

“Perfected in Weakness”
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Readings:

2 Corinthians 12.7-10

Introduction

- Paul had experienced revelations so extraordinary that he could barely describe them.
 - He had been caught up into paradise.
 - Yet the same man who saw heavenly glory also carried a painful thorn in the flesh.
 - God allowed both experiences to coexist in his life.
- The theologian Warren W. Wiersbe wrote about the life of the Apostle Paul in this way:
- "What a dramatic contrast between the apostle's two experiences! He moved from paradise to pain, from glory to suffering. He tasted the blessing of God in heaven and felt the blows of Satan on earth. He moved from ecstasy to agony."
- That description captures not only Paul's life,
 - It captures our lives as well.
- Life is often a constant movement between joy and sorrow, celebration and grief, hope and disappointment.
 - One day we find ourselves standing on the mountaintop, overwhelmed by God's goodness.

- The next day we are walking through a valley we never expected to enter.
- Paul knew both realities.
 - He experienced extraordinary revelations from God,
 - yet he also carried what he called a "thorn in the flesh."
 - Three times he pleaded with God to remove it.
 - Three times he prayed.
 - And God answered.
 - Not removing the thorn, but giving him a promise:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

- Paul trusted that promise so deeply that he could say in chapter 11,
 - "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."
- We usually boast about our strengths, our accomplishments, our successes.
 - Paul boasts about his weakness.
 - That's because he learned that when he was weak, God was strong.
- Today we will reflect on three truths from this passage.
 - The first two may be difficult to hear:
 - Suffering Is Inevitable
 - and Suffering Is Indispensable

- But if we stay with Paul until the end, we will discover a profound hope in Christ:
 - Suffering Perfects the Power of God

1. SUFFERING IS INEVITABLE

- Most of us would prefer a life without suffering.
 - We want health without sickness,
 - success without failure,
 - relationships without heartbreak,
 - and life without loss.
- We know that is not the reality of the world we live in.
- In seminary, one of the subjects we study is called θεοδικία theodicy, which is the attempt to understand how a good, just, and all-powerful God relates to the reality of evil and suffering.
 - One of my professors said then: suffering is unavoidable because human life is fragile.
 - Even death itself accompanies us every day. As we sit here together, every one of us is one second closer to death than we were a moment ago.
 - It does not matter whether you are ten years old or ninety years old.
 - Human life is finite.
- Paul understood this reality.
 - That is why he prayed for relief.
 - He did not enjoy suffering.
 - He did not seek suffering.
 - He asked God to remove it.
 - But God did not remove it.
- God is not a vending machine in an airport.

- Faith is not a transaction where we insert a prayer, as a credit card, and receive exactly what we requested.
 - Sometimes God heals.
 - Sometimes God changes circumstances.
 - Sometimes God opens a new door.
- But sometimes God does something different.
 - Sometimes God gives us strength instead of escape.
- Paul prayed for the thorn to leave.
 - God responded by saying, "My grace is sufficient."
 - The suffering remained.
 - The grace increased.
- Notice that Paul was not lacking faith.
 - The problem was not that he prayed too little or believed too little.
 - God simply had a different purpose.
 - And Paul had to learn to live with it.

2. SUFFERING IS INDISPENSABLE

- So suffering is inevitable and also indispensable.
- This second truth may be even harder.
- One of humanity's oldest temptations is the temptation of self-sufficiency.
 - In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were tempted to believe they could live independently of God.
- We still struggle with the same temptation.
 - We often act as though our intelligence, our plans, our resources, and our abilities are enough.
 - We like the illusion of control.

- But suffering has a way of exposing that illusion.
 - Suddenly a medical diagnosis might remind us we are not in control.
 - A broken relationship reminds us we are not in control.
 - A loss, a disappointment, or a season of grief reminds us we are not in control.
- Suffering reveals our limitations and reminds us that we are creatures, not the Creator.
- Paul learned this lesson well.
 - The thorn in his flesh became a constant reminder that the glory belonged to God, not to him.
 - And because of that reminder, Paul remained dependent on God.
- J. I. Packer once observed that even if he spent forty years praying and never received the answer he wanted,
 - those years would still be worthwhile because they were spent in fellowship with God.
- Prayer is not merely about obtaining what we want.
 - It is about learning dependence upon God.
- Paul learned that the very things that made him weak were the things that drove him closer to the Lord.
 - The thorn became a teacher.
 - The weakness became a pathway to communion.
 - The suffering became an invitation to trust.

3. Suffering Perfects the Power of God

- And now we arrive at the hope part of this sermon.
- Our goal is not to eliminate every form of suffering from life.

- That is impossible in this world.
- The real question is:
 - What do we do with our suffering?
 - Many people try to carry it alone.
 - They hold tightly to their burdens.
 - They attempt to manage everything themselves.
 - And eventually the weight becomes too much.
- But God invites us to do something different.
 - He invites us to place our burdens into His hands.
- When we insist on carrying everything ourselves, there is little room for God to work.
 - But when we surrender our pain, our fears, our disappointments, and our weakness to Him, we create space for His grace.
- It is like opening the door of a house and saying:
 - "Lord, this is Your home.
 - Come in.
 - Rearrange the furniture.
 - Clean what is dirty.
 - Repair what is broken.
 - Tear down what was poorly built
 - and rebuild it according to Your wisdom."
- That is what God does through His grace.
 - He enters our weakness
 - and transforms it into a place where His power becomes visible.

- We see this most clearly in Jesus Himself.
 - The cross looked like weakness.
 - It looked like defeat.
 - It looked like failure.
 - Yet through the apparent weakness of the crucified Christ, God accomplished the salvation of the world.
 - The resurrection revealed that God's power had been at work all along.
- This is why Christianity contains such a beautiful paradox.
 - The world says strength comes from independence.
 - The gospel says strength comes from dependence.
 - The world says weakness is a shame.
 - The gospel says weakness can become a place where God's glory shines.
- As Paul writes:

"When I am weak, then I am strong."

- Not because weakness itself is good.
 - But because God's power is revealed within it.
- Then we discover that God's strength can accomplish what our own strength never could.

CONCLUSION

- Many of us want explanations.
- We want God to tell us why.

- Why this illness?
- Why this loss?
- Why this disappointment?
- Why this suffering?
- Often God doesn't give us explanations.
 - But he always gives us promises.
 - And we can hold on to them.
- Paul asked for an explanation and a solution.
 - What he received was a promise:
 - "My grace is sufficient for you."
- That promise was enough for Paul.
- And it is enough for us.
 - Because the grace that sustained Paul still sustains God's people today.
 - The grace that carried him through suffering can carry us as well.
- So whatever burden you are carrying today, bring it to Christ.
 - Whatever weakness you are hiding, bring it to Christ.
 - Whatever thorn remains in your life, bring it to Christ.
- Therefore, brothers and sisters, do not measure God's presence by the absence of suffering.
 - Measure it by the sufficiency of His grace.
 - And His grace is enough.
- Amen.