

II Corinthians 12:7b-10 I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. ⁹And 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 weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. ¹⁰That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.

I wonder how many people have read the Gospel lesson for today and thought, “This is the craziest thing I’ve ever read. Who can take this seriously?” It is the beginning of Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount, the part that we call the Beatitudes. That word basically means “Blessed.” People talk online about how blessed they are when good things come their way. Jesus has an entirely different take on that.

He says, **“Blessed are you who are poor...who hunger now...who weep now...whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.”** When is the last time you saw someone post online about how miserable their lives are and then say, “Boy, I must really be blessed!”

The context and Matthew’s account of this sermon make it clear that these are spiritual things Jesus is talking about. We are blessed when we learn to give up on ourselves and instead rely on Jesus for everything. We are blessed when people reject us simply because we are Christians. It means that we know what’s most important and the world just doesn’t get it. Knowing Jesus changes the way we look at everything. The Apostle Paul is proof of that. He says **Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong.** God’s grace is sufficient so boast about your weaknesses.

When you read the beginning of this text you might wonder why Paul would be in danger of becoming arrogant. God had said about him, **“I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”** And suffer he did! In the previous chapter he wrote, **“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. One time I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day on the open sea.”**

I think that would keep a person’s pride in check. But in the verses before this text we see that Paul got to see what I don’t know if anyone else ever has. He **“was carried up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words that a man cannot possibly speak.”** Paul got to see heaven itself and see what it is like there. That could make someone arrogant. “I must be really special because God showed me this. Me! Not you.”

That sort of thing can happen to us too. We boast about the blessings God has given to us as if we had anything to do with it. I’ve been a believer my whole life! Good for you! You didn’t have anything to do with that. God did it all from beginning to end. Or I could boast about being a pastor. Once again, I didn’t have anything to do with that. God gave me the gifts and a place to use them. It’s all to his credit, not mine.

God had the perfect solution for Paul. **“I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant.”** There has been gallons of ink spilled over the years trying to determine exactly what this thorn in the flesh was. It’s all speculation and a waste of time to be honest. All that we know is that it was some painful physical problem that he would have for the rest of his life.

The word translated **“torment”** is very vivid. It describes a boxer hitting his opponent in the head over and over again. Except Paul would never get knocked out so the beating would just continue. That doesn’t sound like much of a gift, does it. It was God’s way of saying, “You know what, Paul? This isn’t all about you. It’s all about me. My pure grace alone made you what you are. Remember that.”

Maybe you’ve got a more minor thorn in the flesh too. Maybe you have some health issue that you just have to deal with. Maybe it is that pet sin that you really struggle against, but you fall into it over and over again. All I have to do is look down at my right hand and say, “Nope, I’m still not that bright.” Of all the physical problems to have, this is relatively minor but it is something I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Paul responded to it in the proper way. He turned to God. **“⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me.”** That shows us how severe this was. Paul sloughed off beating, imprisonment, and even having stones hurled at him until everyone assumed he was dead. We don’t hear him begging God about any of that, but the thorn in the flesh was something different.

This makes me think of a fine Christian woman who was a member of my church in Wisconsin. She had a horrible, aggressive form of cancer that gave her sores all over her body. Her case reminded me of Job. I have no idea how many times I prayed that God would heal her. They tried every treatment under the sun, even some not yet approved by the FDA. But the cancer didn’t go away. It claimed her life in her early fifties.

Sometimes people call things like this “unanswered prayers.” That’s really not a good name for them. They were heard by our God and answered. I know that’s true because he promised to. It’s just that, in his wisdom he had a better plan. It might not seem better to us because we aren’t all-knowing. We can’t see things from the big, eternal picture like he can. So all we can do is place our hand in his and pray the same words our Savior used in the Garden of Gethsemane, **“may your will be done.”**

God did actually speak directly to Paul to give him an answer to his prayer, **“My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.”** There’s only one thing that we ever really needed and that is the undeserved love of our God in our Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus paid for all of our sins on the cross and opened up heaven for us. All of the other things in life are just details. The problems of this life are short and mild compared to the eternal joys waiting for us in heaven.

Let me tell you the rest of the story about that woman I mentioned. Her name was Kim. She was Korean. When she was an infant she was left at the door of an orphanage with part of her pinkie missing. It seemed like her life story would be a tragedy. Except God pointed at her and said, “Mine.” She was adopted by a WELS couple in Wisconsin and brought to know her Savior. She set a beautiful example of patience in suffering for the congregation. Then the Lord took her to heaven. To God all praise and glory!

Paul talked about this weakness earlier in this book, **“We hold this treasure in clay jars to show that its extraordinary power is from God and not from us.”** We are those clay jars. The jar isn’t the important thing. The treasure inside of it is. When people see us with our sin and problems it is clear that the power of the Word has nothing to do with us. It has everything to do with him. So God’s glory shines more brightly in comparison.

Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong. God’s grace is sufficient so boast about your weaknesses.

At the end of this text Paul gives a list of different kinds of weaknesses. This isn’t an exhaustive list, but they are things that will be pretty common to every believer. They will come into our lives at different times and in different ways. Sometimes they are relatively easy to deal with. Sometimes they will seem as heavy as a 16 ton weight. God had Paul lay all of these things out for us so that we aren’t shocked when they come.

The first one is **“insults.”** If you are really living like a Christian you know all about this one. There’s always that one person who is more than happy to tell you exactly what they feel about Christians and Christianity. Online people are particularly bold when they are anonymous. Then there is **“hardships.”** Literally that means “necessities.” They are the times in life when you wonder how in the world you are going to make ends meet.

After that is **“persecutions.”** This one is pretty straightforward. The word pictures someone chasing after you and hunting you down. We have freedom of religion here, but in many places in the world the threat of persecution for being a Christian is a daily reality. Last is **“difficulties.”** The word has a picture of going through a narrow hallway or being under pressure. There is always the pressure for Christians to conform to the world and do what everyone else is doing.

There’s one very important thing to notice here, **“¹⁰That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ.”** Jesus talked about that in the Gospel lesson too, **“Blessed are you...whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man.”**

So Paul is not talking about any and every problem we might have to face in life. If I punch someone in the face and they punch me back, that’s my fault. I shouldn’t have been swinging my fists around. Even my hand injury doesn’t really fit into this category. I happened because I was careless in the use of my snowblower and I paid the price for it. If I would have treated my body as the gift of God it is, I wouldn’t have done that.

However it did fall into this category when a friend of mine in Green Bay asked, “If you are a pastor, why did God allow this to happen?” I don’t think he intended to make me question God’s love for me, but he kind of did. Could God have suspended the laws of physics so I wouldn’t have gotten hurt? Sure. But he also gave me eyes that could see the danger and brain that can process that information. He did keep it from being much worse.

So Paul can only come to one conclusion, **“Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me.”** He gives a picture of Christ’s power being like a tent that covers us and protects us from the elements. So people don’t see our weaknesses. All they see is Christ’s power at work through us.

That also means that we don’t have to worry that somehow our human weakness are going to limit the power of the Word. God knew what we were like before he called us to be his own. He knows that we aren’t

superhuman. He doesn't need us to be. God's Word is more than powerful enough all by itself. It's like a lion. You don't have to defend it. You just release it and let it do its thing.

When I was younger I would go to pastors conferences and start to feel bad. I heard preachers that I thought were far more gifted than I. I read papers that said things more clearly and beautifully than I ever could. What I should have done is thanked God for the gifts he gave to my brothers. Instead I felt like I came up short by comparison. Now I realize how silly that was. God doesn't need me to be the second coming of the Apostle Paul or of Martin Luther. He just wants me to bring his Word faithfully.

In this book Paul is addressing some people who are trying to oppose him in Corinth. They were making themselves out to be far better than Paul was. They acted as if he was just a hanger-on to the apostles. They said that when he writes he sounds great, but he's not much of anything in person. He referred to them as the "super apostles." They were trying to convince the Corinthians that they needed them instead of needing the Word.

God cannot use us when we are relying on ourselves. As long as there is a shred of "I can do it myself" in us then we aren't trusting God completely. Paul shows the proper attitude here. He says, "**For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.**" That sounds like nonsense, like a contradiction in terms, but it's not. When we realize how weak we are on our own and trust in God's strength alone, then we are more powerful than anyone could possibly imagine. It's not our power, but God's power.

So if we are going to boast, let's make sure that it's not about ourselves. We have nothing to boast about on our own. The only thing worth boasting about is what God has done for us. In one of our Lenten hymns we sing, "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the death of Christ, my God. All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood." We can show people that all those things that he did for us, he did for them.

Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong. God's grace is sufficient so boast about your weaknesses. The prophet Jeremiah was inspired to write in our first lesson, "**blessed is anyone who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.**" If our confidence is only in ourselves, that's going to end badly. If our confidence is in the Lord, everything will go well. After all, he's been planning all of history all for us.