

## Boast in Your Weakness

Brothers and sisters in Jesus,

This month our Scripture lessons lead us to focus on excellence in the Christian life. Today we will talk about our testimony. What is the best testimony you can give as a Christian?

Some people think they know what to testify about. They think you should talk about how successful you are—maybe say how successful God has made you. Talk about how rich you are. How smart. That sounds appealing, right?

But listen to the Apostle Paul: **“I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses....I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardship, in persecutions, in difficulties.”**

Would you boast about your weakness? Imagine boasting that you can't lift as much weight as the next guy. Or boasting how poorly you did on a test. Or boasting that your sister learned how to ride a bike at an earlier age than you did.

Now, you might say something like that, if you were trying to make the other person look good. Let's say your sister graduated from college, you might say, “Yeah, she always was an over-achiever—even learned to ride a bike before I did.” You might talk about your own shortcoming, to make her look greater.

Paul talked about his weaknesses, so he could talk about how great Jesus is. Our weakness gives us a chance to testify—testify to the glory of our God. Today, with Paul, we are encouraged to Boast in our Weakness.

Boasting in our weakness has never been the popular way. Almost 2000 years ago there was a Roman Emperor named Marcus Aurelius. He wrote down a diary of thoughts that was published as his Meditations. It has been an inspiring book for generations of people. Marcus wrote that our actions can be stopped by some impediment, but our minds can't be stopped. He said that our minds can figure out a way to get around any problem. In fact, the problem itself spurs our minds to find a new path. This sometimes is summarized as, “the obstacle is the way.”

Now there is some truth in this. Our minds are amazing things. They often can come up with some approach to get around an obstacle if we keep trying. General Ulysses Grant, leading Union troops in attacking Vicksburg Mississippi, tried all sorts of ways to attack the fortress for a year. He blew up dams to raise the water level. He dug a canal to divert the river. Finally he risked his gunboats sailing past the fort so he could get his troops to attack from the south, then spent months with the city surrounded until it surrendered. He was not going to give up until he won.

Persistence is a key to success. But it doesn't guarantee success. Plenty of armies have kept trying to attack, only to be wiped out because their general was so stubborn. General Grant had the huge advantage of having twice as many troops, with plenty more that could come to help if needed. There is no guarantee that you will always win if you just try hard enough.

Sometimes Christians get this idea that God will give us the strength to do whatever we want. Maybe you heard the phrase, “God won't give you anything you can't handle.” That's not actually in the Bible. The Bible says God won't let you be tempted beyond what you can bear—

in other words, he will give you strength to resist sin. But God does not say you could lift 1000 pounds or join the NBA if you really want to. There are some obstacles you can't overcome.

Paul knew this. Listen to what he wrote earlier in 2 Corinthians: **“We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life....But this happened that we might not rely upon ourselves but on God.”**

God does allow us to be in situations that are too much for us. He doesn't do that to teach us that *we* can handle it, but to teach us that *he* can handle it. His saving power is seen most clearly in human weakness.

This is a lesson God taught his Old Testament people again and again. Recall the story of Gideon. God told young Gideon to “go and save Israel.” But Gideon protested that he was from a small family, and a small clan. When God asked Gideon to build an altar to the Lord, Gideon did it in the middle of the night when no one could see him. Gideon did finally go out and raise an army of 32,000 men. But God said that was way too many. God had Gideon pare his army down to 300. And the Lord used this little band to rout 125,000 enemy soldiers.

God chose Gideon for his weakness. And God made sure everyone knew that he, the Lord, was the one who won their victory. God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Paul saw this. By the time he wrote 2 Corinthians he was a successful preacher. He had been given a special vision from God, a vision of heaven itself. And along with that God sent him a **“thorn in the flesh.”** Paul doesn't say what that was—a weak leg? Loss of sight? Epilepsy? People have made all sorts of guesses.

Paul prayed three times for God to take this physical affliction away. But note how the Lord responded: **“My grace is sufficient for you.”** All Paul needed was the love of God—the certainty that God was with him.

Big problems in this life have several purposes. For one thing, they humble us, as we realize that we can't do it. The problems lead us to cry out to God for help. And they also glorify God, as he leads us to recognize that in our Lord we have everything we need. As the Lord said, **“my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

God's power reaches its goal when you stop trying to do it all yourself and trust in him.

We see God's power reaching its goal in weakness most clearly in Jesus himself. The Lord and Maker of the universe became a human baby, unable to speak or walk, utterly dependent on other humans for his protection. Although he is God himself, Christ became a servant. In today's Gospel we heard Jesus teaching and healing people, even though so many rejected him.

And then Jesus went to the cross. Alone, abandoned, undefended, Jesus was crucified and died, giving up his spirit. And through this weakness and death, God accomplished his greatest saving work. Jesus redeemed all mankind, conquering death and the devil, as he proved by his resurrection.

Now we are the ones who get knocked down and are weak. Our sins separate us from God. Those who try to save themselves will perish; those who recognize their weakness and instead look to Jesus are forgiven of all sins, and have everlasting life.

And now we can live according to this principle, and glorify God each day. We have something to boast about. We don't boast about ourselves. We boast about Christ.

Paul regularly found himself weak, in trouble; but he always had something to boast about. When he was in jail in Philippi, he and Silas sang hymns of praise to God—and then had the opportunity to lead the jailer and his family to faith by teaching about Jesus and washing their sins away. On trial before a Roman governor, Paul spoke boldly about how God was with him, and then turned the conversation to Jesus, who had paid for everyone’s sins. Sent to prison in Rome, Paul wrote back to the Christians in Philippi, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice!”** And Paul used the opportunity of his imprisonment to witness to the palace guard.

Imprisoned again toward the end of his life, Paul wrote confidently about the hope he had: **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord...will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearing.”**

Now you can give your testimony to others. Practice looking at your weaknesses as opportunities to tell others about God. Instead of just saying, “I can’t do it,” add, “But God can handle it.”

If you lose your job, don’t just see this as an obstacle for you to overcome; tell others that you know God has promised you will have food and shelter and all you need. If your eyesight is declining, talk about how the Lord is watching over you, and his angels will watch over every step you take. If you are sick, talk about how your great physician is still with you.

Even at the end of life you can witness to others. Pastor Jim Bartz of Eau Clair, Michigan has been a friend of mine for a long time. Less than two months ago he went into the hospital because of trouble breathing. He tested positive for covid. This led to pneumonia, then low oxygen. He was put on a breathing machine. One of his lungs collapsed. Ten days ago he was put into a coma to rest his body. But they were not able to wake him from the coma.

Throughout this time, Jim, and then his wife, sent out messages of hope on social media and email. Pastor Bartz had always loved to end his messages by writing, “I am blessed!” As he got sicker, he continued that, adding, “I am still blessed! Jesus loves me and I’m in his hands.” With that confidence, he entered his eternal home this past week.

Whatever your thorn in the flesh may be, whatever weakness you may have, see it as an opportunity. An opportunity to tell others about Jesus Christ, who became weak so that we would live forever. You can even boast—boast in your weaknesses, and boast in your Savior.