



HIDDEN STRENGTH

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Federal Way, WA
June 27, 2010*

Since our summer series is called “Life in Flip Flops,” I thought you might want to see the world’s most expensive pair. Any guesses what these went for? Would you believe \$17,000? Personally, I feel cheated if I spend more than \$20 on flip flops, and they better be really comfortable.

I don’t think these shoes are really for wearing, though. They’re a one-of-a-kind pair with 1,500 little feathers made out of real gold. The straps are lined with diamonds. So I doubt you’ll run into anyone running around in these on the beach. They’re nice to look at, but not the kind you’d feel like you could live in for the summer.

What we’re calling flip flops in this series are the truths of Scripture that completely reverse our thinking. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. The last will be first. Jesus was constantly surprising his followers and turning their world upside down with what he said and did.

We can hear those things and treat them like that \$17,000 pair of flip flops -- beautiful concepts that we’d never want to actually wear. Ideals for a perfect world that might get messy in ours. But they are intended to be part of our everyday wardrobe. Jesus is calling us to walk a radically different path than we would choose on our own.

Sometimes we lose sight of just how shocking of a presence Jesus was when he was on earth. The author Dorothy Sayers once said,

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah...”

Read through the gospels sometime and try to count up all the times Jesus surprised someone or caught them off guard or turned the conversation on its head. He does something unexpected on almost every page. His very existence – God in a human form -- defied logic. Walter Wink once said, “If Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him.”

If Christ cut across the grain, then we as his followers are called to do the same. The church is here to offer the world a radically different, dramatically better picture of

reality. We have a hope that doesn't look like anything else out there. And in order to convey that, we have to reorient our own lives around the paradox Jesus constantly presents to us. We have to learn to live in the flip flops.

Last week we looked at the world's idea of greatness in comparison to what Jesus said was great. We gravitate toward power and influence, and he held up a child as an example of greatness. In God's view, we have worth not because of our power but because we're his.

This morning we're going to head over to the book of 2 Corinthians to talk about a flip flop Paul discovered. The church in Corinth was being heavily influenced by some flashy preachers who had come through town after Paul. They were way more polished and compelling in their speaking style, but they were more sizzle than steak. Paul was warning the church to not be impressed by the wrong things.

Then he proceeded to lay out some of his own credentials and why he had the authority to say what he was saying. And he shared with them something he rarely talked about – secret visions God had given him. He was caught up into heaven and saw amazing things he wasn't even allowed to talk about. It had happened 14 years earlier and was still fresh in his mind.

But what was equally fresh was what happened to him after the visions, and that's where I want to pick up the story this morning. Paul tells the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me 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. 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. 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.

If you've ever been on a job interview, you may have had to answer the question, "So what would you say is your greatest weakness?" It's a tricky question, and the unwritten rule for answering it well is to come up with something that SOUNDS like a weakness but that really makes you look good. "I'm too much of a workaholic. My last boss could barely get me to go home at night." "I guess I'd say I'm kind of a perfectionist and I'm not happy unless I do my job right." "I'm not a very good delegator, I feel so responsible for my work." "I never seem to be able to use up my sick leave."

Paul didn't really learn that technique for winning people over. Here he is trying to convince the Corinthians to stick with him and not the other "super apostles". He had a good thing going with all that talk about special visions. That sounds impressive. Then he turns the conversation and very candidly shares about his weakness. Not pretend

weakness – the real kind. And he would have us believe that the weakness itself is more valuable on his resume than the fact that he had secret revelations.

Two things I know: One, I don't like feeling weak. That would not be my chosen state to live in. Two, I wouldn't say when I'm weak I am strong. I would say when I'm weak, I'm weak. When I don't feel well, I'm more likely to be crabby. When I feel insecure about my own abilities, I'm more likely to be critical of others. Weakness seems to beget additional weakness in me – not strength.

Yet Paul discovered this apparent contradiction that weakness makes possible. Where my own frailty is most evident, Christ's power can also be most evident. It's not true automatically: my weakness can remain just that – a weakness. But if I choose to look for him, I will find Christ waiting for me in the least likely spot.

We don't know a whole lot about the specific weakness Paul was suffering from. There's been a lot of speculation about whether it was his eyesight or some type of temptation he was plagued by or even a person who kept giving him flak. The way he describes it makes it sound like it was probably something physical. We know it was definitely **painful**. He calls it his thorn in the flesh. If you've ever had a thorn you couldn't remove, you know how even something that small can really hurt and become a huge distraction.

Paul also recognized that this weakness had a **spiritual** dimension. He acknowledges that it was given to him by God, but that it was also a messenger of Satan. Here we have a mystery that is hard to grasp. Why would God put something inherently evil in Paul's life?

I don't know that I have all the answers to that question. What I would say this morning is that God is bigger than Satan and his goodness overrides the devil's badness. And while Satan might think he's attacking someone with one goal in mind, God is really allowing it to help move someone toward his goal. As John Piper once put it, "The devil himself becomes the unwitting teacher of God's word."

Remember when Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers? When he confronted them later, he said,

Genesis 50:20

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good...

God is fully capable of repurposing things in our life that Satan would try to use to other ends.

Regardless of how he does that, one thing is clear. Weakness has the potential to be spiritually harmful or spiritually helpful. Oswald Chambers said, "Sorrow burns up a great amount of shallowness, but it does not always make a man better. Suffering either gives me myself, or it destroys myself." As a "messenger of Satan," the weakness could

have derailed Paul. But Paul clearly saw God's sovereign hand behind it, and that enabled him to view his weakness as more than a tool of the devil – it was a tool of the devil that had been hijacked by God for Paul's good.

The other fact we know for sure about Paul's struggle is that it was a **chronic** condition. It wasn't going away anytime soon, and he was having to adjust to it becoming the "new normal." Accepting a reality like that can be hard.

It was the new normal because the problem was **unfixable** by Paul. Remember – this is the guy who healed people with his touch. This is the guy who prayed and brought somebody back to life. This is the guy who survived an attack by a deadly snake with no side effects, who lived through shipwrecks and saw earthquakes break his chains when he was in jail. He is someone accustomed to seeing miracles happen when he prayed.

But in this case, he is unable to pray out the weakness. What he has done for others, he cannot do for himself. He says he approached God three times about it, and you can bet it was some intense praying. He pleaded and begged for God to change things, but he didn't.

So not only is Paul aware of the pain he feels from the thorn in the flesh – now he's aware of his own inability to make it go away. It's another layer of weakness for him to grapple with. I might add, if you have been looking at your own unchanging weakness and thinking the problem must be that you're not worthy enough for God to fix it, remember Paul.

Taking those four characteristics – painful, spiritual, chronic and unfixable – we can look at our own lives for areas of weakness that might also be ripe for Christ's activity. What is the pain I'm experiencing right now? Maybe it is physical. Maybe it is emotional. What is limiting my ability to enjoy life and function in a healthy way?

How do I know if there's a spiritual dimension to it? When Paul describes the messenger of Satan and says it was there to torment him, the word he uses is very graphic and means to punch with the fist. He was hit hard. So here is this messenger, a deliverer of messages and these messages are beating him up. I think that's a good way to identify weakness that the enemy is trying to use. What negative messages am I taking in that are knocking me around? What is causing me to feel like I'm getting beat down? That is a spiritual side of weakness.

Maybe I've been living with something for a long time and it's just part of the furniture now. What is the chronic pain that has outlasted my prayers about it?

And, is there something that I've realized I just can't solve, no matter how hard I try to fix it? It could be a broken relationship. It could be something about my own personality or temperament that I feel limits me, or circumstances I've had no choice in creating. What am I dealing with that I have no control over?

Add all those components up and you could be facing some serious discouragement. To have long-term difficulties you can't change can lead to despair, because the situation feels hopeless. But Paul felt there was tremendous hope. A pathway to strength was hidden deep within the weakness.

Initially, Paul prayed repeatedly for God to take away the problem, and I think that's always a legitimate place for our prayer to begin. We believe in a powerful God who can and does perform miracles. And if he gives us complete victory over something, hallelujah. I know plenty of people who have seen God bring a complete cure to a physical ailment or total release from a temptation that has haunted them or emotional healing of some very deep wounds. God is still the God of deliverance and rescue.

But what happens to our faith when he doesn't? Do we think he has failed us? In Paul's experience, God met him, but in a totally unexpected way.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

My grace is sufficient, God says. Grace is an interesting word choice here. It's normally defined as undeserved favor. God's goodness that we couldn't earn for ourselves. So how is this possibly an example of God's grace? How does allowing this weakness to continue show God's favor?

Maybe God was just saying the strength he would give Paul to endure living with this condition was a form of grace, and that would be enough.

But I think there is something more at work here. Paul stated at the beginning of this section that the reason God had given him this affliction was to keep him from becoming conceited. The visions he had been privileged to have were pretty spectacular and could have led anyone to feel really good about themselves for being singled out. What if Paul HAD become conceited? How would that have undermined his ministry? He might have taken an entirely different direction. He might never have written all his letters that eventually became part of Scripture.

Who knows what he was spared and what an undeserved favor God did for him by intervening and protecting Paul from his own arrogance? In a way we may never fully understand, the weakness itself was an expression of God's grace because it shielded Paul from more sinister temptations.

Paul came to trust that God's grace was all over this situation, and I believe that is the key for us as well. Each situation is different, and I'm not saying God always works the way he did with Paul. Not everyone needs the same lesson, so we can't apply everything about his situation to us. But it is safe to say that our greatest difficulties are simultaneously opportunities to encounter God's favor in deeper ways.

Kris (with a K) Rocke (with an e) heads up the Center for Transforming Mission. He works with the poor and the marginalized in Central America, people suffering all types of injustices and difficulties we could only begin to imagine. He says this is his operating philosophy : “Grace is like water: it flows downhill and pools up in the lowest places.”

I think that’s an outstanding visual image for how weakness becomes strength – it creates a space for God’s power and grace to collect in greater quantities.

Marva Dawn is a Christian speaker and author who has been saddled with all kinds of physical weaknesses. She’s blind in one eye, she had to have a kidney transplant so she’s on strong medication for the rest of her life, and a mistake by an orthopedic surgeon left her with one leg shorter than the other and in need of a leg brace to walk. She’s a living weakness.

She was having a problem with her feet before leaving on a trip for one of her speaking engagements, which meant she was going to have to give her presentation while sitting in a wheelchair. She was complaining to her husband about her disappointment and would rather have cancelled, but felt like she couldn’t back out of her obligation. It was such a letdown compared to the way she had envisioned it going in her mind.

She went ahead and went, wheelchair and all. And her perspective changed during the conference. A man came up to her after one of her later lectures and said, “I wouldn’t believe a word you say – except that you are sitting in that chair!”

Marva writes and says, “I’d had too small a dream. I just wanted my life to be easier by being out of that wheelchair; I hadn’t asked God to fulfill his larger purposes of deepening someone’s faith precisely because I was in it.”

What ARE the larger purposes God can have for us in our weakness? We may not get an example as clear as that one as to why we go through what we do. But we can identify what God’s strength will look like in those places. He is incredibly consistent in the way he empowers those who turn to him in their weakness.

When we talk about anything being strong, we usually have in mind one of three things: Capacity, Durability or Concentration.

Capacity

Remember the Hefty Cinch Sak commercials? “Tough enough to overstuff.” They claimed their trash bags were stronger than the competition because they could hold more.

Weakness has a way of making us stronger by helping us hold more. It increases our capacity. For one, it increases our capacity **for God’s word**. Martin Luther used to say that the three paths to understanding Scripture were prayer, meditation and suffering trials. That fits right in line with what the Psalmist says:

Psalm 119:71

*It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees.*

We gain an ability to take in God's word by going through difficulties. John Bunyan found this to be true. He was a Baptist pastor in England in the 1600s. This was a time when it was illegal to be involved with any church except the church of England, so he was thrown in prison for preaching, and he stayed there for 12 years.

It was torture for him to be there, because it separated him from his wife and four kids, one of whom was blind. All he had to do was say he would stop preaching and he could go free, but he couldn't do that. So he and his family paid a heavy price.

Part of what got him through was the new strength he found through Scripture. While he was in prison, he wrote,

I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now. The Scriptures that I saw nothing in before are made in this place to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now.

If you are in the middle of a crisis, I can't urge you enough to turn to God's word for help. The situation you are in will actually enable you to take in more of it. Just like you can eat more when you are extra hungry and the food gives you strength, you can take in more of Scripture and be strengthened by it when you are weak in a way you might not if you were in a stronger spot.

Weakness also expands our capacity **for compassion**. Suffering makes us more sympathetic to other people experiencing similar difficulties. If you've ever been really sick or had a particular surgery or suffered a loss of some kind, chances are the people who have been the most supportive are those who have gone through similar trials themselves. Earlier in this same letter, Paul had spelled this out to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 1:4

He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God was there for us.

Our ability to relate to other people, to counsel them to come alongside them is enlarged a million times over when we speak from the place of someone who knows.

Durability

Another meaning we have for strength is durability. In Afghanistan, the American military is making use of a fortress that was built by Alexander the Great more than 2,000

years ago. Even after centuries of attack by the elements and foreign armies, it's still a secure location for fending off enemies. That's some durability.

The experience of weakness builds into us an ability to endure. It's like when I was back in high school and decided to take up the guitar. I picked up an old beater at a pawn shop and started strumming away. For the first several weeks, it hurt, because the strings were cutting into my fingers when I pressed on them. To be able to play for long periods of time, I had to build callouses. The only way to build callouses is to go through the pain of playing without them. But once you've done it, you can play for hours.

James 1:2-4

Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. 3 For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. 4 So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.

We're not just building up an ability to go through hard times, though. We're also building up callouses against the attacks of the enemy. We develop the ability to change the spiritual dynamic of those thorns so that they work for God instead of the devil.

One commentator pointed out that the word there for thorn is the same word that is used in other places for a stake, like a tent peg, holding something down. In that sense, we can think of these thorns as holding us close to God, because they make us cry out to him in desperation. Paul Barnett says, "...the person in Christ is to allow those 'thorns' to pin him closer to Christ who imparts grace to the sufferer both to bear the pain and also to develop qualities of endurance and patience."

This really leads us into the third type of strength, which is

Concentration

You know how sometimes when you get down to the last bit of orange juice in the carton, and you pour yourself a cup, it can be thicker and more orangey than the first glass you drank? It's more concentrated. It's stronger in flavor.

Weakness has a way of helping us become more concentrated, less diluted, because we let go of things that don't matter as much. Just like we were saying the thorns pin us closer to Christ, they also bring him into sharper focus for us.

One of my favorite verses is Psalm 34:18:

Psalm 34:18

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted.

The reason he is close to the brokenhearted is because he has stood in the same place. The path of suffering and weakness is the path of the cross, so it is no wonder Jesus is so

accessible when we're hurting. We're walking where he walked. There's an old hymn that said "No one understands like Jesus." No one gets our limitations the way he does. No one has ever experienced a weakening more than the one who left the glory and power of heaven to be limited in a human form. No one has ever willingly endured more suffering than the Son who left his Father to die for people who rejected and ridiculed him. And the more hard pressed we are, the deeper and more concentrated our sense of connection with him becomes, because we begin to grasp the reality of what he did for us. Weakness strengthens our relationship with Jesus himself.

It also makes us more present in the moment. When life is relatively easy, we don't always pay much attention to what is right in front of us. We're dreaming about the future or reminiscing about the past. Hardships have a way of commanding our attention on the immediate. And that can help us see where God is at work here and now.

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon was another one of those suffering saints. Most of his adult life he struggled with depression. His wife was an invalid for many years of their marriage and the last half of his career he was fighting his own illnesses.

He took great comfort in God's words to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." He clung to the IS in that sentence, because that means grace is always present tense. Listen to these words from him:

It is easy to believe in grace for the past and the future, but to rest in it for the immediate necessity is true faith...At this moment and at all moments which shall ever occur between now and glory, the grace of God will be sufficient for you. This sufficiency is declared without any limiting words, and therefore I understand the passage to mean that the grace of our Lord Jesus is sufficient to uphold thee, sufficient to strengthen thee, sufficient to comfort thee, sufficient to make thy trouble useful to thee, sufficient to enable thee to triumph over it, sufficient to bring thee out of it, sufficient to bring thee out of ten thousand like it, sufficient to bring thee home to heaven. Whatever would be good for thee, Christ's grace is sufficient to bestow, whatever would harm thee, his grace is sufficient to avert, whatever thou desirest, his grace is sufficient to give thee if it be good for thee, whatever thou wouldst avoid, his grace can shield thee from it so his wisdom shall dictate...Here let me press upon you the pleasing duty of taking home the promise personally at this moment, for no believer here need be under any fear, since for him also, at this very instant, the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient.

What is your greatest felt weakness this morning? Christ's grace is still sufficient. He can still expand your capacity, increase your durability and strengthen your concentration.