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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington  
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Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Worship Theme:

**EPIPHANY MOMENTS: BLESSINGS ARE CURSED; CURSES ARE BLESSED**

If we want to accurately see the world, we need to have this epiphany. That which the world considers a blessing can often be a curse. Things like success and wealth and health can lead us away from our God. We become so enamored with those blessings that we forget about the Blessor. Conversely, there are hidden blessings in what we would normally consider curses. When we fail, when we suffer, and when things don't go our way, it forces us to put our trust in God and for our souls to be satisfied in him. The reality is that perceived blessings can be curses, and perceived curses can be blessings.

Sermon Theme: "I Am Strong..."

1. When I Am Strong
2. When I Am Weak

What makes you strong? Is it being able to handle whatever challenges life throws at you? Is it having a body that can withstand anything, or a mind powerful enough to solve any problem with impressive logic? Is it having enough money to always buy whatever is needed to fix an issue? We all wish we could have such a perfect life that there would never even be any issues in the first place, but we know better. Yet as we go through life, our default assumptions still almost always are "if I am strong, I am successful"; "if I'm weak, I have failed."

Then we wake up one day, and there they are: all the problems, issues, and challenges we hoped we would never face. A body that can't seem to handle anything anymore, a mind that was once so sharp now starting to dull, a bank account that had so much now in danger of going into the red, and a "perfect" marriage, family, and life now seeming to be the farthest thing from it.

And what do we do? Seek advice from Youtube and Tiktok, read a bunch of articles, and fill our shelves with books. Yet we quickly realize so many of their solutions expect the answer to come from the same place: YOU. It's up to you to fix yourself and make everything right again, and far too often we agree with them! We stare into the mirror and say, "I know I'm better than this! I just need to pull myself together. Put a smile on and deal with my own problems to prove I'm strong enough. I can't let people know I'm struggling, and I definitely can't ask for any help. How embarrassing that would be! Then they'll know I'm not as strong as I pretend. I need to keep fighting my battles until I make it or die trying. It's a 'survival of the fittest' kind of world, so I can't be weak; I have to be strong!"

But is that really strength? Relying on ourselves to pull it together when everything is falling apart? Digging deep inside ourselves until we fix all our problems? Working ourselves to the bone so that our lives are guaranteed blessings instead of filled with weakness and loss? It doesn't matter how well things are

going and it doesn't matter what we tell ourselves in our heads, we just have to keep on going. That's what we've been taught, right? "Shake it off, walk it off, rub some dirt in it, suck it up and take it like a man!" Don't stop until every part of your life is Instagram-worthy! You must have the strength and solution inside you, and if you don't, then there's something wrong with you.

But let's think about the man who wrote 2 Corinthians. By the time Paul wrote this letter, he had a life no one would want. It had started so well, a life of guaranteed success! In his letter to the Philippians, Paul lists some of the reasons he should have had a great life - *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* [Philippians 3] He trained with one of the best teachers and was looking ahead to a promising career as a Pharisee. Even as a student, people were already paying attention to him. He had a very strong future to look forward to, certain to be a great success – a life filled with wealth, power, and every blessing!

But suddenly all that changed. After a miraculous encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul went rogue! Started following the very Jesus he used to persecute the followers of! Now instead, almost everywhere he went, Paul was on the run or in prison, frequently beaten, and at least once, people even tried stoning him to death. Where blessings were once expected, now curses seemed to be his only prize. On top of all that, in our reading today he talks about a "thorn in his flesh." We don't know exactly what it was, but it likely was a problem with Paul's body that was serious enough to cause him great distress, even calling it a "messenger of Satan" sent to torment him.

So where was the "strong" Paul now? Why didn't he just shake it off, suck it up, and move on?! The obvious answer is because life doesn't work that way. No matter how hard we try, sometimes it's impossible to be strong. If Paul became filled with despair and was ready to give up on everything, I don't think any of us would blame him for it. The old Paul had life made – all he had to do was follow the rules and everything would have been perfect! No beatings or prison, no life on the run. Why throw away a life of strength and stability and blessings for a life of suffering and pain and curses? It seemed to many people that Paul had traded his strength for weakness. If **I am strong when I am strong**, then Paul had failed.

As Paul was bombarded (inside and out!) with all these voices taunting his weakness and failure, he cried out to the Lord in prayer. According to our terribly foolish thinking, Paul did what no strong person ever should: he asked for help. *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take [the thorn in my flesh] away from me.* Paul so badly wanted to be strong again. Who wouldn't?! He wanted to be in tip-top shape so he could have a successful life and be a good worker for God's kingdom. These were important things, and Paul wanted to be strong for them!

Did you notice how God responded? Did he say, "Oh sure, Paul, let me get right on that. I'll have this problem solved in no time so you can get right back to being strong and blessed and awesome again!"? Not at all. Instead, *he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

How might you have felt if you heard that? Surprised? Disappointed? Like God had let you down? Not only did he not take away your problem like you asked, but he basically told you to just deal with it and everything will be okay!

But God's "deal with it" is not the same as "rub some dirt in it" or "walk it off." God was reminding Paul that no matter how weak Paul got and no matter how many things went wrong, GOD is never weak. God never gets things wrong. In saying, "*My grace is sufficient for you*," God was not minimizing Paul's suffering or telling him it wasn't real; just the opposite! God was acknowledging that Paul's suffering and weakness were so real that the only thing that could help him was a God-sized solution! That was true of Paul's earthly suffering, and even more true of Paul's sin and need for a Savior, exactly the same way it is for all of us. So God gave Paul and us the best answer and help we could ever hope for: his grace. Truly, that's all we need in life. Yes, things in this world are important and, yes, sometimes painful and difficult things happen to us. But in our moments of weakness, we can always rely on God's strength.

Paul's weaknesses could have been a tremendous barrier for him and his ministry. But by the completely-sufficient grace of God, Paul received strength to carry on. I imagine those words echoing through Paul's mind over and over again: *My grace is sufficient for you. My grace is sufficient for you.* No matter what happens today, tomorrow, or ever: *My grace is sufficient for you.*

As if this wasn't already different enough from our natural thinking and expectations, Paul continued: *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.* What a strange reaction – boasting and delighting in weakness! But Paul hadn't gone crazy. He knew exactly what he was saying: "When I in my sinful human flesh am weak, then the power and strength of my perfect sinless God shines forth. I am humbled so that God may be glorified. I am weak so that God's strength may be the obvious reason for every success I have. **I am strong when I am weak.**"

That's a powerful response of faith. You and I know far too well that difficult circumstances don't go away just because we're God's people. We all have a story to tell. Extreme financial hardships. Incurable physical struggles. Dreadful consequences of sin in our lives. Families with enough drama for a tv show. Insults and persecution at school or at work, maybe just because we believe in God. Mocking from neighbors and friends who spend their Sundays sleeping in or doing "fun things" while you spend your time at church, Sunday School, and Bible Class. Powerful temptations we can't seem to say no to. Strained relationships with people we love because we stood up for the truth of Scripture instead of supporting their misguided sinful ideas. Yes, there is no shortage of trouble and hardship in our lives. As we deal with them, we may not feel very strong or successful. Instead we may feel quite weak, certain we have failed.

But dear friends, Paul is not the only person to whom God spoke these words. No matter what hardship, difficulty, or weakness we face, God still speaks them to us too. They have never failed before, and they're not about to now. All

throughout our lives, over and over again, God says to each one of us, “*My grace is sufficient for you.*” It’s difficult when we don’t immediately feel much different. Our hardship isn’t gone, we still feel inadequate, and our weakness is often still more visible than our strength. Yet in those very moments, we remember WHY God’s grace is sufficient for us.

God’s grace doesn’t promise a happy, successful, comfortable life on earth. Instead it gives us something even better: an eternal perspective and promise. Even as God acknowledges everything we endure in this fallen world, he lifts our eyes again to the cross of Jesus. There we find the sweet gospel message of the full forgiveness of all our sins and the undying promise of a life where there will never again be sadness, crying, mourning, pain, or any weakness at all.

That promise allowed Paul to look at his suffering and weakness in a whole new light and to see that it was only for a little while, and God would never stop loving him through it! By the grace of God, we get to have that same perspective. Our problems don’t go away when we become followers of Jesus, but we do receive his perfect strength to get us through them. Our lives may not always look like we expect, and sometimes the line between blessings and curses and between strength and weakness may seem blurry and unclear to us. Yet we know we can endure it all, because GOD is with us, and a perfect forever life is coming!

It’s not wrong to want to be strong in life. But as followers of Jesus, we also know it’s okay when we’re weak. Our own strength will never save us; only the strength and grace of God can do that. We need his help, guidance, and strength every day of our lives, and God loves it when we pray for that. Asking for help, especially from God, is never weakness; rather, what makes us strong is being able to say, “I’m not strong! But JESUS is!” *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> 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.* To the God whose strength and grace is always sufficient for us be all praise and thanksgiving, now and forever. Amen.

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.