

5.29.22

Finding Strength in Weakness 2 Corinthians 12.8-10**Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

I wrestled with how to begin my sermon today. On Saturday, **May 14th**, a white, 18-year-old gunman conducted a racist attack at a **supermarket** in Buffalo, N.Y., killing 10 people and injuring three others. On Sunday, **May 15th**, there was a shooting at Irvine Taiwanese Presbyterian **Church** in California. On Tuesday, **May 24th** 19 children and two adults were murdered at Uvalde Elementary **School** in Texas. North, West, South, a grocery store, a church, a school, all in 10 days.

Part of me wanted to ignore the latest mass shooting and part of me feels it's expected that I say something. Someone emailed me on Wednesday and asked if I was going to release a statement to give people hope and comfort. But there are no words of hope or comfort to be offered. Words are insufficient, inadequate, and pointless. As **Jeremiah 31:15** expresses, *"This is what the LORD says: "A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."* There are no words to ease the grief of the families, and nothing can bring back their precious children and family members. That's why Job's friends sat with him in silence for a week after he received word that his children were dead. Because there are no words.

Part of me doesn't want to think or talk about what happened at all. I feel angry, disgusted, frustrated, and helpless that ten years after the horror that took place in Newtown, CT, these incidents keep happening. Depending on your politics, people have their talking points every time there is a mass shooting or a school shooting which are occurring at an all-time record high. But whatever your politics, you can't ignore that of all the nations in the world, the United States is exceptional in that we're the only country that allows school shootings and mass shootings to occur with regularity while doing nothing to stop them. Until we prioritize children and change our values, our behavior, and our laws to make murder more difficult we're collectively saying, *"We're okay with innocent children being gunned down in school on a regular basis."* Something has to change; you can't be okay with this going on and on, we can't become numb to it or accept it as inevitable. It's not inevitable. This only happens in America.

Expressing thoughts and prayers while doing nothing to stop the carnage isn't going to accomplish anything because God tells us through the prophet Isaiah that God doesn't listen to prayers when our hands are full of blood. This is what God says, **Isaiah 1.15-17 (NIV)** "When you spread out your hands in prayer,

**I hide my eyes from you;
even when you offer many prayers,
I am not listening.**

Your hands are full of blood!

16 Wash and make yourselves clean.

**Take your evil deeds out of my sight;
stop doing wrong.**

17 Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

**Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow."**

We all deserve to be safe – in schools, places of worship, grocery stores, our homes, neighborhoods, and America. This cannot become normal. We cannot become numb. We cannot look the other way. We all know if nothing changes, nothing changes. God help us to do what is right in our own lives beginning with showing greater kindness, empathy, and courage to protect the innocent and to confront to what needs to be confronted.

The Apostle Paul was familiar with suffering and pain, and he knew from experience that sometimes spiritual experiences come at a personal cost. When Jacob wrestled with God, he hobbled away, limping for the rest of his life. Paul reluctantly shared with the church in Corinth an experience he had of being caught up to Paradise, but to keep him from being too puffed up or spiritually condescending (which was an issue for a number of folks in that church), Paul says he was given "*a thorn in his flesh*." Paul calls this thorn "*a messenger of Satan to torment me*." Listen to **2 Corinthians 12.8-10**,

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 my power 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.”

From time to time I encounter people who mistakenly believe that if they have faith, they'll always be healthy, happy, and have no problems or struggles or that if someone prays and isn't healed it's because the person lacks faith. This inaccurate thinking runs contrary to Paul's experience and to the experience of many faithful Christians including some of you and your loved ones. There's no doubt Paul had great faith, nevertheless his repeated request for the removal of the thorn or stake was not answered by the thorn being removed.

It's difficult to ascertain exactly what the thorn or stake was for Paul. **“A stake in the flesh”** was a common figure of speech in Paul's day for excruciating physical pain. The thorn could be a physical issue such as epilepsy, migraines, malaria, a speech impediment, or a vision problem. We know that Paul, while able to withstand great physical hardships such as beatings, imprisonments, and a shipwreck, was not the picture of health. A couple passages hint at an issue with his eyes. In **Galatians 4:13-15** Paul writes, **“You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me...I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your own eyes and given them to me.”** Then in **Galatians 6:11**, Paul writes a few words himself, **“See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand.”** It's possible Paul had trouble with his eyes. Regardless of what the thorn is, Paul's prayer wasn't answered by the thorn being removed. Perhaps this is like the experience of some of you.

You or a loved one has cancer, Alzheimer's, diabetes, or heart trouble. You pray and pray but the condition remains. You have an addiction, arthritis, allergies, chronic pain, even shrapnel that remains in your body for life. There are many types of thorns including chronic unemployment or underemployment, loneliness, depression, family, marital, or relational issues - the list is long because **we all have thorns. Our thorns**

come in assorted sizes and shapes, some seem to have more barbs than others, but we all have them.

At this point someone may be thinking, *“If God isn’t going to remove our thorns when we pray for that to happen, what’s the use? What’s the use of praying? What’s the use of God?”* The answer to those questions begins by noting it’s correct that Paul’s prayer for the thorn to be removed was not answered, but Paul’s prayer was answered. The answer God gives is, **‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’** I try not to get too much into grammar, but it’s important to note that **this phrase is in the perfect tense denoting finality.** What the Lord said to Paul was not subject to change or revision. The perfect tense of the word indicates that **Paul still heard** the Lord saying to him, **‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’** The Lord’s promise is that whenever a thorn, whenever a messenger of Satan, afflicts us, the Lord will give us sufficient strength to cope with what must be faced.

When we pull back from Paul’s life to the New Testament, we discover that the power of God demonstrated in and through Jesus, the power of God that raised Christ from the dead, is **power in weakness.** That’s why Paul wrote in in **2 Corinthians 11:30, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”** That’s a new model for macho, *“Look how weak I am!”* Paul is asserting that God’s grace is most easily noticed in the awareness of our weakness and need.

Paul’s ministry was marked by pain, hardships, and trial and was only possible through the power of God. He says in the passage we heard earlier from 2 Corinthians 4, *“But we have this treasure (meaning the gospel) in clay jars, (Photo from ancient Corinth of cracked pot) so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.”* It’s the surpassing power of God that enabled Paul’s life and ministry.

That same power of God is available to us as well because like Paul we’re cracked pots, we have our thorns – none of us is perfect. We all have things that are wrong with us. All of us are inadequate in one way or another. Perhaps we’re made this way to help us learn to depend on the Lord and each other. Where human strength abounds, the effects of divine power may be overlooked or forgotten. That’s why the

Israelites were strongly warned in **Deuteronomy 8:18-19**, about the temptation to pride and self-sufficiency especially in times of prosperity “*Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.*” The whole practice of tithing and giving proportionally to the Lord is a reminder that it’s God’s power that enables us to have whatever we have, and if we continue to put the Lord first, we’ll see God act in ways to sustain and strengthen our faith.

When Paul writes about God’s power being made perfect in weakness he doesn’t mean he’s timid or lacking in resolve, weakness is his term **for the frailties of human existence and the adversities he faces** in living and sharing the good news of Jesus. **What Paul discovered through his suffering is that the grace and power of God intersect with your life at the point of your weakness and need.** Your afflictions may draw you closer to the grace of Christ. Part of that means accepting that ***in the present world*** there’s **evil, violence, injustice, and inequality and these must be struggled with and fought against** even if they may not be fully overcome in our lifetime.

You may suffer from ill health or disease or pain that neither intercession, counseling, nor medication is able to overcome. What are you to do in these circumstances of pain and suffering – what do you to do with these thorns?

You can pray that the Lord will deliver you as Paul prayed. Maybe God will deliver you as God sometimes does, but we’re mindful that all instances of deliverance in this life are partial. Something is going to get all of us eventually, no matter how strong our faith or how healthy our habits. If God doesn’t deliver us, then what? It’s all too easy to allow these things to eat away at our lives until we become embittered and wallowing in self-pity. **Those of us who are in Christ are to allow our thorns to pin us closer to Christ** who gives grace to the suffering. God’s power comes to its full strength in our weakness.

A closing story: While serving with Operation Mobilization in India in 1967, tuberculosis forced Doug Nichols into a sanitarium for several months. He writes, “I did not yet speak the language, but I tried to give Christian literature written in their language to the patients, doctors, and nurses. Everyone politely refused. I sensed many

weren't happy about a rich American (to them all Americans are rich) being in a free, government-run sanitarium. (They didn't know I was just as broke as they were!)

The first few nights I woke around 2:00 a.m. coughing. One morning during my coughing spell, I noticed one of the older and sicker patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit on the edge of the bed and try to stand, but in weakness would fall back into bed. I didn't understand what he was trying to do. He finally fell back into bed exhausted. I heard him crying softly.

The next morning, I realized what the man had been trying to do. He had been trying to get up and walk to the bathroom! The stench in our ward was awful. Other patients yelled insults at the man. Angry nurses moved him roughly from side to side as they cleaned up the mess. One nurse even slapped him. The old man curled up in a ball and wept.

The next night I again woke up coughing. I noticed the man across the aisle sit up again and try to stand. Like the night before, he fell back whimpering. I don't like bad smells, and I didn't want to become involved, but I got out of bed and went over to him. When I touched his shoulder, his eyes opened wide with fear. I smiled, put my arms under him and picked him up. He was very light due to old age and advanced TB. I carried him to the washroom, which was just a filthy small room with a hole in the floor. I stood behind him with my hands under his arm pits as he took care of himself. After he was finished, I picked him up, carried him back to his bed. As I laid him down, he kissed me on the cheek, smiled, and said something I couldn't understand.

The next morning another patient woke me and handed me a steaming cup of tea. He motioned with his hands that he wanted one of my Christian tracts. As the sun rose other patients approached and indicated they also wanted the booklets I had tried to distribute before. Throughout the day, nurses, interns, and doctors asked for literature. Weeks later an evangelist who spoke the language visited me, and as he talked with others he discovered that several had put their trust in Christ as Savior as a result of reading the literature. What did it take to reach these people with the gospel? **It wasn't health or strength or the ability to speak their language or a persuasive talk.** I simply took a trip to the bathroom."

Doug Nichols could have done nothing, and let the man's suffering continue, but he intervened and did something small that ended up have larger implications. If you and I take steps towards caring more for others, we'll all be in a better place. Like the Apostle Paul, Doug Nichols wasn't healthy or strong, but God's strength is power in weakness.

God gives us grace to endure weakness, hardship, adversity, illness and even death because when we are weak, then the power God can be demonstrated in us and through us. We're all inadequate, and if you don't think so just ask someone who knows you well, yet we can praise the Lord who made us this way because God's got enough adequacy, power, and strength for you, me, and for all who are willing to humble themselves and ask for it. So go ahead. Ask. Because God's **grace is sufficient for you, for the Lord's power is made perfect in weakness.'**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever had a chronic situation like Paul's "*thorn in the flesh*" that you prayed to have removed, and it wasn't or hasn't been? How has that impacted your faith or your prayer life?
2. How would you respond to someone saying, "*If God isn't going to remove my thorn when I pray for that to happen, what's the use? What's the use of praying? What's the use of God?*"
3. Paul heard the Lord say to him, '*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*' What do you think that means?
4. When you consider the life of Jesus and the experience of Paul, how do we see God's power at work through weakness?
5. What Paul discovered through his suffering is that the grace and power of God intersect with our lives at the point of our weakness and need. Have you had that experience? If so, what happened?
6. You may suffer from ill health or disease that neither intercession, counseling, nor medication is able to overcome. What are Christians to do in these circumstances of pain and suffering – what do you do with these thorns?

