

### ***Christ's Power Perfected in Weakness***

In the name of him who brings down the proud and mighty and raises up the humble and weak, dear friends in Christ: I am reminded almost daily that there are a lot of misconceptions out there concerning what the Christian faith is all about and what it really means to be a Christian. Perhaps the most common mistake that people make is to think of Christianity as nothing more than a higher standard of conduct and a program of moral development aimed at helping people to live up to that standard. In this view of Christianity, Jesus is seen as the ultimate teacher of righteousness. He came to tell us how to live and he also served as the primary example for us to follow. He told us to be kind, loving, and concerned about each other, and then he went out and did it; therefore, if you want to call yourself a Christian, you should too. What often gets attached to this general idea of Christianity are all the things that people with certain strong opinions *think* that Jesus *probably* would have said and done if he were still around today. Sometimes I'll hear things like: "Since Jesus was such a together sort of guy, we're absolutely sure that he would protest the war in Iraq, fight to save the whales, drive a hybrid car to reduce greenhouse emissions, lobby congress in support of same sex marriage, and because he loved animals, he'd surely be a vegetarian. So today these are the ways we should practice Christianity." I don't think so.

Here's another example of misunderstanding what it means to be a Christian, and specifically in this case, to be a Lutheran. I received an entire box of *these* last week. It's a sixty-five-page booklet that calls itself *The Lutheran Message*. I thought, "Great. This should have some solid theology in it." I was sadly disappointed. Sure, there are a few Bible passages scattered here and there throughout its many short articles and poems; but for how they are actually applied this could just have easily been named the *Mormon Message*, or the *Unitarian Universalist Message*, or even the *Muslim Message*, because there's nothing in here that anyone from those faiths would disagree with. Only once in the whole thing does it even hint just a bit that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice of some kind whereby we may triumph over death and sin. But it's very vague about it. And then, after that hazy reference to the Gospel, just a couple of sentences later the same article goes on to say (I'm quoting now): "Some Christians join God's elect through the exercise of faith alone. That is the teaching of justification by faith, where God's grace envelops us *in return for submission to his will*. For other Christians, personal good works seem recommended by the teaching of Jesus as points of entry into the kingdom of heaven." That's what it says. So, in other words, some Christians are saved by faith alone; but only if they follow God's orders—which means that they aren't really saved by faith *alone*; but rather by faith *and* their obedience. There is nothing Lutheran about that statement. In fact, it's precisely because some people were teaching that that the Reformation had to happen. But even worse is that it goes on to say that "other Christians" find their way to heaven by the route of good works. Either way it's your choice because one is as good as the other. Both are equally valid *Christian* paths to heaven. My friends, this is the doctrine of demons. Did I say that I have an entire box of these that *I will not* be handing out?

Things like this should raise red flags for us. They remind us that just because something is labeled Christian in general or Lutheran in particular doesn't mean that's what it is. The food items you buy at the grocery have to list the contents of what's inside accurately, and advertisers have to be truthful about the claims they make for their products; but there are no such laws that govern the use of religious terms. When it comes to matters of faith, spirituality, and theology, the old adage *caveat emptor* applies: let the buyer beware. It's up to you to test the content of what you read or hear to ensure that it's true, reliable, and that it conforms to God's Word.

With this in mind, I'd like to challenge another common misunderstanding that is often found falsely claiming to be a sound Christian teaching. The basic idea can be stated like this: God loves you. He loves you so much that he sent his Son to die for you. He wants to bring you to heaven through faith in his Son and bless you richly for all eternity. And let's be clear: so far, that's absolutely right; but the idea gets messed up when it goes a step beyond and asserts that not only does God want to bless you richly for all eternity, he wants to begin right now by blessing you *in every material way* in this life. That is to say he wants you to be healthy, rich, and successful at all times. He wants to bless you up, down, and six ways from Sunday with all

the perks and benefits this life has to offer. He wants to ensure that everything comes up roses for you at all times, and that there's never any conflict or challenges for you to face. And these blessings can be yours if only you believe strongly enough that God wants you to have them.

The notion is sometimes called the health and wealth gospel; and even where it's not explicitly (and I daresay so crassly) taught, it is a general impression that many, perhaps even most Christians have. We tend to think that if I'm a Christian, then I (or the people I love) shouldn't have any major problems – God should take care of all of them for me. This is especially true with regard to our physical wellbeing. Many Christians think, "Well, okay, maybe God doesn't want me to be rich and lie around in luxury; but surely he wants me to be healthy at least. I mean, the healthier I am the better I am able to serve him. And just think of all those people Jesus healed in his day. It was a big part of his ministry back then; why wouldn't it be the same today?" Why not indeed? One very good answer lies before us in today's Epistle lesson.

Paul the Apostle had a problem that he calls a thorn or a splinter in the flesh. The word he uses describes something sharp and painful; he's not talking about a minor irritation. Now, we don't know precisely what it was that he suffered from, and as a result many Bible scholars have tried to guess what it might have been. For example, knowing that Paul was sick quite often, some think that he may have had a form of malaria, which is a viral disease that causes high fever, vomiting and diarrhea, and severe muscle pain. The symptoms last for several days at a time and then go away, leaving the victim weak and exhausted. But then a week or maybe several weeks later, the symptoms return because the virus isn't gone – it never goes away – it just goes into periods of remission and dormancy. And so the victim ends up in this perpetual cycle of sickness and health all the while becoming weaker and more run-down over time. So, malaria would seem to fit the description; but other Bible scholars have suggested near sightedness, arthritis, or some kind of digestive disorder. Some have even thought that it might have been a spiritual condition, saying that perhaps Paul suffered bouts of depression or maybe a severe temptation toward a certain sin. Still others have proposed that Paul's thorn might be a reference to his many enemies who were always trying to discredit him and sharp shoot his ministry. If that's the case then these people were a thorn in the flesh in the same way that we speak of certain people being a constant pain in the ...uh, *neck*.

For what it's worth, I personally favor the idea that it was a physical ailment of some kind; but the fact is that we don't know and that it really doesn't matter. All we know is that it hurt Paul. It made it more difficult for him to do the mission that God gave him. Whatever it was, Paul hated it and wanted it to go away. And perhaps it's better that we don't know what it was because then it *could* be anything, thus making what he has to say about it apply to all the thorns in the flesh *that God sends* to his people.

Yes, that's right: Paul says God gave him this thorn, this "messenger of Satan to torment him". That's a statement that shocks a lot of people. We normally think of God and Satan as being on opposing sides, so to speak. Now we hear that God sent an agent of Satan to afflict Paul. It almost sounds as if they're working together – and *that* doesn't sound right. But it's important to remember that in an absolute sense there is only one side. The Lord is in control of all things, even the devil. And the Lord uses all things, even the evil ones, to accomplish his good purposes. So even though Satan hates God and wants to destroy him, it turns out that whatever mischief he does to frustrate the Lord's purposes actually works to advance the Lord's purposes. He can't win. He's quite literally damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. But don't make the mistake of feeling sorry for him; he's still your enemy and would like very much to see you fall. Blinded by his hatred, he's only too happy to bring affliction to any of God's servants. But it's important to remember too that the Lord sets the limit for the amount of damage that Satan can do.

Now, one of the readings we had last week said that the Lord does not willingly bring affliction or grief to people. In light of that, someone might protest that there's a contradiction here. If the Lord doesn't willingly afflict people, then how can we hear today that he sent of messenger of Satan to torment Paul? Sure sounds like he did it willingly. But the idea is that the Lord doesn't sit up there in heaven thinking of ways to make our lives miserable because he gets his jollies out of it. Rather if he brings things that cause us grief, he does it in the same way a loving parent provides discipline for a child. It's no fun to discipline, no loving parent enjoys it; but it's a job that needs to be done in order to ensure a child grows and develops properly. It's in that sense that the Lord does not willingly bring affliction. And it's important to recognize that not all discipline is applied to correct bad behavior. Most discipline is designed to teach and reinforce positive behavior. A loving parent

makes a child do his homework, clean his room, help out with the chores, practice a musical instrument, whatever – even sometimes amidst tears of protest – not to punish the child for something he did wrong but rather so that the child learns how to do things right.

In Paul's own case, the thorn in the flesh was sent by God as a means to keep the Apostle from falling into sin. Three times, Paul says, I pleaded with the Lord to take the affliction away. The Lord answered him, "No. I'm not going to take it away. My grace is sufficient for you. That's all you need." Paul came to understand that this thorn was given him for a positive purpose. Specifically, the Lord gave it to him to keep him from being carried away by the sin of pride.

Paul was a man who understood pride very well. It was (arguably along with hypocrisy) the chief sin of the Pharisees. You remember them: they were the ones who thought they were better than everyone else because they committed themselves to a life of strict obedience to every letter of God's law. They were obsessed with it and imagined that they were closer to God than anyone else on account of their fanatic dedication. Before his conversion, Paul was a man who described himself as a Pharisee even to the Pharisees. Whatever it was they were supposed to be, Paul was more of it; and the rest of the Pharisees looked up to him with something like awe. In addition to this, Paul was profoundly proud of the way he had defended the traditional Jewish faith against the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. He had hunted Christians down mercilessly thinking that by doing so he was pleasing God.

You probably remember the story of his conversion. He was headed to Damascus to arrest Christians who had fled there seeking to escape the persecution that he was largely responsible for creating. He had a warrant to bring any Christians he found back to Jerusalem to stand trial. It was while he was approaching the city that Jesus appeared to him in a vision. The brightness of his glory blinded Paul and literally knocked him to the ground. Lying in the dust, Paul discovered that he was fighting for the wrong cause – that the God he had been trying so hard to please turned out to be the God into whose face he was spitting. Paul was devastated. More than that, he was terrified. He felt certain that the Lord would chuck him headlong into the deepest pit of hell. And he knew he deserved it. But then he discovered God's grace in Jesus. He discovered that Jesus had endured the sufferings of hell for him when he gave his life on the cross. He discovered that the living Savior forgave him, and that he had a mission for him. Paul the enemy of the Christian Church was to become its leading advocate. He was the one chosen by Lord Jesus to carry his Gospel to the Gentiles. It was quite an honor the Lord gave him.

But Paul remained especially susceptible to pride, that's what attracted him to the life of the Pharisees to begin with. Now the danger was that he might fall into the same sin in the opposite direction. I mean here he was, hand picked by Jesus and given this special commission personally from heaven. And now he was running all over the Roman world proclaiming the Gospel, performing miracles, making converts, and planting churches everywhere. Even among the original Apostles, Paul was recognized as a leader and Bible scholar. And now, whenever a theological question came up, all eyes turned to Paul for the answer. It would have been very easy for him to have become full of himself and once again imagine that somehow, he deserved God's appreciation and praise on account of all the good work he was doing in his service. But to do that, to harbor the notion that he was earning God's favor by what he was doing, is to deny the very Gospel that he was sent to proclaim. The Lord's grace and favor come to us by the work and merits of Christ, not by anything we do. Paul could easily have lost sight of that. In the process of helping to save others, he might have been lost himself. And to keep that from happening, God gave him this affliction in the flesh. It was sent to keep Paul reliant on the Lord and on his grace. It was sent to cause him trouble, to make him cry out, "Lord, I can't do this" so that the Lord could respond, "That's right; you can't. But I can do it through you. You have my grace in Christ Jesus. That's all you need."

And for Paul this was a breakthrough. He knew that the Gospel of Jesus was the wisdom and power of God; but now in his affliction, he came to understand that the more dependent he was on God's grace, the stronger he actually was because it was God's power and not his own that he was operating with. He came to see all of his afflictions and problems the same way. So rather than complain about the things he was suffering and beg for them to be taken away, Paul says that they were cause for rejoicing. Whether they took the form of weakness and illness of the body, the insults he received from the hostile members of the church, the hardships he had to endure when he went without food and shelter, the persecutions and beatings he received

from angry mobs of unbelievers ... all these problems only made Paul depend more on the grace of God in Christ, and *that* made him stronger. They kept him in the faith and made him a better instrument for the Lord's use. And by sharing these insights, Paul means to instruct us that we may see our own afflictions the same way.

It's a completely different way of thinking about the problems and challenges we face. It certainly overturns the whole health and wealth gospel thing. God hasn't promised that everything will come up roses for us – not in this life anyway. What he has promised is that he will keep us in Christ Jesus and in the saving faith, and that he will bring us through this life and all of our problems to the next. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't be grateful for the blessings God gives us in this life. I'm not saying we should go seeking problems. I'm not saying that when problems come we shouldn't pray to be delivered from them. What I am saying is that like Paul we should see our problems for what they are: evidence of God's great love for us. God gives his grace to the humble. So in order to give us his grace, he has to humble us. We have to feel the need for his forgiveness and strength. And so we understand that in adversity, whatever form it takes, the Lord is working to make us more reliant upon his grace to us in Jesus. We understand that it is in our weakness that our faith and therefore also our strength in Christ is at its peak. And we understand that when God says "No" to our prayers for deliverance, that he has a good and loving purpose for it. He's saying, "My grace is sufficient for you. I've given you my Son. That's all you really need in this life and the next." May he make us strong in *this* faith that his power may rest upon us, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***