

## Embrace Your Humanity...

### *By Boasting More Gladly in Your Weakness*

2 Corinthians 12:7-10    David Sunday    January 22, 2017

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It's wonderful, Lord, that You welcome us like this—broken, desperate, empty, guilty. You welcome us with open arms. How we thank You, God, that You do not leave us to ourselves, but You so graciously come to us in Your compassion. We are a weak and needy people. We are not a strong church. We are a weak church. Thank You that You are the Lover of the lowly and the Helper of the weak. We want whatever happens here to be all about You.

So capture our hearts, Lord. Wherever we are proud and lifted up in our thoughts, work by Your Spirit that we might truly humble ourselves under Your mighty hand. O Lord, please have mercy on us, that we would not wait for You to come and humble us for that would be very painful. Help us to humble ourselves under Your mighty hand willingly. But thank You, Lord, that if we fail to do that, You have many ways of humbling those who walk in pride. We do not want our pride to keep us from You, God. So please give us broken and contrite hearts that tremble at Your Word. Draw near to us today for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please open your Bible to the Apostle Paul's most heartfelt, personal letter—2 Corinthians. This is a remarkable letter because it shows us this apostle—who could write the magnificent things he wrote about the gospel in books like Romans and Ephesians—and shows how he applied this gospel to his own life. We see how this magnificent gospel truth works itself out in Paul's ministry and his own personal experience.

We will read in chapter 12 some of the most remarkable words in all of Scripture. Only someone who has been captured by the glory of Jesus Christ could speak the way the Apostle Paul speaks here. Even as we read these words, there's a familiarity to them that might make us think we understand it. But I'm telling you today, friends, I don't yet get it, and I'm not yet living in the fullness of this truth. I need the Holy Spirit to work in me what He worked in Paul. I'm grateful the Holy Spirit is in our midst to do that for all of us today. You need this word, church. I need this word.

So let's ask God the Holy Spirit to be applying this teaching to our hearts as we read it. Oh, it's a dangerous thing to simply content ourselves with knowing more about the Bible—and

not seek to be letting the Bible live in us and its truths transforming us. I'm going to come right into the middle of Paul's paragraph here and read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

*<sup>7</sup> So to keep me from being too conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

God, thank You for Your living Word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in Your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Anyone feeling weak today? Utterly burdened beyond your strength? Wondering, "How am I going to go on?" Are you feeling as if you just do not have it within yourself to change the hearts of those who are near and dear to you—let alone your own heart? And you're thinking, "I cannot do gospel ministry—I'm too weak"? If you're feeling that way today, I say that is a good thing. That is a good thing.

God does not despise us in our weakness. It's what we were looking at last week in Psalm 103:13-14—He remembers what we forget. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. He knows how frail and feeble we are. And His knowledge of our frailty and feebleness does not repel Him from us—it draws Him to us in compassion. It's because He knows our weakness and remembers that we are but dust that He has compassion on us as a father does for his children. That's why He draws near to us with such mercy. That's the character of our God.

But that's not the character of humanity. When we think we're strong and we not someone who feels weak, we tend to scorn the weak, to look down on them and feel we have a right to be superior to them.

This is illustrated in the classic comic "Peanuts." Charlie Brown is all forlorn one day, feeling miserable as he so often does. Lucy sees him in this glum-looking condition and asks him, "What are you worrying about, Charlie Brown?"

Charlie says, "I feel inferior."

"Oh," says Lucy, "you shouldn't worry about that. Lots of people have that feeling."

"What—that they're inferior?" Charlie asks.

"No," Lucy replies, "that you're inferior."

We are afraid, aren't we, that God will treat us the same way; that He will rub in the wound of our weakness the salt of scorn and contempt. We think God doesn't want to get close to people like us. But the Bible says it's just the opposite. Sadly, the church is not always like God is on this. We in the church are people who become enamored with our own power. We want to think we're strong. We want to think our church is better than other churches. We want to think we have a right to have the best preacher and the best people and the best music and the best everything—because that's what we deserve. When we get like that, God has ways, doesn't He, of reminding us, "You are but dust."

In the church in Corinth, there were some shady characters coming into the midst of the people, trying to take over the leadership and put down the Apostle Paul himself. They claimed that they had had esoteric experiences, that they had gotten so close to God that people had better listen to them—because they were so strong spiritually. They started spreading stuff around to put down the Apostle Paul, things like we read in 2 Corinthians 10:10. Listen to what they were saying about the Apostle himself: *"They say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.'"*

How arrogant. How conceited, that a church that had the Apostle Paul as one of its founders—a church that got to hear him preach faith—had grown unimpressed with Paul himself. They didn't like the way he looked; they thought, "He's not a very good preacher." I'm going to tell you something. If Paul's not good enough for you, something's gone awry. They were looking down on Paul.

The amazing thing about this letter is that Paul doesn't hate these people. Paul doesn't distance himself from these people. He doesn't act aloof or defensive or sour in his attitude toward them. I don't know if I'd be like that. I want to be. But if there were a hundred people in this church rising up and trying to criticize the way I look and the way I preach, and so forth, I might get a little annoyed. I might act proud. I might become defensive. And that's why I need to hear what Paul says in this letter. I need it. I know it, but I don't know if I would live it the way Paul does.

Paul displays what J. I. Packer calls "unquenchable love and unconquerable hope" throughout this letter, even though he is being attacked, minimized, ignored, unappreciated, treated as inferior, seen as weak and unimpressive both physically and in his preaching. But Paul doesn't let it get to him. Paul was one of the rare preachers who was not worried about people thinking too lowly of him. He was much more concerned that people might think too highly of him—and thus they may not see the glory of Christ.

I want us to look at how Paul views weakness in this letter. I'm drawing on a wonderful sermon that our elder and friend Justin Taylor preached seven years ago at Grace Community Bible Church. It was the weekend my wife Kate ended up in the hospital with her new diagnosis of cancer, so Justin agreed to preach at the last minute. He brought a wonderful sermon on weakness, saying these words: "The weakness of your frame is to show the power of His name." I think that's a great statement. "The weakness of your frame is to show the power of Jesus' name."

If we were a black church, we'd be interacting about this right now, okay? The weakness of your frame is to show the what? The power of Whose name? Jesus' name. Let's say it together. "The weakness of my frame is to show the power of His name." Paul believed this. This was his philosophy of life.

Look back at chapter four, verse seven. In the song "Receive the Glory," we say these words: "We are only jars of clay that hold a priceless treasure." That's what we confess and it comes from 2 Corinthians 4:7: "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*" What is this treasure of which Paul is speaking? Looking back to verse three, we see what it is. It's the gospel—the good news of God Who comes down to sinful people. He shares in their humanity, lives the perfect life that they failed to live, and then goes to the cross and dies so all our sins can be forgiven through His death. Then they bury Him, and it's utter weakness, and it looks like God has lost.

But on the third day the stone is rolled away from His tomb, and up from the grave Jesus rises in resurrection life and power! That's the gospel message. And because Jesus died and rose from the dead, He has the power now to forgive of our sins and transform us from weak, dying people into people who are going to experience everlasting resurrection life. Paul says, "This is a treasure! This message is alive and powerful." Verse three: "*Even if our gospel is veiled,*" even if people can't see it, "*it is veiled only to those who are perishing.*"

There's a real enemy who really doesn't want people to see the good news of the gospel. Verse four: "*In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*" This enemy is active in the world today, and I'm telling you right now there is a battle going on. Satan does not want you to see Jesus as all glorious. He does not want you to believe that the greatest treasure in the world is to know Jesus and to experience His love and power in your life. He wants you to think that what you're going to eat for lunch and what you're going to do this afternoon and the money you're going to make this week and the people you're going to hang out with—all of that is way more important than what you're hearing right now from the Word of

God. Satan is trying to blind your mind from seeing that Jesus Christ is glorious and that He is more to be desired than anything in this world.

Then Paul says, “We’re all about proclaiming Christ.” Verses five and six:

*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

He’s come and done a miracle, giving us new life, Paul says. Knowing this and experiencing this is the greatest treasure anyone could ever attain in this world. Now, if you were custodian of a great treasure—like the world’s most beautiful diamond, for instance—and you were told you need to find a container for this treasure, you probably wouldn’t put it in an Aldi bag. You would put it in a crystal container with a black velvet backdrop, because you want that great treasure to look nice.

But there’s always the danger, isn’t there, that the container could become so impressive in its appearance that you miss the glory of what’s inside. So sometimes it’s the contrast that shows the glory of the treasure. And what Paul is saying is that’s the way God has decided it should be with the gospel. God doesn’t want to take any risk that people would think the vessel carrying the treasure is the treasure, or that the vessel that carries the treasure is better than the treasure.

So God has chosen people like us—who are very weak and vulnerable, who on the outside aren’t very impressive, who sometimes feel as if we’re about to fall apart at the hinges—God chooses crack-pots like us to carry the treasure of His gospel. Jars of clay—that’s who we are. Not many noble, not many mighty, not many wise, not many impressive—God doesn’t choose a lot of people like that (1 Corinthians 1:26). He chooses people like you and me, who are very ordinary and very weak. And He does that very intentionally, so that the treasure of the gospel can be seen.

We need to understand that our weakness is not going to thwart the accomplishment of God’s purposes in this world. I want you to be encouraged by something this weekend. I want you to believe that there is nothing that is going to stop God’s purposes from being accomplished in this world. Nothing is going to stop God from getting His work done. You can trust that. You can rest in that.

Your weakness isn’t going to stop Him from getting His work done. In fact, your weakness is the vehicle through which He is going to advance His work in this world. The weaker you feel—the weaker you are—the more you will depend on Him and the more His glory will be

seen. So we say again, “The weakness of my frame is to show the glory, the power, of His name.” Paul believed this.

What was weakness like for Paul? Well, don’t think he’s talking about something like, “I have a weakness for girls,” or a weakness for drugs or alcohol or, “I am just weak, so I give in to sin.” That’s not what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking not about being lazy or mediocre or passive. He’s talking about the experience he’s having in seeking to live for Jesus in this world and the effect that all these trials are having on him—his limitations, his humanity, the heartache he goes through.

Let’s walk through 2 Corinthians a little bit and see some of the ways Paul describes his weakness. We’ll start with chapter one, beginning with verse eight: *“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”*

This is the great apostle Paul speaking. He’s saying, “There are times in gospel ministry when I am so utterly beyond my strength that I feel as if I’m about to die.” He says in verse nine, *“Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”*

I would say, friends, if you never feel this way in light of your life for Jesus, it’s probably because you’re not wholeheartedly seeking to live for Jesus in this world. If you are wholeheartedly seeking to live for Jesus and make Him known, there are going to be times when your strength is utterly exhausted. Your internal strength is going to feel like it’s gone. You’re going to feel what you imagine death feels like. But you’re also going to experience resurrection life.

Let’s go to chapter four again. After Paul tells us that this gospel treasure is in jars of clay, in verse eight he starts describing some of the weakening experiences he’s gone through. Notice that it’s like a paradox. He experiences weakness, death. He also experiences God’s resurrection life. Just like Jesus on the cross Who dies and then rises, that same pattern is being worked out in Paul’s life. So 2 Corinthians 4:8: *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed...”* Living for Jesus in this world will make you perplexed at times. The church will make you perplexed at times.

*...but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

This is gospel ministry, Paul says. It's a life of dying, but it's also a life of experiencing resurrection. Then look at chapter six and let's zoom in on verse eight, as he describes more of his experiences. He says they were going through "*...honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true.*" Some people thought Paul was a fraud, a fake. It's not fun to be treated like that by people. "*As unknown,*" just a nobody, "*and yet well known.*" God knows us. "*As dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.*" That's our experience in this world. It's a lot of weakness. It's a lot of difficulty.

Then let's look at one more passage before we go back to chapter 12. In 2 Corinthians 11, beginning at verse 21, Paul starts talking about all the dangers he had experienced, a litany of undeserved dangers. Verses 23-30:

*Far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

As I'm hearing all this, I'm asking myself, "David, do you understand even the faintest glimpse of what Paul is experiencing here? Are you getting this?" Sam Storms says, "Weakness is feeling deep within your soul and body the frailty of your creatureliness and your utter inadequacy to accomplish anything apart from the fresh and sustaining supply of power and grace."

Okay. I get that. I've felt that. I have felt deep within my soul and body the frailty of my creatureliness and my utter inadequacy to accomplish anything apart from the fresh and sustaining supply of God's power and God's grace. I have felt that. And if I'm reading Paul correctly, God is saying to us through Paul that He wants us to be feeling that all the time. He wants us to be embracing as the norm in the Christian life the fact that we are frail creatures,

utterly inadequate to accomplish anything apart from the fresh and sustaining supply of His power and grace.

There should never be a moment when I do not feel that in my Christian life. There should never be a time when a church says, “We can handle this ministry for a while. We’re doing pretty well,” patting ourselves on the back, thinking we’ve got it. “We’ve got this, God.” God says, “No, you don’t. You are ever utterly inadequate to accomplish anything apart from the fresh and sustaining supply of My power and grace.” So we need to incessantly, consciously depend on the strength that God supplies. And if we’re not—if we think we’re strong enough—we are utterly weak. It’s when we’re weak that we’re strong.

Let’s look back at chapter 12 and see what Paul is doing here. Paul has had a remarkable experience that he talks about in the first few verses of this chapter. He brings it up because his critics are all talking about their esoteric experiences, saying, “We’re better than you, Paul.” Paul says to them, kind of tongue in cheek, “Actually, I’ve been caught up into the third heaven and I’ve seen the glory of God in a way that would blow your socks off. If you want to compare notes about who’s experienced God’s glory in Christ, I’ve got some stories I could tell. But I’m not going to do that.”

The reason Paul will not boast of things like that is because he does not want to obscure the glory of Jesus. He is way more concerned that people would think much of Christ than that they would think much of him. And God did something in Paul’s life to keep him from being puffed up and conceited by the experiences of Christ that he has had. We read about it in verse seven: *“So to keep me from becoming conceited by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”*

You can read hundreds of pages about what that thorn is. The clearest thing we can say from the Bible is that God didn’t get very specific in telling us what this thorn was—because that’s not the point. This thorn that Paul was given was painful. It was something that caused Paul to plead with Jesus three times for its removal. It was something that was given to him by God—we see that in verse seven: *“...a thorn was given me in the flesh...”* In other words, “God entrusted this thorn to me.”

But it was also God using Satan as a messenger, sort of similar to what we read in the book of Job. God’s intentions for this thorn were different from Satan’s intentions. We’re not sure what the thorn was. Perhaps it was a physical malady or something internal that Paul was struggling with or human enemies. I think there’s good reason to believe it was some kind of painful physical malady that Paul had to deal with, but again, that’s beside the point. The point is



God wanted this thorn to have a humbling effect on Paul's life. It was to keep him from being conceited. Satan, on the other hand, wanted this thorn to drive Paul crazy, to harass him, to torment him. And Paul pleads with the Lord for its removal.

Weakness and pain and suffering and sickness—these aren't things we're just supposed to stoically endure. We can cry out to Jesus, Who hears us, for their removal. But the response of Jesus is, "I'm going to bring you relief, Paul—but not in the way you're looking for. You want that thorn taken away. I'm not going to do that just yet. But here's what I'm going to do to bring relief." Verse nine: *"He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"*

The verb there, "He said," is in the perfect tense. In other words, He said it once, but it's something that continues to hold true. It was something He wants us to hear over and over again, and it's not just for Paul—it's for us too. God is saying to us, "My grace..." In other words, the grace of God is not just a commodity that God gives—it's Jesus Himself, His presence with us. His presence in our lives is sufficient for whatever we're facing, and His power will continue to be made perfect in our weakness. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ with His people is going to be like a never-ending river replenishing itself, continuing to fill us with everything we need to live for Him in this world. That's what He wants us to hold on to. And it's when we are at our weakest that we find ourselves most hungry and dependant and crying out for His presence in our lives.

Justin pointed us to a little poem by a lady named Martha Nicholson, called "The Thorn." It uses a word "mendicant," and I didn't know what that meant. I had to look it up. It means beggar. Listen to what she says:

I stood a mendicant of God before His royal throne  
And begged Him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.  
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart  
I cried, "But Lord, this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.  
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which Thou hast given me."  
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."  
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,  
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.  
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,  
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face.

That thorn is what causes us to see more clearly, "My grace, all-sufficient shall be your supply. Do not fear your weakness. Embrace it as an opportunity to experience My presence and My power."

What does that look like—embracing weakness—for our church and for our individual lives? First, for our church. I believe every church has a tone that people can hear and an aroma—a fragrance—that people can smell when they get in the room. It’s possible to be a Bible church that loves the Word, that loves learning the Word, yet boasts in knowledge and distinctiveness; boasts in separation from the world. We can actually start feeling like we’re a little bit better. We’re pretty special. We’re pretty powerful.

When people come into a church that feels that way—whether we say it or not, whether we agree with what Paul is saying here or not—they know what we really believe. Do we believe we are weak and our only strength is in Him? Or do we believe that we’re pretty special? I want us to be this kind of church. William B. Sprague, in his Lectures on Revivals of Religion, says this:

Wherever God’s people have been truly humbled before Him, and have been brought deeply to feel their own impotence, and have been willing to be used as mere instruments, and to let Him have all the glory—there you will find that a rich blessing has usually been bestowed.

May that be the fragrance people smell here, the tone people hear. “Here are people who’ve truly been humbled. Here are people who really feel their own impotence. Here are people who have been willing to be used as mere instruments. Here are people who give God the glory—all the glory.” When people find that kind of church, they find a church where something mighty is happening, where power is being made perfect in weakness, because God gets the glory. May we be that kind of church.

Then as individuals, there are really two types of people in the world. There are lots of people in this world—the majority of us—who are very worried about how other people think of them and very concerned that people are not going to think as highly of them as they want. So they use all kinds of disguises to hide their weaknesses and to accentuate what they think is powerful and strong about them. So there’s that kind of person who’s always thinking, “I hope people don’t look down on me and I’m going to make sure they don’t.”

Then there’s another rare bird, like Paul, whose greatest concern is not that people are going to think too lowly of him, but rather he didn’t want people to think too highly of him. He didn’t want to obscure the glory of Christ. I’m not sure where I’m at on that spectrum from day to day. I see a mix in my own heart. That’s why I need to listen to what Paul is saying here.

Let me tell you something that happened three weeks ago, on Tuesday, January 3rd. I had a great day—a great morning, a great afternoon. Around 4:30 I went home and was getting

ready to meet some people from our church to see that movie we talked about in December. Then I started feeling really funny in my stomach. I thought, “No, I’m going to keep going.” I ran and felt worse. Then I went to Chick-fil-A and felt horrible and thought, “I should not have eaten what I just ate.” We went to the movie anyway and I made it about a half hour in—and had to leave. I was home in a fetal position in bed for about 36 hours straight. Weakness. Weakness. Weakness.

By Friday morning I was starting to feel better. I hadn’t done anything to prepare to preach that Sunday. I was too sick. I got a text from Dan Huff saying, “We were with Doug Dunton and he would love to preach on Sunday, if that would help you.” My first response was, “No...because all those people will think I’m a slacker if I don’t preach this week. I didn’t preach last week. If I don’t preach this week, they’re going to think, ‘What’s happening? He’s slacking off.’” I did not want to glory in weakness. I wanted you to think, “He’s capable. He’s adequate.”

About a half hour into that goofiness, I started thinking, “Well, what about Doug? He hasn’t been here much and he won’t be here much in the coming months. He loves our church. Wouldn’t it be nice for him to be able to preach here?” Then I started thinking, “Well, what about you? Wouldn’t it be good for you to hear from Doug Dunton and what he has to share from God’s Word? After all, I don’t want to be the headliner here. I want God to be the One Who is on display.” Then I got to thinking, “Well, what about me? I actually am pretty weak still and I could use the rest.”

So after this internal struggle and some help from a couple elders, I decided to boast all the more gladly in my weakness and let Doug preach. I don’t know what it looks like for you this very day, but I’m going to ask you to bow right now before the Lord and talk to Him about this. Can you be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, because you know that when you are weak, you are strong?

I want you to tell God right now an area of weakness that you’re very conscious of in your life, an area of frailty and weakness that you’re ashamed to embrace. I want you to tell Him where you’ve been playing some games, acting stronger than you really are. And I want you to receive from Him this word: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

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