

Remember *"I am the greatest?"* Who could ever forget? What a symbol of the world's approach to success and fame. Elections follow suit and every politician who stages a visit to a soup kitchen does the same thing to impress and hopefully guarantee success.

So what is Paul up to in this text where he says, "I will boast only of my weakness?" Does that even make sense? When volunteer soldiers surrounded George Washington in the midst of a bitter winter, with no clothing and many without shoes did they brag to the British, saying "look how weak we are?" Can you imagine trying to sell a house by pointing out all that is wrong with it, or going to a job interview with only your shortcomings on a resume?

Paul was a success story in every way imaginable. He was educated more than 99% of his friends. His father was a Roman. His mother a Jew. He was extremely religious and active in protecting his faith. He could travel wherever he wanted. He could read and write. And he saw the risen Christ in a vision that changed his life. As he began his missionary journeys he was delivered from jails, rescued from shipwrecks, survived poisonous snake bites and had no equal in any earthly sense. And yet there was something that dragged him down.

What his affliction was we aren't sure of, but he called it his "thorn in the flesh." So we know how painful it was and how it must have affected him. Whether it was poor vision, some chronic ailment, or a devastating loss, it affected him and frustrated him to no end. He prayed for God to remove it or heal him to no avail. But Paul continued his ministry, never stopping or slowing down. And despite such a weakness we know the power of his life.

The way of the world is so different. When we are weak or broken we are tempted to crawl into a cave and hide. If we can't be the greatest, the easiest option is to give up and assume we aren't as worthy as others. We can be jealous of those who have more or do more, and let their successes get in the way of even attempting ours.

On the other hand, how many use ailments as excuses? Or wallow in weakness while begging for sympathy or demanding attention? Think of all the commercials you see where people are encouraged to see disability or accident as an opportunity, like the lottery, to become great or wealthy and have more of the earthly goods we all seek?

This passage in which Paul wrestled with such extremes is one of the most helpful passages in his many letters. While he could have made a case for being "the greatest Christian of all time" he instead focused on his weakness and said it had become his greatest strength. In other letters he said "I am the least" of Jesus disciples because I know how weak I really am."

God spoke to Paul saying, "My grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness." Think about that as more than just a catchy phrase! This is exactly what God used to shame the wisdom and power of the world and overcome the temptations and lies of Satan. Such weakness is precisely the point of Bethlehem, Calvary, and the Empty Tomb!

God made himself weak by assuming our likeness by his arrival as a helpless baby. He

made himself weak accepting the ridicule and beatings which he didn't deserve and died as a criminal for crimes he never committed. He surrendered to the same tomb we will all climb into which is the greatest moment of weakness for all. And then he showed how his power was made perfect in weakness as he emerged on Easter, lifting us up with him!

Our world is obsessed with earthly power and will spend any amount of money to become the greatest or the most famous or the most feared. And we go even further, loving to revel in the weakness of others, as that can make us feel more special and important than they. Elections are lost rather than won, as we have become adept at making weakness rather than strength the assurance of power for someone who otherwise would not have a chance.

Paul was able to see weakness as a gift, as it kept him from pride or arrogance. It kept him humble, allowing him to remember that any success was from Christ alone. And in such a reflection, the power of the cross and empty tomb gathers even more meaning as we understand that such a loss is the only path to any gain for any of us as well.

Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful brief book called *The Wounded Healer*. Its premise is that the greatest healer is one who has experienced pain and loss in his or her own life. This comes from the example and power of Christ alone. As each of us is lifted from loss we bear that mark of his cross, but also carry the sweet scent of Easter's lilies and the bright light of a risen Son. You know who the people are in your lives who have been lifted up from weakness by the power of God alone, and how much hope their witness has been for you! We get it. We understand it. Paul had it right!

This is the grace and the good news the world so desperately needs to embrace. Rather than "I am the greatest," or "pity poor me," the message that will change lives is that "I am nothing except for the blessing in me of a God who loves even me, despite who I am or am not!"

Listen to Paul's words again as written by Eugene Peterson in his wonderful paraphrase of the Bible called "The Message."¹ *Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness." Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.*

The way Jesus overpowers the weakness of our lives might be illustrated by the idea of immunity occurring when a virus attacks and in a miracle of creation, our body develops antibodies that prevent such attacks again. Only in weakness can there be healing, and for when we see the power of the cross and how that has changed our lives, we totally understand Paul's wonderful words that have been shared in this text.

¹ The Message. Eugene Peterson. Copyright Eugene Peterson 2002

Paul said, I had two choices. I could boast of my strengths and say I am special. Or I could lift up my weakness and say Christ is special. And now you understand the difference between grandstanding and being a loving witness. Now the power of Bethlehem, Calvary and the empty tomb are not just stories but the love that has changed even me.

Paul celebrated his annoyance, as it reminded him that Jesus ALONE was the message. It was only in being tied to Jesus that he had any hope. This painful reality reminded him how powerful and necessary God's love was for him. He said, *my strength IS WEAKNESS, as it pulls me from God. My weakness is STRENGTH, as it causes me to cling to God.*

Our own "thorns," rather than separating us from God and each other, can remind of our neediness and Jesus' willingness to offer healing and hope. And that is, after all, the point of Jesus undeserved suffering and death. Rather than allow us to sail through the flood of life alone, he paired himself up with us, so that we might emerge from the sunshine and storms of life, never alone, and always with the gift of new creation that he alone can bring.

Do you remember the fable of a lion with a thorn in his paw and a mouse that pulled it out? How terrified that mouse must have been and yet what an unlikely pair they became. From the beginning God has said, it is not good that anyone should be alone, and so my love will become your partner and a new creation will begin. Or, in his own words, "my grace is enough for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." - tws