

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10**

**Sermon: Joy in Weakness**

God’s power, grace, and mercy in opposition to our weakness is a major theme for this morning. The psalmist urges us to lift up our eyes to God, the King of the universe, especially in times of distress. In the Old Testament Reading, the prophet is sent to rebellious Israel to speak the Word of the Lord. Whether or not they listen, they will know that God’s Word has come into their midst. Likewise, in the Gospel, Jesus comes to his hometown to teach, but he is rejected as being even less than a prophet, that is, weak. That reading ends with Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs, giving them the authority to perform miracles in his name.

Most employees, at one time or another, have to go through what is sometimes called a performance review. A part of that review may include answering questions like “What have you accomplished over the last twelve months?” and “What are your goals for the coming year?” We dread reviews. And what we may dread most is the part where we have to list our strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths are relatively easy: One can always write something like “hard worker,” “team player,” “conscientious.” Who could argue with those? They’re general enough. But what about weaknesses? Because whatever we write, we’re admitting we aren’t up to par. That we don’t measure up. That we are, well, weak.

No one wants to think of themselves as weak. In our culture, weakness is bad and strength is good. The physically strong win in athletic competitions. The mentally strong excel in academics.

Having just this week observed the Fourth of July, we celebrated our nation, the freedoms we have, and the military that protects those freedoms. A military that is the greatest—and strongest—in the world. Who would shoot off fireworks because they live in an inferior nation? Yes, strength is good, and weakness is bad. Everyone knows that.

And as a result, we’re taught to cover up anything about us that can be interpreted as a sign of weakness. A father will tell his son who has burst into tears, “Big boys don’t cry.” Because in our culture, crying means weakness.

It shows that we're too fragile. Too emotional. Too vulnerable. Signs of weakness, we are taught, are to be avoided.

But interestingly enough, Paul in our text tells us that he can boast in his weakness, because weakness allows the believer to see Christ's Power at work in and through His people.

Don't get me wrong. Paul was a man who could be proud of all he'd accomplished. No problem with an annual review for him! He was intelligent. He had a way with words. He had preached to thousands. He was, in his day, bigger than Billy Graham. He'd been given a special revelation on the road to Damascus, where he'd seen the risen Christ with his own eyes.

And in the early verses of our text, he speaks of another great revelation he had. A vision of being taken up into heaven to see its wonders. Think about how that would look on his resume! Paul: a man given access to the glories of heaven!

But instead of boasting about how great an evangelist he was, Paul tells us that he rejoices instead in his weakness. And he points to one example.

A shortcoming, an ailment, or a failure of some kind that he's unable to do anything about. He calls it a "thorn" in his flesh.

Have you ever had a splinter under your skin? Splinters can be annoying. Bothersome. Distracting. They can even get infected. Usually you have to get a needle and tweezers in order to remove a splinter.

But I don't think Paul is talking about a splinter stuck under his skin. Instead, we get the idea that it's a bit more serious than that. People have speculated what the thorn Paul refers to really was. Was it opposition to his message and ministry? Was it some temptation to which he was particularly susceptible? Was it a physical problem such as poor eyesight or a stutter? We don't know. But we do know that Paul considered it a serious impediment, perhaps even to his ministry. Serious enough, in fact, to pray three times that God would remove it.

Yes, Paul was anxious about this thorn in his flesh. It was, he felt, a distraction that he'd be better off without. But God saw it differently. For God knows that if nothing were ever to go wrong in our lives, we'd begin to forget that we even need him. If we never faced struggles of any kind, we'd begin to think that we could make it on our own.

After all, with no problems in life, who needs a problem solver?

There is, of course, one problem, one thorn in our flesh, that on our own we can never do anything about. Sin, sin that is deeply imbedded in our flesh. No amount of digging with a needle and tweezers will remove it. No amount of self-discipline can eliminate it. No, we're stuck with it because of who, what, and where we are: weak, sinful people living in a fallen world, led astray continually by the lord of lies.

Sin is the ultimate sign of weakness. We strive to hold it down, but we're never able to master it. The same "thorns" keep coming back again and again. Like Paul, our sinful human pride tries to make us believe that we are better, stronger than we really are. What sins have you tried to overcome, only to fail over and over? Lust? Laziness? Lack of spiritual energy? Even though we know our God is intolerant of these weaknesses, these failures, and that the consequence of remaining in sin is eternal, still . . . we are utterly unable to stop the sin.

We all probably know someone who blast us Christians for being hypocritical: "You Christians say one thing and then do exactly the opposite!

You condemn violence—you say that one should ‘turn the other cheek’—but then you blow up in anger when someone does something to you. You turn a blind eye to those in need even though you have plenty, and your language is just as filthy as anyone else’s. You hold Jesus up as your great example, but then you fail to follow his example yourselves. You Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites!”

And they are absolutely right. As Christians, we know what we should do, how we should act, and how we should speak. Then we turn around and utterly fail to do what Christ calls us to do. The reason? We are weak. With Paul, we admit: ***“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out”*** (Romans 7:18). We are plagued by a thorn in the flesh called sin, and we ourselves cannot remove it no matter how hard we try.

But our gracious and loving God didn’t leave us to face this thorn in the flesh, this weakness, on our own. In his mercy, he sent his only Son, who put on our weak human form to make the payment demanded for sin. God is, of course, eternal, invincible, and immortal. Death can’t touch him.

But when he chose to humble himself and become man, he made himself vulnerable. Jesus, born of woman, became mortal. And that meant he became weak. Weak enough, in fact, to die.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us that the world in his day saw the cross as the ultimate sign of weakness. The usual response to the Gospel by nonbelievers was this: “How could the all-powerful God of the universe be nailed to the cross to die? That’s foolishness!” But Paul responds that even in his weakness, God is stronger than man’s strength. By humbling himself to death, even death on a cross, Jesus accomplished what no man could ever do.

Using his perfect, unblemished blood as the atonement, Jesus paid for all the sins of the world. The thorns on his head and the spikes holding him to the cross won our salvation. Yes, by becoming weak, Jesus conquered Satan and sin for all time. And on Easter, he showed his true strength by also defeating death for each of us, once and for all.

Now, through faith, Christ's power rests upon us. Through our Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells in us and empowers us to live as servants of Christ. We share his love—imperfectly, even hypocritically, to be sure—but never giving up, using the strength he gives to continue on despite our weakness. It is just as Paul says: ***“For when I am weak, then I am strong”*** (v 10). Christ turns our weakness into strength, using our faults to help us see that we can never win the crown of righteousness on our own ability, so that we must rely on Christ and his power alone. With this truth made clearly evident in us and through us, we use his power to seek, to share, and to serve.

One day, unless Christ returns soon, we'll all face the ultimate sign of the weakness of our humanity: death will come knocking. And while our culture sees death as weakness, for us it takes on new meaning in the shadow of the cross and the open tomb. The cross and grave, signs of weakness to the world, are signs of power for our lives. Remember the power over death that God promises us, ***“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect—made perfect!—in weakness”*** (v 9).

Amen