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***My Grace is Sufficient***  
***2 Corinthians 12:5-10***

<sup>5</sup> On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup> even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. **Therefore, to keep<sup>[a]</sup> me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.**<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>8</sup> **Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,** <sup>9</sup> but he said to me, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for power<sup>[c]</sup> is made perfect in weakness.”** So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the **power of Christ may dwell in me.** <sup>10</sup> **Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.**

I just spent a week and a half on vacation, and it was good, but also challenging. Isn't that how it always is?

***Unexpected adventure and challenges***, right?

Yet through it all, somehow,  
God granted ***peace and beautiful*** times of meditation and prayer—  
especially in the early morning hours, but also throughout the day.  
Praise God for that!

I don't have to tell you that ***life is a mess***,  
and it's a broken world out there, right?  
And we are certainly ***broken people***.

My Dad's favorite author was Ernest ***Hemingway***,  
and one of his famous quotes is:  
***"Life breaks all of us,***  
***but some of us are STRONG in the broken places."***

That's what Paul is talking about in this second letter to the church in Corinth. He's been hearing about their fights, and divisions, how some 'super-apostles' have been vying for leadership positions,

and he steps in with this letter,  
to remind them that they are *looking for strength and power*  
in all the **WRONG** places.

He starts 2 Corinthians 12 ironically with a description of a *heavenly vision*—  
which he talks about in third person,  
but commentators are pretty sure was his **OWN vision**.  
But instead of *boasting* about that special vision from God,  
he chooses to *distance* himself from it,  
to step away from the power struggles in Corinth,  
and direct them back to their *true strength*—found only in *Jesus Christ*.

And in case we forgot, the strength of Christ is actually found—believe it or not---  
**in WEAKNESS**.

Paul knows this all too well,  
because God allowed him to have some kind of pain,  
*a thorn in the flesh*,  
some kind of disability, and God **did NOT relieve him** of that pain.

Rather, God said

*“my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness”*.

The *power of God* was *revealed* to Paul through that weakness.  
It was Paul’s *reminder* that all power is really **God’s power, not our own**.

Can you even imagine if such words about strength in weakness  
were spoken across *our nation? In our news? In our media?*

But friends, this is the Gospel.

It is the Good News.

God’s *power* IS made perfect in our weakness.

God’s *grace* IS sufficient for us when we are weak.

This is the *only way* Paul can go on to say,

***When I am weak, then I am strong***’.

So what do **YOU think** about that?

We hear this strength in weakness *paradox*,  
and some of us are thinking, yea, right.

And yet, what is *foolish* to the world, is so often *wisdom* to God.

What is *illogical* to us humans, is actually *logical* in the kingdom of God.

God specializes in ***turning our worlds upside down!***

Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung says that here “*In America we value independence, being able to take care of ourselves. As a result, we treat **weakness, vulnerability, and suffering as evils to be avoided, prevented, and overcome.***” Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, “Power Made Perfect in Weakness,” in “Suffering,” *Christian Reflection*, 2005, 12.

But Paul is saying just the OPPOSITE!  
***He’s saying that weakness, vulnerability, and suffering---***  
 God uses these things for ***good!***

Many people have speculated on ***what his thorn*** in the flesh really was, and why Paul doesn’t say.  
 Maybe it was because the people in Corinth ***already knew?***  
 But it really doesn’t matter, and it’s probably a God-thing that we ***don’t know.***  
 Instead, we can read these verses and substitute ***our OWN trials and challenges,*** the things that we’ve asked God to take away in our own lives, only I have to admit that I’ve asked ***way MORE than three times!***

What is ***the thorn*** in the flesh for ***YOU?***  
*Chronic pain? Mental illness? Addiction? Family struggles? Financial worries? Job stress?*  
 We all have thorns, and we all have something ***to learn through them!***

That is ***NOT to say that God creates and gives*** us thorns.  
 Paul himself is very clear—the thorn is ***from Satan, not God.***  
 God is ***not the author*** of evil, pain, and suffering.  
 Rather, God is the ***one bringing GOOD out of*** evil, pain and suffering!  
 There’s a big ***difference,***  
 and on it hangs the gospel of Jesus Christ!

We ***CANNOT say that all suffering is a gift.***  
 Paul is ***not saying***—just ***grin and bear it!***  
 What he IS saying is that ***God IS always WITH US*** in our suffering.  
 And we can find God’s ***grace and power,*** even in times of trial.

For Paul, God’s grace and power is like the ***air*** we breathe.  
 Can you picture that?

Ever heard of “Streams in the Desert” by L.B. Cowman?  
 It’s one of the ***best devotional*** books I’ve ever read.

Because its pages are saturated with the *paradoxes of faith—strength in weakness, grace in sin, power in the broken places.*

For the July 3<sup>rd</sup> reading, it talks about seeing a beautiful *meadow* of lush grass, dandelions, and violets.

Then the next day the man saw it *plowed under* by a farmer—leaving only the barren dirt!

That's when God revealed a *vision*—of a *field, ripe with delicious corn*, and then the man realized, *“God's purpose here is to yield a harvest”*.

In that seeming destruction and weakness, came beauty and life!

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah in chapter 53, spoke about a *suffering servant*---

a passage that many looked back to, after the cross of Christ.

It says: *Surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*

<sup>5</sup> *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*

In *Philippians 2*, Paul says that Jesus ‘emptied’ himself, ‘becoming like a *slave*’,

But he *emptied* himself in LOVE, going all the way to death on a *cross*, *that's what revealed his power*—the suffering, the cross!

We *saw Christ's strength* because of his weakness!

*Sufficient grace, power in pain, strength in weakness-*

These are truths we find throughout scripture, and in our own lives.

The heroes of our faith are all *imperfect, lowly, broken and sinful*.

Every single one of them!

And Jesus, though perfect, was *also lowly, and broken* on the cross.

But *what happened* because of that cross?

The *resurrection*!

The cross was the *pathway to joy*.

Are you familiar with the *12 step program*?

It reminds me of this idea of strength in weakness.

It is all about being *real, vulnerable, and sharing weakness*—  
 It's all about turning everything over to God,  
 because that's when we *find real strength!*  
 It's such a model for our faith.

I know many of you have heard of the Japanese art of Kintsugi--  
 It's the art of putting *broken pieces of pottery* back together—  
*with gold along the cracks.*  
 The artists believe that cracks in the pottery are *not things to hide,*  
 but rather *BEAUTY to behold!*  
 The pottery becomes *beautiful, because of its 'scars'.*  
*What do you think of that?*

You know, the prophet Malachi said that *we become truly beautiful*  
 when we go through the refining fires of life,  
 because God *makes us pure through those trials!*

Even secular people know this truth about *strength in weakness.*  
 Ever heard of the professor Brene Brown?  
 She a social researcher who studies *vulnerability.*

Sounds a little odd, but that's her life's work---*studying vulnerability.*  
 She believes that the biggest problem we all face is our *lack of tolerance*  
 for vulnerability!  
 So much of the time, *we want to be STRONG,*  
 or we want to *NUMB ourselves* with all kinds of things—  
 addiction, overeating, overspending-- so we won't be vulnerable anymore.

But living *a meaningful life requires* being *real, vulnerable,*  
*and open*  
 to BOTH the *pain and the joy* of life.  
 (see brenebrown.com)

Now, we usually *put on a good face* most of the time, even at church, right?  
 We *try to have a picture perfect,* Facebook approved life, don't we?  
 We try to hold it all together, and look like we know what we're doing.  
 But sometimes inside, we are really *falling apart.*  
 Like a *majority* of the time—

Ever wonder what to say when people ask “*How are you?*”  
 If we’re honest, *we could go on for days*, right?  
 Well, what if we decided to be *real, and vulnerable?*  
 To *open ourselves up* to one another---when we’re talking with someone safe.

Brown says that can *lead us to feelings of fear and pain,*  
***BUT it can ALSO lead us to***  
***JOY, love, courage, compassion, and connection.***  
 In other words, vulnerability is a *package deal.*

To be real and vulnerable means *feeling what you feel.*  
 When things are *scary*, you feel *afraid.*  
 When things are *crazy*, you feel *confused.*  
 When things are *hurtful*, you feel *pain.*

But it ***ALSO*** means you have the *capacity to feel*  
***JOY, and love, and compassion!***

Here’s the deal---we *can’t have the joy and love*  
*without the pain and difficult* feelings in life.  
 So what happens if you ***NUMB*** yourself to avoid pain?  
 Well, you also *cut yourself off* from the joy and love as well!

I don't remember who said it,  
 but I’ve always believed what I heard,  
 it’s “*the depth of pain that leads to the deepest joy*”.  
 That has certainly been true in *my life*, what about you?

***I think Paul would agree.***  
 It’s why he was so adamant about us finding ***strength in weakness.***  
 Because through our weakness, we find Christ’s strength,  
***Which leads us to JOY!***

If you read through Paul’s letters in the New Testament,  
 you’ll find lengthy descriptions of the pain and suffering he endured.  
 And it was precisely ***those times of pain and suffering***  
 that led him to the ***greatest JOY.***  
 It enabled him to say in Philippians 4,  
 That he was ***content at all times.***

So the question is my friends,  
*What do you believe?*

Do you believe that *God's grace is sufficient* for you in times of pain?  
 Or are you still *looking for other things* to relieve your pain?

Do you believe that *God's power is made perfect* in weakness?  
 Or are you still trying to hold it all together yourself?

Do you believe *being vulnerable—like Paul, and like Jesus—*  
 is the pathway to love, joy and peace?  
 Or are you trying to find your *own path?*

What if we all *took the risk*, and *surrendered* our pain to God?  
 What if we all took a *look at the thorns in our flesh*,  
 And handed them over to God, saying,  
*YOU GOD, can do something great WITH this, THROUGH this, and IN this!*

What if we *looked at our weaknesses*, and got *real* with one another?  
 What if we discovered the truth---  
 that all the *saints* have known throughout all the centuries—  
*that when we are WEAK, we are actually STRONG!*

Friends, hear the *GOOD NEWS of the Gospel* today.  
*Christ's power is made perfect* in our weakness.  
*God's grace IS sufficient* for us—no matter what our struggles!  
 And *our thorns* in the flesh—may actually lead us  
 to the *JOY AND PEACE* we so desperately need.  
 And for the gift of amazing grace, all God's people can say together, Amen.