

It's the most dreaded question of the job interview: "Tell me," the interviewer asks, "what's your greatest weakness?" How do you answer that question? If you don't come up with something, you sound arrogant, but if you come clean with your weakness, you might not get hired.

Monster.com, the job search website, describes a variety of strategies for answering the weakness question. One approach is to disguise our weakness as a strength. I interviewed a guy once for an adult ministry position. I asked him his weakness and he said he wore his emotions on his sleeve. It actually sounded like a strength to me for a people-ministry position. But then a little ways into the interview he started to cry, so the interview ended pretty quickly.

Another strategy is to minimize your weakness by explaining how you've already overcome it; I think I have done this in interviews: "I can remember saying, "No one who knows me would say that details and administrative organization are my strength. But I overcome this by keeping many good administrative types around me gainfully employed." I don't recommend this strategy!

Another strategy is to share a real weakness, but make sure it is completely irrelevant to the position being hired. I hired a youth pastor one time who told me his weakness was accounting. If he could gather kids and share Jesus with them, I didn't care if he knew a debit from a credit.

Revealing our biggest weakness is one of the last things in the world we want to do. That's why we fill our resumes with degrees earned, awards received, and professional accomplishments. Ever notice that there are no weakness or liability sections on resumes?

We know we have weaknesses. Paul tells us we are jars of clay, not designer vases made of fine china. We are not stainless steel pots that never scratch, rust or dent. We are ordinary, fragile and imperfect vessels that happen to carry within us a treasure called the life of Christ. As long as we have Christ in us we are unbreakable, even in the face of hardships, heartache and need. We don't have to deny or disguise those weaknesses in us. On the contrary, we can own our weaknesses and allow God to turn them into strengths as only He can.

What do we mean by weaknesses? When I speak of weaknesses, I am not referring to our sinful choices we make when we are disobedient to God. By weaknesses, I mean things that are upon

us that cripple us, that steal our joy, that wear us out, that hinder us from serving God.

The weaknesses Paul is talking about here are obstacles we wish we didn't have to deal with in this life, circumstances we know God can take away. It could be a physical ailment that holds us back, a relationship challenge beyond what we can handle, a burden we carry that continues to cause suffering. These weaknesses are things in your quiet times of reflection and prayer we ask God to remove. And you fantasize how great life would be if God took them away, but you feel helpless because you are powerless to change anything.

So why would we talk about these weaknesses in a series called, Basecamp: Essential Tools for the Journey? How could a weakness actually be a tool to help us walk the journey to follow Christ? Because when we lay these weaknesses before God, they become opportunities for God to work in clay pots like us and for His glory to shine in contrast. Paul says earlier in his letter, "God's strength is made perfect in our weakness."

As you continue your journey to follow Christ, I can almost guarantee that you will have stretches on this journey that seem like you are struggling up a steep hill with no end in sight. You will have stretches when the trail seems unstable and you fear falling. You will have stretches when you look up and down the trail and see no one and feel so alone.

When we feel weak, when we are suffering, we have many more questions than answers. This passage is for all of us this morning who need reassurance when hardship, persecution, unfairness and physical limitations have weakened us. This is a passage to remind us about what matters to God and how our weakness fits into His grand purposes.

It's hard to wrap our arms around the idea that our weaknesses may be at the center of God's great purposes. It's hard to consider that the uncomfortable season we are in right now may be the launch pad for God to do His greatest work through us. I've heard theologians refer to the place where we receive God's uncomfortable grace.

In 2nd Corinthians 12 we will see this uncomfortable grace play out in the Apostle Paul. Even Paul had weaknesses. Paul had to figure it out, humble himself and accept them. And when he did, he saw God's power and grace displayed through his weaknesses. I pray we will see God's power and grace displayed through our weaknesses. Our big take away today is that:

God Turns Our Weaknesses into His Strengths

As we open to 2nd Corinthians 12, we might be wondering if Paul actually had any weaknesses. From the world's standpoint he didn't. Paul had the mother of all resumes. It was full of strengths; he could win a bragging match with anyone.

But at this point in Paul's journey as a traveling church planter, he got into trouble just about everywhere he went. He had more enemies than friends. In fact, he had rivals in the Corinthian church questioning his credibility as the leader of the movement. He found himself in the awkward position of persuading his readers of his credentials for ministry.

And he apologizes for having to do that. He says, I know I sound foolish doing this but bear with me because I want to make a point. If my opponents want to boast in worldly resumes then I can boast too. Those who question me, are they Hebrew? Well, I am too. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am too.

Paul Displays a Resume Worthy of Boasting

Then he worked his way down the resume to the section on experience. Back in chapter 11 he highlights some of these. He said to his opponents, "I have had far greater labors, far more imprisonments and beatings, often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jewish authorities, the forty lashes minus one. I was threatened by bandits, I was in danger on land and at sea. I was shipwrecked. In Lystra I was stoned and left for dead. I have gone without sleep, food or water. I have been cold and naked. I went through the worst humiliation when I, a grown man, was about to be arrested and was put in a basket and lowered down from an upstairs window so I could escape."

In other words, Paul says, "You want to boast in pedigree? I can keep up with you. You want to talk about persecution? I can outdo you. You want to speak of performance? I've done all right. You want to talk pressure? I've stood up underneath it. Okay, so you want to talk about spiritual experiences? Let me talk to you about visions and revelations."

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to 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, things that no one is permitted to tell (2 Cor. 12:1-4).

In Acts 9, we read that Paul has seen the risen Jesus on the Damascus road. Here he tells us that there were many occasions when he had visions from the Lord and the Lord had appeared and showed him things and taught him. Now Paul gives us a dramatic point on his resume. In a strange twist he switches to the third person as though it happened to someone else. I am not sure why, because we will read in verse 7 that he himself experienced these visions.

If you do the math, this amazing experience likely happened sometime between 40-44 AD. It is possible it happened during that time he was stoned at Lystra and left for dead. We don't know the exact time, but we do know that Paul was genuinely caught up in heaven. He didn't know if it was an out-of-body experience or if he was physically transported to a third heaven.

What is the third heaven? This third heaven was a reference to the Jewish belief about the structure of the universe. They believed there were three heavens. The first was the atmosphere around the earth, the sky and clouds. The second was the stars, the sun and moon. The third was the invisible realm. This is where God's throne was, and they called it paradise. It was a dimension invisible to our physical senses. That is where Paul says he was taken.

Think about this. Paul experienced paradise and then had to come back to earth. It must have been better than anything we can imagine. Maybe it was one of those things when he returned he said, "Did that really happen to me?"; so strange and foreign to him that he spoke about it in 3rd person instead of 1st person. Paul had heard things. He had seen things. He had learned things about life and heaven. And the things he experienced were so heavenly that he couldn't form earthly words to describe them.

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, or because of these surpassingly great revelations (verses 5-7a).

He boasts because these spiritual experiences were true. But he wants to separate himself from that piece on his resume. His heart was about God working through his weaknesses. It's as if Paul is saying, "Let's get past all this resume stuff. I want you to see the real me. I am weak, and I need grace every day. Let me boast about the grace of God. Let me boast about what God taught me in my weaknesses."

Paul Displays a Weakness

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 (verses 7b-8).

Bible scholars speculate about what Paul means by a "thorn in the flesh." The word thorn translates as a word used to describe a sharp instrument that causes pain, lodged deeply, and was difficult to remove. So this thorn was not a minor "pain in the neck." Rather this was a chronic source of pain and anguish so debilitating that it hindered him from serving Christ. Some people suggest it was a spiritually dark place that Paul went at different times on his journey. That's unlikely because in the next few verses, Paul actually speaks of the positive affects of this thorn. Some suggest it was an emotional struggle such as bouts of depression or anxiety. But the word for flesh in the original language seems to suggest that his weakness was some kind of

physical ailment or disability. Then we can speculate about what it was. Was it poor eyesight, migraines, arthritis, or some injury that came from persecution? There is evidence in the epistles that Paul may have had some chronic stomach problems.

Whatever it was. Paul didn't like it and he didn't want it. He prayed repeatedly that it would be taken from him so he could serve Christ. Paul was a man of prayer, he had healed others, and he believed that God would take this thorn away from him.

This is a good lesson for us. We should pray with the same hope. It's right for us to pray and push back against things that hinder us from serving Christ. We should pray for the sick knowing God does heal. We should pray for deliverance for those in bondage because we know God sets people free. Sometimes it's God's plan to take the thorn and sometimes it's not. Like Paul, we too will learn on this journey to accept God's sovereign will and that it will be strength for the journey.

In verse 7, Paul told us the purpose of the thorn: so he would be kept from becoming conceited because of those great revelations. What might be the greatest enemy to our serving Christ? It's self and pride. And God may choose to give us weaknesses to increase our dependence on Him in order to beat down the pride in our lives.

He also says the thorn was a messenger from Satan. We know that Satan is a known thief who wants to rob us of our health and strength. We know Satan is a destroyer who wants to harass, annoy, and keep constantly digging at us. Yet, at the same time Satan delivered the thorn, God was superintending the process. We see here that God allowed Satan to inflict the thorn in order to accomplish God's higher purpose.

What is that higher purpose? That we would die to our abilities. That we would be brought to a place where we see that He is the one who opens and closes doors. Paul had to be puzzled. He kept asking. And we don't know when the answer came, but it came. God responds to Paul's plea by saying to him, "No Paul, I'm not going to remove that from you, but my grace is sufficient."

God's Grace and Power is Displayed in Paul's Weakness

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 (v. 9).

The phrasing is like what a sovereign king would give as his final edict. We need to know for the journey that we will all experience moments when, after persistent and believing prayer, it becomes evident that God is doing something we can't understand and wouldn't choose. Then like Paul, we turn our attention from our inability to change things to the reality that God's grace is sufficient to intervene in our circumstances. At some point in Paul's journey he was given the tool he needed. It was

uncomfortable grace, and here is how Paul applied the tool of uncomfortable grace.

So the thorn remains, but the power of Christ is displayed in Paul and through Paul.

What does it mean when Jesus says to us, "My grace is sufficient for you?" It means that God's grace is delivered to us when we surrender to Him our weakness. It's present tense, so God's grace is to be appropriated and applied to our "thorn" every day to enable us to cope with our thorn. It comes in the right amount at the right time. What does God's grace look like? It looks like the presence and power of God taking over and carrying us through the rough stretch of the journey. And this power of Christ in Paul allows him to gladly boast not in his resume, but in his weaknesses.

Here are questions Paul had to be asking related to his weakness, and we should ask the same. Do I believe that I am entitled not to have a thorn? Can I accept that there can be some God-honoring purpose that can come through a thorn? Can I really experience a deep level of intimacy with Christ if I never go through some form of suffering in this life that requires me to trust God more?

The calling of God may include a thorn. This is not because God's plan has failed. This is not because God has been unfaithful, or weak, or forgetful of my situation. This is not because the world is out of control or Satan isn't tethered on a leash.

I know my need to trust God in tough stretches of the journey has brought ugly things to the surface in my life. Ugly things like pride, self righteousness, my judgment of others, my sense of entitlement, of envy, all ugly things that need to come to a head and be lanced like a boil and drained out of me.

A great question for us to ask is, "If God is about removing ugly things in my life why wouldn't he allow thorns?" Unless I am taken to places beyond what I can control... unless I am taken beyond things I can comfortably manage... how else can I trust that God's grace is sufficient and that His strength is made perfect in my weakness?

That God would love me so much that He would push me to toward more humility. That God would love me so much that He would use a thorn to get me to abandon my own wisdom, intellect, and energy. That He would love me so much that He wouldn't give up on me until I would boast in Christ from my position of weakness. This is grace.

This is uncomfortable. But it is an essential tool for the journey because we are called to be displayers of God's power and grace from our position of weakness. This is a sacred calling to be messengers that God's grace is sufficient. So be encouraged. Be confident. While we endure thorns we are assured that Christ still reigns as Lord.

Finally Paul reveals one more thing that displays God's grace and power in his life. This is just amazing that he could react to a weakness with this attitude.

Paul Delights Because His Weakness Makes Him Strong

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (v. 10).

Paul in reality is weak. This is the truth about him. And this is the truth about us. It's a simple ordinary weakness caused by the tough stuff of life that we are called to face every day. Paul's weakness is simply the ordinary weakness of a servant of God weary to the bone and limp from serving others with weaknesses. And he finds that he can somehow delight in weakness because God accomplishes His purposes and then he is strong.

We will all experience moments when, after persistent and believing prayer, it becomes evident that God is doing something we can't understand and wouldn't choose. We should recognize that God has a greater purpose in mind. Then we will discover that God's grace is sufficient for the experience.

Joni Eareckson Tada was an athletic young woman who broke her neck diving into the shallow waters of the Chesapeake Bay and was paralyzed from the neck down. In that moment, she lost nearly all her physical abilities. Even the simplest of chores became impossible for her. Along with physical disability came emotional despair and spiritual struggles. She was depressed and suicidal and railed at God for allowing such a thing to happen. But at her lowest point, when it seemed that absolutely everything had been taken away from her, she turned to Christ and discovered that His grace was enough for her.

For a time she asked God to take it away. What a testimony it would be if she were healed! Think of all she could accomplish if she wasn't stuck in a wheelchair. But at a certain point, Joni accepted that God's will for her life included a wheelchair. She began to understand that God could accomplish more through her weakness than through her healing.

For three decades now God has been doing just that. His power has been made perfect in her weakness. Through her 30 books, her artwork, her speaking, and her organization she has touched the lives of millions of people. Confined to a wheelchair, with virtually no physical strength whatsoever, she has changed the world. God's grace has been enough for Joni, but she's had to take hold of that grace every day.

How do we take hold of God's grace? Once we accept our situation as God's will, we must take hold of all of God's resources—his strength, joy, and peace. We have permission to take hold of God's grace. We have permission to actively take hold of it

because it became available to us when we invited Christ into our lives. There's nothing passive about Paul's response to his thorn in the flesh. He endured it. He boasted in it. He delighted in it because God's grace makes him strong. And he knows that God can accomplish things through his weakness that could not have been accomplished through his strengths.

Joni tells a story of being in a ladies' restroom during a Christian women's conference. A well meaning woman who was putting on lipstick in front of the mirror said to her, "Oh, Joni, you always look so together, so happy in your wheelchair. I wish I had your joy!" Several women around nodded, "Yes, how do you do it?" they asked.

Joni replied, "I don't do it. Let me tell you how it works. After my husband, Ken, leaves for work at 6:00am, I'm alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00am. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, 'Oh, Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, dress me, sit me up in a chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't even have a smile to take into the day. But you do, Lord. May I have yours? God, I need you desperately.'"

"So what happens, then, when your friend comes through the bedroom door?" one of the women asked.

"I turn my head toward her and give her a smile sent straight from heaven. It's not mine. It's God's. And so," she said, gesturing to her paralyzed legs, "whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning."

God's uncomfortable grace has been enough for Joni, but she had to grab a hold of it every day. And so do we. Has it ever occurred to you that the very thing you want most removed from your life might be the very thing God uses in the greatest way for His glory?

Lord willing, not many of us will have to deal with the things Joni deals with on a daily basis. But we all have weaknesses, scratches and dents. We are all just clay pots, ordinary and fragile. But God loves the ordinary. God loves working through the ordinary. Because when the ordinary has to surrender their weaknesses, they become strengths that display God's resume. And that is exactly what can happen while we walk this journey until Christ returns to remove our weaknesses and takes us home to be with Him.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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