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St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
2100 16<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Austin, MN 55912-1749  
Pastor Ted Barthels  
Sermon preached on  
July 11, 2021  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture Lessons: Ezekiel 2:1-5; Mark 6:1-6

Hymns: 20; 21:1-3,6; 19:1,3,5,6 38:4

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. <sup>8</sup>Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. <sup>9</sup>And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God our Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: Pride – one of the greatest of human failings.

That is not what the world thinks. In fact, in the world we are encouraged to be proud. We should be proud of who we are, proud of what we have accomplished, proud even of the sinful lifestyle

one may have chosen to embrace. Indeed, the world is encouraged, almost bullied, to join in with pride over sin.

A lot of this may be couched in the phrase of self-esteem with the proposal that if one doesn't have an elevated sense of self-esteem, one will not be able to succeed in this world. If one has a low self-esteem, one will inevitably end up with a sad end in prison or in some self-destructive behavior. What has been revealed is that just the opposite is true. People in prison, people who victimize other people have an elevated sense of self-esteem, thinking of themselves as better than others and so deserving of anything they could take from others. Some individuals who are self-destructive regard life as having been terribly unfair to them since they thought they should be entitled to all their heart desired. When it didn't happen disappointment overwhelmed them. so often it all comes back to sinful pride.

Pride in things spiritual is even more dangerous and more prevalent. Man esteems himself as being righteous without the merits of Jesus Christ. Even those who confess Christ as Lord and Savior must constantly be on guard against pride and a sense of self-sufficiency. We want to see ourselves as contributing something, at least our willingness to believe, or accepting of Christ, as having come from within ourselves.

Pride is a great danger for pastors as well, perhaps one of the most common of sins among pastors. We desire some acknowledgement of appreciation for the work we do, which is fine, but when success in ministry is apparent the pastor is sorely tempted to find the cause for that success within his fine preaching and art of persuasion.

This temptation to claim credit for success in ministry can easily go beyond the pastor to the entire congregation or church body. Pride is a human failing that all too often appropriates the glory that belongs to the Lord. Thank God for --

**THEME: The Blessing of Adversity in Serving the Lord.**

**I. Adversity Reveals Our Need for God's Continuing Grace.**

In the verses immediately before our text the Apostle Paul is defending his apostolic calling and position. This was important, not so much for Paul himself but for all who heard his preaching, that they should be assured of the apostolic authority for all that Paul had preached and written in his epistles to the various churches. It continues to be important for us that we should be certain that the Apostle Paul was indeed called by Jesus to be His apostle to the Gentiles, for in our day, especially in our country, the apostolic authority of the Apostle Paul has been severely attacked, and for much the same reasons as it was in those early days of the Church, to undermine the truth of God's Word Paul preached and also wrote in his epistles. In defending his apostolic office Paul had reported how he had been called to ministry. He wrote of some of the extraordinary visions and experiences the Lord had granted Paul in preparation for his work of ministry.

That leads us to the words of our text in which Paul speaks of his personal afflictions, his "thorn in the flesh." *"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure."* (v.7)

Paul recognized the danger of pride, that he could be exalted above measure in his own eyes, as well as in the eyes of those to whom he ministered. There are many speculations regarding Paul's "thorn in the flesh," but the Holy Spirit led Paul to leave it rather general for a reason, that we may all learn from Paul regarding the infirmities that we may bear in this life. It is safe to assume two things regarding Paul's "thorn in the flesh;" that it was a physical infirmity which infirmity was not only apparent to others, but that it also impacted Paul's ability to do his work, to conduct his ministry the way he wanted to fulfill it. Whether it was Paul's poor eyesight that interfered with his ability to write, or a recurring disease that laid him up in a sick bed from time to time, or simply Paul's stamina being limited resulting from physical injury, it was a weakness that Paul saw in himself, and it was a weakness that others also perceived. This was true for false teachers who called themselves "super- apostles," who would attempt to use this infirmity to their advantage against Paul. This weakness was also observed by Satan.

Because of this Paul describes this “*thorn in the flesh*” as “*a messenger of Satan to buffet me.*” (v.7) How could Satan buffet Paul? With assorted temptations, as Satan would seek opportunity to tempt us all. Paul could be tempted to be frustrated with his weakness, and perhaps also with the Lord, who not only allowed Paul to be impacted by such an infirmity, but then denied Paul’s request to remove it, even though the Apostle ardently sought for relief on three occasions. The Lord’s answer to this faith-filled request of Paul was, “*No.*” Paul could be tempted to be discouraged by the limitations this infirmity brought into his life. Paul could be tempted to be angry that others would seek to take advantage of this infirmity in their attempts to undermine Paul’s faithful proclamation of the gospel.

The devil will attack in every way he can, and the result is often shameful. Paul doesn’t credit the devil with success in leading him to sin, but Paul does make it clear that this thorn in his flesh, and Satan’s buffeting Paul with it revealed to Paul his weakness. It set Paul up for the Lord’s response to Paul’s prayers and the underlying reason why the Lord allowed this infirmity to continue.

It was all about grace. It is hard for us to fathom the ways of God and His grace. We see things as being a curse, even when God allows them into our lives, but they may well be intended to serve as conduits of God’s grace, and so they become a blessing for us, most clearly a spiritual blessing.

So it was for the Apostle Paul. “*And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*” (v.9) God stated clearly that He was dealing with Paul according to grace, and that the grace the Lord brought to the Apostle Paul was sufficient to the Lord’s purposes, first Paul’s eternal salvation, and secondly, Paul’s ministry of the gospel. With this ongoing “*thorn in the flesh,*” Paul was continually relying upon the ongoing grace of God to bring Him God’s love and forgiveness and the support and strength Paul needed to bear this infirmity. It kept Paul humble in his service to the Lord.

It is in this context of our service to the Lord that we are considering these inspired words. The infirmities that seem to hinder us in our efforts to serve the Lord may also frustrate us. We may fervently pray to the Lord for deliverance from such infirmity. We all become weaker with advancing age. We may have other physical or emotional disabilities or challenges that seem to hinder our ability to serve the Lord as we would like.

This may be equally true for a congregation. Our congregational “infirmities” may be limited financial resources, or “small numbers,” or limited facilities, or even the lack of participation by some possessing gifts critical to ministry. Let us address these matters to the Lord in prayer, asking for His deliverance, but also asking for His grace, that we may know the sufficiency of His grace in all these things, that we may not fall into temptation as Satan would buffet us, and try to undermine our faith.

Let us beware of the temptations to discouragement or even despair in our efforts in ministry. The Lord abides with us in His grace. He doesn’t hold back. His grace is sufficient. It leads us to the wondrous conclusion the Lord laid before the Apostle Paul, “*My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” (v.9) Yes, --

## **II. Adversity Reveals Human Weakness and Divine Power**

Paul was made ready by the Lord to acknowledge his own weakness that he might comprehend the power of Christ. He wrote in our text: “*Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*”<sup>10</sup> *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (v.9-10) Paul’s adversaries were boasting about their great oratory skills, and their superior knowledge of God’s will. They gloried in themselves, and it was all to the harm of the people. Paul who was inspired by the Holy Spirit and endowed with wisdom from above gloried in his infirmities. Again, it wasn’t a matter of, “Look how much I have suffered for the Lord;” or “Look at how much I am doing even though I am hurting;” but rather, “This isn’t me. This isn’t my wisdom; this isn’t my power. This is the power of God working through the message of the

gospel which the Lord Himself has entrusted me, that I might share it with you for your salvation.”

Remember the words Paul wrote to the Romans, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.*” (Romans 1:16) It was that message of redemption in the sufferings and death of Christ and the justification that is declared in Jesus’ resurrection that Paul proclaimed to the world. It is that message which the Lord has empowered with His Spirit to change hearts and call sinners to repentance. It is that message that is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. It is all the Lord’s power and the Lord’s glory that one is saved from sin and death.

Paul worked hard, and Paul suffered willingly and frequently for the sake of the gospel. He acted as if it all depended on Paul, but Paul did this with the confidence that it didn’t depend upon him and his powers of persuasion at all, but it was the power of God in the gospel that called people to faith.

So, it is also for us, we can be assured that the Lord accompanies His gospel message with divine power that has and will continue to call sinners to repentance. Yes, we should be driven by our love for our Savior, and by our appreciation of the wonders of the gospel, and by a love for souls as well. We should do all we can, striving to advance the kingdom work the Lord has entrusted to us, and share this gospel with people in our communities, as well as around the world. We do this knowing that the Lord has called us who are no more than weak and imperfect clay pots, vessels with imperfections and people with weaknesses and infirmities so that the glory will be the Lord’s. The power that is present in His gospel of a crucified and risen Savior it what changes hearts and lives.

This is an opportunity for us “*to take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (v.10) Doesn’t that sound strange, that we might take pleasure in our infirmities or persecutions, in the things that distress us? We take pleasure in them because it shows the world what we know by faith. The power and the glory of salvation is ALL with the Lord. It is a

privilege that He allows us this honor of being proclaimers of this gospel. He will bless our professions of faith, weak as they might be with His almighty power to save. It is as true for us today as it was for Paul 2000 years ago, “*when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (v.10) To God be **all** the glory both now and forever!

**AMEN.**

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.