

Date: July 8, 2018

Scripture: II Corinthians 12:7-10

Title: IN GOD, OUR WEAKNESSES BECOME STRENGTHS

I read something interesting about one of the world's most revered religious leaders. He is the Tibetan Buddhist leader known as the Dalai Lama. It seems that, though the Dalai Lama may be what the Buddhists call an "enlightened being," he has his weaknesses. According to a report in *The Week* magazine, it's said he sneaks chocolate chip cookies when he's supposed to be fasting. And he uses an air gun to scare away irritating birds. Here's a good one: While the Dalai Lama meditates, he likes to have a radio on in the background, playing news from the BBC World Service. His Holiness also admits that mosquitoes have caused him to question the fundamental Buddhist prohibition against taking life. He said, "When I'm trying to sleep, their loud buzzing and their bites really annoy me."

I thought that was interesting. Though he espouses reverence for all forms of life, the Dalai Lama is tempted to kill mosquitoes. We all have our weaknesses! 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, he courageously led his country, the United Kingdom, to fight against the tyranny of Adolph Hitler. As renowned and successful as he was, 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 didn't 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 from his youth until his death. 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's 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.

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, 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."

Paul of Tarsus, 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 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 Paul's day, there was no medication to control seizures. If that was his thorn, he was stuck with it.

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."

I think that's interesting. If I have a significant weakness, I will pray about it for weeks or months or even years. If it's a really significant weakness, I may pray about it every morning and every evening for the rest of my life. But that's the difference between Paul and your pastor. 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. But I can 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.

First, a weakness can become a strength, if we don't 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."

A writer named 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."

Lee says, "Ah, 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!'"

Let me tell you, Larry Lee's daughter is on her way to being a champion at life. A weakness can become a strength, if we don't 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.

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 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, 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, that has become a metaphor for me, for the kind of life Paul lived.

Do you know the story of young Ricky Hoyt? Ricky has been disabled from birth and yet in 1989 he and his father participated in a national Ironman competition. Are you familiar with Ironman races? A typical Ironman Triathlon consists of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bicycle ride and a marathon 26.2 mile run, raced in that order and without a break. It’s grueling almost beyond belief.

Ricky knew he would get lots of skeptical looks on the race course. He also knew the winners would probably cross the finish line hours ahead of him. His goal would be to finish, even if it took all day, even if he had to cross the finish line in the dark.

Robert Reccord and Randy Singer in their book *Made to Count, Discovering What To Do with Your Life* describe Ricky’s ordeal beautifully. They describe the grim look of determination on Ricky’s face as well as the astonished looks on the faces of the spectators. They say a buzz grew through the crowd as the spectators wondered whether Ricky would finish. They describe the loneliness of running by flashlight on the deserted roads of Kona on the Big Island of beautiful Hawaii as Ricky started the final leg of the race well after the leaders had already finished the entire race. And they describe the roar of approval as the crowd greeted Ricky at the finish line followed by an ear-to-ear smile on the face of the young man who refused to let a disability define his life. After all, the crowd had just witnessed a young man who couldn’t even walk, finish his first Ironman triathlon!

Here’s how Reccord and Singer describe this amazing feat: “Ricky Hoyt was born with cerebral palsy. He finished the race just one second ahead of his forty-nine-year old father, the man who swam through 2.4 miles of ocean pulling Ricky behind him in a rubber raft, then pedaled an oversized fifty-eight pound bike for 112 miles with Ricky sitting in a basket on the front, then pushed Ricky in a special cart for the 26.2-mile running marathon.

“All the self-help books and motivational sayings in the world could not have carried Ricky through that race. It was the love and strength of a father that took Ricky

where he could not go alone.”

Isn't that a beautiful metaphor, for the life of faith? No one truly succeeds in life, on their own. Self-made man? Self-made woman? It's a myth. There are actually very few worthwhile goals in life you can achieve on your own. The truth of the matter is, that true success only comes to the man or woman who realizes, we're truly successful when we realize that a loving Father is towing our raft, pedaling our bicycle, pushing our cart. And if you haven't come to that realization, maybe that's why you're so dissatisfied with your life and why, even when the world acclaims you as a success, you feel so empty. You're trying to live your life without God.

That's the lesson Paul learned. Can you hear him testifying about what God had done in his life? He would say, "Look at me, 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."

Paul was a man of tremendous intellect. He was also a man of unquestionable persuasive powers. Perhaps, if it hadn't 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 works. His 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 if our weakness causes us to rely upon God. Whatever is afflicting you in your life, turn it over to God, relying on God Trusting, Believing, and having faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.