrase like to be between a rock and a hard place. We all understand that or understand what hardships are, which is basically something outside of us is making things really difficult, putting pressure on me.

Some of us have faced persecution. We all know what it's like to be insulted. But we understand this idea of weakness. And whatever it is, whatever this thorn in the flesh was, it was sent to harass Paul, he says.

This word harass literally means to torment or to strike with the fist. whatever it was, it was bad.

[15:52] And Paul felt pretty beat up about it. And in verse 7, he calls it a messenger of Satan. Now, we understand that a messenger carries a message.

And I think that helps us to understand this passage. So when we have something that makes us feel weak or vulnerable or frustrated, that thorn in the flesh, there are two messages that we could be listening to.

That first message would be the message of Satan, which is all throughout Scripture we've seen where he tries to tempt us and deceive us and to think that God doesn't love you.

He wants to keep you down. Don't you think you know better than God does? If God really loved you, wouldn't he grant this for you? That message of Satan that came in the garden, literally, God had said to Adam, you can eat of all the fruit of all the trees except this one tree.

And Satan comes in and has him focusing on this one tree and said, if God really loved you, he would let you eat of that one too. Instead, he doesn't know what's best for you.

[17:05] He knows that when you eat it, you will become like him, knowing good and evil. The message of Satan is God does not love you. He does not have a plan for you.

And he is withholding something great from you. He wants us to doubt God's love and good plan for our lives. And when we're feeling a thorn in the flesh, that's one message that we are tempted to believe.

But the second message comes from God. That when we have that thorn in the flesh, something that makes us feel weak, vulnerable, frustrated, that says, my grace is sufficient for you.

My grace is enough. It can satisfy your longings. My grace will provide all that you need. I'm giving you all that you really need and it is good for you.

So hear what God's saying. I'm giving you my riches. I'm giving you all that you need to face the problems that you're facing today. I'm giving you the very power of Christ to strengthen you.

[18:11] My grace is sufficient for you. But we're tempted to believe the other message. So Paul's saying, a messenger of Satan was given to me.

A thorn in the flesh that came to harass me. And he heard this message from Satan, but then he heard this message from God. Which message are we going to listen to?

But Paul says in verse 8, three times I pleaded with the Lord about this. Three times I asked God to take this away. And the Lord said, no, I'm not going to take it away.

Commentators will kind of tell us that this echoes Jesus in the garden. We know how he came three times praying, saying, Lord, if it be your will, let this hour pass for me.

Let this cup be taken away from me. And each time God said, no, you must face this. When we're suffering, good meaning, well-meaning people will tell us things like, hey, the situation's going to change.

[19:20] This will get better. We know this is going to go away. But what if it doesn't? What if it doesn't go away? What message will you believe?

Jesus's words from Matthew chapter 7, where he says, who among you, when a son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or when he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?

If you being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly father give what is good to those who ask him? Are Jesus's words true to us?

That he is a good father? Not giving us a stone or a snake, but is giving what is good to his children when they ask.

Do you believe that? When we have a thorn in the flesh, it is tough to believe it. We've all been there. As I'm talking about a thorn in the flesh, you probably have something that is going through your mind and where we have pleaded with the Lord to take it away.

[ 20 : 24 ] And when we think about our pleading and we're hearing a no, we shouldn't be hearing a harsh voice. Like a lot of times it's like, no, I'm not going to do this. Stop asking. But that's not God.

Instead, it's more like the loving, gentle father saying, not right now, sweetie. Not yet, buddy. I'm Abba, father, and I give what is good.

You have to trust me. I'm going to give you something better. I'm going to give you my power so that you can thrive despite this thorn.

And this will deepen our relationship and you will know me more. And also, you will be able to comfort others with the comfort that I'm comforting you with right now. God says, my grace is enough.

It is all you need. And then verse 9, Paul goes on to say that the message that he got was, my grace is sufficient for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[ 21 : 26 ] When we are weak, it allows God's strength to actually work through us and to put his strength on display. We already named some examples of that with Gideon and David and Christ.

And one of my favorite examples that gets me through a lot of hard times is from 2 Chronicles chapter 20 when King Jehoshaphat comes before the Lord. A great army has come against him. And he says in verse 12, for we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

He then sends out the worship team ahead of the army. And the Ammonites fight against themselves and destroy themselves. That'd be like us putting Don in the band out in front of everybody and say, hey, lead the way.

God did it. We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you. For when I am weak, I am strong. Paul Tripp, in his great devotional book, *New Morning Mercies*, he addresses this idea of weakness that was really ministered to me recently.

[ 22 : 32 ] He says, I don't want to be confused or unready to feel unqualified or hold others back. I don't like it when it seems that there are things I should know and I don't know.

I don't want to let myself or others down. But your weakness is not the great danger that you think it is. Rather, the great danger is your delusion of strength.

Because if you think you're strong, then you don't seek the help that you desperately need from the one who is the ultimate source of strength of every kind. For when I am weak, then I am strong. So Paul goes on to say, therefore, let's read verse 9. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

He says, I'll do this all the more gladly. This word gladly is actually where we get the word hedonism, joy. He's saying, when I embrace my weaknesses, that's when the power of Christ is made perfect in me.

[ 23 : 40 ] It's emptying ourselves of our self-sufficiency so that we can be filled with the power of Christ. It means that I can find joy in the middle of suffering, in the midst of weakness.

Because it's then that Christ's power rests upon us. And I realize, if you're going through suffering, I realize you read something like this and you're like, this sounds like someone who hasn't suffered before.

But we know Paul suffered more than we can imagine. I mean, I don't think we understand when it talks about him being lost at sea a couple of times. I don't think we fathom how terrible that is.

This is someone who has known great, great suffering. But he's saying we can rejoice. We can be glad about our weaknesses when these things come because it allows the power of Christ to rest upon me.

This word rest literally means to pitch a tent or to tabernacle. And one commentator said that this is likely Paul drawing on the Old Testament image of the glory of God coming to rest on the tabernacle.

[ 24 : 52 ] Think of that imagery. The power of Christ coming to rest on you in the middle of your weakness when you need it most.

Gets rid of all self-sufficiency and allows us to rely on his sufficient grace. We can handle the thorn because Christ's power and presence comes to settle on us, to rest on us.

We can be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. And again, this is not glorifying weakness and saying the more bad stuff that happens to me, the better.

We can even glorify our weaknesses where we try to compare with other people. They're not suffering as much as I am. How dare they say that? We bend this so much because of our sin. But instead, we must learn to embrace our weakness to rely on Christ and the strength that he provides. So what?

[ 25 : 57 ] How should this change the way that we live? Weakness is not a hindrance to joy and thriving. It's a means by which we can have joy and thrive.

Weakness does not get in the way of experiencing what God has for you. A thorn is not a sign that God doesn't care. Weakness is a tool to help us experience God's amazing grace.

So when God lets us experience weakness, he's graciously reminding us of who we are and who he is and where we can find real strength. God is protecting us from ourselves.

I love Tripp's words there of delusion of strength. Weaknesses help us wake up from that delusion. And we've got to learn to draw on the power of Christ, learning to embrace that weakness so that God's perfect grace can work in us.

Now when hardship and suffering comes that make us weak, I think one of the things that we should say is, okay, Jesus must be up to something. When the phone rings and that's that person that you would least like to hear from or to think about, we should think, I wonder what God is up to right now.

[ 27 : 18 ] When we face that situation at work that makes us wake up with dread, not even want to get out of bed tomorrow, we should think, what is God wanting to do for me?

When we're overwhelmed by the problems that seem to just pile up on top of each other, the problems that we're facing just multiplies and we feel weighed down by that.

Anything that disrupts the way we think the world should be going, we should be thinking, what is God wanting to do through this? What is he up to today? So as I was working on this passage this week, recently the acres are kind of up for visa renewal.

That can be a real stressful time. And we were getting some word from the office that there's some timing issues and we're a little stressed about it. And we're praying and we're praying and we're praying and the Lord provided.

This is great. This is wonderful. Okay. The Lord has answered our prayer. Well, on Friday, after I've been working through this passage for a week, I have sent some messages to our person in the office and haven't heard anything.

[ 28 : 27 ] And she finally responds and says, hey, I've got an update for you. I will send to you soon. Now, previously in the past six months, that's been code for, uh-oh, things haven't been going as they should, but it's okay.

We're working on a solution. And so I sent that message. Okay, I have to ask, is everything okay? And then I see those three dots.

And I wait. And I wait. And I said, all right, Lord. You've been working in me on this. I've got to ask the question, what are you up to right now?

I don't know if I can handle this. What are you up to right now? And I heard that my grace is sufficient. So I was resting.

Come to find out there's nothing wrong. It was a total just like God just teaching me something in that moment. Am I willing to apply this to my life and the things that I dread and the things that I don't want to be true in the most inconvenient, stressful times?

[ 29 : 36 ] Am I willing to say, all right, God, what are you up to? I'm here for it. Your grace is sufficient for me. Are we willing to embrace weakness in that way?

Are we going to try to cling to our own strength, which is what we try to do oftentimes? But when we do that, when we try to hold that control, we are avoiding the power of Christ working in our lives.

When God doesn't seem to be answering prayer, when it seems he's abandoned us, because we can't fathom anything good coming from this situation. When those times happen, we just have to realize we haven't reached the end of the story yet.

God is working. He is working powerfully and he is giving me his riches to make it through, to thrive, to have joy.

He has my good and his glory in mind and he just says, trust me. And we have to understand, God's not necessarily trying to solve all of our problems that we're facing.

[ 30 : 38 ] God is trying to use your problems to draw you to himself so that you can know him deeper, increase the intimacy that you have with him, be a comfort to others.

And so weakness is like an invitation to a deeper relationship with Jesus because we're learning to depend on him in ways that are new. Every morning it seems like.

Because Jesus embraced weakness for us, all the promises of God find their yes and amen. Jesus embraced weakness on our behalf perfectly so that we could have his perfect strength.

And one day God's going to take care of all those secondary problems. Jesus says, I'm making all things new. And until then, until then, let him draw you into that deep, soul-satisfying relationship that he desires for us to have, even though it requires us to embrace weakness.

Let's pray. God, we do thank you that not only you are our strength when we're weak, you meet us in weakness filling us with your strength, making your strength perfect in our weakness.

[ 32 : 04 ] Let us learn to cling to that, Lord. Lord, we are so tempted to believe the message of Satan. We're so tempted to say, if he loved me, he would answer me right away.

He would say, yes, help us, Lord, to trust you. You've proven it over and over and over and over.

Day by day, your mercies are new every morning. Your grace has been lavished on us, and yet we daily, moment by moment, forget.

Please help us to latch on to your grace, to embrace weakness, knowing that when we are emptied of our self-sufficiency. Your sufficient grace fills us with the strength of Christ.

Let us embrace that, Lord. Let us live in the way that you desire for us to live so that we can have intimacy with you and fellowship with one another, building up each other in Christ, because we're all weak, needing strength, and we need each other as you've created us to be interdependent.

Help us to rely on you and to embrace weakness in order to find strength of Christ. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.