

**St. Timothy's Lutheran
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2 Corinthians 12:7 - 10**

Strength in Weakness

Some things in life are wonderfully fair. You study hard for a test and you get a good grade. You save and are wise with money, and you have a nice nest egg of retirement. You exercise and eat well, and you have a long life. You wait to marry the right person, and when that person finally comes around, you feel you are the luckiest person alive.

Other things in life are *not* so fair. The stock market crashes, and you lose your retirement. You eat and exercise well, and you get cancer. You fulfill your commitment to remain faithful to your spouse 'til death do you part, and your loved one gets dementia. You finally have the baby you have hoped and prayed for, and your body doesn't survive the birth.

This life is a wonderful, maddening, and fragile place. We want it all to make sense, to work like clockwork, to be *fair*. Sometimes we think it *can* be fair, that we can even control it. And then we come face-to-face with the surprise and pain of reality.

When I was in my mid-twenties, I worked in youth ministry out in the country. It felt very remote and isolating. Meaningful friendships were hard to come by, because most people out in the country were married, had children, or had their own routines and friendships. But it just so happened that a handful of months after I started youth ministry, a young woman named Sarah began youth ministry at the church next door.

I didn't imagine that Sarah and I would become such friends, but oh, we did. We would tell jokes just to hear each other laugh and see the looks of "you're crazy" on other people's faces. We called each other "partners in crime." We did so many youth events together and even *created* a youth ministry together.

Soon after, Sarah got married, and was *so happy*. Who knew that you could find the love of your life playing online video games? But Sarah did.

And after a while, Sarah desperately wanted a child. She went on a Mexico mission trip, and encountered a woman at the local church. The woman said that she could sense that Sarah desperately wanted a baby, and so she prayed that Sarah would conceive.

Sarah came back excited, believing that this woman's prayers would be effective. And she was right. Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son, John, and John was the light of her life.

Sarah loved being a mom so much, that she wanted to have another child. In the next few years, she suffered two miscarriages. In September of last year, she asked for prayer, because she was pregnant!

In May, Charlotte was born. Charlotte was a healthy baby girl. Sarah and Charlotte needed to recuperate at the hospital after a difficult C-section, and after a few days, they were released to go home.

A week-and-a-half later, I missed a phone call from the secretary of the old country church. She sent me a text message: Call me back ASAP. I called her back with caution, and she blurted, "Sarah died." "What? No! I just spoke with Sarah, and she was *fine*. You have the wrong information." "No Jonna," she said, "Sarah died."

I sat in shock. My husband, Alek, stared at me. "Sarah died," I told him. And after he finished yelling his questions of confusion, we both sat in shock.

Though I know it hasn't yet helped, I continue to ask God "Why?" Why didn't He save her? Why did He allow someone with such a beautiful, kind spirit, to die so young? Sarah was only 30. Why should Charlotte have to grow up without a mom? Why?

How fragile life is, and how arbitrary it seems at times! The pain we experience *shatters* our sense of the world's and God's fairness in a profound way. And yet, Scripture never tells us that the world or God, are fair. Scripture instead gives us plenty of examples of what one might think fair or reasonable, and how God doesn't fit into that construction.

Scripture provides a storehouse of what we wouldn't expect. In Scripture, we find that a person gains her life by losing it; to be the greatest, one must become a servant; and strength is found in weakness.

In 2 Corinthians 12, the author, Paul, has had an other-worldly revelation. He felt so near to God, that he was unsure if he experienced God in his flesh or in his spirit. He describes it as being in paradise, in the third heaven, and hearing things that cannot be retold. This experience, this revelation, was so wonderful, that he would surely have an ego. Who *wouldn't* be proud if they experienced what Paul had experienced, and who *wouldn't* be jealous of an experience like Paul's? So that he would not become too prideful, Paul writes in verse 7, that he was given a thorn, or a stake, in the flesh.

There has been a lot of speculation over what this thorn, or stake, in the flesh might have been. Was it a physical, psychological, or spiritual malady? Some have suggested that Paul had a problem with his eyesight. There seems to be some evidence for that. Other commentators believe there is evidence that Paul suffered from virulent malaria. One who suffered from malaria described the accompanying headaches as “being like ‘a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead.’” Another described it as “the grinding, boring pain in [the] temple, like the dentist’s drill.”¹ These descriptions match the metaphorical language of a stake in the flesh. Whether it was malaria, poor eyesight, or another malady, Paul was given a weakness, so that he would not become prideful.

In verse 8, Paul writes that he pleaded *three times* with the Lord to remove his weakness. After the third plea, he got a response. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9a).

God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Weakness is not something to be avoided or overcome. Weakness is not something to be ashamed of. Weakness is not the reason to discount or label yourself as unworthy. Weakness is instead the *very disposition* God uses to demonstrate His power. Weakness is something to celebrate, for when *we* are weak, *He* is strong.

I have a friend named Bill, who exemplifies this strength in weakness greatly. I would like you to hear his story.

“Therefore, boast all the more gladly of your weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon [you]. For the sake of Christ, then, [be] content with

¹ Barclay, 258.

weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when [you] are weak, then [you] are strong” (2 Cor 12:9b – 10). “[God’s] grace is sufficient for you, for [God’s] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

You are my strength when I am weak
 You are the treasure that I seek
 You are my all in all

Seeking You as a precious jewel
 Lord to give up I'd be a fool
 You are my all in all

Jesus Lamb of God worthy is Your name
 Jesus Lamb of God worthy is Your name

Taking my sin my cross my shame
 Rising again I bless your name
 You are my all in all

When I fall down you pick me up
 When I am dry You fill my cup
 You are my all in all

Jesus Lamb of God worthy is Your name
 Jesus Lamb of God worthy is Your name
 Worthy is Your name²

² <https://genius.com/Dennis-jernigan-you-are-my-all-in-all-lyrics>