

Please read this and pray for your church family. Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, April 5, 2020.

We are Weak, He is Strong

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

Over the last two weeks, we've looked at who God is and how his character, ability, and nature should be a comfort to us as we continue to walk through this difficult season. I hope that you have been encouraged through the Word about how much God loves you and how he is our refuge, strength, and solid ground in the midst of the upheaval and turmoil all around us. This week, I'd like to pivot a bit and consider from the Scripture who we are in comparison to God. This era of pandemic has hopefully renewed your trust in God; however, if you're anything like me, it has also helped to expose areas of weakness and idolatry. The previous world we lived in made it easy, considering the pace we were all running at, to gloss over and ignore struggles with sin, idolatrous thinking, and careless or lazy religion. This kind of unexamined spirituality is poisonous to the soul. Slowing down has been a reminder to me of just how frail and needy I am, which is something I lose sight of often, if I'm honest. I'm grateful as I've been reflecting on all of this to know that I have a mighty Savior and that his grace is sufficient to meet and satisfy all of my deepest needs. So, in that line of thinking, I want us to consider human fragility in light of God's all-sufficiency. To do that, we're going to look at 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

As we turn to that passage, we want to remember that 2 Corinthians is an epistle, or letter, that Paul wrote as a series of correspondence to the church in Corinth. To that end, it's helpful to read the whole of 1st and 2nd Corinthians together to understand the context of this passage. By the time we get to chapter 12, Paul is speaking in the middle of a point and to truly understand it we need to back up and see the whole argument. In a drastic oversimplification, Paul wrote 1st Corinthians to address some divisive thinking about theological and practical matters in the life of the body of Christ, and to rebuke them for compromising worldliness creeping in to the church. The tone is one of fatherly discipline and rebuke. Paul wrote 2nd Corinthians at the return of Titus who delivered the letter and reported back to Paul the congregation's response. Paul is primarily writing 2nd Corinthians to express his encouragement that the church responded positively to the letter, confirming their continued trust in the gospel. He's also writing to them to encourage them to continue their collection for the church in Jerusalem and to prepare them for his upcoming visit to them. It's in this that we get to the section of the letter chapter 12 is in.

Paul is also writing 2 Corinthians as a rebuke, because even though he's encouraged by their repentance and trust in Jesus, there are some false teachers in the body who are undermining Paul's authority, experience, and leadership, in order to promote their own teaching, agenda, and authority. In a bit of scathing sarcasm, Paul in chapters 10-11 describes these rivals as unsubmissive to Christ, lacking in authority, unrealistically boastful in their achievements, preaching a false gospel, and a financial burden on the Corinthians. Rather than being heavenly blessings to the congregation, they are actually satanic deceivers. As we'll see at the beginning of chapter 12, the boasting of these deceivers and their attempts to undermine Paul have forced him to defend his apostolic authority and the sincerity of his love for the Corinthians. Starting in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Paul shows how he is just as

qualified, if not more so than the false teachers. Even more than that, he will boast in his suffering and hardships to demonstrate his sincerity of faith and dedication to serving Christ and Christ's church, unlike the false teachers. It's here, in chapter 12, that we read of perhaps Paul's greatest claim to spiritual boasting and also his greatest weakness and how both of those things point not to Paul's glory, but to the everlasting glory of Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, we read in the ESV:

"1) I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3) And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4) and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5) On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 6) though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7) So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9) 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10) 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."

As Paul had been previously describing his weakness as a way of boasting in the Lord, he begins chapter 12 by continuing to what might be considered his greatest spiritual boast. In verse 1 we see that he was moving on from physical boasting and experiences to spiritual ones. He described a vision he had of God, a direct vision from the Lord. In verse 2, he described "a man" who was caught up to the third heaven. The man described in these verses is most certainly Paul because of his specific knowledge about details concerning the vision, his seeming knowledge of the content even though he can't speak of it, and its direct relation to the thorn that is clearly described as given to Paul in the latter part of the passage. It seems Paul is almost embarrassed to have to relate this information just to affirm his own apostolicity. Paul related that he was caught up into the third heaven. The first heaven was the sky and atmosphere of the earth, the second was the vastness of space and the stars beyond the atmosphere, and the third heaven is the heavenly realm beyond these where God dwells and has his throne. Paul was caught up to paradise, though in verses 2 and 3 he's not sure if it was a physical visiting in the body of this realm or not. In verse 4, he heard things in this vision which were too marvelous to utter. It seems like he may also have been forbidden to speak of what he heard and saw.

Notice in verse 5 and 6 that Paul said he will boast of such a man. Receiving this vision is something to brag on God about and this man should be grateful and could speak to the greatness of God. Paul, however, does not want to speak of this. He is fearful that people will laud him, and lift him up, rather than just seeing him as a normal human. In this way, Paul is concerned that even speaking of this event draws the focus, attention, and glory away from the one it belongs to, God, and towards a mere man. He's clear that it wouldn't be foolishness, but truthfulness if he boasts about this, but again, he wants God to receive the glory. This should be seen in contrast to the false teachers who are readily willing to boast in their own achievements, accomplishments, and "spirituality."

In verse 7, notice that Paul says to keep him from becoming conceited, proud, and arrogant concerning this vision, he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. Notice again that the vision is connected to Paul receiving this thorn which is why it seems the man Paul described earlier is himself. Notice the divine passive in this verse. Paul “was given” this thorn. The implication is that Paul received this affliction, this weakness, from God to protect him from the deadly peril of pride. He described the thorn as a messenger of Satan to keep him from becoming conceited, or self-centered. Ultimately, no one knows what this thorn Paul received was. Typically, scholars and students of the Bible think the thorn was some kind of spiritual or psychological affliction or anxiety, or opposition to Paul’s ministry, or some kind difficult, lingering physical malady. Many conclude that Paul’s thorn was some kind of physical affliction. At the end of the day the point Paul is making is that God allowed him this thorn, this suffering, in order to ultimately protect him from conceit and pride.

We see the extent and severity of Paul’s suffering in verse 8, as he pleads with the Lord on three separate occasions that it would be removed. Linger over how God responds to Paul’s plea in verses 9-10. Paul cried out to God to remove his suffering and end this affliction. God responded not by taking the thorn away, but by reminding Paul of the all-satisfying sufficiency of his grace! It was better for Paul to continue in suffering, because it was there that Paul truly knew and understood the nature and extent of God’s grace and strength. Notice the intimacy and care in God’s response. Specifically, he says, “My grace is sufficient for you.” The word “sufficient” describes God’s grace as enough to meet and exceed Paul’s need. It more than balances the equation. Though Paul is suffering, he can be contented in God’s grace. He has enough in Christ. Not only that, but the power of God is perfected in his weakness. This speaks to the display of God’s power through Paul’s frailty. The purpose of Paul’s fragility is ultimately the display of God’s might. The phrase “is made perfect” speaks to completion or accomplishing a purpose. So, though Paul wants his suffering and affliction to pass, he sees that God has purposed it to humble Paul and to display the matchless grace and infinite strength of Christ, his Savior and Lord, through him. Weakness and power existed concurrently in Paul’s life, the weakness being his, and the power being the Lord’s. Through this suffering the power of the gospel, the grace of the Lord, the sufficiency of Christ is made visible to all.

Paul concludes this thought in verse 10. For the sake of Christ, or on behalf of Jesus’ glory, Paul was content with weakness, insults, hardships, and sufferings. It pleased Paul to honor Christ even in his frailty. He was grateful that Jesus could be exalted through his own humiliation. God’s grace could be lifted high as Paul was reminded of his lowliness. This isn’t some self-less altruism on Paul’s part where he’s simply glad to suffer because God is honored. Paul is satisfied in his suffering. Paul has enough in weakness. Paul is pleased to confess his humanity because it displays and magnifies the loving-kindness of God. He’s content because even though he’s suffering, he has more than enough for his need. He has grace to match and exceed his weakness. In this sense, Paul understood God to be honored in the displaying of his power in Paul’s suffering, and Paul was at peace knowing he was relieved from having to be strong and sufficient for himself. When Paul looked at himself, he saw things that might be worthy of human boasting, but ultimately, he was just as weak, fragile, and hard-pressed as any other human. When Paul considered the ways in which God met and exceeded his needs and displayed his glory and grace to and through Paul in his weakness, Paul was glad to boast, not in himself, but in the all-sufficient grace of Christ. This is why Paul would boast in his weakness, much to the shame of the false teachers who would boast of their own wisdom, might, and ability. Paul’s suffering allowed his life to magnify the one who was worthy of all honor, glory, and praise, which was not himself, but the Living God.

This theme of the grace of God runs through this letter. Paul understands that apart from God he is weak, worthless, and dead in sin. Yet God, in his mercy, had made a way for Paul to be freed from sin and death. Paul had been reconciled to God through the substitutionary, atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul, by faith in Jesus, had received forgiveness for his sins and had been declared to be righteous before God, all of this an act of God's grace to him. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we read that, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Honestly, we're all fragile. We're all weak. We have no abiding strength in ourselves. Eventually death, age, illness, and a myriad of other afflictions catches all of us. Yet Paul described his ability to boast in this kind of weakness and suffering. He had hope in the midst of trial and hardship. The hope he had was this salvation in Jesus' name. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, Paul described how we are fragile jars of clay, but inside of us we possess this priceless treasure in Christ. Speaking of the frailty of human life, last week when we were discussing Psalm 23 during family worship, Nate made a really insightful remark about how we all essentially live in the valley of the shadow of death. It's never far and it's always looming over us, and yet our comfort is that God is with us. Paul, in 2 Corinthians 4:11, describes how we're always being given over to death, that Jesus might be manifested in our life, similar to what he went on to say in chapter 12. Notice in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 how Paul concludes his thoughts there about our weakness. He says, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." Consider how Paul can talk about all of his suffering as light, momentary affliction. Meaning that what is to come is greater than these light afflictions, and what is to come is eternal, not momentary or transient. Paul has this hope through the repentance of sins and faith in Jesus Christ. His eternal hope, his hope to endure what's to come, ultimately is his trust in Jesus. This trust in Jesus is also what helps him endure the thorn in his flesh, human weakness, and all these earthly trials.

So, how should we apply this text? How should we consider what this text means in the midst of a global pandemic? Allow me to share a couple of thoughts for reflection.

- 1) This passage helps us to acknowledge that there is real and terrible suffering in our world. Christians are not meant to be naively chipper. We above all people are meant to be realists. The scope of the impact and trauma of COVID-19 pandemic will have long lasting implications for the entire world. When we make light of this thing, we ignore the fact that there are people in our community that are wondering if they are going to be able to survive because they're out of work. We ignore that fact that people are suffering and dying from this illness. We have to acknowledge that human life is frail, and yet it is extremely valuable. I'm afraid we are very talented at not seeing hurting people because we're not the ones hurting or they are at an arm's length. Ask God in this season to help you see, truly see, the priceless, fragile people around you. Ask God how you might be a witness to the gospel as you love and serve those who are hurting near you.
- 2) Though we're meant to be realists, we are also uniquely meant to be the most hopeful of people in the midst of this pandemic. Paul didn't boast in weakness as some kind of masochist. He boasted in his suffering as a means of displaying undying hope! He was willing to boast in his suffering that through it others might see the glory, grace, and love of Jesus. Don't give way to hopelessness in this season. Turn again to the Scripture and ask

God, as you read, to renew your hope in Jesus. Ask him to give you unique opportunities to share that hope with others in this season. We are frail, but we have this unsurpassed, priceless treasure. How can we share it?

- 3) Consider how this season uniquely and specifically is exposing the idols of your heart. Perhaps more than any other time in living memory, we are tragically aware of human frailty. This is not only true as this season demonstrates our physical weakness, but also how the inconvenience of COVID-19 brought to a screeching halt a lot of the things we valued most. Prayerfully consider how this season has made you afraid. What does it say about what you trust in? Consider how this season has made you bored and what that says about what ultimately satisfies you. Consider how this season has made you angry. What does that response say about what you value? The normal rhythms of life before mid-March 2020 made it hard to slow down and meditate, introspectively, about what we really love and worship. Don't let this peculiar season pass you by without taking inventory of your spiritual life.
- 4) Finally, spend some time considering what God has done for you in Christ. Remember the good news of the gospel. Remember how God met you in your sin and weakness, how he overcame sin and the grave, how he gave you new life in Jesus Christ, how he sustains and carries you all the days of your life, how he guides us as a good Shepherd, how he provides as a good Host, and how he has promised to never leave or forsake us. We who are in Christ and have trusted in Jesus for salvation have an exceedingly priceless treasure, an immovable foundation of hope on which to stand, and an iron-clad, blood-bought, assurance that God is for us not against us. Hebrews 12:1-3 calls us to consider Jesus, who suffered for us, that we might run the race, persevere, and not lose heart.

Friends, I have been praying for you. Please continue to pray for First Southern. Please continue to love and care for one another. Please continue to give as you are able to support the ministry of the church. Please know that on Palm Sunday, like this one, Jesus walked face-first in to Jerusalem and towards his own death and suffering that you and I might live. And please know that God will see us through these days, and by his grace we will boast in our weaknesses as we reflect on his strength.

Sincerely,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
First Southern Baptist Church, Williamsport, PA