

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany; February 16, 2025
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
"He is Strong"

Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. And he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weakness, so that the power of Christ may shelter me.

That is why I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Once upon a time, the good people of Minnesota elected a former professional wrestler to be their governor. Toward the end of his term that governor gave an interview in which he was asked about religion in general, and Christianity in particular. He said, "[It's] a sham really. It's a crutch for weak people who need strength in numbers." Many Minnesota Christians took deep offense at their governor's words, especially the fact that he called them weak. This caused Ventura's poll numbers to drop, and contributed to his decision not to run for a second term.

Several years later, a popular comedian and political commentator released a documentary film called "Religilous," in which he took aim at all religions, and especially Christianity. In this film he said, "Christianity is for the weak. Not believing is a luxury that strong people have. Christianity is fine for prisoners, and the dying, and the simple-minded who have no legs of their own to stand on. But for people who have their own strength, they have the luxury of not believing it. It's the weak who need it." Of course, Christian churches across the nation called for members never again to watch Bill Maher's television program, so deep was their offense at his comments.

I wonder how many of these angry Christians – the ones who got all worked up about Jesse Ventura and Bill Maher calling them weak – once learned a song called "Jesus Loves Me." One of the most famous songs in Christianity finishes with the line, "little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong."

While it's not the goal to defend every opinion of Bill Maher and The Body Ventura – this is probably the first and last time they will ever be quoted from this pulpit – it turns out they are more right than you might at first like to think when they call Christians "weak" people.

One of the most important Christians in history, St. Paul, was plenty weak. And it's no wonder. During his lifetime he was flogged, which was enough to kill many people by itself. He was stoned at least twice, once so severely that he was left for dead. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, and generally abused throughout his life. At the first church I served, there is a big, beautiful statue St. Paul that depicts him as a trim, fit, limber-looking guy. But based on what the Bible says about what he went through, I picture him more as a ragged bag of bones walking with a bad limp, with scars on top of scars.

Still, despite all of his weaknesses, St. Paul might have had reason to view himself as a strong person. After all, out of all the people in the early Christian church, God had chosen St. Paul to be his missionary to the Gentiles, to travel the entire known world, to organize and open churches, and to watch thousands upon thousands come to faith while he preached. That could make a person feel very strong. Paul got to write letters to congregations and individuals under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which means that what came out of his pen were the words of God himself. That could have a way of making you feel strong, I imagine. In these verses, he also mentions that God chose him to receive astounding visions from God, seeing things that in these verses he calls **revelations of extraordinary nature**. And earlier in this chapter he calls them, **inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell**.

All of those amazing things that Paul got to see and do and experience might have had a way of making him forget just how weak he was. So, in addition to all the scars and bruises and everything else, God allowed St. Paul to have a thorn in his flesh to torment him. Exactly what this “thorn in the flesh” was is not known. Some Bible scholars think that Paul may have had troubles with his eyes, because when he was converted, he saw a very bright light and then had scales grow over his eyes. Others speculate he may have suffered from malaria, or some serious affliction connected to all the beatings he took. Whatever his thorn in the flesh was, it was bad, and it wasn’t going away...no matter how much Paul prayed. He says, **Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me**. You might think, “Three times isn’t so many.” But “pleaded” is a word of intense passion. I picture these “pleadings” along the lines of Jesus’ prayers in the Garden, where his sweat was like drops of blood. Three times Paul begged with all his heart for God to give him relief from this thorn. But God would not.

Instead, God gave this answer to Paul: **“My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.”** Weakness is good for Christians; it was God’s way of telling Paul, “You still need me. You still need my power. You still need my grace. You’re nothing by yourself.”

Do you have reason to feel strong? I bet everyone one of us has at least some reasons to feel awfully good about ourselves, to feel like we’re in good shape all on our own. We live in a community and in a nation that still – despite our struggles – abounds with wealth. We may not always realize it, because we’re used to seeing it around us all the time. But it’s there, and for many of us, a lot of that wealth is our own. Not only that, most of us enjoy good health, families full of loved ones, good intellects, dependable income, bright futures. Good looks, athleticism, a position of authority... whatever it may be, it can all have a way of making us feel very, very strong.

On our own, however, all humans are actually very weak. Every human being is fading away physically and will one day reach the end. A few weeks ago, I watched another, very recent, interview with Jesse Ventura. He’s not bragging about his strength anymore. Bill Maher now speaks openly about his fear of his encroaching death. I hope they might reconsider their stance on their strength and believe in their Savior. “Not likely,” you say. St. Paul wasn’t a likely candidate to believe either, from our point of view.

In the end, we are not just weak; we are helpless. And not just physically. We are, more importantly, helpless spiritually. By ourselves we are totally weak, totally helpless to make things right with God, to undo the broken, sinful condition we are in from conception, or all the

trash we've done and thought and said during our lives. We are totally helpless to make ourselves lovable, forgivable. We are totally weak, totally helpless to reach heaven.

But with all the things and people around us and the pride in us that can trick us into thinking we're strong, many people consider themselves too strong, too tough, too independent to need God's help in this life. Or too good to need God's Son as their Savior. In their arrogant self-reliance they reject the help God offers them on this side of heaven and the help he offers them to reach heaven. "I don't need that stuff," they tell themselves. "My life is going fine as it is. That's for weak people. I'm too strong for that stuff." And they lose out on God's help. They lose out on his salvation. Because they think they're strong, when they're actually weak.

Sadly, our own sinful arrogance and self-reliance can pull us Christians in that direction, too. During good, prosperous times in our lives and in our families we too may start to think, "My life is fine without God. I don't really need him right now." For example, during times of economic prosperity in this country, church attendance almost always drops. While during times of economic hardship, it rises again. Why is that? When pocketbooks are fat, Christians feel strong enough without God. And they stop listening to him. Another example: For hundreds of years churches have been racking their brains over how to maintain young members and keep teenagers from wandering from the fold. This is not a new problem. Why is it so hard to keep them? Because young people think they're indestructible. They think nothing can touch them. They're too tough for God, too strong. And we've all fallen into that line of thinking at one time or another.

God does not want that attitude of thinking we're too strong to need him to overtake us and rip us away from him. And so he sometimes allows thorns into our lives, just as he did with St. Paul. It may be a thorn in the flesh that he allows, or it could be a thorn in our pocketbooks. It could be a thorn in our families, with difficulties popping up in relationships. It could be a thorn in our minds as we age and begin to feel our mental power slipping. The thorns could come in almost any form, any time, and in any size. Sometimes they are large and serious enough to feel more like flying two-by-fours than thorns. But they come to remind us how weak and fragile and helpless we really are by ourselves.

He lets them come so we remember that we need his help in all things in this life, and so that we remember that we must rely on him alone to reach the next life. So we remember that we need him for everything, including our forgiveness, which only comes from him in his Son Jesus. There is an old saying: "When you're on your back, the only way to look is up." When thorns – or flying two-by-fours – come into our lives and knock us on our backs, there is purpose to it. When we are on our backs, when we are in trouble and pain, then we remember to look up to God by looking back at his promises to help us in all things.

Our thorns remind us of how weak we really are...and his promises remind us how strong he is to help us. Jesus made this point many times during his ministry. He said, **"Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."** Little children are weak, helpless, and dependent. Those are the people to whom heaven belongs – the ones who look to God to deliver them in his grace. He said, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** He said, **"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."** Through our weaknesses, he turns us back to his gospel of forgiveness in Christ crucified, so that we say again, "I am weak, but he is strong." Then we recognize that God's grace really is

sufficient, that his grace alone makes us strong. Then we recognize that God's power is made perfect in weakness, because our weaknesses cause us to fall into his strong arms instead of trying to stand on our own two feet. Then we say along with St. Paul: **For whenever I am weak, then I am strong.**

St. Paul recognized God working through his weakness, which is why he closes with these words: **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.**

The way Paul uses the word "delight," it means more like "be content." We don't need to throw parties or jump for joy if we get sick or lose a job or whatever. But we can, and we do, understand that God has a purpose for all the thorns in our lives, no matter where they come and in what size. Because all our strength is, in the end, nothing but weakness. His strength, and his grace in Christ, is what we need in this life and for the next life. We are weak, but he is strong. Amen.