

Rev. Janet Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 26, 2021
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

Sermon: Strength Through Christ Alone

The Scottish preacher John Harper was aboard the Titanic in 1912 when the ship went down. Harper drifted into a young man holding on to a plank. Harper said, "Young man, are you saved?" The young man answered, "No." A wave separated them and after a few minutes they were within speaking distance. Again, Harper called out to him, "Has your soul made peace with God?" The young man said, "Not yet." A wave overwhelmed John Harper, and he was seen no more. But the words "Are you saved?" kept ringing in the young man's ears. Two weeks later the young man stood up in a youth meeting in New York, told his story, and said, "I am John Harper's last convert." ***The Apostle Paul said, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10)***

Trevor was born four months premature with cerebral palsy, an enlarged heart, underdeveloped organs, a brain bleed, staph infection, and lungs that collapsed three times. Doctors told his parents that even if he survived, which seemed unlikely at the time, he would never walk or talk. Yet as the years went by, Trevor not only survived, he learned to walk first by using a walker, then with the assistance of forearm crutches, and eventually—after surgery at the age of six—Trevor began to walk independently.

Even though Trevor experienced the miracles of learning to walk and talk, he still struggled with loneliness. He didn't know any other children with cerebral palsy. Like many individuals living with a disability, Trevor felt painfully alone. Who could he turn to in his darkest hour? Was there anyone willing to be that friend described in the Bible who sticks closer than a brother? At age fifteen, Trevor found that friend when he gave his heart to Jesus, and in that moment, Christ began to fill his void and rescue Trevor from his loneliness.

The Apostle Paul said, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Trevor boldly proclaims, "I consider cerebral palsy the greatest blessing in my life because it has opened so many doors to share the Gospel to so many who are hurting and looking for hope. Challenges, pain, and suffering are a guarantee when you live in a broken world. But the One who created the world can turn our brokenness into something beautiful. What the enemy meant for evil, God meant for good. I have claimed 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 as my life verse."

The Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul says to the Corinthians, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. ***For when I am weak, then I am strong.***"

Fifty-four years ago, Joni Eareckson Tada took a dive into shallow water at the Chesapeake Bay at age 17. She had just graduated from high school and ready to go to college when that dive changed her life forever. Immediately her head hit the bottom and it snapped her head back and crushed her spinal cord at the fourth cervical level and she became a quadriplegic, unable to use her hands or legs. Her sister saved her and pulled her from the water, but Joni went into a journey she had never experienced before, and it was a journey of deep, dark depression because she would be totally paralyzed for the rest of her life.

Joni said, "Jesus was kind of tucked in my back hip pocket. I just pulled him out every once in a while, when I needed something. I was not taking the Lordship of Christ over my life very seriously. So, I did not know how to get out of my sadness. I was hoping that the joy of the Lord would just happen to me without any hard work. I kept waiting for my circumstances to change but that never happened, because I stayed in my wheelchair, so I stayed depressed. But finally, because of the prayers for me, I found the courage to ask myself if I really wanted to do the hard work of believing God and trusting in his promises. Psalm 62:8 says, "Trust in the Lord at all times." That's hard work to do that! Now years later I am glad I had the courage to battle the sadness and say yes to the

promises of God. Nobody is as in touch or in tune with the sadness in your soul as God. Let God pay close attention to the cry of your heart and to all those deep and inexpressible feelings of longing and groanings. Turn your dark feelings Godward, not inward. Don't minimize them but do something good with them."

Joni founded ***Joni and Friends*** that delivers wheelchairs around the world to people that don't have them or can't afford them. They give Bibles to people with disabilities in countries around the world sharing the love of Jesus. ***Joni and Friends*** helps provide food and helps build homes for people with disabilities.

Joni said, "God has been so gracious to me in my hardship, and I just want other people to experience that goodness from him, that kindness, that generosity. Sadness and depression and those feelings can be the very impetus to not only teach us who we are but also to partner with God to go find somebody else who is hurting worse than you are. Psalm 125:3 says, 'The Lord has done great thing for us, and we are filled with joy.' So, when you're depressed, think of what God has done for you in the past, because when you do, you're heading in the right direction emotionally." ***"For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10)***

The Apostle Paul learned one of the greatest paradoxes in Christian life—strength is found through weakness. It is when we are on our knees in prayer to God and we feel as though we have nothing left to give and we are desperate and calling out for God to help us that we realize that strength comes through Christ alone in our weakness.

Philippians 4:13 says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

This seems contrary to the philosophies being taught today, but from a spiritual perspective, this reveals great truth. In order for the believer to become strong in the faith, we must experience weakness. One will never be strong in the Lord until they are weak.

It says in our scripture lesson today that Paul was given a thorn in the flesh and there has been much debate as to what this thorn in the flesh might have been. That debate continues today, but what it was isn't

important but how God used it in Paul's life does matter. The thorn in the flesh caused great concern for Paul. There was likely some sort of physical discomfort or pain associated with his affliction and suffering. It was so burdensome that he asked the Lord three times to remove the "thorn" from him. This reveals a burden that was continual; it never ceased, and Paul saw no benefit in the thorn and for a while he was focused on the suffering it caused.

We can relate to Paul as could the people with their "thorns" I just told you about. We all want to remove the thorns. Our troubles and heartaches are all different, but we all face adversity in life in some way and at some time. No one wants that "thorn," and no one enjoys that pain or discomfort.

Like Paul, we immediately begin to pray for the Lord to remove the burden or trial from us. We focus on the pain and give little thought to any benefit it may bring or growth to our spiritual life. If our trials create spiritual growth, drawing us closer to our Lord, instead of building a wall of separation, then they are beneficial in our lives.

The Lord allowed this "thorn" in Paul's life for a purpose. He would use this "thorn" to teach Paul much about his faith, essentially bringing victory to him through his adversity.

The Lord's response to Paul is very interesting. He doesn't speak of the nature of the thorn or the severity of Paul's suffering. Jesus revealed that His **GRACE** was sufficient, and that His **STRENGTH** was perfected in weakness.

What does GRACE mean? "Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing."

Ephesians 2: 7-10 The Message:

GRACE is unconditional love toward a person who does not deserve it.

GRACE is understood to mean a spontaneous gift from God to his people. It is generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved.

Paul was focused on the thorn, the suffering, just like we would be, but Jesus wanted Paul to be focused on the Lord's grace and strength in the midst of having the "thorn". While the "thorn" would not be removed, the Lord would provide the grace and strength necessary to endure life with it but also to go beyond expectations and do amazing ministry because of it.

This scripture verse can bring comfort and hope, but it is also challenging to us to not just see the suffering and the pain but to focus on his grace and strength when facing adversity in life. That focus is a challenge to a disciple of Jesus. We must seek the Lord's grace and strength in our lives above all else when we are faced with the "thorn."

His Grace is always sufficient, regardless of the trial we must endure. You will never face a trial that our Lord is unable to guide you through because of his **GRACE** and **STRENGTH**.

This spiritual growth of Paul's didn't come easily or quickly. Over time Paul understood how his "thorn" gave him a new perspective on life and new opportunities to serve Christ. Over time he was willing to welcome adversity, and if you can believe it, even rejoiced in it, so that he might experience the power of Christ in his life.

If suffering with his "thorn" was the source of strength and power through Christ alone, he welcomed such difficulty with open arms.

This perspective comes from a committed walk with the Lord and learning the value of His grace in our lives and the power it provides.

When we allow the trials of life to consume us, we submit to defeat and despair.

"For when I am weak, then I am strong." Remember it is a paradox that the world does not understand. Paul had finally come to an understanding where he realized his weaknesses actually provided strength to his life and ministry.

When he allowed himself to be vulnerable and needy before the Lord, he was able to receive the strength that only Christ could provide. This had not been available while he tried to handle every situation and

overcome in his own strength. He realized he couldn't live life on his own strength but only through acknowledging his weakness did he have strength in Christ.

We want to handle every situation, and we fear being seen as weak in this world. It is only when we realize that we cannot handle the burdens we carry and the suffering we endure alone. There is only strength in Christ for the journey ahead. When we stop relying on ourselves and trust solely in Christ, then we are made strong!

I don't know where you are in the journey, but I am certain we are all dealing with struggles and adversity in our lives. If we admit that we can't handle the "thorn" in our life alone and turn to Christ alone, we will receive the strength to endure and to be used for his ministry and his glory. We can boast in our weakness because that's when Christ's power is made perfect.

Don't endure life alone, remember: ***"For when I am weak, then I am strong" in Christ Alone.*** Whatever your need is, Christ is the answer!