

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

“I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord” 2 Corinthians 12 verse 1.

That is how Paul starts out our Epistle reading today. He boasts about the amazing insights given to him by the Lord. He boasts despite nothing to be gained by it because he is trying to highlight the difference between a true Apostle and a false Apostle.

You see, the false Apostle boasts about his own works, his own merits, his own revelations. But Paul turns the boasting about revelations and visions into a precursor of his own weaknesses.

Paul boasts by confessing his weakness, his thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. In fact, Paul pleaded three times to the Lord to have this thorn removed, but God answers Paul’s prayers with a resounding, “NO!”

Therefore, Paul concludes that he will boast all the more gladly, because he can boast about his weakness, for paradoxically, “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Co 12:10).

[When I am weak]

Let’s step through this paradox.... Suppose the only truth is that we are weak. Paul says, “on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses” (2 Co 12:5).

What would happen if the end result was simply our weakness?

Imagine a teenage boy who has been the victim of bullying his whole life. He is short for his age. He is horribly uncoordinated. He can’t do a push-up to save his life, and he can’t seem to do well at anything he tries.

Every day, at home and at school, he is reminded of his weaknesses. His face is constantly rubbed in his own failures and his own regrets. If only he was stronger. If only he was smarter. If only he was more popular. If only...

He has no hope in the “if only” because he is reminded time and again that there is no, “if only.” His only confidence is the hard reality of his own weakness. He isn’t stronger, he isn’t smarter, he isn’t more popular.

He tries out for a sports team and is told he isn’t good enough. He tries out for music and he is told he isn’t skilled enough. He comes home in sorrow and pain and he is told he isn’t trying hard enough.

So, he sleeps in and misses the bus, he misbehaves to try and get attention, he tries drugs to see if they can change how he feels. Nothing seems to work and everything he tries ends in failure and despair.

Could this teenager benefit from boasting in his weaknesses? Despite Paul’s ability to boast in weakness, when this teenager boasts in his own weakness, it only brings more ridicule down upon him. He has nothing to live for. He has no hope in the future.

In despair, this teenager is lost in his own weaknesses and failings.

Paul says, “when I am weak, then I am strong,” but if we ignore the strength in this paradox, then we end up only in weakness and despair.

We end in a world of failure and a world with no hope.

We have failed, we have nothing to boast in because, in the end, we are losers.

We can’t succeed because we are lost in our sins.

This is the first half of the paradoxical nature of our salvation. We are poor miserable sinners. We have nothing but failure and weakness. We have no strength to bring to the bargaining table. We have no hope of success.

[*When I am strong*]

But Paul says, “when I am weak, then I am strong.” If weakness isn’t the key to understanding this paradox, then let’s take a moment to instead focus on our strength.

What would happen if we didn’t have any weaknesses and instead lived a life of strength?

This time, let’s imagine a successful mother and business woman.

This woman is in the prime of her life. Shortly after the time she walked out of the hospital with her 3rd healthy baby, she had lost all her pregnancy weight. In fact,

thanks to her excellent time management skills she is able to work out 5 days a week at the local cross-fit gym near her 6-bedroom home.

Her kids are the perfect students and get straight A's on all of their report cards.

As a business manager, her team holds the sales record and she has received bonuses this year both in pay and in additional vacation time.

She is currently up for promotion again and everyone knows she deserves it. Her boss is just waiting for the minimum time of employment before he gives it to her.

Everything seems to be going her way, yet she always has another goal to reach. She constantly strives forwards, with never-ending relentlessness she reaches and reaches, but never finds fulfillment. She is not content with what she has and can only focus on the next best thing.

It is almost like she can't seem to find self-fulfillment. She never gets the sense of completeness. She never gets to rest. To her, nothing in her life seems sufficient. She only sees how much more there is to do. She only focuses on change and improvement. She boasts in her strength and other people find her to be quite conceited in her own surpassing greatness.

And yet, despite her boasting, she can't seem to get to the finish line. The line keeps moving forward. It keeps bounding beyond her reach. She suffers no weakness or failure, but still can't find sufficiency.

Paul says, "when I am weak, then I am strong," but if we ignore the weakness in this paradox, then we end only in effort and toil.

We end in a world of self-reliance.

We have worked so hard, yet we are still not sufficient to the task.

We can't succeed because the goal is perfection and we were dead to our sins before we got started.

This is the second half of the paradoxical nature of our salvation. We work night and day to be perfect, but our best strength is still not good enough.

[When I am weak, then I am strong]

If either side of salvation's paradox is lost, then we are also lost. Paul says, "when I am weak, then I am strong." To illustrate this, let me tell you about another person.

His name is Luke Scheele and this is the story about one of the strongest points in Luke's salvation. At the age of one month and one day, his parents brought him to Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Fort Lupton, Colorado. There he was baptized in the name of The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As an infant, of only one month and one day old, Luke was helpless in his weakness. Unable to do anything for himself except cry and complain. He was fixated on nothing but his own selfish desires. Lost in his sins. But at that moment Luke experienced strength beyond comprehension. Strength beyond human capacity and ability. The very strength of God poured into him by God's Words combined with the waters of baptism. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

The same is true for you. In the weakness of your failure and in the futility of your good works you have nothing. But in your weakness, you are forced to despair of your own efforts and let God work through you. In repentance, you can give your weaknesses and failings to God and paradoxically His gracious love will be your strength.

After Jesus pleaded three times in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cross to pass from him his prayer was answered with, "No." Yet Jesus finished His prayers with, "Thy will be done" (Matt 26:42). Because, Jesus understood that for the Father to be glorified, Jesus had to die in weakness.

Paul also pleaded three times for the Lord to remove his weakness, his thorn in the flesh. But the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Co 12:9). Therefore, Paul writes, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Co 12:9-10).

[Conclusion]

In your weakness, God's gracious will is that you are forgiven of all your sins and that life and salvation are yours. God's grace is sufficient for you. God brings you to your knees. He shows you that nothing you do is good enough. He brings you to the point where you can finally despair of your own works. It is there, at the point of weakness, that you can truly realize the power of God's grace.

Thy will be done, we rejoice in the will of God, the God whose power is made perfect in our weakness. For when we are weak, then we are strong. Amen.

"Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do His will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." (Heb 13:20-21)
