

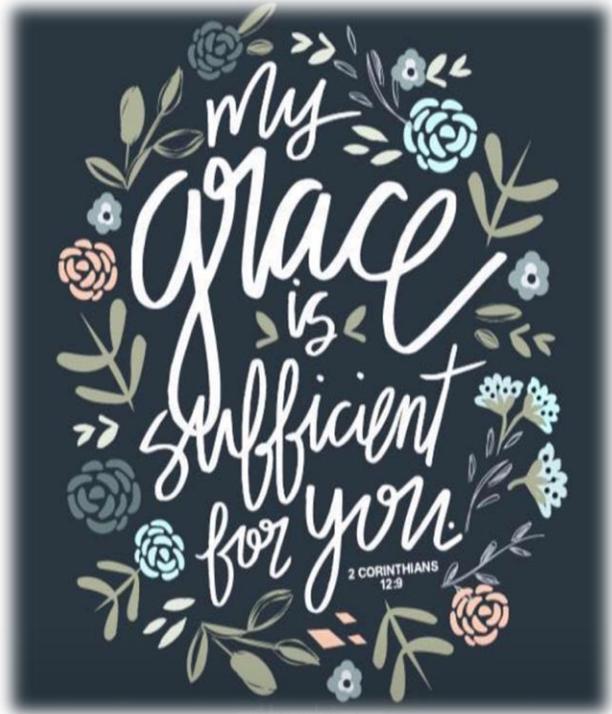
“WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG”

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The more I learn, the less I know. For every two steps forward, I take one step back. I’m happiest when I’m sad. “Waiter, I’d like to order the jumbo shrimp.” Each of these sayings represents a paradox. A paradox is a statement or situation which seems to contradict itself, but is nevertheless true.

Scripture contains many striking paradoxes. For example, Jesus said in Matthew 10:39, “**Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.**” He also said that in the kingdom of God the first will be last, the least will be greatest, and the exalted will be humbled. These are paradoxes.

2 Corinthians 12:10 also presents a remarkable paradox: “**For when I am weak,**” Paul wrote, “**then I am strong.**” But how can this be? How can there be strength in weakness and weakness in strength? The apostle Paul learned the answer through a “thorn in the flesh.”



Thorns

We don’t know the nature of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. Theories range from a personal weakness or particular temptation to such physical ailments as epilepsy, malaria, or eye disease. But we do know why Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. He tells us himself: “**To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me,**” 2 Corinthians 12:7. The Greek is more literally ‘to go on beating me with fists;’ that is, a constant pain; a constant messenger of Paul’s weakness and mortality; and therefore, a constant reminder of the true source of strength—God.

Our first instinct with a thorn in the flesh is to dig it out. And when the thorn in our flesh is from a problem instead of a plant, we often ask God to do the same; namely, to remove the thorn. Sometimes He does. At other times He doesn’t. He allows the thorn to remain, even though it hurts; and even though we can provide a litany of reasons why that thorn is better out than in: “Lord, I’d be so much happier if I were out of debt. Lord, if the aches

and pains were gone, I'd spend more time with the grandkids and do more work at church. That's reasonable, isn't it, Lord?"

Yes, it may be reasonable. And yet, for God's greater plan and purpose for our lives, what may be reasonable—removing the thorn—is not always desirable and beneficial. This is a hard saying, but it is true. The apostle Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove his thorn. And don't think Paul failed to offer pressing, legitimate reasons: "Lord, if You remove this problem, this illness, I will work harder, travel farther, reach more people with the saving Gospel." Yet, God's response was: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness,"** 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Understanding what God was accomplishing in his life through that thorn in the flesh gave Paul a new perspective on "thorns" and "problems"—so that he could actually write: **"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me,"** 2 Corinthians 12:9. And this is the secret to that paradox, isn't it? Admitting our personal weakness and relying on God's strength is what makes us truly strong. And if God teaches us this lesson by permitting a thorn in the flesh, isn't He to be praised instead of blamed?

David, the young shepherd boy who faced the giant Goliath. Abraham, whose body was reproductively dead, yet promised a son. Moses, who complained, "I can't speak well." Jeremiah, who complained, "I'm too young." Isaiah, who complained, "I'm undone." Elijah, who slumped beneath a juniper tree and begged God to end his life. Peter, who denied Christ three times. Paul, who three times pleaded with the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh. And even Jesus Himself, who in humility embraced the death of the cross. All of these—including your life and mine—are shining examples of God's strength made perfect in weakness.

"When I am weak, then I am strong." That's the paradox. And that's the promise.

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