

“Wellspring of Weakness”
II Corinthians 12:9–10
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For this study we will be learning from the text in II Corinthians 12. Maybe you have been there before where you're at that place in life where you are approaching a job interview and how you are going to go about it. There is always that lingering question that we try to figure out the answer to. We can answer questions like 'what are strengths,' 'what is your experience' but the question 'what are your weaknesses' is one typically try to formulate an answer for. Perhaps you have thought about weaknesses in light of how they could be positives or how they could be strengths.

For instance, one of your weaknesses may be struggling with perfectionism where I pour myself too much into my work. I overwork at times. Now many of those weaknesses can be perceived as strengths as well. Because of that we have this mindset that we must present well and in life some times that permeates to our lives. This comes from a western mindset of weakness that weakness is viewed negatively or a deficiency or a major shortcoming.

Back in the Greek mindset this same idea and philosophy was there. We see this with Homer's work in his character Achilles. That's where we get Achilles heel. Achilles was this great warrior who had this deficiency, this problem and he tried to cover this problem. What was the goal of his enemies? It was to exploit his problem, this weakness of his.

Unlike that western or Greek view, the Christian view of weakness is quite different. We will see this as we look at this passage in II Corinthians. This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible as Paul speaks to his weaknesses and you see this transparency in Paul. You see it throughout his epistles as he writes. We see it in Romans 7 where he talks about this progressive struggle he wrestles.

Romans 7:18–20 says [18] *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.* It is his flesh where he struggles with those deficiencies, those temptations, those weaknesses.

Paul continues this and in II Corinthians we see that he struggles with this revelation that God has given him. He struggles because it's a balancing act of this great revelation, this vision that the Lord has given him, but at the same time there is this thorn. The main text of our study is II Corinthians 12:7–12 but I'm going to start at the beginning of the chapter to build a backdrop as we look closer at this text.

II Corinthians 12:1–10 says [1] *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. [2] I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. [3] And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— [4] and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. [5] On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— [6] though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. [7] So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan*

to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

What an amazing and encouraging text this is. In this study as we look closer at this text I want to bring up four ways I believe that weakness can be a well spring or a continual benefit in our life. I would like for you to look at this text as an encouragement and to see weakness from a Christian world and life view and not a western world and life view.

First, when we realize that weakness is not the enemy, weakness gives us an honest estimation of ourselves. In II Corinthians 12:7 we see that Paul has an honest estimation of himself. What was this thorn, this deficiency, this shortcoming Paul is talking about? We don't know for sure. We do know that throughout his epistles Paul speaks of different elements – having a weak stomach, potential eye conditions, his struggles with his flesh in Romans 7 and another aspect is that Paul almost died from a stoning. It's possible he could have struggled with a progressive head injury from that stoning. When you look at the history of stoning it's so aggressive and awful. Paul took some real hits and if it wasn't for brothers and sisters in Christ who came around to protect him with God's provision in that he could have died. So there is a lot of things that is going on here. Then in Galatians we see that Paul struggled with a sickness.

We'll never know for sure this side of heaven, but one thing is for sure that what Paul is speaking to is not a figurative weakness or a supernatural weakness is the sense that he didn't experience it. No, it's very physical and emotional and maybe potentially mental. This is a real weakness that Paul struggles with. In other words, this real struggle was something that Paul had a grasp on. I believe as you read Paul's epistles Paul is grounded by the reality of his weakness. His weakness works as a reality that helps him to see who he truly is. This is an important exercise for Paul and one that he encourages us to do.

Romans 12:3 speaks to this exercise of self-evaluation, of having an honest estimation of ourselves, the importance of that and how weakness, if we truly deal with it in an appropriate way, brings us to a good, healthy place. Paul says in Romans 12:3, *[3] For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* This honest perspective that Paul has thrust him into two thoughts that are really important in our lives.

One, it thrust him into the one thought of his potential sin. Why does Paul have this thorn in the flesh (II Corinthians 12:7)? It is because he knows that he could potentially become conceited, prideful. Paul, as a former Pharisee, knew one of his weaknesses was to drift back into this prideful mindset so he could see God's providential reason behind this weakness of his and that's important. The reason it's important is because when he saw God's reason behind this weakness he always saw the benefit. Being able to see God's providential reason behind our weakness keeps us from seeing our weakness as the enemy. Weakness is not the enemy.

Secondly, this mindset keeps Paul from going to a place of self-loathing. When we look at our weaknesses there is this real temptation of vacillating in our flesh. I have wrestled with this and maybe you have too. This idea of success produces a mindset of self-righteousness, of feeling like we've got it all put together at times. For me, that's very fleeting and very temporary. On the other side is this mindset of self-loathing where we think we don't have it all

put together. Today, in the contemporary society in which we live where everywhere we look through social media, advertisements and everyday life, there is this perpetual emotion of ‘surfacy’ happiness to where weaknesses are not even dealt with.

Think about this. For those of you who have Facebook, how many times do you see somebody post a really bad picture of themselves? How many times do you see someone post a transparent moment? Although someone might say that’s not the place to post that but my point is that there is so much of this ‘surfacy’ mindset that it’s hard to deal with the reality of weaknesses. That’s why we need to have this Gospel-framed mindset.

Paul’s Christian world and life view allowed him to account for weaknesses and not try to recklessly snuff them out thereby creating a chasm in life. There is a chasm of reality that some people live in and we’re tempted to get in. When we don’t live in reality we deny the truth of what is going on and we lost opportunities to speak into people’s lives, to their hurts, pains and struggles, because there is this chasm of reality, this falsehood that we live within. We don’t see this with Paul.

The reason he is able to live in reality throughout his letters is because he has a deep pursuit for holiness. That pursuit for holiness constantly reveals his weakness to himself. There is really two pursuits we can have in life when we look at our weaknesses. One is embedded in a western world and life view, a secular world and life view and the other is embedded in the Christian world and life view.

The world pursuit is the pursuit of perfectionism. It’s a human construct and this view tells us we have to be perfect to be valued, worthy and loved. This is polluted by the fear of man. The other construct is a Godly construct and it is the pursuit of obedience. It’s the pursuit of being excellent and that is embedded in the fear of God. That’s a healthy place to be whereas the pursuit of perfectionism is an unhealthy place to be. Perfectionism says you can’t make a mistake, you can’t fail, you can’t be weak or have a notable deficiency. I don’t want to be pitiful or pitied.

We, as Christians, are susceptible to this mindset of perfectionism, even though we know the truth. For non-Christians this whole idea of performance and merit-based living is the only thing they have to cling to because they have no savior to restore them. That’s why it’s so important for us to live in the truth of the Gospel so they can see that the Savior can restore them too and so they can see the reality of the Gospel.

So how do we know which view of weakness we live by? Do we pursue obedience or do we pursue perfectionism. My second point in this study gives us a test for this mindset. That is, do we engage our weaknesses because weakness engaged reveals God’s power. What do I mean by this? Being engaged is that we don’t run from it or eliminate it or guard it by proximity. It also means that we’re wise in how we handle and communicate our weaknesses but that we deal with it and wrestle with it.

I love II Corinthians 12:8 because it shows the humanity of Paul, [8] *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.* Paul knows his weakness and it keeps him from being conceited. He knows God in His providence and sovereignty has that weakness in his life but at the same time, Paul knows it’s hard, it’s tough so he engages the Lord with this weakness of his. He asks the Lord for His help. The fact that he asked three times means that this is not a static event that going before the Lord in our weakness, asking Him for help, is not a static event but a dynamic event. It’s seeking the Lord continually.

Something amazing happens when we go before the Lord and we see it in the very next verse. II Corinthians 12:9a says [9a] *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my*

power is made perfect in weakness.” How is God’s power made perfect in weakness? We know that pride is the great enemy of God because it is the root of all sin and when we’re prideful we hide, protect and guard. But when we’re not prideful, we honestly admit our weaknesses and plead to God, God says ‘I may not take this weakness from you, you may not get the kind of release you think you deserve and the reason is that this weakness keeps drawing you back to Me and that perfect My power in you because you’re trusting Me at a deeper level than you ever would if you had not this weakness.’

I was 18 years old and afforded the opportunity to go play basketball in Tennessee for a small school and I was a step too slow and about four inches too short for about any real position on the team. So I was kind of an in-between guy on the team and for those who know basketball I was in-between a 3 and 4. If I played the 3 I was too slow to play defense on the wing and if I played the 4 I was too small to be with the big guys down low. I had a problem dealing with that. I struggled with the reality of that. I remember the talk one of the assistant coaches had with me one day after practice.

He said ‘Ray, here’s the deal. If you’re ever going to play on this team you have to focus on your weaknesses and work on them. One of your weaknesses is that you’re a step too slow so you need excellent technique. You need to be able to know exactly where you are at all times and understand the guy you’re guarding, his strengths and weaknesses and you need to focus on him.’ When he said that to me I struggled with it because I didn’t want to be that guy. I wanted to be the talented guy that didn’t have that struggle, that weakness. Finally, it took me about a year because I’m a hard learner, but I came to realize that my coach was right. I really started working on those areas he told me about and sure enough the Lord blessed me with the opportunity to play the next year. So by focusing on my weakness, being honest about my weakness and seeking assistance, I saw myself getting better.

Now that is a small illustration of the point here but when we truly deal with our weaknesses, present them to the Lord and seek His assistance we will see the Lord working in our lives. Sometimes the Lord will deal with you like a microwave but some of the times it will seem like a crock pot deal but God works in our lives when we trust Him. It’s not a maybe but a definite because He wants us to trust Him at a deep level.

When we trust Him at that level something happens to us externally. People will begin to see it in us. When we start living transparent lives as we see with Paul, we have a very contagious life. This means that people see us as real, honest, transparent and they also see some of their own struggles in us and this encourages them. This leads us to third point in this study.

The third point is weakness is a well spring in our lives when we wear it well so that we will encourage others. We see how Paul takes this as He calls on the Lord for His assistance in II Corinthians 12:9b which says *[9b] Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* What is Paul talking about when he says ‘I will boast of my weaknesses’? So here we see in Paul’s private time with the Lord he is pleading with the Lord to be released of his weakness and the answer he gets is ‘no, but...’ which is no, the weakness is not going away but My grace is sufficient for you and in this weakness My power is evident.

Let me tell you what his comment is not like. Boasting of our weaknesses is not accepting sin or moral deficiency in your life as a mainstay. In other words when we see some sin we have a peace treaty with, where we’re allowing this to be in our lives, boasting in that weakness is not saying ‘well, that’s just me, that’s just who I am and you just have to kind of deal with it.’ That’s not Biblical and that’s not what Paul is saying here. It’s also not developing

your identity around a sin and telling everyone that, that is just who you are and they have to deal with it. It's one in the same. It's basically saying that you're not going to wrestle with the moral deficiencies in your life for that's just a part of you DNA but that's not Biblical.

Paul is saying that he is pursuing obedience. Paul is referring to a balanced, truthful narrative of our lives and that without Christ we are woefully inadequate. Without Christ I can do nothing but with Christ I can do all things. If I don't cling to Christ I am nothing but with Christ we can do all things and that's the balance. That is saying 'yes' I'm weak but Christ is strong and 'no' to self-esteem and 'yes' to Christ's esteem. That's the Biblical balance. When we do this others see a Gospel narrative in our lives and they feel the ability to be honest about their own lives. Thereby experiencing a corporate encouragement that glorifies God.

I know some of you will be surprised but as a membership pastor sometimes I get remarks, suggestions and insights into how we can do things better at Briarwood. The vast majority of those are very positive insights but with those constructive ideas and thoughts I will also hear some say to me that they have really been encouraged by their time at Briarwood. Many times people who have connected deeply within the church is because they have connected with others in the church who have been loving and real. They generally come to this church because of the Biblical teaching but ultimately the reason they stay connected on deep levels is because they find people they can do life with and be real with. So it's very valuable to have this kind of transparency and Gospel narrative in our life.

The final element in this study to try and ensure weakness is a well spring in our life, is when we exalt God with our weaknesses. How do we do that? A key phrase in this II Corinthians 12 passage is when Paul says 'so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' Basically anything good in Paul's life he is communicating comes from God, not from him. Anything that happens that is good, profitable, that encourages him and helps him overcome his weaknesses is obvious of the supernatural work of God in his life, covering those weaknesses and pointing others to Him.

This is seen throughout the Bible in example after example. I will name a few. Moses had incredible speaking challenges and he had anger problems. There was Abraham's age, Sarah's infertility, Jacob's struggle with wine, David wrestling with lust and the bad decisions that accompanied this. Naomi was an older widow when God uses her in a mighty way. Peter was as cosmic failure 24 hours before the crucifixion. Those are just a few and every time I look at these stories I don't say 'wow these are incredible people who overcame incredible weaknesses' but I say 'wow, we have an amazing, loving, generous, gracious God that worked in a supernatural way through these peoples' witnesses.' When I see that it encourages me and I hope it encourages you that we can bring our weaknesses to the table and God can work through our weaknesses as well to glorify Himself.

So what is our takeaway in this study? How do we respond to this weakness in a Biblical way? First of all, maybe the most challenging and important is to do a self-inventory, to really assess where we are, to be honest about how we deal with our weaknesses. Is this something that we're trying to hide, angle or spin in our life? Are we being honest with ourselves and others? Most importantly, are we being honest with God? God knows our heart. He knows where we are and He is also calling us to be honest with Him. So are you being honest?

Secondly, are we trusting in God's strength? Are we trusting in His provisions? At every opportunity are we exalting God through the revelation of our weakness and the revelation of His strength? The great thing about God is that you don't have a lot of 'if, thens' in life, meaning **if** I do this, **then** this happens, because life is a moving target at times. We as finite

individuals can't guarantee things but God is infinite. When God promises something it is guaranteed and it's going to happen. God does not promise us that we're going to be able to live life without weaknesses but He does promise that He will work through our weaknesses so that He will glorify Himself. And in spite of our weaknesses, we can be used in amazing ways to advance His Kingdom and to encourage others.

As we look to be evangelists, this is one of those areas in our life that we can speak to people and relate to them. When we identify with them and what their struggles are to try to connect with them, not in a disingenuous or frivolous way but with wisdom and discernment, they can see that our weakness is similar to their weakness and hopefully they will understand that our solution can be their solution. That is the solution of Jesus Christ and hopefully they will turn from the human dilemma to the positive answer of Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for Your Word. Lord, thank You that in the midst of our weaknesses You are strong and that Your Word promises us that Your power is made perfect in weakness. That is really hard for us to understand sometimes, but when I look at Your Word, Your people and Your character I see that You call us to trust You. Father, I pray that is what we do. I pray that we seek to trust You in a deeper way and then in that others would see Christ in us and that we would not try to pose or pretend but that we would be real with others around us so they too would see Your goodness in our lives. I pray this in Christ's Name, Amen.

Power Point

Four ways weakness can be a wellspring (continual benefit) in our lives.

1. Weakness realized gives us an honest estimation of ourselves.
2. Weakness engaged reveals God's power.
3. Weakness wore well encourages others.
4. Weakness exalts God.