

## **Strength in Weakness 2-09-03**

2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; John 15:5; Zechariah 4:6

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV) <sup>7</sup> *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.* <sup>8</sup> *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* <sup>9</sup> *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* <sup>10</sup> *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.*

Last week the sermon was on the topic of finding passion. We went over the kind of passion that is man made and how it can be compared with the "strange fire" that the sons of Aaron used in their incense. Passion for the wrong things can be poisonous to our lives. Most illicit passion is usually centered in self. It seeks the praise of man. It hopes to impress so as to gratify and glorify self. It isn't the fire that comes from drawing close to Christ and being consumed with Him. Instead, it is zeal to see self respected and honored.

We often can't discern one from the other. Some people claiming to be servants of God say all the right things. One good test, though, is after all is done and said, do you forget the messenger and remember the message? Do you end up holding the fruit of desiring to be closer to Christ, or closer to that person? Many pastors and other servant occupations have started out hoping to only honor Christ, but as the crowds grow, so does ego. In the end, the whole focus is the man. The fire of God is traded for "strange fire". Few people realize anything has changed. The real life changing power of God is no longer there. Then, all that is moved in the hearer is emotion. Sometimes God will use even a lifeless, self-focused ministry to reach a desperate soul, but that is not because the instrument is yielded, rather, the seeker is desperate, and God is merciful.

In our passage for today, the Apostle tells of a physical difficulty that he is enduring. It tormented him. There is a lot of speculation on what this was, but we are never really told. He prayed three times, but God did not see fit to remove it. Then Paul realized it was a great help to him. He had revelations of heaven that could have caused him to become prideful. The Apostle realized how weak human nature is. He knew he needed help to keep from becoming prideful. The word God spoke to his heart causing him to realize that it was when he was weakest then he was the most reliant upon God. That is when the power of Christ rested upon him. It wasn't when he felt full of power, or felt inspired, or had a fresh revelation, but when he was weak.

Only when we realize how needy we are does the Holy Spirit come in with the power of God. The Lord told Paul that God's power is made perfect in weakness. When Paul heard that, he said, "Well then, if that is the case, I'm going to boast about my weaknesses." You see, the Apostle knew how much he needed the power of God. He knew every good thing in his ministry was because of the power of Christ in him. In

fact, he said, "I'm just going to quit living and let Christ live in me." (Galatians 2:20)  
"Then the power of Christ will always be on me." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Now look again at what he wrote in verse 10. *<sup>10</sup> 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.* Not for himself, but for Christ's sake he delighted in weakness. Paul had his priorities right. He wasn't living to please himself; he wasn't living for ego or recognition. He just wanted to please his Savior. For His sake, he delighted in weaknesses. What a statement! Think about your weaknesses. Do you delight in them? I don't! I hope I'm learning to. May the LORD give us a new attitude! If we really understand this principle, that God can anoint and empower us when we recognize our inadequacies, then we would have Paul's attitude.

When was the last time you thanked God for an affliction? We usually rebuke it, put it on the prayer chain, run to the doctor, or anything to escape. But have you ever thought, "Thank you Lord for this affliction so that I will quit relying on self and let your power show up"? (Psalms 119:71) That is when people can see God in our lives. They don't see Him when you are operating under your own fire – your own worked up enthusiasm. But when you are in God...! The power has to be more than you!

What about insults? When was the last time you thanked God for insults? They keep us in check. They make us turn to God and ask if there is substance to them. If it is substantial then I am instructed and turn to God. If the insult is without basis in reality, it is probably because I am serving God – rejoice! Insults remind us that all the insults we receive fall on Him. (Romans 15:3) He is our shield. (Psalm 84:11) He takes all the fiery darts! God give us a new attitude about insults. They usually make us bitter and poison our attitudes. But if we are in Christ, glorying in our weaknesses, realizing that the less we think of our ability the more the power of God rests upon us, then we welcome those insults. You can't insult me half as bad as I deserve. The problem is that we start to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. That is when the insults sting. Our pride is wounded! Thank God! Wound it some more! Wound it to death!

And what about hardships? Are you delighting in them? Persecutions, difficulties, it is all the same. When I am weak, then I am strong, not in self but in the LORD! That is where the real strength is. (Habakkuk 3:19a) Before the Holy Spirit can fill us with His power and enable us to bear fruit that remains, we must recognize how great our need is! Listen to how Jesus put it so bluntly, "Apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5b) He didn't say you can't do much, or you'll do very little, or not be very effective. He said you can't do anything. Nada – zero! Do you believe that? Most of us spend the day doing nothing of any eternal value. The days turn into months and the months turn into wasted years and the years turn into a wasted life. There was a lot of activity, just nothing of any lasting value.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes a life that doesn't let Christ do the work in you. 1 Cor. 3:10-15 (NIV) <sup>10</sup> *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds.* <sup>11</sup> *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.* <sup>12</sup> *If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,* <sup>13</sup> *his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it*

**Commented [notes1]:** 71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. Psalms 119:71 (NIV)

**Commented [notes2]:** 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." Romans 15:3 (NIV)

**Commented [notes3]:** 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; Psalms 84:11a (NIV)

**Commented [notes4]:** 19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; Hab. 3:19a (NIV)

to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.  
<sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

You can only build with gold, silver and costly stones when you humble yourself and let Christ do the work through you! All your efforts, as noble as they may appear, are wood, hay and straw. It has to be Jesus doing the work or it will be consumed.

Sometimes we give lip service to the Bible. We say it is our standard, our source of all truth, until we come across one of these hard sayings, and then we find out we aren't acting like we really believe it. You do or you don't. The word of God does not lend itself to cafeteria-style consumption. It's an all or nothing type of book. Jesus says, "I do it, or it's meaningless!" The only way we grasp the reality of the Word is when we see the truth about our need and humble ourselves and plead for help. Jesus likens it to a child asking his father for a good thing. He said the Father delights to give the Holy Spirit to those that ask for Him. (Luke 11:13) You don't ask unless you recognize the need.

Now listen intently as we journey through the Word of God and see how contrary to our secular humanist culture it is. Everything essential to the Christian life comes when we realize our needy condition and look to God to meet the need.

That humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite to salvation**. Psalms 18:27-28 (NIV) 27 *You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.* 28 *You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.* God saves the humble! Psalms 149:4 (NIV) 4 *For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.* Who gets crowned with salvation? You have to recognize that God is perfect and you are not to repent. You have to recognize you can't save yourself. That requires humility.

The humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite to being filled with the Spirit**. I know some people say that they got filled with the Spirit when they got saved and that is all they need. Please take a look at Acts 2 and Acts 4. The same people that got filled with the Spirit in Acts 2 got filled again in Acts 4. The first time, in Acts 2, they recognized their need for power to share the Gospel. They'd been scared to death and were hiding. Now, in obedience to Jesus, they waited and prayed for the power of the Spirit that they so desperately needed. Pentecost happened! The second time, in Acts 4, they recognized they needed God to give them boldness in the face of new threats and BOOM! The place started shaking and they were filled again with the Holy Spirit! You say you never felt a place shake? Well, maybe you have never seen how needy you are to the extent that they did. It's when you realize how desperately you need God that the power of the Spirit comes rushing in to meet the need.

The humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite to serving God**. Zech. 4:6 (NIV) 6 *So he said to me, "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty.* God told Zerubbabel that if he was going to get the work done it had to be the Spirit of God, not human energy or effort. 1 Cor. 2:4-5 (NIV) *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.* Paul wrote that he did not preach by human wisdom, but relied on the Spirit of God to work through him the very wisdom of God. If

**Commented [notes5]:** 13 If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"  
Luke 11:13 (NIV)

you are going to serve God in your home, at your work, or in the church, you must see that you cannot serve God without Him empowering you to serve by the Spirit. What is fallen man that He should serve the Eternal One? It is ridiculous to think you can do something for God without His enabling power.

The humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite for effective prayer**. If we ask anything according to His will He hears us. How do we know what to pray for unless the Spirit intercedes for us? Romans 8:26-27 (NIV) *26 In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.* Notice in this passage that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. He doesn't come running to our aid when we think we can do it, but when we recognize we can never do it without Him. You might want to add 2 Chronicles 7:14 here also. Remember that humility is a prerequisite for the prayer that brings rain and heals the land. Also see 2 Chronicles 34:27.

The humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite to being led of God**. The proud do not follow. You may have seen the Audi commercial that has one caption, "Never follow". Jesus says, "Follow me." He asks you to follow Him because He knows how incapable you are of leading. He is the Leader and the only One capable to lead. The more you recognize your need, your inadequacies, the more you will want to follow closely the One who is capable of leading. Psalms 25:9 (NIV) *9 He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.* Who does this verse declare to be the person who is guided and taught the way of God? The humble!

The humble recognition of need is a **prerequisite to being revived**. Isaiah 57:15 (NIV) *15 For this is what the high and lofty One says-- he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.* He is right there with the contrite, the repentant, and those who are lowly in Spirit, but the proud He keeps at arms distance. James 4:6 (NIV) *6 But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* Do you want the grace of God in your life, his nearness to you? Then you must humbly recognize how much you need Him. Recognize your complete inability to do anything without Him.

We could go on with Biblical examples of the heroes of faith that recognized their utter inability to do anything. It seems like that is who God chooses, mainly because they are dependent entirely on God. Moses declares he cannot speak. David was the smallest of the family and asks why God would even consider choosing him. Peter says, "Go away from me, I'm a sinful man." Paul calls himself the chief of sinners. We could go on and on. Then we could mention the ones who started with a humble recognition of their inability and utter reliance upon God, who later in life began to take credit and lost the power of God, ending in their ruin. King Saul, King Solomon, and Gideon to name a few. You can think of pastors who have gone down the same destructive road.

Now would you please ask yourself, "Is my life run in my own power? Are my actions the work of Jesus, at His leading, or am I self-reliant? Am I doing nothing but building with wood, hay, and straw, or am I doing something that lasts with gold, silver and precious stones? Is it my might and power, or Christ in me?"

**Commented [notes6]:** 13 "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. 2 Chron. 7:13-14 (NIV)

**Commented [notes7]:** 27 Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. 2 Chron. 34:27 (NIV)

The Master was searching  
for a vessel to use;  
On the shelf there were many-  
which one would He choose?

Take me, cried the gold one,  
I'm shiny and bright,  
I'm of great value  
and I do things just right.  
My beauty and lustre  
will outshine the rest  
And for someone like You, Master,  
gold would be the best!

The Master passed on  
with no word at all;  
He looked at a silver urn,  
narrow and tall;  
I'll serve You, dear Master,  
I'll pour out Your wine  
And I'll be at Your table  
whenever You dine,  
My lines are so graceful,  
my carvings so true,  
And my silver will always  
compliment You.

Unheeding the Master  
passed on to the brass,  
It was wide mouthed and shallow,  
and polished like glass.  
Here! Here! cried the vessel,  
I know I will do,  
Place me on Your table  
for all men to view.

Look at me, called the goblet  
of crystal so clear,  
My transparency shows  
my contents so dear,  
Though fragile am I,  
I will serve You with pride,  
And I'm sure I'll be happy  
Your house to abide.

The Master came next  
to a vessel of wood,  
Polished and carved,  
it solidly stood.  
You may use me, dear Master,  
the wooden bowl said,  
But I'd rather You used me  
for fruit, not for bread!

Then the Master looked down  
and saw a vessel of clay.  
Empty and broken  
it helplessly lay.  
No hope had the vessel  
that the Master might choose,  
To cleanse and make whole,  
to fill and to use.

Ah! This is the vessel  
I've been hoping to find,  
I will mend and use it  
and make it all Mine.

I need not the vessel  
with pride of its self;  
Nor the one who is narrow  
to sit on the shelf;  
Nor the one who is bigmouthed  
and shallow and loud;  
Nor one who displays  
his contents so proud;  
Not the one who thinks  
he can do all things just right;  
But this plain earthy vessel  
filled with My power and might.

Then gently He lifted  
the vessel of clay.  
Mended and cleansed it  
and filled it that day.  
Spoke to it kindly.  
There's work you must do,  
Just pour out to others  
as I pour into you.

(Author unknown)

That is our hope for Wayside Chapel, that Jesus will pour Himself through us. We don't have anything going for us but Jesus! Location won't make a difference without Jesus. A warm welcoming group of people will make us inviting, but if Jesus isn't anointing us and loving through us, we'll soon be at each other's throats. A great program and an exciting vision may get us worked up, but if it is to bear fruit that remains it must be from Jesus. He's all we have. Without Him we can spin our wheels, make a lot of noise, maybe even draw a crowd, but it won't make any lasting difference. If we have seen this truth, that we can do nothing without Him, there is hope. If you see that, would you commit yourself to pray daily asking the Lord to anoint me to preach in the power of the Holy Spirit? Would you pray for all our teachers to be empowered? Would you join me in praying that we would all have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us? This week I was praying about this very thing when I was listening to a twenty year old audiotope of Sidlow Baxtor. Listen for a moment to his testimony about the power of prayer.

If we will ask, the Word promises we will receive. The answer may tarry, as God tests our resolve to see Him glorified. But by God's grace let us persist in knocking, in seeking, in asking for God to work through us.

I'm not talking about moving our emotions, though He should be free to do that. I'm talking about something even deeper, changing the way we think, so that we see our weaknesses and glory in them, knowing that when we are weak, only then we are strong. I'm referring to Him being LORD in all our thoughts and all our decisions. I'm asking for a fire that will consume anything that is not of Him so that the only reason we gather is to worship Jesus with our whole being. Even more than that, the only reason we live is to be a vessel for Him. We need a zeal for Him like He has for us. What a difference that would make! When God moves, those resisting His Spirit will be upset, but many more will be drawn to Christ. It's not about numbers, but I'd rather be in Numbers than Exodus. Will you start asking with me daily for God to work in Wayside? Acknowledge our utter inability to do anything but fight and make a mess, and plead for God to do His work in us, will you?

*2 Cor. 13:7-9, 11 (NIV)<sup>7</sup> Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. <sup>8</sup> For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. <sup>9</sup> We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection.*

*<sup>11</sup>... Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*

AMEN!