

July 7, 2024 – 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

“What are your strengths and weaknesses?” Have you ever been asked that question before? It's a staple of job interviews. A question that most people dread. Listing your strengths isn't hard. You don't want to sound arrogant, but there are plenty of ways to be modest and still brag about yourself a little. You're a hard worker, you're a team player, you're conscientious. Those types of things.

But what about weaknesses? That is a tricky question. Because whatever you say, you're admitting you aren't as good as the person who interviewed before you. You aren't up to par. You don't measure up. You're admitting that you're... well... weak.

And no one wants to think of themselves as weak. In our culture – in virtually every culture – weakness is bad and strength is good. In a few weeks, we'll be watching the Olympics. A competition of physical strength, where weaker opponents are systematically eliminated. Strength is good. Weakness is bad. Everyone knows that.

And as a result, we're taught to cover up anything about ourselves that could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Boys are taught that they're never allowed to cry. Girls are taught to always wear a smile. Don't look hurt. Don't look sad. Don't look weak.

But interestingly enough, St. Paul in our Epistle today tells us the exact opposite. St. Paul says that he boasts in his weakness. That he is made perfect in weakness. That he is content with his weaknesses. St. Paul likes looking weak.

Which is interesting, because St. Paul had an awful lot of strengths to be proud of. He was intelligent. He had a way with words. He had preached to thousands. He'd been given a special revelation on the road to Damascus, where he had seen the risen Christ with his own eyes. And he continued receiving special revelations from the Lord and inspiration by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul had a lot to boast about.

But instead of boasting about how great an evangelist he was, how wise in the Scriptures he was, how special his ministry was, Paul tells us that he rejoices instead in his weaknesses. And he points to one particular example.

He doesn't really describe what this messenger of Satan harassed him about, and many theologians have speculated. Maybe it was a shortcoming in his ministry. Maybe a sinful temptation that continually plagued him. Maybe a physical ailment of some sort. Maybe a memory of his past that just kept coming back to haunt him. We really don't know. Whatever it was, he calls it a thorn in his flesh.

Have you ever had a splinter under your skin? Splinters are annoying. Painful. Distracting. They can even get infected. Usually you have to get a needle and tweezers in order to remove a splinter. And in the process you end up making an even bigger wound out of it.

St. Paul obviously wasn't talking about a literal splinter stuck under his skin. But whatever it was, Paul considered it an obstacle to his ministry. A painful distraction. Serious enough, in fact, that he prayed three times that God would remove it.

Yes, Paul was quite upset about this thorn in his flesh. It was, he felt, a distraction that he'd be better off without. And why wouldn't he? With all of the gifts that God had given him, wouldn't God want to give Paul an unencumbered ministry, without this thorn constantly irritating him.

From a human perspective, you would think so. But God sees things differently, both for Paul and for us. Because, as Paul explains here, God knows that if nothing were ever to go wrong in our lives, we'd begin to forget how much we even need him. If we never faced struggles of any kind, we'd begin to think that we could make it on our own.

Our men's Bible study was talking about this recently. One of the great themes of the Old Testament is that God's people always have enemies. And one of the ways that God defines himself to the Israelites is that he is the one who defeats their enemies. He is the one who solves their problems. They are weak, but He is strong.

They are weak against the might of Pharaoh's chariots, but He is strong to deliver them from Egypt. They are weak against the kings of Canaan, but He is strong to bring down the walls of Jericho. They are weak against the Philistines, but He strong to slay Goliath. Over and over again: they are weak against their enemies. He is strong to defeat those enemies.

But when they forget about that relationship, that's when things start to go awry. When the Israelites forget that it was the Lord who freed them from Egypt, then they start worshipping golden calves and other false gods. When the Israelites are overcome by fear and frustration, then they begin to grumble against the God who loves them. When the Israelites begin to think that they are the ones who conquered cities and they are the ones who defeated giants, then they begin to ignore the commands of God altogether.

And you know how God sets them straight in all those circumstances? He gives them a thorn in their flesh, just like he did for St Paul. He makes them wander the desert for 40 years. He sends fiery snakes into their midst. He lets the Midianites or the Philistines or the Assyrians have victory over them. He even sent them into exile for 70 years.

These were not the actions of a God who had turned on his people. Who hated them or had abandoned them. Quite the opposite. They were the actions of a God who loves his people. And who wants them to know and remember that they are weak and He is strong. That when an enemy comes, they don't turn to their own strength. They don't turn to their own wisdom. They don't turn to their own power. They turn to Him and Him alone.

That was apparently a message that even a great man of faith like St Paul needed to learn. For rather than let him become conceited in the greatness of the gifts God had given to him, God gave him a thorn in his flesh. And a simple, but important message: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

The power of God is made perfect in weakness. The power of God was made perfect in the weakness of a humble outcast named Moses. The power of God was made perfect in the weakness of a small shepherd boy named David. The power of God was made perfect in the weakness of a prophet to a rebellious people named Ezekiel, as we read in our Old Testament lesson today.

And the power of God was made perfect in the weakness of a child born in Bethlehem. Of a carpenter's son in Galilee. Of a man so ordinary, even his own hometown could not believe that he was the Messiah. The power of God was made perfect in the weakness of a convicted criminal dying on a cross outside of Jerusalem, and of a stone rolled away to reveal an empty tomb.

God's power is the most evident when it demonstrated through the weakest means. And so we gather today as sinful people. Members of a small church in a small town. Who know we have sinned in thought, word, and deed. People who are plagued by painful distractions. Temptations that we struggle to resist. Physical disabilities that God hasn't healed. People with pasts that we wish would just go away.

And God says, "Come. Eat this bread. Drink this wine. I know it looks weak. But my power is made perfect in weakness. So eat of my Son's Body and drink of my Son's Blood."

We eat the body of Christ under this bread. We drink the blood of Christ under this wine. And we find in them forgiveness from the weakness of our sinful flesh. And strength to live with our thorns. To be content with our thorns. To see in those thorns the constant reminder of all the enemies God has already defeated on our behalf.

For sin, death, and the devil are already conquered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our true enemies are defeated once and for all. And these thorns we deal with, they are nothing in comparison to what Jesus endured. We deal with a small splinter. An annoying distraction to keep us humble. He dealt with the nails of the cross. And by his wounds, we are healed.

Our thorns are nothing in comparison to what he endured for us. But even these thorns will be taken away on the last day. And that is where God's power will ultimately be made perfect in us. For even these sinful lives in which we live will be taken into the glory of paradise. A place where there are no enemies. There are no thorns. For God's grace is indeed sufficient for us. And by his grace, we will be made new. Amen.