

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – July 8, 2018

Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV)

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10) 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.**

Dear Friends in Christ,

At the most recent World's Strongest Man competition an actor who plays the role of "The Mountain" in the HBO series, *The Game of Thrones* reached the summit of his career by winning the title of the World's Strongest Man. He competed in events such as the Fridge Carry, the Log Lift and the Vehicle Pull.¹

Pound for pound, the strongest girl in the world may be Naomi Kutin who at the age of 10 weighed 99 pounds but could squat and deadlift more than twice her weight. Naomi started lifting competitively when she was 8 and quickly began setting national and world records in adult powerlifting categories. By 9, as a wispy 88-pounder competing in the 97-pound weight class, she squatted 215 pounds to break a world record held by a 44-year-old German woman. She's 16 now and in competitions she routinely squats 321 pounds and dead lifts 365 pounds.²

Forbes Magazine annually publishes a list of the world's most powerful people. The top five included: Xi Jinping, the leader of China; Vladimir Putin of Russia; President Donald Trump; Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany and Jeff Bezos from Amazon.³ They may be powerful but I can't envision any of them hoisting refrigerators and dead lifting more than twice their weight.

Now no matter how strong or how powerful these individuals are – they are still human beings who get injured, hurt and who face their share of challenges and struggles. In that sense, they are just like you and me, and the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul would never have even been in the running for World's Strongest or most powerful person in the world competitions. He described himself as having a "thorn in the flesh" that caused him to be weak. In his weakness, he pleaded with the Lord to take his "thorn" away. The Lord responded by pointing him to the grace and power of Christ. So let's –

Theme: Consider the Grace and Power of Christ

1. His grace encourages our prayers in difficult times
2. His power provides us strength in difficult times

Immediately before this text, Paul had spoken about some special revelations that God had given him. But now he is speaking about the fact that the Lord had found a way to keep him from being conceited because

¹ <https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/health/a20440617/the-mountain-worlds-strongest-man-hafthor-bjornsson/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/01/nyregion/meet-supergirl-the-worlds-strongest-teenager.html>

³ <https://www.forbes.com/powerful-people/list/#tab:overall>

of what the Lord had done for him. Paul told the Corinthians that the Lord **gave [him] a thorn in [his] flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment [him].**

Paul doesn't tell us what his "thorn" or weakness was. All we know is that it was something that Paul felt was a hindrance to his service to the Lord. Some people have speculated that Paul may have had some kind of physical disability: severe headaches, poor eyesight, epilepsy, or malaria. Others suggest it may have been a particular temptation or even a person. It was not God's intent to reveal the specifics to us. What God wants us to understand is that nothing happens in our lives without his divine permission. What the apostle first saw as a cruel ploy of Satan was in actuality a gracious gift of God as Paul explains in the words of our text. What Paul felt was something that would hinder him in his efforts to carry out the Lord's work actually made Paul look to the Lord for his strength.

The same is often true for each of us. No doubt you have experienced things in your life which you felt made it difficult or challenging to carry out your God-given role in life. The challenges might have been (or may be) physical, mental, emotional. It may have been a particular situation or set of circumstances that left you feeling frustrated with your own abilities. Sometimes these difficult times and situations might be just a bit of nuisance and other times they may be quite extreme. The Lord will use them to get our attention and to direct our attention away from ourselves and to his power and strength.

In the midst of Paul's weakness the power of Christ who defeated sin, death and the devil; who stilled raging storms, cured illnesses, raised the dead and who is now seated on his heavenly throne ruling all things for the benefit of those who believe in him gave Paul the confidence to plead with the Lord. **Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me,** Paul told the Corinthians. On at least three memorable occasions Paul earnestly made a special appeal to the Lord asking him to remove what he perceived as an impediment -- his thorn in the flesh. This was a persistent problem and Paul prayed persistently to the Lord about it -- going so far as to pray, "Take it away. You have the power if you are willing."

Paul's three-fold prayer might remind us of Christ's prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane. Like his Savior, Paul was persistent in prayer. God's word encourages us to call upon the Lord in the times of trouble with the promise that he will deliver us. (cf. Psalm 50:15) Jesus prayed -- asking that his suffering be taken away if possible. The Father answered Jesus' prayer by enabling him to endure the suffering that was required as a payment for the sins of the world. Angels were sent to strengthen Christ. And of course we know that following his suffering, Christ was delivered from death by his resurrection. With his suffering Christ redeemed the world from sin and death.

Paul prayed asking for the removal of his thorn. We don't know how but in some way the Lord said to Paul, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** The Lord's grace and power was all that Paul needed. Rely on the Lord and not on yourself is the message which we can take home from these words. As Paul continued on with his ministry in spite of being tormented by his thorn in the flesh Christ would shine through his actions. It would be obvious that there was a greater power enabling Paul to do what he was doing -- that power of course was Christ. And that is really what Paul's prayer was all about. He wanted Christ to shine through his message.

When we see God's answers to these prayers we learn that our heavenly Father doesn't always answer prayer in keeping with our wishes. Our deliverance doesn't always take the form we hope but the grace of our Lord Jesus encourages our prayers non-the-less.

Previously Paul had reminded the Corinthians of the grace of Christ: **you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty**

might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9) We also know how the creator and ruler of all things humbled himself by taking upon himself a human nature so that he could rescue us from sin and eternal death. If he was willing to do that for us surely we have every reason to come to him with in times of trouble – appealing to his grace for the reason for our prayers and to his power for the answer to our prayers.

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In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul reminds us that because of the grace of Christ we are God’s children and that Christ speaks to his heavenly Father on our behalf. This has a very practical application for us in times of difficulty as Paul explains in that chapter when he asks: **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?** (Romans 8:35 NIV) He answers his own question with this response: **... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. (38) For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, (39) neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 8:37-39 NIV)

We can pray with the confidence that the power of Christ will provide us with strength in difficult times. Our adversity becomes God’s opportunity. Or as Paul said in our text, **I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.** Paul’s words indicate that he was willing to accept the “thorn in the flesh” that afflicted him as God’s will for his life because he knew that Christ’s power would rest on him and would enable him to accomplish whatever the Lord willed.

When Christ’s power is resting on us we are able to face the troubles of life with renewed confidence and hope. Christ will not abandon those he came to rescue. He will use his power to lead us safely to our eternal home – enabling us to serve him as he walks with us through this life.

Our text continues, **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.** Anything that emphasized the grace and power of Christ filled Paul with joy no matter how painful it was for him. Paul experienced all of those kinds of troubles as he spoke about the living Jesus as the Savior of all. He carried his thorn in the flesh with him as he was insulted by Jews and Gentile unbelievers. At times, his travels were difficult and dangerous. He was persecuted and even experienced bodily harm for the sake of Christ. These are not the kind of situations which would make a person happy. And yet Paul says that he took delight in them. It was a joy for him to endure those situations because ultimately his strength came from the Lord who would not disappoint him.

“The world says, ‘Only when I am strong, only when I have status, power, influence wealth, only then am I strong.’” Christians share a different perspective with the Apostle Paul. We say, “Only when I am weak, only when I realize that the worlds symbols of strength mean nothing even if I have them all, only then am I strong.” (Peoples Bible – 2 Corinthians)

Each of us together with the Apostle Paul has been blessed with “thorns.” Sometimes the Lord takes them away from us to remind us of his grace and power. At other times he allows them to remain so that we will rely on his grace and his power. “Thank God for thorns, whatever form they may take, for they remind us that we are weak. And when we know that we are weak, then we can be strong – in Christ. Those who find their strength *in* Christ can then, with Paul, be strong *for* Christ.

With the grace and power of Christ, our lives will be filled with acts of love and service to each other and to our Lord as we carry out God's purpose for our lives.

You and I might never make a top ten list of the most powerful people in the world or win a strength completion. But that doesn't mean we are weak and powerless.

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In Christ, when we are weak, then we are strong!

Amen.