
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’ve never sat in an interview for a job that was more than a part time or summer gig, so most of you probably know the job interview process more than I do. But I do know that almost every interview I sat through included questions on strengths and weaknesses. You know how you’re supposed to answer these questions. When it comes to strengths, you’re supposed to list all the best qualities about you as a worker. Then when it comes to your weaknesses, you are also supposed to list strengths but say them like they are weaknesses. “I care too much.” “I work too hard.” “Sometimes I’m really a stickler for doing a good job.” But what if you sat in an interview and did the opposite? What if during the weaknesses section you listed your honest weaknesses, then when asked, “what’s your greatest strength?” you responded, “my weakness is my strength”? It might sound backwards, but that’s how Paul talks today.

What makes you weak? What are the struggles you’ve been dealing with lately? And before you’re too quick to shrug and move on, I want you to think about their things that feel like they’re not going your way. We all have them. Do you ever start to break because you’re so tired of the hurt or the failure?

“Enough is enough!” These are the words of frustration that people cry out when they’ve crossed their breaking point. We don’t like suffering of any kind, whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. We don’t want suffering, and we don’t see any good in suffering. Maybe it leads us to wonder if God has left his throne in heaven. Maybe it leads us to accuse him of mismanaging his kingdom. I mean, if I can figure out the way things should be in my life and the world around me, why can’t God? My plans often seem better than God’s plans.

Life teaches us to see no value in suffering. In fact, it becomes a goal in life to do all we can to avoid and remove suffering. Is a woman sick and depressed? Load her up with meds until she can’t feel anything at all. Is a man lonely or feeling guilty? Distract, distract, distract with anything that will keep his head above water, even if the long-term effects are even worse than the initial problem. We think up laws to cover up the consequences of bad decisions, even to the point where people stop seeing these bad decisions as bad in the first place. When suffering family members get toward the end of life, sometimes their loved ones will place them in nursing homes, not because they feel that’s what’s best for the dying, which is a valid and loving reason, but because it keeps them from having to even witness the suffering of another. But no matter how we try to avoid suffering, no matter how we use the technology of our day and the prosperity of our country to shield ourselves from hardship, it will still come. All this might lead us to say, “Enough is enough!” There comes a point when we just can’t take all the stress and frustration of life. There comes a breaking point when we just give up.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with that sentiment. God gave him this incredible sneak peak of heaven. He got to see things that even he could not describe. But getting to see heaven early could have become a point of pride for Paul. How many people have had the privilege of seeing heaven before they died? Not many. How special must Paul be to get this glimpse of glory? How much would Paul be tempted to lord it over the other believers?

So, to keep him from using this as a point of boasting, God allowed Paul to develop a thorn in his flesh. It's described as a messenger from Satan meant to torment him. Now, we don't know what that thorn in his flesh was. Was it a chronic illness he carried for the rest of his life? Was it a speech impediment that made his preaching much harder on the ears of his hearers? Was it a physical deformity, like a limp to make all his traveling more difficult? We do not know. And I think Paul keeps this thorn to himself so that he can prove a point to those who suffer in many various ways.

Paul did not want this struggle. He had not asked for it. In fact, Paul tells us that he goes to God with a plea for the Lord to take it away. Three times he does this, begging God to remove this suffering from his life. But what does God say? "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness."

It would have been easy for Paul to scoff at this, for him to say, "I thought God loved me. This sure is a strange way to say I love you." I think we would understand if Paul had turned his back on God. But he didn't. I'm sure it took time to wrestle with the why. I'm sure he spent a lot of time thinking about those words, "my power is made perfect in weakness." How could God's power be shown in Paul's weakness? Wouldn't this make people say, "God's servant is suffering, so maybe God doesn't have the power to help him?" How could God love Paul if he allowed this curse to fall on him? I mean, God is ultimately in control of all things. We can't divorce him from this thorn in the flesh as if he was unaware and unable to stop it. So, why did he allow it? This is the argument that is made every time a natural disaster wipes out a town. It's the accusation that is dealt every time an act of terrorism and death is carried out on our fellow citizens. Where is God? Is he gone? And if he's not gone, why did he allow this suffering? Why didn't he put a stop to it?

But after some time, Paul understood why God had allowed this. He recognized how God's power was made perfect in human weakness. If Paul never faced suffering after his heavenly experience, would he think he was saved by grace alone, or would he be tempted to believe that he was saved by his own merit? Listen to what he says, "Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me." Paul's weakness kept him from boasting in himself. Instead, this messenger of Satan reminded him of his sinful situation. It reminded him that he was either going to have to stand before the storm of sin and death and conquer it himself, or he was going to have to run from it and take shelter. Where did this thorn lead him to take shelter? Under the cross of Christ, under the power of the Savior who shed his blood to redeem Paul from sin and death. This means that Paul went from "enough with the thorns" to "the thorns are enough."

Not much about suffering makes sense when we begin to suffer. It feels like a punishment for something we didn't do. It feels like a speeding ticket without any infraction listed. The truth is though, suffering only makes sense when God speaks. How can suffering be good? Well, I think we first have to look at Jesus. The suffering he endured was good for the world. His hardship brought us peace. The reason we talk about the cross, an object of torture, with such joy is because we know that it means forgiveness and eternity for us. For that reason alone, we cannot say that suffering is never good. But there are more benefits. When we suffer, we are reminded of our sinfulness and life's frailty. If I never felt my conscience stabbing me or looked at a lifeless body, I would probably would have never believed that my actions are all that destructive. But suffering does more. It drives us away from trying to fight the storms in our lives head-on with all the arrogance in the world and instead leads us to the fortified shelter of the Savior. This is one of the reasons Jesus warns the rich about the dangers that come from loving their wealth. If you have no needs and no problems, you are most at-risk to see no need for a Savior from life's struggles.

But I do want you to understand, it is ok to ask God to take suffering away. Paul does it here three times, and he's never chastised for it. God invites us to come to him with anything. And he may answer that prayer

with a “yes,” or a “just wait a little longer.” But he may also tell you, “no.” He may tell you, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” And if he tells you that, if your suffering must linger longer, even until he calls you home, it does not mean God don’t love you. In fact, you should see that struggle as a sign that God loves you and wants nothing more for you than that you stay close to him until that day of glory.

We do not seek suffering, but we do embrace it. We don’t develop some twisted masochistic desire where we try and find suffering. But when it finds us, when God allows it into our lives for his loving purposes, we hold it in its right place. And every time we suffer or fail, we are reminded where our true strength is found. It’s not found in the body or the mind. It’s found in Christ.

Then comes the question of his grace. If it is sufficient, enough for us in every way, where do we find it? God’s grace is found in his word and in his sacraments, what we call the Means of Grace. This is how God showers us with continual forgiveness and new life each day. This is where we understand suffering. This is where we learn not to hate hardship, but in a sense, we learn to love it. Why? Because when God allows us to suffer, he’s showing us the love that we need. He’s showing us Christ’s suffering in our place. He’s showing us that while everything of earth wears out and dies, life in his kingdom has no expiration. Like a dad force-feeding his son medicine—because while the son thinks it’s torture for the sake of torture, dad knows it’s best for his son—God allows hardship into our lives because he knows this is what we need.

So, dear friends, when asked, “What is your greatest strength?” you can say, “My weakness is my strength.” Because whenever I am weak, then am I strong. Amen.