

“Weakness = Strength”

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

8/30/09

God turns our weakness into incredible strength.

The Fair has come to an end for yet another year. I know, that’s hard to believe and probably harder to accept for some. It’s always a great time—seeing folks, riding rides (yes, I still get on a few), inspecting all the animals.

Am I forgetting something? Oh yeah, food.

Can I just say right now: The Fair is unfair.

It’s unfair that the fair wafts sweet smelling food through the air.

It’s unfair that fatty food tastes so good.

It’s unfair that all my absolute favorite foods to eat are all at my fingertips.

I am supposed to be eating healthier, and I have been. I have been doing good. And then the unfair Fair comes to town and makes me do things I am not supposed to do. It’s the Fair’s fault!

Oh, alright. I know. The simple truth is I am weak.

Paul said, *“Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”*

My truth is more like: When I am weak, sometimes I am really weak. “God forgive me,” I mutter with a mouth full of deep fried twinkie.

Alright. Well, this message is not specifically about temptation, although it could be. For me that truly can be weakness. But it is to say that I know I have my weaknesses—some that are more serious than just indulging in tasty treats. I know what they are. God knows what they are. And so my question comes to God sometimes saying, “God, what am I to do? Here I am Your servant and I don’t know how I am going to do all I need to do for You. I know what You want, but I don’t have what it takes to make it. I am weak, Lord.”

We are finishing up our sermon series on Living Abundantly in Adversity. That by the power of God there is always hope, peace, joy, strength, comfort, no matter what the adversity that surrounds you. We have heard some testimony to that, and I pray that you continue to allow God to do His transforming work within you.

And so today we hear these words that God gave to Paul as he shares with the Corinthian Church his encouragement in all times. *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.”*

What does that mean?

God can use me best when I let go of all the rest.

Yes, I must always strive to do my best in all situations. I must do my part in trying to make good choices and treating others well and working hard. But I know, there have been times when I come into a challenging situation and my first response sometimes is to grind it out and try to figure it all out on my own. Then I get stressed and worried. Then I am not thinking clearly at all. I tend to stew about things and internalize things and all of a sudden my whole perspective on the situation is out of whack and my strength is zapped.

And when I finally let go and let God, as we say, it’s amazing how my outlook changes. When I let go of all the rest—all the stuff I try to use other than God to deal with adversity—that’s when God can take over.

You see:

You can't fill a vessel that is already full.

And oh my how we can be full of ourselves! I stuff my mouth, my head, and my heart full of all the things that I want and I think will comfort and strengthen me—all the things other than God.

But then adversity comes. And whatever that may be, I find how quickly I get emptied out. I find out how weak I am on my own.

But you can't fill a vessel that is already full. And so:

Adversity becomes opportunity to let God take over.

God is the Master at filling voids. And when God takes over, this vessel, this clay jar, is filled with a treasure beyond all measure—the power and glory and grace of Jesus Christ. Weakness becomes strength. God's upside down Kingdom wins again.

Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian minister and American writer once wrote:

“The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.”

We can sell God short on what He can and will do with our lives, because we see it through our earthly eyes. “I know my weaknesses, so how am I going to get through this God? My weakness, this adversity, is too much for what You want me to do.”

I want you to listen to some of the heroes of the faith we have in the Bible and their so-called weaknesses.

Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah (Jacob's first wife) was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was eccentric to say the least, Peter was impulsive and hot-tempered, Martha worried a lot, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul had poor health, and Timothy was timid.

Guess what? Every person God used in the Bible was a real human being, and all that comes with being human. I think we can forget that. And guess what else? Everyone of those persons had to completely trust God with His plan for them because what they had to do played right into their weakness.

“So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

Out of weakness comes strength—God's power revealed in our lives.

The empty vessel offered up to God is filled by God.

Elisa Morgan, president of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International, writes:

“I'm probably the least likely person to head a mothering organization. I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was 5. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother.

“While my mother meant well—truly she did—most of my memories are of my mothering her rather than her mothering me. Alcohol altered her love, turning it into something that wasn't love. I remember her weaving down the hall of our ranch home in Houston, Texas, drink in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure I was asleep. I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work.

“Sure, there were good times like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong.

“Ten years ago, when I was asked to consider leading MOPS International, a vital ministry that nurtures mothers, I went straight to my knees—and then to the therapist's office. How could God use *me*—who had never been mothered—to nurture other mothers?

“The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering—*“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”*.”

Elisa Morgan, Christian Parenting Today (May/June 1999), p. 64

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In Matthew 11, John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus if He is in fact the Messiah, the one for whom the Baptist had been waiting. The reply that Jesus sends back to the Baptist is, “...*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*” Jesus said, “*I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*”.

God is not removed nor unmoved in our struggle with sin and suffering, for God knows that we suffer and actively enters into it in a very personal way, as was shown in Christ’s humiliation and crucifixion.

“God does not look on our suffering from the outside but from within, from the brow and hands of Jesus hanging on the cross.”

To be able to endure the suffering of today and gain strength for tomorrow, we must have an awareness that we are not alone and helpless in our adversity.

As one theologian put it: “God keeps company with those who suffer, rub’s His nose in it, feels what it is like to have a daughter or son who suffers, and transforms that suffering into new life.”

Enter the Resurrection.

Thus, as Galatians 2:20 says, “*It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me*”.

Now listen, this does not mean that the Christian promise is that “everything is all right”, for everything has not been, is not, and will not ever be “all right” as long as we live in this world. The anguish we suffer as we live out our lives is a real, spirit-grieving experience. You can make someone angry pretty quickly by telling them in the midst of their adversity: “Everything is all right.”

Jesus made that perfectly clear as He suffered and died on the cross. He cried out to God in anguish--physical, emotional, and spiritual anguish--“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In that moment for Jesus there was no easy answer, no useless cliché someone could have shouted up to Him which would have made His tortured body feel any better.

The resurrection does not negate or justify our struggle.

The power of the resurrection works in adversity to bring the strength of the Creator of life into our plight, and it works through adversity to create new life and infinite possibilities where it seemed death and finality were the only possible outcomes.

Paul writes, “*But we have this treasure in clay jars...*” In Christ we do have a treasure, a beautiful and powerful presence of God which is within us and around us.

“*It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me*”.

There’s an old story of a mother, wishing to encourage her young son's progress at the piano, bought tickets to see a master pianist. When the night arrived, they found their seats near the front of the concert hall and eyed the majestic Steinway waiting on stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk to, and the boy slipped away.

When eight o'clock arrived, the spotlights came on, the audience quieted, and only then did they notice the boy up on the bench, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

His mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, the master appeared on the stage and quickly moved to the keyboard.

"Don't quit—keep playing," he whispered to the boy. Leaning over, he reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side, encircling the child, to add a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerized.

In our lives, unpolished though we may be, it is the Master who surrounds us and whispers in our ear, time and again, "Don't quit—keep playing." And as we do, God fills in the notes until a work of amazing beauty is created.

Darrel L. Anderson, Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 2.

Don't quit. Keep playing.

As 1 Corinthians 13:7 reminds us: *"There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance."* Amen.