

Walking in Weakness, Walking in Power

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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We're going to be looking at 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 this morning. Let me pray for us before we read.

Our God in heaven, we thank you that you have created us and that you've called us to yourself. Thank you that you have given us your word so that we can know you and so that we can know how you want us to live. As we look through your word today, we pray that you would help us to understand what you're saying to us, that we would believe it and walk in accordance with it. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

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. 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. 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 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. 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. 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." 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In today's passage, Paul says a lot about weakness. He says, I will boast of my weaknesses. He says, I am content with weaknesses. He says, "When I am weak, then I am strong." Do you often sense your own weakness? Are there things that you would like to do but you just don't seem to be able to do them? Are there outcomes that you would like to bring about, but you just can't seem to make them happen?

In our years working as missionaries in Japan, there is nothing we have seen more clearly than our own weakness. We can't make people understand the gospel. We can't change their hearts. We can't convince them to do what God says that they should do. Walking in weakness has been our constant experience in the mission field. And I suspect that for all of us, it is our frequent experience in many areas of our lives.

Paul says that walking in weakness was his experience as well. In Paul's case, he was made conscious of his weakness by the presence of what he calls a thorn in the flesh. There have been all sorts of speculations about what this thorn in the flesh was, but Paul doesn't tell us what it was. If the particular nature of Paul's thorn were important, certainly, he would have told us. Perhaps he

intentionally didn't tell us because what he learned through his own thorn is relevant to us however we experience our own weakness.

Paul says that the thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations which he received in a vision he was shown. Paul speaks about this vision as if it were someone else who saw it, but it's clearly Paul himself who saw the vision. We don't know what Paul saw or what Paul heard in the vision, but there would be no danger of Paul becoming conceited because of somebody else's vision. Whatever this thorn in the flesh was, it was Paul's constant companion for the rest of his life. He was constantly reminded of his own limitations by it. He was constantly aware of his frailty.

Paul wrote about weakness in another passage, which you are probably familiar with, earlier in 2 Corinthians. In chapter 4, Paul wrote, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

It seems that walking in weakness is part of God's plan for His people. We have a treasure. We have the knowledge of the glory of God through our faith in Jesus. But we carry this treasure in jars of clay. In ancient times, treasures were often carried in clay containers in order to protect them. In comparison to these treasures, these clay containers were noticeably drab. They cracked easily. Their plainness was obvious. We are the jars of clay. We have the glorious gospel in our hearts, but our cracks and our weaknesses are plain for all to see. But the glorious gospel that we carry in our hearts was also wrought in weakness. The eternal Son of God took on some of the limitations of humanity to come to this earth. He allowed Himself to come under the power of Jewish religious leaders and Roman officials, and He died on a cross. Jesus put Himself in the place of weakness in order to save us.

As I have said before, we constantly experience our weakness on the mission field in Japan. Let me tell you about one such instance. Some of you have heard in the past about a man who I'll call Mr. X. We first had contact with Mr. X when his daughter and a friend came to a children's event at church. We invited the children who came to that event to Sunday school the next day, and these two girls came. The next week, being a good father who wanted to see what it was that his daughter was getting involved in, Mr. X came with her to Sunday school. Then he became to attend worship at the church. Later, he began to attend a men's Bible study on Sunday mornings. From the things that we heard him say, we could tell that he was rapidly growing in his understanding of what he was reading in the Bible.

Suddenly, about a year and a half later, he stopped coming to everything. At first, there were excuses. He wasn't feeling well. He had to work. But soon, we began to be concerned that something bigger was going on. And then one night, he showed up at our door. He was clearly very shaken, and he told me what had been going on.

Earlier in his career, he had regularly padded his expense account when on business trips and meeting with clients. He had stopped doing this since he began learning from the Bible, but what he had done had been discovered by his company. He was afraid he would lose his job and be unable to support his family. He was afraid that the company would make a public example of him. He was in anguish about the shame that he would bring on his family.

I began to meet with Mr. X three or four nights a week. We memorized scripture together, and we prayed together. Through his eyes, I understood the psalms of anguish in ways I never had before. There had been an initial meeting with the company's lawyer, but after weeks of silence, Mr. X was growing increasingly paranoid. He thought that the company might force his agent mother to sell his house to recoup the funds. He thought that the family of a co-worker, at whose wedding he had a prominent role, would harass his wife and child. He considered going into hiding with his family. One night, he told me that he considered killing himself earlier that day.

Each time we met, we talked over the same spiritual truths. That's because the fear of the unknown and imagining all the worst-case scenarios would drive him to the brink since the last time we met. He was frequently at his breaking point. But we talked over and over of God's ability to protect him and his family and how God could turn even these terrible circumstances into something good.

Finally, seeing his condition, the company asked him to consult with a psychiatrist. He was treated with medication. After several weeks off from work, he was asked by the company to return to the office. It became clear that the company was not going to prosecute him. Eventually, he resumed his previous role in the company.

God did exactly what we had hoped and prayed for him. He protected him and his family. In His mercy, God restored him despite his sin. God worked in these excruciating circumstances to show them that he had for them a hope and a future. And Mr. X simply drifted away. He stopped coming to meet with me. Despite repeated invitations to come back to church and to the Bible study, he has never done so. If I see him on the street, he'll be friendly, but any spiritual interest seems to be gone.

I felt like I did all the right things in this situation. I stood faithfully with Mr. X in this time of hardship. I pointed him to God with scripture and in prayer. And he seemed to hold onto those things, but there was something I couldn't do. I couldn't change his heart. I couldn't cause the seedlings of faith to take root and to endure once the crisis had passed. Those are things that only God could do. I was confronted with my limitations and my weakness.

Paul doesn't only talk about weakness in what we read today. He also talks about power. God's message to Paul when he asked that the thorn in the flesh be taken away was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul learned to be content in the place of weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon him. He came to understand, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Our experience as Christians is not only one of walking in weakness. We also experience walking in power, that we're jars of clay, and there is a glorious treasure within us. It's the treasure of the gospel, the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And precisely because we are jars of clay, the power of the gospel in us is obvious. It shows that the surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Although we constantly experience walking in weakness as missionaries in Japan, there are times where we experience walking in power as well. Let me tell you one more story. There was a missionary working with us who learned about an international church in Dubai in the Middle East which was reaching out to Japanese people who had been transferred there for their jobs. She left Japan and went to Dubai of all places in order to reach Japanese people. No sooner did she arrive in Dubai than she met a Japanese woman who had just been diagnosed with cancer. I'll call her Mrs. Y.

Mrs. Y had become a Christian when her family had previously been transferred to another country, and she was now attending this church in Dubai. She wanted to receive treatment for her cancer in Japan, and so our missionary friend contacted us to see if there was a place where she could stay during her treatment. It turned out that we had a room available in our apartment that we could offer to her, and she came to stay with us.

Of course, the treatment was very hard, and the outcome was far from short. We prayed often with Mrs. Y and sought to encourage her with truths from the scriptures, some of the same truths that I had shared with Mr. X earlier. Mrs. Y had a 6th grade son who came from Dubai and stayed in our home with his mother during his school spring break. I'll call him Z.

Now, imagine that you're an 11-year-old boy, and your mom is being treated for cancer on the other side of the world. How are you doing? Naturally, Z was terrified. He was afraid his mother was going to die. He was very worried about what would become of him. So when Z arrived at our home for spring break, his heart was already very soft. He attended worship at Sunday school at church. He participated with his mother in family devotions at our home. I read to him from the *Chronicles of Narnia*

every day. In God's word and in fellowship with God's people, Z found comfort for his heart. When he returned to Dubai at the end of the spring break, he asked his father, who is not a Christian, if he could be baptized. His father, seeing how Christians had cared for his wife and son, gave permission. Z came back to Japan during his school summer break. As he stayed with us again, we worked through a children's catechism to help lay a stronger biblical foundation for his faith, and he was baptized at the end of that summer before returning to Dubai.

God's power was clearly apparent in the transformation that took place in Z's heart. God was already at work using circumstances to soften his heart before he came to Japan, and God worked dramatically to seal biblical truth to his heart in a very short time to bring him to a surprisingly substantive faith for such a young man. And his faith has stood the test of time even as his mother seems to have been cured from cancer and even as he's had to make choices between church activities and other activities as a junior high school student. It was an opportunity we didn't foresee at all. God simply dropped it in our laps, and God worked powerfully and dramatically in those unique circumstances.

Walking in weakness is not something that only missionaries experience on the mission field. We all experience it, and we experience it in a wide variety of areas in our lives. So I suspect that you know as well what it's like to be confronted with your own limitations and weaknesses. Do you know what it's like to walk in weakness as a parent? I certainly do. Do you know what it's like to not be able to protect and influence your children as you'd like? Do you know what it's like to walk in weakness at your workplace or at your school, to not be able to overcome the interpersonal challenges to create a peaceful and productive environment? And with all that's going on in our country and in our world at this present time, we are all experiencing our weakness and our lack of ability to control our circumstances in new ways.

Walking in weakness is hard. Paul says about his thorn in the flesh, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." But God didn't grant his request. Instead, it seems that God had a purpose for the thorn remaining in Paul's flesh. It seems that there was something that God wanted to accomplish through Paul continuing to walk in weakness.

In the passages we have read today, we have seen two possible things that God may be doing by allowing His people to continue to walk in weakness. One is something that He does in them, and the second is something that He does through them. First, God sometimes uses the experience of walking in weakness in His people. He uses it to shape them.

For example, Paul says that one reason God allowed the thorn in his flesh to remain was "to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations." The constant pressure of the thorn kept Paul in a state of humility. If the thorn were removed, there was the danger that Paul would become conceited because of the special privilege that had been given to him.

You've probably heard of the Japanese art of bonsai in which beautiful miniature trees are pruned and shaped. One particular style of bonsai is called the wind-swept style. In this style, all of the branches of the trees point in one direction as if they had been bent that way by many years of strong winds. In actuality, wire is used to bend the miniature branches all in one direction. The wire has to be left in place for a minimum of several months. If the wire is removed early, the branches will simply go back to their original position.

We as people are a lot like this as well. We're all a little like Mr. X. Under the pressure of a trial, our hearts may become soft and pliable. But when the trial is removed, we may tend to go back to our old ways. In His wisdom, God knows that there are times when we need to be in the place of weakness for a prolonged time so that the changes which are brought about will be changes that last.

In addition, we often encounter God in the place of weakness. God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." As he endured his thorn in the flesh, Paul was sustained by God's grace. Through his experience, he came to know God in deeper ways and learned to rely on God in new ways. He found

sustenance in God's power, and this brought him to the place where he could say, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." In the same way, we often encounter God in new and deeper ways as He sustains us in the midst of hardship and trial.

Second, God sometimes works powerfully through His people when they are in the place of weakness. God said to Paul, "My power is made perfect in weakness." And in the passage from 2 Corinthians 4 that we read earlier, we saw that it's because the treasure of the gospel is in jars of clay, because Jesus lives in the hearts of weak people that it's clear that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. God can use us when we're in the place of weakness in ways in which He can't otherwise. And when He does so, no one will be tempted to think that the power came from us.

So what do we do? Let me suggest two things. First, when we find ourselves in situations where we're longing for change, we should look to God and not to ourselves for the power to bring about that change. I failed recently in this area. I was trying to help someone, and the person would not take the first step necessary to get the help. I thought I could outsmart the person and nudge them in the direction that they needed to go. So I said, if you want help today, this is what you need to do. If you want to wait until tomorrow, which I knew they didn't, that's okay. I thought that either the person would do the thing necessary to get the help, or if not, at least they would learn that the next time that help was offered that they needed to seize the opportunity. But it fell flat. The person didn't take the necessary step, and they didn't learn anything either.

Seeing my failure, I learned that I was looking to myself, to my cleverness, to bring about the change. And I learned that I didn't have the power that I thought I did. When faced with my own weakness, I was convicted that I needed to look to God in prayer to work in those circumstances.

Second, we should be willing to walk in weakness, willing to be in the place of weakness. In part, this is a matter of faith. Can we trust that what God is trying to do in us while we're in the place of weakness is a good and necessary thing? Can we trust in His wisdom and His goodness? And it's also a matter of yielding ourselves to God. Are we willing to be in the place of weakness so that God can use us? Are we willing to be used by Him in unique ways as we walk in weakness?

I'm told that Francis Schaeffer once said, "To be a Christian is to walk with a victorious limp." I think that's a profound truth. As Christians, we walk in weakness. But as we walk in weakness, God will bring us along to victory, victory over sin as He transforms our hearts, victory over death as He raises us to eternal life. And sometimes we experience victory in this life as His power works in us and through us. Because of the victory of Jesus, of the cross, and of the empty tomb, we will share in His victory.

Limp on, brothers and sisters. Limp on all the way to victory. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we all know what it's like to walk in weakness. We frequently come face to face with our limitations and our frailty. We thank you that you don't leave us alone in the place of weakness. You sustain us with your grace. You work in us and through us when we're in the place of weakness. Of course, we don't enjoy being weak, but help us to trust you even when we're in the place of weakness. Help us to be willing for you to use us even when we're in the place of weakness. Glorify yourself as you show your power through our weakness. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen.