

A sermon preached at
Plymouth Presbyterian Church, St. Helens, Or
Spotlight on the Early Church: The power in weakness
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
By Pastor Peter J. Blank, H.R.

We all have our weaknesses, don't we? It really doesn't matter who we are.

One of the most highly praised motion pictures of 2017 was titled *Darkest Hour*. It was about Winston Churchill. As one of the prominent statesmen of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill achieved what others only dream of. He courageously led the United Kingdom to fight against the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. As renowned and successful as he was, however, Winston Churchill had his struggles.

Churchill as a young man was confronted with two big challenges. First, he suffered a speech impediment--a lisp caused by a dental condition. But this did not stop him from becoming a celebrated public speaker. We're told that he often wore an artificial tooth, designed to ease this impediment. He also avoided words in his speeches that he had difficulty pronouncing. Yet his speeches were both inspiring and motivating.

The second obstacle Churchill had to overcome was a mental health challenge. He called it the "Black Dog." Winston Churchill suffered severe bouts of clinical depression all his life. The condition became especially severe during times of military setbacks. Nevertheless, Churchill wouldn't allow this condition to stop him from carrying out his duties as Prime Minister. He believed the needs of his country came before his personal needs. It is most interesting that, despite his speech impediments, Churchill went on to become one of history's greatest inspirational speakers. And, despite his depression, he was an inspiring leader. (Michal Stawicki and Jeannie Ingraham, *99 Perseverance Success Stories: Encouragement For Success In Every Walk Of Life* (Kindle Edition))

All of us have weaknesses. Some of our weaknesses are physical, some are mental, some are moral. Some of these weaknesses have to do with our work, some with our family life, some with our relationship with Christ. Some of us, for example, have short tempers, others of us lack diplomacy. Some of us are too proud, others of us lack back-bone. There are no perfect "10s." Maybe that is just as well.

Saint Paul had his weaknesses. One in particular caused him much heartache. We don't know for certain what it was. He called it his "thorn in the flesh." Some have suggested that St. Paul suffered from epileptic seizures. If so, he was in good company. Two of the most powerful men who ever lived--Julius Caesar and Napoleon--were epileptics, as have been many other great individuals. In St. Paul's day there was no medication to control seizures. If that was his thorn, he was stuck with it.

St. Paul prayed that God would deliver him from his affliction. Three times he beseeched God about this matter, but God's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul prayed about his "thorn in the flesh" three times, then let it go and trusted it to God. When he heard God say to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," that was enough for Paul. God was saying to Paul, "Trust me, Paul. I will take care of you. I will use your weakness to demonstrate my power." And God did use Paul's weaknesses in a wonderful way. Paul's influence over the Christian community has been second only to Christ himself. No wonder. Look at how strong Paul's faith was in God. He prayed three times about his

“thorn in the flesh,” then let it go.

We can learn from Paul’s experience. Paul not only learned to accept his thorn, he even began to boast about this weakness in order to show the power of Christ. Paul, by God’s grace, turned his weakness into a strength. And so can we. Here are some principles we can apply to our weaknesses.

A weakness can become a strength, first of all, if we do not give in to it. As someone has said, “Some people succeed because they are destined to, but most people succeed because they are determined to.”

It might be a physical weakness or a disability that is your thorn in the flesh. Olympian Wilma Rudolph had a thorn in the flesh. Wilma, a track legend, didn’t get much of a head start in life. A bout with polio left her left leg crooked. Her foot twisted inward so she had to wear leg braces. It took seven years of painful therapy before she could walk without her braces. She was 11 years old when, through sheer diligence and determination, she forced herself to walk without braces for the first time.

Her older sister was a good runner, and at age 12, Wilma started to think about running too. Less than 2 years later, she outran every other girl in her high school in Clarksville, Tennessee. A college track coach saw her run. He talked her into letting him train her. By age 14 she had outrun the fastest sprinters in her age group in the U.S.

In 1956 Wilma made the U.S. Olympic team, winning a bronze medal. That actually was a disappointment to her. Wilma wanted to win the gold. So she motivated herself to work even harder for the 1960 Olympics in Rome--and there Wilma Rudolph won three gold medals, the most a woman had ever won to that time.

Wilma Rudolph simply would not give in to her weakness or give up and she became a champion. To think, this was someone who spent the first seven years of her life with braces on her legs in order to be able just to walk. She’s a good reminder that a weakness can become a strength if we don’t give in to it. (Crossroads, Issue No. 7, p. 18)

Writer Larry Lee tells about his 10-year-old daughter, Sarah, who had that same kind of determination. Sarah was born with a muscle missing in her foot. As a consequence, she is forced to wear a brace all the time. And yet Sarah came home one beautiful spring day to tell her Dad she had competed in “field day” at her school. That’s where they have lots of races and other competitive events.

Because of her leg support, her dad’s mind raced as he tried to think of some encouragement he could give Sarah--things he could say to her about not letting this get her down. But before he could get a word out, she said “Daddy, I won two of the races!” Larry Lee couldn’t believe it! And then Sarah said, “I had an advantage.”

“Ah,” says Lee, “I knew it. I thought she must have been given a head start . . . some kind of physical advantage. But again, before I could say anything, she said, ‘Daddy, I didn’t get a head start . . . My advantage was I had to try harder!’” (larryl@usit.net)

Larry Lee’s daughter is on her way to being a champion at life. A weakness can become a strength if we do not give in to it. We’re talking about the power of character . . . the power of determination . . . God has given us the ability with His help to overcome difficult circumstances.

Author Irving Stone spent a lifetime studying greatness, writing novelized biographies of such men as Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, Sigmund Freud and Charles Darwin. Stone was once asked if he had found a thread that ran through the lives of all these exceptional people. He said, “I write about people who sometime in their life . . . have a vision or dream of something that should be accomplished . . . and they go to work. “They are beaten over the head, knocked

down, vilified and for years they get nowhere. But every time they're knocked down they stand up. You cannot destroy these people. And at the end of their lives they've accomplished some modest part of what they set out to do." (Source unknown)

St. Paul had that kind of attitude, that kind of determination. Besides his "thorn in the flesh," who can forget the other obstacles he faced in his ministry? He writes, "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked . . ." (II Corinthians 11: 24-27). Yet Paul never quit.

Paul's experience convinces me, most of all, that our weaknesses may become strengths if they remind us of our dependence on God.

It would have been easy for Paul to boast of his influence on the early Christian community, but he knew that the glory did not belong to him. His weaknesses should have condemned him to failure. Only by the grace of God could he make his life count. And he did so in a magnificent way. Let me tell you a story of my blind optimism, or my proud nature.

I have watched the Olympic divers do flips and twists from the high dive and land in the water with almost no splash. Watching them gives me confidence for what I could do from the 10 meter platform.

It was a Saturday many years ago while was in college. I had convinced myself I could do a back flip in a layout position off of the high dive at the college pool. The pool was not particularly full that day, so I headed for the steps. As I started up the ladder looking at the platform, I thought, "No, it's not that high up. I can do this!" I reached the platform and realized looking down that it was a whole lot higher than I thought when I was on the pool deck. I was determined I was not going to head back down without diving off. Besides, there were kids waiting to come up the ladder. So I got myself ready standing at the edge, when I looked around and down, I suddenly felt like Greg Louganis. I felt like I was naked in front of the whole world. I breathed in and out a few times. "I can do this," I said to myself. I bent my knees a little, gave a bit of a jump, my arms wide open with my head tipped back. I was on my way. So far, I had succeeded in completing one quarter of the the turn. My body was parallel to the water...and there it stayed all the way to the water. The water, well, the water broke my fall. I hit the water with a loud smack! My landing did not create as much of a splash as a loud smack. My landing got the attention of all judges, the parents, kids and life guard too, gathered on the pool deck. I had all their attention. And they agreed, "That's got to hurt!" And it did. When I hit the water (and hit it, I did), I barely broke the surface. In that moment that passed like a lifetime, I learned that water can burn. (And it did burn from head to toe!) I couldn't wait to get under water to put the fire out. When I was under water, I found I couldn't put the fire out. My backside was still on fire minutes later when I reached the poolside ladder. I slowly, step by step, made my way up and out of the water still on fire. I quickly towed off and thought it was time I went home to put ice on, maybe it would put the fire out. I was famous-for-a-moment that day. I felt like a fool.

My story from years ago has a message in it. You guessed the obvious one: Don't try this at home (or anywhere)! There's a deeper meaning though: It's a story from a time in life when foolish pride ruled my life. Where did it lead me? To do a humbling back flop. I ascended the ladder in my foolish strength and left the pool in my weakness. I have learned to walk more

humbly, my friends.

That is the lesson St. Paul learned: to walk humbly. Can you hear him testifying about what God had done in his life? “Look at me,” he would say, “I once persecuted the church. Look at me, a man who has to battle this humiliating affliction--this thorn in the flesh. Yet Christ has used me to plant churches all over the known world. Look at what God is doing!”

The Apostle Paul was a man of tremendous intellect. He was also a man of unquestionable persuasive powers. Perhaps if it had not been for his thorn in the flesh, he would have leaned upon his own ability rather than the power of God working through him. And you and I would never have heard the name of Paul of Tarsus.

That's the way life of faith works. Paul's weakness became his strength. His scar became a star. His hurt became a halo. And the same thing can happen to us--if we don't give into our weakness, and when our weakness causes us to rely upon God.