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My Grace is Sufficient for You
2 Corinthians 12:2-10

⁵ On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷ even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep^[a] me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.^[b] ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power^[c] is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

I just spent two weeks on vacation, and it was a doozy.
Isn't that how it always is?

Unexpected adventure and challenges, right?

Ed and I went to Missouri for a few days, and Ed got sick (which he never does!) and ended up in urgent care, my daughter Emily, staying with her Dad, ended up in two hospitals. My biological mom had surgery. When we returned, my stepmom went to Ireland and I started caring for my Father, meanwhile his sister had a heart attack and stroke, and I ended up taking him to be with her much of our time.

Yet through it all, somehow, God granted such ***peace and even beautiful*** times of meditation and prayer—especially in the early morning hours, but also throughout the day. And even though it wasn't 'vacation' so to speak, it was a ***break from work*** so I could focus more on the family that needed me! Praise God for that.

I don't have to tell you that ***life is a mess***,

and it's a broken world out there, right?
And we are certainly ***broken people***.

My Dad's favorite author is Ernest ***Hemingway***,
and one of his famous quotes is this:
*"Life breaks all of us,
but some of us are strong in the broken places."*

That's what Paul is talking about in this second letter to the church in Corinth.
He's been hearing of their fights, and divisions,
how some 'super-apostles' have been vying for leadership positions,
and he steps in with this letter,
to remind them that they are ***looking for strength and power***
in all the ***wrong*** places.

He starts 2 Corinthians 12 ironically with a description of a ***heavenly vision***—
which he talks about in third person,
but commentators are pretty sure it was his ***own vision***.
But instead of boasting about that special vision from God,
he chooses to ***distance*** himself from that,
step away from the power struggles in Corinth,
and direct them back to the ***true strength***—found only in ***Jesus Christ***.

And in case we forgot, the strength of Christ is actually found—believe it or not—***in weakness***.

Paul knows this all too well,
as God allowed him to have some kind of pain, ***a thorn in the flesh***,
some kind of disability, and ***did not relieve him*** of that pain.
Rather, God said *"my grace is sufficient for you, power is made perfect in weakness"*.

The ***power of God*** was ***revealed*** to him through that weakness.
It was Paul's ***reminder*** that all power is really ***God's power, not our own***.

Can you even imagine if such words about strength in weakness
were spoken across ***our nation? In our news? In the media?***

But friends, that is the Gospel.

It is the Good News.

God's ***power*** is made perfect in our weakness.

God's ***grace*** is sufficient for us when we are weak.

This is the **only way** Paul can go on to say,
When I am weak, then I am strong’.

So what do **you think** about that?
We hear this strength in weakness **paradox**,
and some of us are thinking, yea, right.
Sounds like bologna as my Dad would say!

And yet, what is **foolish** to the world, is **wisdom** to God.
What is **illogical** to humans, is **logical** in the kingdom of God.
God specializes in **turning our worlds upside down**, you know?

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung says that here *“In America we value independence, being able to take care of ourselves. As a result, we treat weakness, vulnerability, and suffering as evils to be avoided, prevented, and overcome.”* Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, “Power Made Perfect in Weakness,” in “Suffering,” *Christian Reflection*, 2005, 12.

But Paul is saying just the opposite!
Weakness, vulnerability, suffering---
God can, and does use these things for good!

Many people have speculated on **what this thorn** in the flesh really was,
and why Paul doesn’t say.
Maybe it was because these friends in Corinth **already knew**?
But it really doesn’t matter, and it’s probably a God-thing that we **don't know**.
Instead we can read these verses and substitute our own trials and challenges,
the things that we’ve asked God to take away in our own lives,
only I have to admit that I’ve asked **way more than three times!**

What is **that thorn** in the flesh for you?
Chronic pain? Mental illness? Addiction? Family struggles? Financial worries?
Job stress?
We all have one, and we all have something **amazing to learn through it!**

That is **NOT to say that God creates and gives** these thorns.
Paul himself is very clear—the thorn is **from Satan, not God**.
God is **not the author** of evil, pain, and suffering.
Rather, God is the **one bringing good out of** evil, pain and suffering!

There's a big ***difference***,
and on it hangs the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We ***cannot say that all suffering is a gift.***

Paul is also ***not saying***—just ***grin and bear it!***

What he is saying is that ***God is always with us*** in our suffering.

And we can find God's ***grace and power*** in times of trial.

For Paul, God's grace and power is like ***air***.

Think about that—can you picture that?

God's power in your life---being like the AIR you breathe?

This is one reason that *Streams in the Desert* by L.B. Cowman,
is one of the ***best devotional*** books I've read.

Because it's pages are saturated with these ***paradoxes of faith—
strength in weakness, grace in sin, power in the broken places.***

In the July 3rd reading the author was talking about seeing a beautiful ***meadow***
of lush grass, dandelions, violets.

Then the next day he was shocked to see it completely ***plowed under*** by a
farmer—leaving only the barren dirt.

That's when God revealed a ***vision***—of a ***field, ripe with delicious corn,***
and then he realized, "*Gods purpose is to yield a harvest*".

In that seeming destruction and weakness, came beauty and life!

You know, the prophet Isaiah in chapter 53:4-5,
spoke about a ***suffering servant***,

a passage that many looked back to after the cross of Christ.

*Surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*

*⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are
healed.*

In ***Philippians 2***, Paul says that Jesus 'emptied' himself,
'becoming like a ***slave***',

that he ***emptied*** himself in love, going all the way to death on a ***cross,***
that's what revealed his power—the suffering, the cross!

We ***saw his strength*** because of that time of weakness!

Sufficient grace, power in pain, strength in weakness-

you can hardly read through the Bible without bumping into these truths on about every other page!

The heroes of our faith are all ***imperfect, lowly, broken and sinful.***

Every one.

And Jesus, though perfect, was ***also lowly, and broken*** in the ultimate way upon the cross.

And ***what happened*** because of that cross?

The ***resurrection!***

That cross, was the ***pathway to joy.***

You know what we see in our secular world like this?

The ***12 step program*** for addictions.

They are all about being ***real, vulnerable, and exposing weakness—***

About turning it all over to God,

because that's when we ***find real strength!***

Have you ever seen Japanese art called Kintsugi?

It's the art of putting ***broken pieces of pottery*** back together—***with gold.***

They believe that the cracks in the pottery are ***not things to hide,***

but rather ***beauty to behold.***

I just love that.

The pottery becomes ***even more refined because of it's 'scars'.***

The Bible would certainly agree, in fact,

the prophet Malachi said that ***we become truly beautiful***

when we go through the refining fires of life,

because God ***makes us pure in those trials!*** (Malachi 3)

Other secular people also know this truth about strength in weakness.

Do you remember me talking about the professor and researcher

Brene Brown? She studies ***vulnerability.***

Sounds a little odd maybe, but that's her life's work---***studying vulnerability.***

She in fact believes that the biggest problem we all face is our ***lack of tolerance*** for vulnerability.

So much of the time, ***we want to be strong,***

or we want to ***numb ourselves*** with all kinds of things—addiction, overeating, overspending-- so we won't be vulnerable anymore.

But living ***a meaningful life requires*** being ***real, vulnerable, and open*** to both the pain and the joy of life. (see brenebrown.com, and her youtube and TED talks)

Most of us ***put on a good face*** most of the time, even at church, right?
 We so often ***try to have that picture perfect***, Facebook approved life, right?
 We try to hold it all together, and look like we know what we're doing.
 But sometimes inside, we are ***falling apart***.
 Like a majority of the time—when people ask how are you?
 We could go on for days, right?

Well, what if we decided to be ***real, and vulnerable?***
 To ***open ourselves up*** to one another?
 Brown says that it can ***lead us to some feelings of fear and pain,***
BUT it also leads us to joy, love, courage, compassion, and connection.
 Hmm.

In other words, vulnerability is a ***package deal***.

To be real and vulnerable means ***feeling what you feel***.
 When things are ***scary***, you feel ***afraid***.
 When things are ***crazy***, you feel ***confused***.
 When things are ***hurtful***, you feel ***pain***.

But it ***also*** means you have the ***capacity to feel joy, and love, and compassion!***
 You ***can't have the joy and love without the pain and difficult*** feelings.
 So if you ***numb*** yourself to avoid pain?
 Well, you have essentially ***cut yourself off*** from joy and love as well.

I don't remember what saint said it,
 but I've always believed what I heard once,
 it's ***the depth of pain that leads to the deepest joy***.
 That's certainly been true in ***my life***.

Paul would certainly agree with all of this.
 It's why he was so adamant about us finding strength in weakness.
 Because through our weakness, we find Christ's strength,
Which leads us to JOY.

If you read through his letters of the New Testament, you'll find lengthy descriptions of the pain and suffering Paul endured.

And it was precisely those times of pain and suffering that led him to the ***greatest joy***.

It enabled him to say he was completely content at all times. Phil. 4:11-13. And at peace.

So the question is my friends,

What do you believe?

Do you believe that ***God's power is made perfect*** in your weakness?

Or are you still trying to hold it all together?

Do you believe that ***God's grace is sufficient*** for you in times of pain?

Or are you still ***looking for other things*** to alleviate your pain?

Do you believe ***being vulnerable—like Paul, like Jesus—***

is the pathway to love, joy and peace?

Or are you trying to find your ***own route?***

What if we all ***took the risk***, and ***surrendered*** our pain to God?

What if we all took a ***look at the thorns in our flesh***,

And handed it over to God, saying,

You can do something great with this, through this, in this!

What if we ***looked at our weaknesses***, were ***real*** with one another,

And found out the truth that all the ***saints*** have discovered throughout

centuries of faith—***that when we are weak, then we are strong?***

Friends, hear the ***Good news of the Gospel*** for you today.

Christ's power is made perfect in weakness.

God's grace is sufficient for us—no matter our struggles.

And ***those thorns*** in the flesh—they may just be our windows to the ***joy and peace*** we long for.

May we look for our Savior, in the middle of our pain,

And to that all God's people said, Amen.