

Weakling, Be Strong!

Pastor Jay Bickelhaupt

Personal independence is something that we all strive to achieve and all cherish when we possess it. From infancy our parents teach us to be independent by teaching us how to talk so we can speak for ourselves. We are taught how to get dressed, how to eat, how to walk which are all forms of being independent. During our teenage years we most likely struggled with our parents because we were or are caught between the stage of being under our parents' roof and rules but having the desire to be completely independent. Then we get our driver's license that allows us to experience the freedom of the open road. Gaining independence is what we seek and losing our independence due to sickness, age or accident is what we dread. Increase in independence makes us feel strong and powerful while the loss of independence makes us feel weak and helpless.

Yet, God tells us that weakness is the key to power. Those who are dependent are actually those who are strong. That does not make sense to our earthly minds or the mentality of the world in which we live. Nor did it make sense to the apostle Paul that strength is actually found in weakness.

Paul indicates to us that there were challenges and pain in his life. He describes it as a thorn in his flesh. The Greek word can actually be translated as a stake or pole that was used to impale people for torture. We have no idea of knowing what he was suffering from. We only know that he suffered greatly to the point that he felt it was a hindrance to his ministry. He felt that he could not be strong for the sake of the Gospel so he prayed to Lord, the ruler of all to remove the thorn from him. God answered his prayer with a "No." Paul prayed again and still God said, "No." Persistently Paul pleaded with God a third time to remove the thorn and still God said, "No. My Grace is sufficient for you." The thorn in Paul's flesh, the tormenting nagging pain that he lived with was given to him by his gracious Lord. Satan meant to torture Paul with it but God meant the thorn to be a blessing.

If I were to squeeze a thistle in my hand I would not think it to be a blessing. Why? Because the little thorns would cause me pain. Pain is no good! Pain or what causes pain is what we avoid. Bare feet and thorns don't go well together, right?

How could a "thorn in the flesh" be a blessing?

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So how could a thorn in the flesh that is described as a messenger from Satan and a tool of torture be a blessing? Paul tells us. The thorn kept him from becoming proud and stuck on himself. The apostle Paul had every reason to be proud. He experienced things that no other person or even apostle had. The verses immediately preceding our lesson describes Paul being taken up to paradise where he heard inexpressible things that sinners have never heard before. He experienced heaven before he died! He spoke with the risen Savior! He experienced raising a little boy from the dead. He experienced tremendous growth as he preached the Gospel. Paul had every reason to boast! However, God did not want Paul to think that he had reason to boast in himself. If Paul would have allowed himself to be puffed up with pride he would be emptied of Christ and the Gospel. God reminded Paul with the thorn in his flesh that he was a weak sinner like everyone else. The power that Paul saw displayed in his life was a gift from the Lord, the

OUR MISSION

As God's disciples, we the men, women and children of Apostles are united in the preaching, teaching and sharing of God's Word in its truth and purity.

By God's grace, we will nurture believers and joyfully spread the Word of God in our community and throughout the world, all to His glory.

(Continued from page 1)

God of mercy and love. The thorn in the flesh emphasized to Paul that he did not act independent from his powerful Savior but instead was totally dependent on Jesus' grace.

How often in our lives do we forget that we are dependent on God for everything or maybe sometimes we do not want to admit that we are? To admit that we are dependent means that we are weak! We are so weak with sin and misunderstanding that we fail to see challenges as the true blessings that they are. Every one of us had or will have a thorn in the flesh. Many have been tortured with cancer and some still struggle with that particular thorn. Some of us live with ailments, pain in the joints, the threat of blindness, disease of the lungs, bad backs, bad hearts, bad knees, bad hips, along with a whole host of emotional and spiritual challenges we face everyday. There is no lack of thorns amongst the group of believers. And if we are relatively pain free today sin promises that there will be pain sometime in the future. The saying is, "The spirit is willing but the body is weak." But our behavior sometimes indicates that when the body is weak our spirit is weaker. We often are not willing to endure pain as blessings and all too often fail to look first to God for help. We look to ourselves to be strong. We are told time and time again that we need to be independent as adults especially when it comes to pain and challenges, right? They are our own problems, we need to deal with them on our own and many times we try to deal with them apart from God and then use him as a last resort. God doesn't give to us thorns in our lives so that we can independently handle them. Paul suffered. You suffer. I suffer. We ask our Lord to remove what is painful but so often he knows that pain is what we need to realize that we are weak. We are dependent on him and his grace is sufficient.

God told Paul that his pain was going to continue because Jesus' love is enough for him. God speaks to you and to me in times of heartache, frustration, and pains caused by all kinds of thorns and says, "Remember, the love that Jesus shows you freely, my grace is enough for you!" But our sinful natures balk at such a thought. Actually, our sinful natures probably do not even think of God showing grace during trials but more likely we think that God is punishing us or is angry with us. Thorns teach us a very important lesson. We are weak! We cannot be independent from our God no matter what, whether good times or bad! Pain and sufferings are blessings not meant to drive us away from the Lord but to drive us into his arms of love. Thorns drive us back to Jesus' grace, the grace that is the power that is needed to endure hardships and trials. Thorns drive us to exercise our faiths by relying on God and struggling with him through prayer.

And when we ask God to remove our thorns let us more importantly remember the blessings that we have received when Christ bore the thorns for us. Jesus too prayed that

the cup of suffering be taken away on the night that he was betrayed by his disciple Judas. Yet it was God's will that his love for you be made known through his suffering. Jesus showed you grace by literally enduring the crown of thorns that were pushed on his sacred head. We complain that our life is hell. For our complaints and our short sightedness not to see challenges as blessings our Savior faced, literally faced, hell without complaint. Christ endured the physical suffering of beatings, nails in the hands and feet, and suffocating as he hung from the cross. The undying love that is evident when Jesus died in our place for our sins and his grace is sufficient for us even during our worst trials. Without this grace we would only be damned sinners with nothing but hell waiting for us. But with his grace we are new creations made spiritually alive through his blood! We are heirs of heaven! We are dependent on Christ's grace and the forgiveness that he offers. And through faith we know that his love is enough even through the most severe trials. In any situation we are strong in Christ! In our weakness God's power is made evident as Christ lives in us and we live for Christ.

It is a gift that you and I can boast in good times and in bad.

That is exactly the reason Paul is able to boast in his weaknesses. His thorn made Paul, the individual, fade into the background while God's power was magnified. Paul prayed that his torturous pain would not hinder his ministry. His prayer was answered as God enhanced his ministry through the thorn. Instead of people recognizing Paul as a person with innate power and natural strength they would see because of his weakness that the power did not come from the person but from the God that he preached. Total focus and dependency remained on Christ.

It is a gift that you and I can boast in good times and in bad. To boast in weakness is something only a Christian can do. Because as Christians we understand that strength is not found in numbers, in the amount of money we have, or how much a person can endure on his or her own. No! Strength is found in weakness and total dependency. Strength is found in God's grace, which is given to us in never ending supply. When we can admit that we are weak is when we are strong, in Christ.

This next week all of us are going to face some kind of thorn. It may be a thorn caused by family tension. It may be a physical thorn in the flesh that causes nagging pain. It may be a thorn in the work place that we are dealing with. It may be a thorn that God has not yet revealed in our lives but he is waiting at the opportune time to strengthen us. Instead

(Continued on Page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

of facing the thorns with pessimistic attitudes I pray that you and I face them as new men and women in Christ. Through this portion of God's Word our attitudes have been changed knowing that we are strong in Christ's grace allows us to be strong for Christ. Next time a family member drives the thorn of frustration deep remind yourself that a thorn was taken away by Christ that allows you to focus on the fact that God made you a part of his heavenly family. Christ calls you brother and sisters. God the Father claims you to be his child. With that in mind we are empowered to show love and patience with our loved ones. When the bones ache and the joints hurt listen to God say, "My grace is enough. It is only a little while, child, and you will be with me in paradise." When burdens and headaches plague us at work and the thorns seem unbearable remember that the most unbearable burden of sin and hell has been removed.

Independence is why this nation was founded. Independence is what we strive for, to be free. But thank God we are not free from his grace, which makes us strong and empow-

ers us to live for the one who lives to love you and me. May God bless you through your many blessings of struggles and thorns.

Amen.

Jay Bickelhaupt is serving as pastor at Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church in Billings, Montana. For contact information, please visit us at www.apostlesmt.net.



This Week's Announcements

APOSTLES T-SHIRTS- Apostles' new look was unveiled at the bike rodeo. Many volunteers wore maroon t-shirts with the logo on the front and back. There have been several requests for these t-shirts, which leads us to order more. If you would like to purchase a t-shirt please sign your name on the sheet in the entryway. We will order them at the end of the month. In order to get a price break we need to order at least 25 t-shirts.

YOUTH OUTING- The college students from our sister congregation in Bozeman are planning a youth outing on August 4th and 5th. This is an excellent opportunity for both parents and our young adults to relax before the school year and get to know other Christians in our state. Please look at the poster in the entry for more information and contact Pastor with any questions. Those who are entering 6th grade to 12th grade are invited. The retreat is North of Livingston.

WITNESS WEBSITE- WhatAboutJesus.com is completely redesigned! This website produced by the WELS Commission on Evangelism is your outreach tool! Visit it yourself or point your unchurched friends, relatives, co-workers, and neighbors to learn about Jesus. Features include: daily devotions, Sunday worship helps, Q & A for those learning

about Jesus, and numerous articles and Bible studies on many diverse subjects. Come take a look for yourself!

ADULT VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL- This year the adults are going to focus on the book of first John. We will dig into the history and examine closely the doctrine of church fellowship. Please join us starting August 3rd and meeting for three more Thursdays following. The class will meet from 7-8:30 p.m. (August 3, 10, 17 & 24)

WOMEN'S CONFERENCE- WELS/ELS Women's Conference will be held in Salt Lake City on September 22-24. The topic of the conference will be Mormon outreach. Information is posted in the Narthex. Registration for the conference is now open.

LADIES GUILD- The next meeting will be September 11.

MOWING- A mowing crew has been hired to care for the immediate lawn around the church. However, it is necessary that we as God's stewards also mow the large field. We are blessed with a riding lawn mower in the shed and are asking individuals to give of their time to do some mowing. Please speak to Pastor or Kirk Cooper if you are willing to help.

(Continued on Page 3)

Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church
Billings, Montana

Worship Services Sunday at 10:30 a.m. and Monday at 6:30 p.m.

Sunday School and Adult Bible Classes Sunday at 9:15 a.m.

Men's Bible Study Monday morning at 6:30 a.m.

Women's Study Tuesday morning at 10:00 a.m.

Heights Bible Study Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m.

Contact the pastor at (406) 656-7141 about the opportunities to join a **Bible Information Class**.

More information and resources are available on our website at www.apostlesmt.net or by contacting the church office at (406) 656-7141.

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Inside: This Week's Sermon

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Apostles Evangelical Lutheran Church
3140 Broadwater Avenue
Billings, MT 59102

Mail to:

Visit us on the web at www.apostlesmt.net.