

“FOR WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG”

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The more I learn, the less I know. For every two steps forward, I take one step back. I'm happiest when I am sad. I found graduating to be a bitter-sweet experience. One thing I know: I know nothing. Waitress, I'd like to order the jumbo shrimp.” Each of these sayings represents a paradox. A paradox is a statement or situation which appears to contradict itself but it nevertheless true; as in learning more and knowing less; moving forward and backward; happy and sad, bitter and sweet, jumbo and shrimp.

Scripture also contains many striking paradoxes. For example, Jesus said in Matthew 10:39, **“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”** Jesus also said that in the kingdom of God ‘he first will be last, the least will be greatest, and the exalted will be humbled. Each of these is a paradox.

On occasion the apostle Paul used paradoxes in his writings. In 1 Corinthians 3:18 Paul wrote, **“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise.”** Becoming a fool to become wise is a paradox.

In 2 Corinthians 6:8-10 Paul listed a series of paradoxes resulting from his apostolic ministry. He said: **“Genuine, yet regarded as imposters; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything.”** Paradoxes.

Verse 10 of today's text also contains a remarkable paradox. **“For when I am weak,”** wrote Paul, **“then I am strong.”** How can this be? How can there be strength in weakness and weakness in strength? To understand Paul's words, we must view them in context. Why was the apostle even writing about weakness and strength? What circumstances in Corinth prompted this discussion?

First and Second Corinthians were both written in the same year, likely 56 AD or 57 AD; and only months apart. Yet, each letter was written for very different reasons. Paul wrote First Corinthians to address several congregational problems; the type of problems not unexpected from a new congregation located in a major metropolitan area and composed mostly of Greek or pagan converts.

When Paul first visited Corinth, the city's population was nearly 750,000; about the size of San Francisco. And like San Francisco, Corinth was a busy seaport. Because

of its strategic location, the city became immensely powerful, prominent, and wealthy. Corinth was known for its architecture, arts and entertainment, cosmopolitan attitude, and pagan temples. The Temple of Athena overlooking the city allegedly housed 1,000 priestess-prostitutes—a popular attraction in a city teeming with sea-sick, love-sick sailors. Above all, Corinth was known for its sexual immorality. Even in the ancient world the phrase “to Corinthianize,” KORINTHIAZOMAI in Greek, meant the same as “to fornicate.” I’m certain that the Corinthian Chamber of Commerce viewed this lewd reputation as an asset, not a liability; much like the saying, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” Or, “What happens in Corinth, stays in Corinth.”

Paul wrote First Corinthians to counter these unwholesome influences, and to remind the Christians in Corinth to live life in view of Christ’s immense sacrifice. **“You are not your own,”** he wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; **“you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”** Just as Peter wrote: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”** 1 Peter 1:18-19.

However, Paul’s reasons for writing Second Corinthians were decidedly different. In this second letter to Corinth, little is said of congregational problems. Instead, the emphasis is on the apostolic ministry, and more so on vigorously defending the apostle Paul’s personal ministry—particularly in chapters 10, 11, and 12, of which today’s text is a part.

So, what happened in Corinth? Shortly after Paul wrote First Corinthians, false teachers arrived in Corinth. Paul was clearly worried about their impact on the Corinthians’ faith. **“I am afraid,”** he wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, **“that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.”**

Along with attempting to undermine the gospel, these false teachers were also undermining Paul’s personal ministry. In reading Second Corinthians, we learn what some of these personal attacks were. Paul was accused of being ‘timid’ in face-to-face confrontations and ‘bold’ when away; of being a strong letter-writer but a poor orator or public speaker.

The accusations sound so ridiculous, so trivial, so petty. Yet, how often don’t we—I say this to my own shame—level similar accusations, consciously or

unconsciously, when we compare one pastor to another. “Oh man, the new pastor is something else, isn’t he? He is such a weak speaker. His sermons are so boring. His personality, dismal; his mannerisms, embarrassing; his appearance, disappointing; his handshake, disgusting. Shaking that man’s hand on Sunday mornings, well, I feel as if I’m shaking an overcooked spaghetti noodle. Do you know what I mean? Do you?”

Amusing, isn’t it, until we realize how wrong such assessments are and how much hurt they can cause. I personally know a man who left the ministry because of these very accusations—and the dreadful, apparently unforgiveable ‘sin’ of making occasional typographical errors in the Sunday bulletin.

How did the apostle defend himself and his ministry? As much as he disliked the line of reasoning—**“I am out of my mind to talk like this,”** he said in 2 Corinthians 11:23—Paul reminded the Corinthians that, humanly speaking, he had every reason to boast of his personal strengths and accomplishments. **“I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super-apostles,’”** he wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:5.

Paul was **“an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,”** 2 Corinthians 1:1. The false teachers were not. Paul had demonstrated the things that marked a true apostle—**“signs, wonders and miracles,”** 2 Corinthians 12:12. The false teachers had not. Paul had worked harder, suffered more, and achieved more than the so-called ‘super-apostles,’ as explained in the remarkable passage of 2 Corinthians 11:21-27.

In the words immediately preceding today’s text, Paul recounted how fourteen years earlier, he had received surpassingly great **“visions and revelations from the Lord,”** 2 Corinthians 12:1; how he had been **“caught up to paradise,”** 2 Corinthians 12:4; and how he had **“heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell,”** 2 Corinthians 12:4.

Yet, rather than to boast about personal accomplishments, Paul desired to boast only of his personal weaknesses. **“If I must boast,”** he said in 2 Corinthians 11:30, **“I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”** Why? Because by God’s grace, Paul had come to embrace the reality of this remarkable paradox: **“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** And one of the means through which Paul learned that important lesson was through a **“thorn in the flesh.”**

No, we don’t know the nature of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. Theories have ranged from personal weakness or a particular temptation to physical ailments like epilepsy, arthritis, malaria, and even eye disease. In the end, it doesn’t matter. Not knowing the nature of Paul’s thorn makes it easier to identify his thorn with thorns of our own. And

we all have thorns, not visible to others perhaps, but still there, pestering and festering just below the surface.

We learn about thorns and splinters at an early age. When my son Justin was two years old, toddling but not yet perfectly balanced, he fell down on a patch of prickly California cactus. I must have spent an hour plucking nearly invisible thorns from his little legs, watching as the thorn-pricks became angry red welts. “Hurts, daddy,” he would say with tears pooling in his green eyes. “I know, son,” I’d say with tears pooling in my own, and then reluctantly go on plucking.

But that’s the nature of a “thorn in the flesh,” isn’t it? Despite its small size or small beginning, a thorn goes on aggravating, goes on hurting, and goes on interfering with virtually everything we do, whether at home or at the office, outside or inside, awake or trying to sleep. Thorns can be financial, emotional, physical, or spiritual. Thorns can even be people. Whose name came to mind as I spoke this last sentence, “Thorns can even be people.” An unreasonable employer. A demanding spouse. An ungrateful child. A bullying student. A bill-collector. An IRS auditor.

Our first instinct with thorns is to—what? Isn’t it to dig them out? I can’t tell you how many thorns and splinters I picked up as a young, barefooted Floridian; or how often my mother sighed, produced a sowing needle, sterilized the tip of the needle in the flame of a match, let the needle cool, and then went to work on that splinter. “Come on, Mark,” she’d say, “let’s get that splinter out.” “Aw, mom. No, just leave it alone.”

When the thorns in our flesh are from problems instead of plants, our first instinct is to ask God to dig them out. Sometimes He does. And sometimes—no, you won’t like what I say next, but you know it’s scripturally true—He does not. Sometimes God allows the thorn to remain, even though it hurts, and even though we can provide a litany of reasons as to why the thorn is much better out than in. “Lord, I’d be so much happier and easier to get along with if I could only get out of debt. Lord, if I had less pain, I could spend more time with the grandchildren and get more done at church. That’s reasonable, Lord, isn’t it?”

Yes, it may be reasonable, but for God’s greater purposes in our lives, removing that thorn may not always be desirable or beneficial. This is a hard saying, but it is also a true saying. According to our text, Paul pleaded with God three times to remove his “thorn in the flesh.” And don’t think Paul failed to offer pressing, legitimate reasons. “Lord, if you remove this problem from my life, I will work even harder, travel even farther, and reach even more people with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.” And God

said, “No, Paul. **My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness,**” 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Even the great apostle Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh.” Why? Because of that very greatness. Because of the remarkable blessings and achievements of his life. As he wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:7, **“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”** The Greek is more literally “to go on beating me with fists.” A constant pain. A constant messenger of his mortality and weakness. And therein the constant reminder of who and what made him strong; not his own strength or wisdom, but God’s.

Understanding what God was accomplishing in his life through that “thorn in the flesh” gave Paul a new perspective on “thorns” and problems in life, so that he could actually say, **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** This is the secret to that paradox, isn’t it? Admitting our weakness and relying upon God’s strength is what makes us truly strong. And if God teaches us this lesson by permitting a “thorn in the flesh,” isn’t He to be praised instead of cursed?

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” There is not an area of our Christian lives where this great principle and paradox do not apply. Consider the matter of our eternal salvation. How are we saved? Is it by our own strength or by recognizing our own weakness and relying solely upon God’s strength? Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **“It is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.”**

What about prayer? So often when we face thorny problems and predicaments in life, our first resort is to worry, and our last resort is prayer. The first accomplishes nothing. The second accomplishes everything. **“Is any one of you in trouble?”** asked James in chapter 5. **“He should pray. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”** When we realize we cannot solve all our problems and instead commit them into hands of almighty God—“Here God, you take this burden. I am too weak to carry it.”—then and there our weakness is replaced with God’s strength. And we are living the paradox, **“When I am weak, then I am strong?”**

What about marriage? Having seen divorce from every conceivable angle—as a child, spouse, and parent—I know how difficult marriage can be. God created the institution of marriage in Eden, that is, in perfection. We live in an imperfect world,

where our old sinful nature often spars with the desire to honor, serve, and selflessly love “until death us do part.”

And yet, no matter how troubled a marriage may be, when two Christian spouses turn humbly to the Lord—admitting they can’t repair the marriage, trusting that God can—is there any situation He cannot fix? Is there any difference that is really irreconcilable to the God who ‘reconciled the world to Himself in Christ,’ as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:19? No. Just as Paul told the Philippians: **“I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.”**

What about ministry? I’ve often wondered why God would want me back in the ministry after leaving it for twenty-two years—after going through the type of challenges and experiences that might make other clergymen shake their heads and say, “That guy will never occupy a pulpit again.” This is my conclusion. Through my all-too-apparent weaknesses and failings, even now, today, in this pulpit, God is showing His strength.

David, who defeated Goliath. Abraham, whose body was reproductively dead, yet who waited twenty years for the birth of Isaac. Moses, who complained, “I can’t speak well.” Jeremiah, who complained, “I’m too young.” Isaiah, who complained, “I’m undone.” Elijah, who slumped beneath a juniper tree and begged God to end his life. Peter, who denied knowing Christ three times. Paul, who pleaded with God three times to remove his “thorn” in his flesh. And even Jesus Christ, who in humility embraced death on a cross to atone for all our sins. All of these and more—your life and my life—are shining examples of God’s strength made perfect in weakness.

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” That’s the paradox. And that’s the promise.