Pentecost 7 – B
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
“When I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong”

Are you satisfied with your life? Are you content? Are you happy with what you have been given? Or are you the kind of person who is constantly searching—moving from one activity to another? It is necessary for us to ask such searching questions because, unfortunately, we live in a world that teaches us to be unhappy, discontented people. Our culture promotes that idea. “God want me to be happy!” many people exclaim, but so many of us are tempted then to find happiness on our own terms.

We live in a world where we are told that we are entitled to happiness. Whether its food, money, houses, cars, or anything else, the message is: “You have a right to own this.” Some people think that we deserve to be healthy, wealthy, and free of pain. But such thinking sets us up for a fall. When we have expectations of the kind of life we feel we deserve, then what happens when things don’t go the way we expect? We feel betrayed, that somehow God has let us down. We ask, “Why, God, why?”

I have a little story to tell you this morning. It’s a story about a fellow who was touring the Holy Land. One of the things this fellow did on his trip was to spend a day out in the hill country with a Palestinian shepherd. As these two fellows were walking along and carrying on a conversation, the traveler noticed that one of the sheep had great difficulty walking and it was always just a short distance away from the shepherd. Curious, he asked the shepherd why the sheep limped so severely and why the sheep never ventured very far away from the shepherd. “That sheep,” explained the shepherd, “is one of the oldest in my flock. Soon after it was born, I found out it was partially deaf. When it was a little lamb, it continually wandered from the flock to places where it could not hear my voice. Many a time I had to rescue that young sheep from the brink of destruction—until finally I tied one leg to its body. Ever since that day the sheep has limped, but it has stayed much closer to me for guidance and protection.”

Limping at the shepherd’s side—what a picture of how those burdens we Christians carry and those different trials and troubles we Christians struggle with are really blessings in disguise. Limping, yes, but limping—at our Shepherd’s side! It is one of those limping sheep who is going to talk to us this morning. His name is Paul. From this page of God’s Holy Word, as he limps at his shepherd’s side, this limping sheep will teach you and me a great and glorious truth: “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

I. How our Lord wisely and lovingly leads us into weakness

Did you know that Paul was highly honored by his Lord Jesus? That’s right! The Lord Jesus called Paul to be one of his apostles and to also be a world missionary who would carry the saving Gospel to the Gentiles. By the grace of his Lord Jesus, Paul had been able to labor more and have greater success than any other apostle. Right before our lesson begins, Paul talks about another honor his Jesus gave to him. Paul was granted a vision in which he says: “Fourteen years ago… I was caught up to paradise. I heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” Now that’s an honor! After all, how many people does the Lord permit to taste heaven before they die? But with all those honors, there was also a certain danger. You see, Paul was still a sinful human being. The temptation to become proud, self-reliant, and self-righteous was real. When a person becomes proud, self-reliant, and self-righteous, there is no room for the cross. Instead of trusting in the grace of God, he or she is now trusting that they “have lived a good enough life to be in heaven.”
Self-righteousness leads most people down the road of hell. The Lord Jesus saw that danger and so in his love and in his wisdom, the Lord Jesus led Paul into weakness.

St. Paul says: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of those surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” Let’s do a little word study on this Bible verse. “Thorn”—that word carries the idea of something sharp and painful, something sticking deeply in the flesh so that it remains there and can’t be drawn out so easily. The Greek root word originally meant a pointed stake that a person might use to defend himself or on which the head of a beheaded enemy might be impaled for display. Not a pleasant thought! …but then neither is the idea behind the word “torment.” That Greek word comes from the word for “knuckles” and means, “to strike with the fist so that those hard knuckles make the blow crush and sting.” What was this thorn in the flesh? Lots of people have tried to guess what it was, but the Lord didn’t tell us and it’s just as well that we don’t know. Then we’re not as likely to whine and complain that Paul didn’t have it as hard as we do. But of this we can be sure, whatever he did have, it beat down on him hard like a sharp stake stabbing him and like hard knuckles crushing into his body. But this devastating physical disability not only wore down Paul physically, it also got to Paul spiritually. He calls this thorn “a messenger from Satan.” Paul recognizes this “thorn” as a challenge to his trust in and love for Jesus. Stop and think for a moment about what the ultimate goal of Satan is. It is never to bring us closer to Christ. It is never to comfort us with the many gospel promises of salvation and help. Satan was out to kill Paul spiritually through this devastating physical disability. He wanted Paul to turn away from his Lord, to believe that his Savior was without compassion and power to help him, and then to cease his missionary work of bringing other souls to Jesus.

Why would the Lord permit such agony that might hamper his servant Paul from this tremendous effort to do so much for the kingdom, more than any of us have ever done? Why? Why? Why? Isn’t that the same thing we ask when we’re struggling in our lives? If the Lord loves me, why is he doing this to me? What am I being punished for? What did I do to deserve this? St. Paul sees his Lord’s love and wisdom in leading him into weakness. The Lord uses this weakness to erase and to prevent conceit and self-righteousness in Paul’s life. The Lord uses this weakness to show Paul how powerless he is as a sinner to beat Satan all by himself in this life. But best of all, the Lord uses this weakness to get Paul to depend on his Savior more than he ever had before. Paul says: “I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Can it be any different with us? How does the Lord wake us up when we wander away from him into sin? Why does he allow “thorns” into our lives? He wounds us by letting us fail and fall flat on our faces. He lets us suffer the consequences of our sinful disobedience. He wounds us with thorns like that so that we come back to him for the healing of his forgiveness. How does the Lord keep us from becoming conceited in our lives? How does he show us that we aren’t the captains of our fate and masters of our destiny? How does he remind us that we can’t beat Satan in our lives all by ourselves? Why, he allows thorns in our lives: Migraine headaches, bad backs, arthritis, depression, anxiety spells, cancer, an impossible boss, a rebellious child, or the boyfriend or girlfriend we’ve been dating suddenly breaks up with us, or maybe one of our favorite toys gets broken. But behind all those thorns in our lives stands our wise and loving Savior! St. Paul writes in Romans 8:28: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Every child of God knows that promise, yet how often don’t we children of God fail to trust our God to keep it? Do you know what the most important word is in that promise? It is the word “all.” “We know that all things...” Every trial we face, every burden we carry, even in those messes we ourselves
make, our Lord will work it out so that through those thorns we limping sheep will draw closer to him. That’s when we can say: “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

II. How our Lord then graciously builds us up into his strength

That’s the way the Lord worked it out in Paul’s life. We go back to the Word and then see Paul’s burden driving him to his knees. With those folded hands and bended knees, Paul leans on Jesus and Paul hopes in Jesus. My friends, that’s where strength is! On our knees with our hands folded, and our eyes looking up to Jesus. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” What a noble and unselfish prayer this was. In essence Paul prayed: “Lord, heal me so that I might be a better pastor and labor even more for you! What was Jesus’ answer to this prayer? Was it the “yes” answer Paul sought, the “yes” answer we so often think is the only right answer to our prayers, the “yes” answer that if we don’t get it we think Jesus isn’t listening? What was Jesus’ answer to Paul’s prayer? Jesus’ answer was “No.” Jesus said: “My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness…” and Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” remained. Yet what a wonderful answer this “no” answer was. Jesus told Paul: “It is necessary for you to keep the thorn so that you realize how weak you would be without me.” But “my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.” “Grace”—that’s our Lord’s undeserved and unfailing love. “Power”—that’s the Greek word for our English word dynamite. Only this dynamite will never blow things up. Jesus said to Paul: It is not your labors but my grace; it’s not your strength, but my power; it’s not your effort, but my blessing that has crowned you with honor and success. My grace and my power that in weakness on a cross saved you from all your sins; my grace and my power that brought you to faith in me because you wouldn’t and couldn’t believe in me on your own; my grace and my power that carried you and supported you in the past... my grace and my power will carry and support you in the future.”

When we come to our Lord and plead for him to lift our burden or to remove our thorn or to solve our problem, our Lord will sometimes give us one of those wonderful, “no” answers too. That “no” answer is always the best answer when it comes from Jesus. “What God ordains is always good.” You see, with that “no” answer also comes Jesus’ promise: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” When we struggle with our sinful flesh and being a Christian doesn’t seem to be getting any easier out there, our Jesus may tell us: “I’m not going to make your following me any easier but “my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in (your) weakness.” My cross is always there! You keep running to it. That’s where the power is. When we plan out our lives and our plans don’t pan out or when the things we thought were so important aren’t given to us, or worse yet, they have been taken way from us, our Jesus will tell us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Or as the hymn-writer says: “When every earthly prop gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.”

God’s primary purpose for you in this life is not to make you happy, but to make you holy. Now, God is not opposed to us being happy, but he wants our happiness to come from knowing him. God wants us to experience peace and joy in his presence. These are things that go deeper than happiness, and will not be found in our ideal about what we deserve. The truth of the matter is, we are blessed to not get what we deserve. God makes this point crystal clear through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. We deserve to be condemned, but God’s grace has promised us that we are his children who have an everlasting home with him in the realm of his inexpressible glory. God has declared us to be holy—pure and innocent in his eyes. And in order to keep us holy, he will humble us, too. We are not guaranteed earthly happiness the moment we put on Christ through the waters of baptism. Life is always going to have its hardships. But God’s purpose is to keep us from pride—from relying on
ourselves, and from the spiritual disaster of self-righteousness, thinking that we deserve God’s love, and that we deserve to be spared this or that.

Sometimes we Christians fail to understand or accept that truth. We feel our faith is as strong as it will get and that we don’t need to grow in our understanding of God’s Word. There are times when we will feel that we don’t really need God as much, as if we can get by on our own. But then comes the adversity. We get sick, financial problems set in, our family struggles flare up. We experience hardship and pain. And we’re quick to blame God and demand that he remove such discomforts from our lives, as if we know better. In fact, God gives us thorns to show us the power of his grace. His grace is made perfect in our weakness. When we are weak, when we have trials, when the ailments of life tear us down, it becomes obvious just how much we need God, and his grace shines.

So, what is your thorn? What person, situation, or illness is chaffing against you? Those hardships are there in your life because God allowed them and is proof that he is working in your life. God is not trying to make you miserable, or trying to push you away, but he is using that struggle as a way to lead you closer to him in faith. Do you want to be strong? Don’t rely on your strength and your power. Thank the Lord Jesus if he sends you some thorn to bring you to realize how weak and helpless you are. This is an opportunity to grow in faith. Look up to him. Hold onto him. Trust him when he says: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Then we can say it too: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Amen.

Hymns: 346, 429, 382, 420