

POWER & STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS | 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1–9

CARLTON MEENTS, SUNDAY, JANUARY 14TH, 2024

Well, what a beautiful-looking crowd. I'm glad because then I don't feel you're going to eat me alive. It's just nice to feel loved. I'm so glad to be with you here, to be able to come and share with you and pray with you. I trust will experience the glory of God as his power and strength will rest upon you in your weakness, whatever weakness it may be, so that you will be convinced his grace is enough, his life and gifts to you are enough to get you through whatever.

That's what he was working on me this last year as he took me through the adventure of cancer. I saw his glory in ways that were not what I expected. I cannot help but share what I saw and heard. So, to begin with I want to look at what we've seen before. Andrew took us through Acts chapter four where we saw Peter and John who were taken before the Sanhedrin Supreme Court, and they were accused of preaching about Jesus, which they'd been told not to.

But Peter, filled with the power and strength of Christ stood up before them and said, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than God, you must judge for we cannot help but speak of what we have seen and heard." I like it in the message paraphrase. They say, "We can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard." That's why I'm here: I can't keep quiet about what I've seen and heard because I want you to see it and hear it as well.

So, we're going to look at power, and strength, and weakness today. We're going to just focus on the last part of Shannon's reading, though the beginning is important as well. Paul talks about the glories he saw that were amazing. He said he went to heaven. He can't describe it, but that's what he believes God did, and he saw his glory there. Then later he says, "Now, I am

being given this challenging weakness, which I asked God to take away, but he said, 'No. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

So, the Apostle is now challenged to see, I believe, the glory of God in his weakness, not in the strength of seeing heaven. For me this last year was a challenge to see that in my weakness (and believe me, I had never been so weak before) the Lord wanted me to live in his power and strength in a way I'd never seen before. What I want to do is talk about verse 12:9 and backward. I want to talk about his power being perfected before we talk about his grace being sufficient, okay?

Before we do that, I want you to see a picture of me to give you an idea of just how weak of a point God had taken me to. I think it's an age-appropriate picture, alright? This is a birthday card my middle sister gave me last year. I looked at it and I went, "That's me. That is me. That's a very good caricature." I mean, it's accurate right down to the pull-up diapers, the flatulence, the emaciated body, my glasses; this was very much where God took me.

But this is the place the Lord wanted to show me a power that is made complete in weakness. Power is made complete in weakness. I want to review with you what I went through last year. It began back in November of 2022. I'd had some back problems and pain, and I then began to have some problems in my stomach, and I thought it was related to my back, so I'm going to just wait and see if it goes away.

Well, it didn't go away, and it got worse, and it got worse, so that by the end of November, I couldn't even eat. I just couldn't eat. There was something wrong. I ended up in the emergency room and they did some tests, a CAT scan, some pictures, and then they came back to Wendy and I and they said, "We've discovered a large tumor under your stomach." I said, "Wait, a large tumor?" "Yes, a large tumor."

When we heard that it was a nine-inch tumor, I was shocked. Of course, you can't help it. My wife began to cry, and my wife doesn't cry much, not at all. Suddenly we realized how serious this was, and I, being overwhelmed, was thinking to myself, "I'm dying." I'm dying. It's interesting because, in that same instant, I sensed a voice present mocking me saying, "Yes, you are dying," and I knew that the enemy had come at the opportune time to attack.

I'm here to tell you the beautiful moment that came right after that, and I've shared this with some of you, but I want to share it again, just that as I sensed that death was present, Jesus stood between me and death. I sensed he was nose to nose and that his voice, very clearly, very succinctly said to me, "Don't listen to death. I have the victory," and I thought, I didn't make that up, I couldn't. I thought "I'm dying," and suddenly I have this sense that there is a victory here. My Lord is speaking victory to me.

Then he very gently and tenderly said, "Do you believe?" Do you believe? "Of course, I've been a believer for over 50 years," and he said, "No, no, no," I sensed him saying, "Do you believe today what I'm saying to you?" So, there was the beginning of the challenge, in my weakness, letting his power and strength help me to do what I just didn't feel I had it in me to do: to believe, to believe.

And that, folks, is what I want to encourage you with today first, and that it's really very simple. The Lord comes and just asks "Do you believe am I greater?" To me it was, "Am I greater than cancer?" Well, I knew cancer was greater than me, but Jesus wanted to know, "Do you believe I'm greater than cancer?" I remember when my father died it was so overwhelming, but the Lord spoke to me and said, "Yes, death took your father, but I took death."

The Lord strengthened me then, and now here again he was saying, "Yes, yes, cancer is now come upon you, but I have taken cancer." I heard his voice. You know, folks, I want to say

how important that is. I believe that we need to hear the father's voice. Remember Jesus in John chapter 10, verse 27? "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." I think he wants us to hear his voice to his children.

He wants us to hear his voice, to help us in our unbelief. That's what I needed because I was crying out, "I believe!" but then in Mark chapter nine, verse 25, I was also joining the father who brought his son who is demon-possessed to the disciples, and they couldn't heal him. Then Jesus shows up and the father sees Jesus coming and he says to him, "but if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us."

Jesus said to him, "If you can? All things are possible for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, and I'm so glad he did, I'm so glad he cried out, "I believe, but help me in my unbelief!" That's what I sensed was going on inside of me. A cry, oh, a cry, "Lord, I believe, but help me in my unbelief." This is so big. This is so overwhelming. I believe the Lord acts instantly on any act of faith that we offer him, even if it's just a weak act of faith.

This was such a challenging time because I realized I was so out of control, and I was at the mercy of everyone, but I suddenly began to see the Lord's hand. It's like when you cry out, like that father, he cried out, help me in my unbelief. Instantly Jesus raised up his son, and in my life, I instantly began to see the Lord work there in that hospital. I mean, within three days they had me in the operating room and put a stint in my lower stomach to help open it up because the tumor closed off my stomach and my kidney, and so they opened the stomach.

They put a drain in my kidney, and I was once again not at risk of my stomach perforating. They also diagnosed my cancer as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and they began my first treatment of chemo, all in three days. Now hospital staff are great, but this looked like

everything was hitting right on the mark. I sensed something of the divine hand of my Father moving along, encouraging us and strengthening us.

He was, showing me that his grace is sufficient. I was seeing his power at work, and I was hearing his voice. I can't help but tell that to you. I can't help but come here and say it was going on. I don't know how else to say it, I was just watching. People have said, "Oh, you're an inspiration," and I say, "How could I be an inspiration?" I was a sick man in a bed crying to God. But the Lord reminded me that they were watching me.

That kind of helped my ego, you know, and I kind of slowed down there. I'm doing this, and yes, I believe. That's what I sense people were watching: God at work. At that time in my life what was so exciting was that as my weakness seemed to increase, the power of the Lord seemed to increase as well. I think the scriptures are clear about this. Paul says in Romans where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, all the more.

What was so exciting is that in the moments of those weaknesses, I could sense his power continuing to surge, and I believe he does that for his people. Even in the worst moments, he's even more present and more at work. This, in a way, was kind of exciting because I just kept looking forward to saying, "Okay, what's going to happen next? It's going to be bigger than what happened before."

He helped me see his power and strengths, which was being completed. He says it's perfected, which means it's completed. That means it's moving to where he wants it to be so that not only do we see it, we hear it, but ultimately it will lead to him being Glorified. You see, the completion of his power is for his glory. That's what we were created for. We were created for his glory in his world.

Well, in this world of sin, his glory is ignored, except when, I believe, it happens in the weakest of situations where it gets the world's attention. Where have we seen that before? Where have we seen that happen in the best situation? At the cross. Jesus, in his weakest, weakest moment is where the power of the Father worked in its greatest, greatest... I mean I can't even think of the words, just the greatest, glorious, revelation.

That's what it is, it's a revelation, because the sins of all the world were dealt with and eternal life was made open in the weakest point, his power was greatest, and it's not something that we can find, it's something that must be revealed as we trust him to reveal it. This little sign I had during that time; God made me take it. I hate bling. This thing is full of glitter. I saw it and I went, "That is not me," and the Lord said, "Buy it." So, I did.

I took it with me from hospital room to hospital room. It was set up across from my bed and when it got dark and hard the Lord would lift my eyes and I would see it. He would say, "Do you believe?" Help me in my unbelief. He would work power and strength in such weak moments. It's hard to describe. He was faithful and true, and he'll be that way for every one of us and whatever weakness we're facing. It doesn't matter what weakness.

See, it's so good that Paul didn't tell us what the thorn was. There's a reason because that means we can replace our thorn with his thorn. What is it? What's the weakness? We cry out, "God, take it away! Please, please!" And the Lord says, "I'm enough. My power and strength are there, and it is working even more in your weakness than if you were not facing weakness. Do you believe? Is my grace enough?"

I was seeing this, and it was exciting because now I was beginning to see how his grace is sufficient. It's sufficient in even the darkest, weakest moments. The Lord's was working. So, I went home at Thanksgiving and then went for my third and fourth chemotherapy. I'm trucking

along and I'm feeling pretty good. Then suddenly, just before Christmas weekend, I started feeling some pain in my lower, gastrointestinal area.

I'm using medical terms now because I know them. I've heard enough of them. I'm thinking, "Okay, I don't want to wait as long as I did the first time, because it wasn't good." So, I ended up back in the ER, and they hooked me up to the machines and tests and everything, and they said, "Well, that stint they put in, we think it's slipped, and it could be obstructing your bowel." Oh, Merry Christmas, because that's where I spent that Christmas.

Here's a picture of me having Christmas. Yeah! Yay! At the ER room I got my, Christmas tree, and yes, that's a hose up my nose. It went down into my stomach because when you have an obstructive bowel, they want to make sure that your stomach is empty. So, I was spending the weekend with that. But the thing that was such a struggle was... where do all the doctors want to be on Christmas weekend? At home.

So, the gastrointestinal surgeon was gone, and they thought I might need surgery, so they were trying to find another hospital with another surgeon. So, they began to look. They went to Modesto, no room. They went to Davis, no room. San Francisco, no room. Reno, Los Angeles, no room! I texted my youngest sister and I said, "Boy, there's no room," and she said, "No room in the inn?" Christmas, oh, sounds familiar. I said, that's funny, but not now.

She sent me that same card, that crazy, card. Anyways, that was interesting because the ER rooms have no windows, they're like a cave, a barn, like Christmas. It was an interesting experience in there waiting. Nothing was happening. What's exciting about this is, again, in weakness, the power and strength of the Lord is at work. He didn't want me to go anywhere,

because on that Monday, as I was sitting in there waiting (this was the day after Christmas) in walked Dr. Jim Greenberg.

He asked me, “What are you doing here?” I was shocked, how did he know I was here? Kim, a nurse there said, “Carlton’s here,” and he looked on the list and he saw me, and he walked in (he knows me, I taught his kids in T.C.) and he’s asking me, “What are you doing here?” He said, “Well, what’s going on?” “Well, I think I’ve got a blockage in my bowel.” “Okay, I’ll get you a room and we’ll start doing tests.”

And I’m going, what? They found me a room, there were lots of rooms, I don’t know what they were talking about. We got the tests, and then the day after Christmas that night, I was in my Hospital room, with a lovely view out the window into the patio. It was a very nice accommodation. I was thankful. But that night at midnight, as I lay there, again, I heard the Lord, and he said, “I have caused this, that I might rescue you, and you might glorify me.”

I remember when I sensed I was receiving that, I didn’t get upset that the Lord said, “I’m causing this,” because what I heard, what I really heard was, “I’m going to rescue you, and you’re going to glorify me.” I suddenly realized, isn’t that most of the stories in the Bible? Oh, yes. He gets his people in a situation, in a weakness, and then suddenly he moves, rescues, and he’s glorified.

Just, take your pick. Let’s think about just the parting of the Red Sea: there he was. He led them, and Moses, to the edge of the Red Sea. Well, then the Egyptian army comes up and traps them there. They’re in trouble, and then he rescues them, and they glorify him. Look at the stories again and realize how God is setting up his people. You might say, “Wait, this sounds almost mean or, heartless.” No, no, no, no.

It's love, drawing us into deeper love and trust. That was a thing that I found as I went from weakness to greater weakness to greater weakness. It was the Lord wanting to say, "Do you believe my power and strength enough?" It was always a sense of, "Okay, you got me through that, but this is a little bit too big." "No, am I greater? Am I powerful enough?"

The apostle helps us to remember that we must cry out in this weakness. "Three times," Paul said, "I pled, I cried." He said, "Take it away!" and the Lord said, "No, my grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in weakness." It's crazy faith, brothers and sisters. It's crazy. But he calls us, he draws us to cry out. And in that moment, in that very moment, he gives us the power and strength to believe and to see and hear him work.

That's what I pray that you can sense: what he was doing in my life, and he wants to do in your life. It was challenging. There was just delay after delay after delay, but God's in the delay. Have you heard that before? God's in the delays. Because it's where he wants us to recognize that in weakness he's going to act. How else is the world going to notice? You see, this is so important to our relationship with him and our witness to the world.

If he can get us through a weakness by his power and strength and his grace is enough for us, he'll be glorified, and the world will notice. They wouldn't notice if our lives are just comfy and perfect and satisfying. I'm sorry. I know it's just like Paul, you'll plead with God, "don't take away this weakness." So, God did it, he did it. I had no blockage. I went home after Christmas and then, in January I had my fourth chemo treatment. The day after that, it got worse.

Lord, I'm weak enough, and it got worse. I experienced angina, which is like a heart attack. It feels like it, but it's no. Well, that got me back in the ER for the third time. God has a way of getting me back in the ER. I mean, it took a long time the first time, but I got the message, I got smarter. Well, when they went back in the ER, the angina was just evidence of

low blood pressure, which was related to the stints that had slipped into my middle GI and now they were blocking the intestines and were soon to perforate through the intestines.

It got worse. The weakness got bigger, and the Lord's power and strength worked in even more miraculous ways, which is where I'm going to stop today. I'm going to come again in February, and I want to share with you what he did through even weakest of weak points I've ever seen in my life, as he saved my life a second time. I was near death at that time and I would like to share with you how weakness is the way.

I'm looking forward to it because that was the challenge of my life to recognize how weakness is the way. In that way, I saw how his grace was sufficient, his power was being perfected, and it was a win-win situation whether I died or I lived. Well, I didn't die, you can see, though I have to admit I was a little excited about meeting Jesus, and he said, "No. Not now." "Oh, okay, I'll come back and see *you* folks."

But here, I'm showing you the power and strength that he's given me as I've recognized, as I've seen and heard. Oh, marvelous, glorious work that he desires to do in all of us. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much. So, so much for you, you're working beyond our understanding and, you're lifting us in the weakest moment in your power and strength to see, to see, and hear your glory that the world may know.

Oh, dear Jesus, help us, help us to cry out to you and trust you to do this. Lord, you say you can, and all things are possible, but Father, it is so hard. Help us in our unbelief. Thank you. And of course, Lord, thank you for letting us see your glory. May it be so, and for the sake of your name as well, we ask, amen.