

NHPC, Overland, MO—7/8/18

*"All Strength Comes from God"*

TEXTS: II Corinthians 12: 2-10

Mark 6: 1-13

***"I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."***

*(II Corinthians 12: 10.)*

Are these the words of a foolish man who refuses to fight back? This may be our first reaction when we hear these words. How can weakness lead to strength? We are quick to dismiss such a foolish idea.

These words were written by the first, and foremost, Christian theologian, St. Paul. Can we really dismiss his words so quickly? Let's consider his words more carefully, no matter how foolish they seem.

These words are from a letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, Greece. Many of the new converts there had been boasting about their magnificent experiences of God. They were proud about what had happened to them. They wore their experiences as a badge, as a proclamation of their strength and importance.

Paul's words to them were a warning: *"Do not be too proud about the abundance of your experiences of God."*

He also spoke mysteriously about his own experience of a ***"thorn...in the flesh."***

There has been endless speculation about this thorn. Was it an illness or a physical disability? We do not know for sure. Paul saw this ***"thorn"*** as a sign from God reminding him and the Corinthians they should not be too proud about their experiences of God.

Life is not always full of wonderful experiences or beautiful words of wisdom from God. As followers of Christ, we also experience weakness, insults, rejection, and the other ***"thorns"*** of life.

At first, Paul tried to overcome his problems by asking God for salvation from his ***"thorn."*** God's response was, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."***  
*(II Corinthians 12: 9a.)*

In other words, *"Endure and I will give you strength even in your weaknesses and hardships."*

Life isn't an abundance of positive experiences of God. It is also full of hardships and suffering.

However, God gives us strength in all moments of our lives, good and bad. If we forget this, we can become complacent and proud when good things happen to us.

The take home message for today is this: all strength comes from God, but this gift of strength comes to weak human beings. Even in times of our greatest weakness, God still comes to us with divine strength. This was clearly the case with Paul. When

he was inflicted by a thorn, whatever it was, it also came with a promise of divine power which was sufficient to sustain him, even in his moment of greatest weakness.

As Christians, we celebrate Jesus' death on the cross as the greatest moment in human history. From a human point of view, this was a moment of great failure and suffering. For us it is the greatest moment in history because God was with Jesus giving him strength and new life after death.

Our gospel lesson for this morning is a prelude to this great failure which turns to triumph.

In these verses, we read about a weak Jesus who cannot command authority even in his own hometown. He had just returned to Nazareth and was preaching in the synagogue. This homecoming was not pleasant. His fellow citizens would not accept him and **"took offense at him."**

It is important to note that in the verses immediately preceding this passage Jesus performed great miracles and commanded great authority and respect.

In today's lesson, he was rejected in his own hometown. He did heal a few people, but otherwise he could not perform the spectacular miracles for which he had become famous. It was a moment of great rejection for Jesus.

There are two sides of life, success and failure, even for Jesus. Nevertheless, in the face of rejection and humiliation,

Jesus carried on with his mission. He even gave the twelve disciples their first mission. He sent them out two by two to preach repentance and heal people of evil spirits.

Even his instructions to them included the possibility of rejection. when he said, **"If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet..."**  
(Mark 6: 11.)

In other words, move on down the road. The gospel message of God's love and strength is not something you force down people's throat. You invite them to accept it without coercion. This instruction also reminds us that there will be hardships in our life. We will face rejection, but God will give us the strength to continue our mission.

The Christian life includes both mission and rejection. Do we live with the conviction that God gives us strength to continue our mission in the face of rejection?

This question emerges on several levels. is the level of personal conviction: Do you as an individual trust God to sustain you in weakness and rejection? This is a question of tremendous importance for each one of us. This question can be asked on the corporate level.

Do groups of people believe and act on the conviction that God will give them strength in times of weakness and rejection? Do small membership churches

believe God will sustain them in their decline? Throughout America, in small towns and city suburbs, congregations are in decline as they confront changing and/or dwindling populations.

This applies to your own congregation right here in Overland. We can bemoan the fact there are fewer and fewer young people in this congregation, but do we believe that God will give strength in this time of uncertainty? As Christians, we proclaim that only God can strengthen and revive us.

This revival begins with our steadfast faith that God is with us in all our sufferings. God is with us in our uncertainties and hardships. God will be with us when we are rejected. God will give this congregation new life despite declines, as it is God's will. God gives us the strength to believe this: There will be a mission for God's Church in this community.

Since we just celebrated the Fourth of July, let me also say a few words about the strength and weakness of our nation.

The ideas we have been discussing today also apply to nations. As Christians, we believe that the United States of America was founded and continues to be directed by God.

Although most of us wouldn't claim that we are an exclusively Christian nation, we do profess to govern our nation by divine principles. One of these principles articulated by Paul is: Strength often comes through weakness.

Weakness is a quality extolled by the Bible. When we are weak, God will give us strength. Conversely, those who are strong will become weak ***when they forget*** that God has given them strength in the first place.

How does this apply to nations? I challenge you to remember American history: We were once weak a weak confederation of colonies, not even really a nation. When the founders of America began a revolution 242 years ago they were unsure of the outcome.

We were a very weak, unorganized new nation. We were daring to challenge England, the world's most powerful country.

Somehow, we were victorious! As Christians, we believe that we were successful because God gives strength to the weak.

We also believe that the vision of equality and human rights shine through the words of the Declaration of Independence and points us, however dimly, in the direction of God's kingdom. Almost 250 years later, we are now the most powerful nation on earth.

Do we remember that we were once weak? Do we believe our strength comes only from God? Do we uphold and proclaim the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence, not only for ourselves, but for the weaker peoples of the world?

These are questions to think about in these days after the Fourth of July, especially as our nation is now embroiled in the affairs of many nations around the world.

Are we truly lending a helping hand to poor and oppressed people of the world?

Our government's actions right now make us wonder. Have we forgotten we were once a weak nation which depended only on God?

Have we forgotten that we once welcomed poor and oppressed onto our shores? With them as partners with us, our nation became strong and powerful! And it was directed by God!

In all areas of human life, we always face the danger of forgetting that our strength comes from God. When this happens, we easily begin to believe that we alone are responsible for maintaining our own strength.

We lose our focus on God who gives us strength and we begin to defend our own power by rejecting even abusing, people who are weak and helpless. This does not help us regain our strength; indeed it diminishes it. In all areas of our lives, let us always remember: Our strength comes from God, especially as we serve people weaker than ourselves.

Let us pray.

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think,

to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever."

AMEN.