

Strength Through Weakness

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, good morning everyone. Lovely to see you. My name is Graeme, I'm the pastor here of the church and it's been wonderful to meet some new faces this morning. You're so welcome. You are joining us at an exciting time. We're at the penultimate sermon in our series in 2 Corinthians.

So, if you have a Bible, come with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. If you don't have a Bible, then you can grab one of the pews round about.

They are for that purpose. If you didn't bring a Bible, you can use them. You can scroll on your phone, 2 Corinthians chapter 12, or failing that, the verses will be on the screen behind me and you can follow along as we read together.

But as you turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 12, know that you are turning to one of the most loved portions of the Bible for Christians down the generations all across the world.

And I think as we take in these 10 verses in chapter 12 together, we will see the beauty. So, the invitation this morning is whatever's going on in your life just now, whatever you've brought in those doors with you, bring it and bring your soul to these verses.

[1 : 1 9] And let's be refreshed as we take in once again who Jesus is. So, in verse 1, chapter 12, Paul writes this, I must go on boasting.

Although there's nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up in the third heaven.

Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows, was caught up to paradise.

And heard inexpressible things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself except about my weaknesses.

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth, but I refrain. So, no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say because of these surpassing great revelations.

[2 : 3 5] Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, 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. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses and insults and hardships and persecutions and difficulties.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. And Lord, we just pray that you'd be with us this morning as we turn to your living and your active word.

Father, thank you that when we open our Bibles, we hear your very voice. And so, Lord, I ask that your spirit, that he would take these truths, that as we meditate on them and glory in them over the next half an hour or so, that he would be at work in our hearts.

Whatever's going on in our lives today, Father, would you bring the perfect application of these verses to our lives? Father, thank you for your love for us. And we just pray these things in the strong name of Jesus.

[3 : 56] Amen. Amen. Amen. So, friends, here is a question to get us going. Ready for it? What does a powerful person look like?

It's a TV show currently airing on the BBC that's on its 19th series called The Apprentice. It's dog-eat-dog in the business world.

There's 18 people. They compete for Lord Sugar's 250 grand investment in their business proposal. And it is all-out power.

Now, I'll give you a little example of this. This is my favorite from a candidate from a few years ago. He said this of himself. He said, I'm a Swiss army knife of business skills and enthusiasm. I've got everything highly tuned and highly chiseled.

Now, I've long given up in the hope of being highly chiseled. But there's part of me that would love to be a Swiss army knife.

[4 : 59] Would you not love that in your life? That's the kind of person that oppresses me. The kind of person that can do anything, that can turn their hand to everything.

Someone whose pitches are slick. Someone whose qualifications are second to none. Someone who's got more letters after their name than they do actually in their name.

Someone whose dress sense is top-notch. I guess that's why in our culture we talk about power dressing. Someone who's confident and capable at everything. Able to cope with every challenge that life throws at them.

We love in our world and we celebrate the story of the self-made man. We were around in the 90s. I think it was 1999 from the top of my head. You remember Destiny's Child had that song.

Independent Woman. And we think these kind of people are mightily impressive. And I look at people like that and I see them in my own life.

[6 : 00] And then I look back at my own heart and life. And I think to myself as I do, compare.com. I wish I had it a bit more all together. And so here's how this passage has acted in my life this week.

And it's an invitation I want to just extend to us all this morning. It's about like this. You know, from our house we've got a great view of King's buildings. You know, on the university campus just in the south of the city.

Here's the thing about King's campus. At the minute there's a massive building project going on. So every day I take the kids to school and we look up and there's a massive yellow crane that's dominating the skyline.

What's happening at King's is there is a massive building there which has stood for decades. And what's happened is it is gradually being deconstructed.

Deconstructed. It's derelict. It's being torn down. Brick by brick, steel bar by steel bar. They are deconstructing this thing. And the plan I heard is once it's down is to build something else in its place.

[7 : 12] Now that's a wonderful picture of discipleship and how it works in our hearts and lives. Friends, we all come at this text having a standing building in our minds of what power looks like. And what impresses us in this life.

And what God has done in my heart this week, and this is a long-term process, is that that vision of what power is and what impresses me, he's began to slowly deconstruct it.

And in its place, he's given me this passage. And he said, this is what true power looks like. So here's chapter 12.

Here is, friends, the liberating paradox of weakness being the new strength. Right? Right? Weakness being the new strength.

And here's the secret sauce of the Christian life. We are never more useful to the Lord than when we are completely dependent on him.

[8 : 18] Weakness is the way. To some degree, what we're doing is we're just looping back this morning to where we all started. And the big thing of this book is weakness is the way.

And the thing is, this is the opposite of how Corinth thinks. This letter written to the church in Corinth. A city where the apprentice would go down a storm. They would love the idea of the apprentice in Corinth in the first century.

Playing right into that are the super apostles who've shown up in Corinth and have tapped into this whole idea of a city who loves the impressive. And what they've done is they have dazzled the people in this church with their claims.

Right? This is like our kids do this every time we go into Princess Street. And they see that shop called Kingdom of Sweets. You ever seen it? And every time they say, Daddy, can we go? What's attracting them to the Kingdom of Sweets?

Right? Bright lights over here. Shiny things over there. Music coming. Can we go? Can we go? It's like that. If you imagine that emoji on your phone. It's like the little yellow man with the stars in his eyes.

[9 : 27] Right? That's what's happened to the people in this church. They've been dazzled by these false teachers who are tapping into the world's idea of impressiveness.

What they're doing is they are teaching and promoting this. We'll come back to it in a minute. And what they're doing at the same time is that they're discrediting Paul. And you can imagine the lines.

This guy is so unimpressive. He's yesterday's man. Sure, he had that wonderful vision on the Damascus Road. But that was almost 20 years ago.

Is he seriously still living off that? We've got better visions. We are giving better talks. We've got better looking lives.

Paul knows exactly what they're up to. And here's one of the key verses in this text. Did you see how often it crops up? It's the word boast. That word comes up roughly 21 times in this letter.

[10 : 31] Here's a little factoid for you. It comes up 21 times roughly in this letter. And five of them are in these 10 verses. It's interesting, isn't it? Paul knows there's a lot of boasting going on.

These false teachers, these super apostles are making big boasts. And here's the thing. Paul's going to boast back. He's all up for a boast off.

He'll play their game. But he'll play it on his terms. So Paul's going to boast all right. But he's not going to boast in himself. He'll boast. Come with me to the text.

Verse 5. He'll play it on his own. In the things that show his weaknesses. And that is extraordinary. It's one thing to admit that you've got weaknesses in life.

It's another thing completely to boast in those weaknesses. No one says this better than D.A. Carson. He's got a lovely little book on chapters 10 to 13 of 2 Corinthians, if you want to get into it, talking about Christian character.

[11 : 40] And he says this. Try this insight on for size. He says, Most people go through life concerned that others will think too little of them. Guilty.

Paul was concerned that others would think too much of him. And you think to yourself, How has Paul got there?

Well, that's where we're headed this morning. Here's the game plan. Here's the formation of this sermon. Friends, I've got two points. Two big truths from this passage. And then one big application for us at the end.

Is that okay? Two, one. Here's the first truth, verses 1 to 7. And really, it's the folly of boasting in self. So when it comes to boasting, here's the thing to see if you come to these verses.

It's not like Paul didn't have a card that he could play. Do you see that? He's had an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. But hear the awkwardness as he talks about it.

[12 : 43] I know a man, he says, verse 2. Now, here's the spoiler alert. Paul is talking about himself in the third person. Who 14 years ago, he says, which if you're into your timelines, it puts this somewhere between Acts 9 and Acts 11, when Paul is in Tarsus.

Okay? Paul has his vision, which takes him to paradise. Now, again in the text, what he calls the third heaven. Do you see that? Jews of Paul's day often talk about the heavens and realms.

So the first realm, the first heaven is, if you imagine this going up, it's where the birds are. Birds fly, it's the sky, right? The second heaven is where the stars are.

Right? You getting it? Then the third heaven is the very dwelling place of God. But notice how Paul goes out of his way, given all of that, to underscore just how passive he is in all of this.

As if to say, this was nothing to do with me. This was not like a video game where I unlocked a secret level. Look what he says. Was I in the body or out of the body?

[13 : 57] I don't know. No. Completely passive. Now, this isn't an outer body experience. What this says is Jesus taking hold of his life and showing him what Paul describes here, inexpressible things.

Now, here's the thing to see. Imagine they gave me top trumps. If ever there was a card that Paul has that he could play to beat the super apostles, here's the card.

But Paul refuses to be drawn into that trap. He doesn't want them to base their confidence in him on the fact that he's claiming to see something.

That's what the super apostles are doing. He's saying, my claim, my message's claim, what backs it up is my character. Maybe think about it like this.

Why won't he be drawn into the trap? There's a statue in the city of Corinth that depicts a famous story from history. And it features Alexander the Great.

[15 : 03] And the story goes that he rides back into town one day after another victory on the battlefield. And he does what victorious emperors, kings, would do back in the day.

Imagine if you're a football fan, you saw Newcastle do this yesterday. What they do is they parade through the city. So Alexander's parading through the city so that everyone can see him in his splendor and in his pomp.

Everybody's into this. But Alexander, from his horse, spies a man at the side of the road who looks mightily unimpressed. So what he does is he goes over in his horse.

This man's name is Diogenes. And he goes over in his horse to Diogenes and simply says, what can I do for you?

And Diogenes sitting there replies, I just want you to get out of the way of the sun. Here's what I think Paul's understood in this passage here.

[16 : 05] The devil would love him to get in the way of the sun. Satan would love nothing more than for Paul to block the glory of Jesus.

Friends, what a lesson for us that the devil rubs his hands with glee when we boast in us. When we are self-reliant, when we are dazzled, when we are drawn to play the boasting game on the world's terms.

When that happens, he has got us exactly where he wants us. And that takes us just to the second truth.

This is verses 8 to 12. And really it's the beauty of resting in grace. And this all centers on what Paul refers to here at verse 7.

Just see it in the text. He talks about his thorn in the flesh. And you get the figurative image there that Paul's using. This is something in his life that weakens him and causes him pain.

[17 : 14] Now people have got their theories on what exactly this is. Maybe it's to do with his poor eyesight. Maybe it's to do with a difficult person who keeps showing up.

I say they're all speculative. And the fact that we aren't told precisely what it is, can I suggest that's a really good thing? Because it means that the principle that we are going to unearth here is a timeless one for the Christian life.

But before we get there, just notice the precision. Notice the clarity with which he writes. They always say that that's the aim of a good public speaker, a good writer, is to be so clear that you are understood.

And yet to be so clear that you cannot be misunderstood. So see what he's doing here. Notice the precision. Paul is not calling evil good.

Nor is this anything to do with his sin, as if he's blaming God for the sin in his own life. Verse 7, this is a messenger of Satan. So Paul understands the source of this.

[18 : 25] But nor does he glory in the pain that comes from it. It's so important that we see that. Verse 8, what does he say? Three times, I pleaded with the Lord for this to be taken away.

So he's praying. He's pouring his soul out to his father. Lord, would you take it away? And yet he's content in the fact that the Lord says no. Do you see how Paul is no massacist?

This is not a hit me again, hit me again. Reveling in the hits that he's taken. It's not that. And yet here's what he does perceive. Verse 7, I was given it.

And that word given, it invites us, it is the portal to a galaxy of theology. Do you see the word given there? Paul has only got that word given because he gets the gospel.

gospel. The gospel, the gospel, what Christians call the good news because it announces that there is a way to be right with God forever.

[19 : 35] And to stand before him, our creator, spotless and forgiven of our sin. Not because of our deeds, not because of our works, but because of the blood that Jesus shed for us on the cross.

It is there that Jesus pays the price to make us through faith his own. So he buys us.

It's where the Bible gets the word redemption from. It's the slave market term. Jesus buys us. What that means is when he buys us, he fully commits himself to us.

And what that means, friends, is that nothing happens to us that is out with his say-so. Jesus never drops the ball.

Nothing sneaks in under his radar. We've got this song from Colin Buchanan that we sing with the kids at night and it really simply goes like this. God never says oops.

[20 : 41] Here's what Paul senses that over and above Satan's worst stands an all-sovereign Jesus who loves him, who holds him, and is fully committed to Paul's best.

So Paul can say to the devil, you mean it for evil. But Paul can say to Jesus, but you mean it for good.

Why? Just follow the logic in the text. Why? Paul recognizes that he gave me it to stop me becoming conceited. Do you see that word?

So Paul recognizes that God has given him something to keep him humble and keep him weak. Maybe Paul knows his own heart. Right? Maybe the temptation to drift towards self-reliance.

Or actually, maybe I could claim just 2% of the limelight for myself. And he's learned in the words of Charles Spurgeon to kiss the wave that throws him back against the rock of ages.

[21 : 59] And that's why he's unashamed, verse 10, about the hardships that he goes through as a result of following Jesus. We saw the catalogue of them last week.

We just got a few of them here. Do you see how Paul's life is the opposite of Instagrammable? Everyone on Facebook set on telling you about their best moments.

Paul's game for telling us about his toughest. We've just got to get this right. He is no constant rock of emotional stability. I think we're so often guilty of talking about him like that, as if nothing phases him.

Nonsense. Every time he feels the ouch of that thorn, it reminds him of what God said to him. And we just get it at verse 9. If you're looking for a memory verse, you do worse than this one.

God said to him, my grace is sufficient for you for, because my power is made perfect in weakness.

[23 : 08] Now that word sufficient, maybe our English translations don't quite get it. Everything. My grace is sufficient. My grace is everything you'll ever need. Paul, as you reach the end of your resources and turn to me, you'll find me to be a God who draws alongside you, full of power, full of love, abounding in kindness, mercy, and compassion.

And this is one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian life, that in our darkest hours, when we cannot fathom how we're going to make another step, Jesus, our good shepherd, holds us, is with us, and he will not fail us.

Jesus, the divine man of sorrows, fully acquainted with grief, knows perfectly how to draw near to his people in times of trouble.

Maybe think of it like this. Friends, when we boast in our own abilities and capabilities, when we try to work it out, when there's a problem, when something's gone wrong, the devil has us exactly where he wants us.

But flip it. When we run to our Father, completely out of resources, Lord, I've got nothing but you, help me to know you more.

[24 : 35] Friends, our Father has us exactly where he wants us. Isn't it amazing when you read the Gospels? Something I asked my kids this week to read in the chapter of Luke every night.

Just go away, tell me something fascinating, really interesting you found out about Jesus. They come back and they tell me, and I see things I've never seen before, but here's the thing, some of the most compassionate and loving words that Jesus has in the Gospels are for people who realise they've got nothing but him.

Our Father has us exactly where he wants us. And so on that note, and as we begin to draw the threads of this passage together, here's the big application. Friends, I wonder if God is calling some of us to embrace our dead ends.

I'll do the way here, okay, just dead ends. You're stuck. Maybe that's exactly where you are just now. You're stuck. You feel like a chess piece backed into a corner.

You've got no idea what your next move is. You've got no idea what the future holds. I just cannot see ahead of me. You feel like one of those days last week when the hard just came in over Edinburgh, but couldn't see a thing.

[25 : 50] I don't know what's up ahead. Did you not laugh a little bit the other day, was it Tuesday or Wednesday, I forget, that was the five-year anniversary of that COVID lockdown.

How did you celebrate? I keep finding masks and jacket pockets and jean pockets. It's funny. It just reminds me of those days. It feels like a lifetime ago, and yet that was only five years ago.

I remember that lockdown being announced on the Tuesday and thinking to myself, I have not got a clue what we are going to do. And Gary rings me and says, I've got an idea, brilliant idea.

I've not got a clue what to do. Friends, when was the last time you found yourself in that place? Have you ever considered, if you're facing a dead end, that God might have you exactly where he wants you so that you would learn this?

Are you saying to yourself, I'm finishing uni this summer, I have not got a scooby what the future holds? And God says, good, I want you to come to me and remember that I am the one who is eternal and knows the end from the beginning.

[27 : 07] I'm not sure what job to do. Good, come to me and know that I am the one who has got good works prepared in advance for you to walk in.

I just worry so much as a parent for my kids, I just want them to make the right decisions. Good, come to me and know that I am the perfect father.

I get so tired, I need my eight hours sleep a night, I wish I could burn the candle at both ends, but I can't, I just get so tired. Good, lay your head on that pillow, take an evening off and know that I am the God who holds you and I am the God who doesn't slumber nor sleep.

Friends, what is he teaching us about his all-sufficient grace? I always love how C.S. Lewis puts this, you'll be surprised to hear that.

Captures this so wonderfully in his book Prince Caspian and it's this scene where Lucy sees Aslan again after a long break and here's the script. Aslan, said Lucy, you're bigger.

[28 : 16] That is because you are older, little one, he answered. Not because you are, said Lucy. I am not child, but every year you grow, you will find me bigger.

bigger. You know, a test I think of whether I find him bigger and more sufficient and all loving and knowing.

Is my quickness when things happen in my life that my default position is to just try and fix on my own, do I find him bigger? The test is whether how quickly I run to him all out of resources.

Or if I could spin a cheesy phrase, and that's why you came this morning, wasn't it? Friends, we live in a world that says when the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Paul was telling us that when the going gets tough, the strong get pleading. Progress in the Christian life isn't realizing we need Jesus less.

[29 : 23] How often we think of it like the stabilizers on a bike. Like Jesus was a great start and yet we'll kind of figure this Christian life out as we grow and as we grow and as we grow, we stand on our own two feet.

No, no, no. Progress in the Christian life is realizing that we need Jesus more. Where is God's power seen today? It's seen in weak people who throw themselves upon a strong Christ and who receive grace and are strengthened by him to keep going.

What does that speak of? And this is one of the big challenges that came from this text as well. What does it speak to me of? It speaks of contentment. I always love what a woman called Elizabeth Elliott.

You've not ever heard about Elizabeth Elliott. She's got a wonderful story. Biography is written about her wonderful. She just said this about contentment. She said, the secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances.

Resting in our Father's complete knowledge of us and our Savior's complete hold of us. Friends, God wants us this morning to redefine where strength is to be found.

[30 : 46] And to find his grace to us, Jesus, who's given himself to us, to find him all sufficient. And just maybe to bring us home, just as we close, let me tell you about my favorite film starring Brad Pitt.

Now, I think this was a book that was originally written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, but I'm one of those guys that doesn't read the book, just watch the film.

It is called The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. Decent film, it's okay. I was more captivated by the concept. Benjamin Button, this man born with a very rare condition, one that makes him age backwards.

Now, get your head around that. He is born because of this condition, a really old man.

So he comes out all covered in wrinkles and shriveled, and you get the idea. And the midwives hand his mother this baby, and here it is, here is Benjamin born.

[31 : 58] He's born an old man, and yet Benjamin dies at the other end of his life at the age of 85. He dies a young baby. And I remember watching it for the first time and thinking to myself, what a wonderful picture of the Christian life.

The more we go on with Jesus, and the more we realize his heart, friends, the more like dependent children we should look like.

The message of this passage, the message of this book, is that weakness is the way. We would normally have questions on the screen at this point, but because it's communion, we're just going to miss it this week.

But friends, if you have any questions, is anything you want to tease out or pray about, that's just the most natural thing to do in response to this passage this morning. You can grab the person that you came with, grab somebody you've seen up the front, we'd love to do that.

But friends, let's not pass up this opportunity to taste and see that Jesus is good this morning. So let me pray and then we're going to sing once again before we move into a time of communion.

[33 : 21] And Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for what you said, that it is the poor in spirit who will inherit the kingdom of God. And Father, I pray that whatever is going on in our lives right now, Lord, we bring to you our fears and our troubles and our hardships.

We bring to you our griefs and our pains and our memories. And we ask, Lord, that in all of this, that your spirit would be teaching us the beauty of knowing that your power is perfectly shown in weakness.

Thank you so much that in Jesus we have a saviour who knows, who cares, and who has given his life to save us. So Father, be with us now as we move to remember him in this time of communion.

Father, we love you. Be with us now, we ask. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.