

---

# The Paradox of Weakness

*2 Corinthians 12:1-10*

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 8, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

---

Right before what we heard in today's NT lesson, the apostle Paul boasts in his weaknesses—imprisonments, floggings, lashes, beatings with rods, being stoned, being shipwrecked, being in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from his own people, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, sleepless nights. He's hungry, thirsty, cold, naked, and anxious (2 Cor 11:23-29). If Paul were an ambitious politician, he would surely lose the next election. Politicians boast in themselves, their parties, and platforms. They present themselves as the best and the strongest. It would appear that life was a bouquet of sweet-smelling roses for them.

No politician, in their right mind, proclaims their weaknesses, shortcomings, and failures; that is the role of the political opponent via smear ads. Politicians present a perfect picture of power, personal stability and reliability, professional capability, trustworthiness and intellectual strength. How many of us would vote for a so-called weak candidate? None of us would. We want to put the strongest people in political office (it is debatable how successful we have been). If someone created an ad about his/her own weaknesses and failures, that wouldn't help him or her win votes; it would probably have the opposite effect. But an election ad or CV like that would be honest. Wouldn't it?

We're all human—politicians, pastors, professors, staff, students, administration. We have weaknesses and shortcomings. We have pains and not so perfect lives. We don't look the best when we wake up in the morning. We get sick. We experience loss. We make mistakes. We're not always right. Life isn't always a bouquet of sweet-smelling roses for us. The sun isn't always shining on us. The archangels are not always serenading us. We experience thunderstorms and tornadoes blow through our lives sometimes. I bet we even have some thorns too, but why don't we say anything about that? We tend to be more like the little kid who always wants to flex his muscles in family photographs to show how strong he is.

The apostle Paul has thorns and weaknesses. He's forthright in his pastoral campaign to the Corinthians. He tells them, "a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated." We're not told what this thorn is, but we do know it's painful for Paul. Many people have speculated what this thorn might be: physical or mental illness, spiritual trials, persecution, opposition, being single; but we are not told what the exact nature of this thorn is. And by not knowing what it is, we cannot distance ourselves from Paul's pain for if we knew what it was specifically, it might not be our exact pain so we might be prone to look away and say, 'that doesn't relate to me.' However, we can't turn away that easily because all he says is a 'thorn' and we all have thorns to deal with in our own lives.

What's significant here is not the nature of the thorn but the fact that there is a thorn present. What kind of thorn doesn't matter because a thorn is a thorn. It hurts whether it's from a rose stem or blackberry bush. Thorns are those prickly and sticky areas of our lives that constantly nag and irritate us, seemingly without end, nagging us like a Tarheel fan, gnawing away at any glimmer of hope. Generally, we don't know why or how we get them. We just know they are there. Thorns – our demons, those messengers of Satan, who constantly haunt and harass us so that life is not a bouquet of roses. Paul believes he receives his thorn to keep him humble and weak so he can't take credit for his spiritual powers. Thorns do make us weak. They pierce our flesh. Blood flows out. We lose some of our vitality. We try to stop the flow of blood but we can't. Like Paul, who asked the Lord three times to remove his thorn, we may ask God to stop the torment, but seemingly God does not. Jesus asked, "Take this cup from me," but he still goes to the cross. Everyone has a cup to hold, a cross to bear, a Selma Pettus Bridge to walk on, a thorn. The healing God basically says, 'no, I won't heal you right now.' Instead, Paul stays in his suffering, whether it's insults, hardships, persecutions, or calamities. Let all the

smiling prosperity gospel preachers hear this: God doesn't remove the thorn in his flesh. Paul can only say, "I am weak." What else can you say when a thorn is your daily companion?

I suppose you can lament like the music group U2 did in 1983 with their song, "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," in light of the tense and violent political context of Northern Ireland. "How long, how long must we sing this song? Sunday, bloody Sunday." How long must we endure cancer and dementia and pneumonia and arthritis and heart disease and eye problems and back problems and depression and loneliness? How long must we experience "hope unborn" dying daily? When my 10-year-old niece was dying about 10 years ago, she literally wrote in her journal, "I feel as weak as a newborn baby or animal." How long must we have thorns?

Thorns aren't self-created because who would knowingly choose to suffer? Who would knowingly choose to have blood transfusions, high blood pressure, and seizures? Who would knowingly choose to have their kidneys fail and go on dialysis? Who would knowingly put themselves at death's doorway? No one. That's just the way it is with thorns. Things happen. Life happens. Cow manure happens. Thorns just happen as we walk along in the garden of life. So how can we make it through life? Where do we turn for help? Is there a rose amid the thorns?

"God knows," at least that's what Paul believes. When Paul has the vision of Paradise, he knows that he doesn't know everything, but God does, so he says, "God knows." God knows that Paul has a thorn in his flesh but God also knows that there is a rose attached to the thorn. God knows, and God wants you to know that God knows everything you're going through. God knows when we sit down and when we rise up (Psalm 139). God knows our coming in and our going out (Psalm 121). God even knows thorns as we hear in Isaiah. "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; others hid their faces from him, he was despised . . . carried our diseases . . . struck down by God, afflicted . . . wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities . . . He was oppressed . . . like a lamb that is led to the slaughter . . . (Isaiah 53). With Christian eyes we can see Christ in Isaiah's suffering servant because Jesus knows thorns. He was the crucified Messiah and at the end of this Lenten journey in the wilderness, we will see Jesus wear a crown of thorns crushed on his head. He suffered tremendously but even with his thorn, there was a rose attached because his mocking crown of thorns became a marvelous crown of royalty through the resurrection. And now some even call him the Rose of Sharon.

You should know that there is a sweet smelling rose. Though God doesn't remove Paul's thorn, God assures him by saying, "my grace is sufficient for you, for (my) power is made perfect in weakness." God tells Paul that strength will come right in the middle of weakness. God tells Paul that he will endure. God tells Paul, "Don't worry my child. I know your suffering. I know life has dealt you a bad hand. I know it isn't what you thought it would be. Don't worry my child. My grace will see you through." God wants Paul to realize that there is a rose blooming even while the prickly thorn nags him because divine power is perfected or completed in weakness. Literally, God's power accomplishes its goal when we are weak. This is a paradox and paradoxes seem absurd, even if they are true.

In the every day, we may hear someone say, "Nobody goes to that restaurant; it's too crowded." Or, "Don't go near the water 'til you have learned how to swim." It is a paradox to say God is at God's powerful best when we are weak. But who else heals the brokenhearted? Who else sets the captives free? Who else gives sight to the blind? Who else can take a crazy man living among the tombs, touch his life, clothe him in his right mind, and make him a preacher? Who else could use ice as a shock treatment to break the chains of a fever epidemic that was squeezing the life out of me as an infant in NYC? Who else can make your bad situation good? Who else? There is no one else who can make us strong in our weak moments of desperation. God is at God's best when we are weak.

In his book, *Actuality*, a colleague at Calvin Seminary, Scott Hoezee, writes, "Grace often comes on us unawares, when we were perhaps least looking for it, much less expecting it. When it does appear in our lives, grace

comes not despite the problems we face or the trials that may abound in our lives on any given day, but right in the middle of all that, as a reminder that the one who is in us and for us is greater than the troubles of the day.” God is so much for us that joy can break out even when we are experiencing sorrow, hope can make a comeback tomorrow, green leaves can blossom, rotten fruit can become ripe again. There can be “an extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor...the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint...the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash”(Howard Thurman).

We can find strength in weakness. No one else can take the credit for this but God. And I guess that’s the point. That’s why Paul says, “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Paul receives divine empowerment because he claims his human frailty. Our glamorous culture grasps for fame, prestige, and power as we climb up the ladder of success but Christianity embraces weakness. The goal of the Christian life is to become weaker, not stronger. God works with us when we are weak and needy or as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “Where life is not rent, the God of Israel is not inclined to be present.” Theologian Marva Dawn—who has arthritic hands, a crippled leg, a blind eye, a deaf ear, kidneys functioning around 17%, dead intestinal and stomach nerves, pain leftover from cancer and jaw surgeries, the imminent possibility of losing vision in her remaining eye, sores that will eventually necessitate amputation of her foot—teaches us that God tabernacles in weakness. If we boast in our own power, we deny God’s power but if we acknowledge our weakness, we will see God’s wonder-working strength. God gives Paul strength when he is weak for “whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” This is the paradox of weakness.

Many times, it is when we are weak that we feel the need for God and our weakness leads us to the Tower of Strength. If we were sufficiently strong, maybe we wouldn’t see the need for God, but if we are truthfully transparent with ourselves, we know we have some thorns in the flesh and the only way to survive and thrive is with God’s help. When you are weak, you don’t have to give in to your pain and give up, because God’s sufficient grace will strengthen you. The power of Christ dwells in you. When we are weak, we become strong because God strengthens us when we are weak.

Life isn’t a bouquet of roses. But with all of our thorns, there is still a sweet smelling rose because of the power of Christ. On this Lenten journey to the heart of weakness, the cross, when you are weak may you ask God to sharpen your senses so that you can smell and inhale the rosy fragrance of divine strength.

Let us pray: *Lord, help us all to be strong enough to be weak. Amen.*