

Weak, Yet Strong

II Corinthians 12:7b-10, Revelation 3:7-13 and John 14:1-6

We are fast approaching the cold and flu season and it's a good time to ask ourselves if we've gotten the flu shot and other shots we may need. When a child gets sick there's usually a parent to take care of them. But if a parent gets sick, hopefully there's a spouse, significant other, or good friend to help care for them and help with childcare. Single parents especially need others when they get sick. They need relatives, friends or neighbors to step in to help them. The same is true for elderly folks who live alone; they need people to call them and check on them to see how they are doing and to step up to help them, especially when they are sick.

In times when we feel weak it's important that we lean on the Lord, asking for His help and grace. That's when memory verses like I Peter 5:7 can be so important, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Isaiah 40:31 is another good verse, "But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." And an easy one to remember is Philippians 4:13, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

According to what I was reading online, that verse is one of the most quoted verses in the Bible, only second to John 3:16. People love to quote Philippians 4:13 in terms of seeking to fulfill their personal goals saying, "I can do all things (meaning 'achieve my personal goals') through Christ who strengthens me." We hear a lot of Christian athletes quote that verse when it comes to winning game victories. But it's good for us to remember the context of that verse in Philippians. In verses 11-12 the Apostle Paul is talking about learning to be content in whatever circumstances he finds himself in as an evangelist for Christ. He knows what it is to have little and to have plenty. He has learned the secret of being content whether well-fed or hungry. He says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." So, the context of this verse is that regardless of being in need and struggling, we always trust God to provide for us.

In keeping with this context and meaning, it is especially appropriate for us to quote this verse when we are feeling weak and in need, showing that we are trusting God to get us through difficult circumstances. One person who certainly learned to trust God through personal difficulties was an Olympic athlete named Laura Wilkinson. As a child, Wilkinson was a gymnast, but had to give up on the sport after a growth spurt during puberty made her too tall to continue. It was then that she turned her athletic interest to diving.

But when Laura first started diving, her coach told her she was too old to start a new sport and was later kicked off her high school team because she was a "waste of space".

Wilkinson earned a scholarship to the University of Texas, majoring in public relations. Undeterred from her high school setback, Laura also earned a spot on the Longhorns diving team. She won the NCAA 10m platform title as a freshman and then won both the 3m and 10m titles at the USA Diving Nationals.

Three months before the 2000 US Olympic trials, Wilkinson was doing a routine warm-up somersault, when she landed awkwardly and broke her right foot in three places. Although her foot was still not fully recovered when she started to train again three weeks before the trials, her perseverance paid off as she placed high in the trials and qualified for her first Olympic team. At the Sydney Olympics, Wilkinson wore a protective shoe that enabled her to walk up to the diving platform. Still in pain from her foot injury, she was in eighth place and trailed Li Na of China by more than 20 points going into the finals. The TV announcer for the event stated Wilkinson was not in medal contention, but during the five rounds of the 10 meter platform final, Laura Wilkinson executed one outstanding dive after another, climbed up the standings, defied the odds, and won Olympic gold.

During her interview after she won and the first thing she said through tears was, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." What a wonderful word of testimony that was. I later learned that she recited that verse before each dive, relying on God for her strength.

The Bible says that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. God certainly gave grace to Laura Wilkinson and her story was an inspiration to all of us. We are reminded that we too should keep going, and keep trusting God, despite our struggles and people not believing in us. We should keep going toward our God-honoring goals with perseverance. Thinking of Laura Wilkinson's story, I would say that perseverance was forged long before she injured her foot. Being doubted by her high school coach and being kicked off the team, she kept moving forward and going toward God. Perseverance isn't something acquired overnight; it requires training of mind and heart, will and emotions. It's something that Christians of every age are called to learn.

We know that the Apostle Paul, one of the most effective missionaries to ever live, had to learn to rely upon God as he persevered through hardships. We read a portion of Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians earlier. At the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12 Paul is boasting or laying open his credentials as an apostle of Christ. He has worked harder, been threatened and thrown in prison more than the other apostles. Despite all these struggles, he had an effective ministry preaching the gospel and traveling to city after city planting churches. He received visions and revelations of the Lord, being caught up into heaven, which might have been a kind of "out of body" experience. And, as if his hardships weren't enough to teach him perseverance, God allowed this "torn in the flesh" to stay with him.

We're not sure what this 'thorn' was, but Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away, to heal him of whatever the ailment was, but God chose not to heal him because (according to Paul) it was to keep him from being conceited. The Lord said to him, "my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."

There's an important principle in these words about not trying to do things through our own power and strength. Sometimes it's only when we feel and know our weakness that we finally turn to God and say, "Help! I can't do it anymore. God you're going to have to help me!" God is there for us when we acknowledge our weaknesses. When we are weak, we can be strong in the Lord. Paul knew that. He learned that secret as he persevered in following and serving the Lord.

As long as God is with us, as we are walking in God's Spirit and seeking to do God's will, we have no reason to feel discouraged. God will accomplish His purposes through us. Friends, that's a reason to rejoice and take heart. We have no reason to go around with some kind of inferiority complex! We find a fitting example of that when we examine the situation of the Christian church in Philadelphia which we read about in Revelation chapter 3. Jesus strongly commends that church when he says, "I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

What does it mean that they had little strength? It probably had to do with their position in society and the pressures they were enduring because of persecution. This persecution came primarily by way of "the synagogue of Satan" which Jesus mentions. Most likely, just like in Smyrna, the Jewish community had excommunicated those of their number who preached Jesus as the Messiah. As the Christians preached and Gentiles became attracted to their faith, the Jews became concerned, thinking these Christians would be thought of as Jews by the Roman authorities and all their Jewish privileges would be endangered. This led the Jews to stir-up the local authorities against Christians, making themselves partners with the enemy of the church who is Satan. That's why Jesus calls them a "synagogue of Satan".

But the good news is, despite these pressures upon them, the Christians of Philadelphia had stood firm, maintaining the values and dynamics of the kingdom of the Lord (keeping the word) and manifesting the qualities of life marked with the likeness of Jesus, affirming "the name". Philadelphia is only the 2nd of 2 good churches mentioned in the letters to the 7 churches in Revelation, and there's a lot of things that Jesus says to this church to encourage them, to strengthen their self-esteem and their resolve in the face of their feelings of weakness and powerlessness.

In this message to the Philadelphia church Jesus calls himself, "holy and true". Holy means that Jesus is set apart, sanctified for God and since the term "holy" is often used for the people of God, Jesus' use of "holy" here may especially be to indicate his solidarity with the Philadelphian Christians.

By calling himself true (which in the Greek is *alethinos* (meaning real and genuine) Jesus is saying he is the real and genuine God as opposed to the God of the persecuting Jews, or the gods of their pagan oppressors. He alone can give them real peace, joy, love and salvation.

In this passage Jesus also calls himself, "He who holds the key of David"; what he opens no one shuts and what he shuts no one opens, and he has placed before them an open door. This implies that Jesus is not only the Davidic Messiah, ruling over the promised kingdom, but he is also the steward of the kingdom, who gives and denies access into the presence of the King. This expresses the same thing Jesus had said in John 14:6 "I AM the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through me", as well as the claim of Peter and John in Acts 4:12, "there is no other name under heaven but Jesus by which we must be saved."

The open door Jesus has placed before the Philadelphian Christians is in direct contrast to the closed synagogue door the Jews had placed before them. Not only could the members of that church walk into God's presence through that door, but also all those who came to faith in Christ through their outreach. This is describing an open door of opportunity for salvation. Jesus depicts these proud and powerful Jews as one day humbly bowing at the Philadelphian churches' feet and acknowledging God's love for them. This was a strong word of encouragement and hope for a church that felt weak but was actually strong in the Spirit.

Jesus makes some great promises to this faithful church. He promises to keep them safe during times of trial. He promises a crown for those who endure, and also says they will be made a pillar in God's temple. That's an interesting reference since in that day one who served the state well was honored with an inscribed pillar in the perishable temple of a pagan god. In contrast the one who serves the living God well would be a pillar in the eternal temple of the Almighty God.

Friends, this same encouragement that God gave the church in Philadelphia is what he wants to say to us today. We need to stand firm for Christ despite the pressures we might face. If we think we have pressures, we should just think about what Christians in other countries are facing for standing firm in Christ, especially those in Muslim countries. I once read a true story about a young woman from a Muslim family who became a believer in Christ, was baptized and changed her name to Joy. Her father tried to force her to marry a Muslim man, but she resisted saying she was trusting Jesus to find her a Christian man. After that her father hired men to beat her, but thankfully some people intervened, and she was taken to the police station. Joy's family showed up at the station and filed a complaint against her, saying they wanted to sue her because she had broken the traditions of their religion, and she had disrespected the family honor by becoming a Christian. The police remained neutral but told them to go to the village for a traditional council meeting to decide her fate.

When they met with the village elders, Joy stood before them and remained firm in her faith, saying she would not go back to Islam nor marry a Muslim because Jesus had changed her life. Everyone was amazed, even the local missionaries, because it's not normal for a young woman to have such courage in that culture. This became a great testimony to the villagers. And even though Joy continued being opposed by friends and family, she remained strong.

The church encouraged Joy and helped her grow spiritually, helping her attend seminary. After finishing her training, she returned to the village and began living with the pastor's family. But her family continued to oppose her and threaten her daily. Then her family kidnapped her and refused to allow her to attend church or see any of the church members. The story ended with a plea for everyone to pray for Joy, her family, the church in her area and the missionaries working with them.

I think that when we hear about people like Joy it puts some of our own problems and pressures in a very different perspective. We can praise God that presently we don't face that kind of opposition to our faith. We can count our blessings and realize the benefits that we have as a church, even a small church in this country. We should never view ourselves with some kind of inferiority complex, comparing ourselves to other believers, or comparing our church to another.

If there's an area that we think we are weak in, we should remember what Paul said about his thorn in the flesh. Knowing that he had to fully rely on God because of his disability he said, "When I am weak, then I am strong" since he knew that God's grace was sufficient for him because God's power was made perfect in his weaknesses. And we need to remember and memorize Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

I believe that we as individuals can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and I believe as a church that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Do you believe that? I hope so, and I invite you to join me in praying for our church that God would grow us in spirit and in number and would use us in a mighty way to serve Him.