

In the second reading, St. Paul says, “*When I am weak, then I am strong.*” What does that mean exactly? These words were written to the Christians of Corinth, a community that was not long established, and yet already starting to have problems. One of the primary problems was that there were new self-appointed leaders who had emerged after Paul left and were distorting the teachings he gave them. Even more, they were trying to impress the people with their spiritual gifts, declaring themselves to be superior to Paul.

He learned of this and as a spiritual father, wrote this letter to correct misunderstandings, and he mockingly referred to the interlopers as super-apostles (11:5). And like a father of grown children, realizing he is in no position to demand anything, Paul sought to persuade them, not with his own brand of boasting, but instead with fatherly tenderness, even acknowledging to them his weakness, his humility. Again, to prevent the temptation to brag of his own spiritual gifts, he says: “*That I...might not become too elated (meaning, prideful)...a thorn in the flesh was given to me...*”

Scripture scholars have tried to understand just what was the ‘thorn’ in Paul’s side: some have suggested an illness or even struggles to be chaste. It might well have been that the thorn was people who were making life difficult. But like any of us, he just wanted it to go away: “*Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me*”.

But as he explains, not all prayers are answered in the way we would ask, not even for a servant of God like the Apostle Paul. He prayed, and God said no.[1] We all know that this happens, and I generally find that we can accept it as an objective reality—until it hits home for us. There’s a wise saying, you’ve likely heard:

*I asked God for strength that I might achieve. I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all men, most richly blessed.* (author unknown)

God said no to Paul. “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*” In other words, lean into me, not your own gifts nor your immediate desires. Lean into me.

I find that as people become aged or infirm, losing independence and autonomy, some become embittered, unable to surrender to the struggle. On the other hand, I find that some eventually find a new and different strength from within—a strength not their own.

It’s as though God says to us, “*Relax, at last. Let me come to you, to be your strength in a new way, in a way that you couldn’t allow or experience in your independence and autonomy. See that my grace is sufficient for you. I will be the power that comes through you in your weakness.*”

And isn’t it true that eventually we can almost always recognize something good from our setbacks, our causes for irritation. More than anything, we learn about ourselves and are stretched into new growth.

It’s so difficult to see beyond our immediate hardships, the thorn pressing into our side. God sees beyond it, even if we can’t. For the thorns we must endure—for as long as we must endure them—let us lean into God, seeking patience and temperance, drawing from within, finding new power in our humility. God asks us to trust that his grace is enough.

[1] Bergsma, John. *The Word of the Lord: Reflections on the Sunday Mass Readings for Year B* (p. 367). Emmaus Road Publishing. Kindle Edition.