

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors at North Shore Alliance Church; thank you for being with us this morning. Just before I preach this morning, I wanted to make a brief announcement—I'm pleased to be able to tell you that our Children's Pastor, Linda, has been given the gift of a sabbatical.

The goal of a sabbatical leave is to revitalize the body, soul, and mind of a Pastor—sabbaticals allow for rest, further education, and the opportunity for renewed enthusiasm and vision. Linda has been a part of our staff team for a little over 8 years, and during this past ministry year, we've been making plans that will allow Linda to be away from her regular ministry duties; she will be gone from the end of December until late April.

Some of you know that Linda has been working towards a Master's Degree at Regent College and she will be taking a number of classes during the upcoming Winter semester. Some of Linda's volunteers have already agreed to step up and take on more responsibility during Linda's absence, and I'd encourage others of you to consider signing up to volunteer for 1-2 weekends during Linda's absence, or maybe volunteering with Preteen. If you would like to help, please contact Linda in the next few weeks.

This is the 11th week in our *Becoming Whole* series—next Sunday will mark the last in the series before we shift our focus to Christmas and the coming of Jesus. Next week I will be talking about *Healthy Marriage*, but I wanted this morning I wanted to address something that is central to everything I've said in the previous 10 weeks.

It's hard to talk about health and wholeness, be it physical, mental, emotional, or relational, without defaulting to a self-help mentality.

Our current West Coast culture is hungry for health and wholeness, but, has a naive optimism about humanity's ability to change and transform ourselves. This week I went onto amazon.ca and typed "self-help books" into the search window and my query generated nearly 330, 000 results. We know we need help, but we assume our own resources are more than sufficient.

illus: let me tell you Mike's story. Mike had been working a stressful job for years—long hours, big decisions, and lots of travel. At first it had been exciting, but it wasn't long before the adrenaline had worn off. His wife didn't like the fact that he was never home, and he didn't like the fact that he never got to see his wife and kids—even when he was physically present, he was mentally and emotionally absent.

Initially, when Mike began to drink heavily, it was just to quiet his mind; it helped him to sleep at night. But it wasn't long before drinking became a way of escaping the stress from work and the expectations from his family—drinking was his strategy to deal with loneliness, the fear of failure, and family relationships that were breaking down. When Mike hit rock bottom, he hit it hard.

Someone suggested that Mike go to A.A. and he figured it was worth giving it a try. Mike showed up a bit early and was standing around—he didn't know anyone, so he hung out at the back, and it was there that he noticed a sign with the 12 Steps printed on it.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

Mike stopped reading after Step 3—his heart pounding in his chest. *I am powerless to change my circumstances. I need a power greater than my own to get me out of the mess that I'm in. God, I need You! I'm giving up, I'm turning to You.*

Mike had to learn the hard way, and in that sense, all of us share in his story—this is the price we must all pay for our rugged independence. We live in a self-help culture—we all need help but we think we are capable to manage on our own. But all of us discover at one point or another, as Mike did, that we are powerless to change ourselves, to change our circumstances, or to change the people around us.

I want you to consider your life for a moment—take an inventory of your physical health, your friendships, your family, your work—are you facing something that is beyond your ability to change? Are there difficult circumstances that have got you anxious, fearful, angry, or despairing? Whatever it might be, call it to mind in this moment.

We've all felt weak, vulnerable, and frail; equally, we've all felt the impulse to flee from what pains us or to try and fix it—if we want to become whole, Jesus invites us to take hold of another strategy. When we discover that we are powerless to change ourselves, our circumstances, and the people around us, we are poised to make an even greater discovery: God is with us, He is for us, and His healing grace is stronger than whatever we face.

The reason so many fall short on the journey to wholeness is because they are unwilling to surrender self. *Becoming Whole* is synonymous with becoming dependent on God—we cannot experience one without the other. This morning I want to talk about the path to wholeness in terms of cultivating dependence on God.

Now I want to be clear from the start—cultivating dependence on God will kill you. You will die to the illusion of self-sufficiency and control. You will need to die to some of the expectations you have of God and others. But passing through this death, will lead to and increased life with God and others.

1. At this time, let me encourage you to open your Bibles, paper or electronic, and turn with me to Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthian church. There are three texts that we are going to walk through, the first of which is 2 Corinthians 1:8-9.

2 Corinthians is Paul's most biographical letter, and in it we see Paul at his lowest. This letter makes it clear that a close relationship with Jesus doesn't grant us a pain-free life. We don't follow Jesus in order to avoid weakness—we follow Him **because** we are weak and He is strong.

The apostle Paul writes, "*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But **this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.***"

Church, this is it...this is the make-it or break-it moment when it comes to cultivating dependence on God—everything rises and falls on the issue of self-reliance.

Adam and Eve believed a Great Lie that went something like this: *you don't need God, He's holding you back, He doesn't want you to be what He is: independent, autonomous, self-sufficient.* As a parent I can clearly remember the moment when my children turned to me and said: *I can do it myself.* I've been saying the saying thing, with the same attitude, ever since I was a child.

I've been meditating all week on a Scripture that is taken from Israel's narrative, a long, sad story of stubborn self-reliance. In Isaiah 30:15 we read, "*This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.'*"

Israel was feeling the pressure from foreign military powers, and fear led to an unholy alliance with Egypt. I use the word "unholy" intentionally. When we look to anyone or anything—other than God—for our rescue or wholeness, we enter into an "unholy" alliance.

Sometimes what we present to others is a carefully crafted illusion; it has the promise of reality but none of its character. With a smile on our face we conceal all the weak, painful, difficult, angry, fearful, jealous, and compulsive bits. It's like putting on makeup: we enhance what we like, and cover over what we don't.

Rod Wilson, in speaking on this very subject, suggests that "most pain is a reminder of the futility of self-reliance".¹ God doesn't waste our pain, but sometimes we do. Pain may command our

attention but dulls our senses—when all we see and feel is hurt; we just want it to be over.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, writes "pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Pain shakes us from our self-reliant slumber; it reminds us that there are things we cannot control. And Paul presents us with an alternative to self-reliance. Our courage, our strength, our ability to problem-solve, to manage outcomes, to endure difficulty, they're all so limited. The alternative is to rely on God.

This morning, if you find yourself under pressure too great to bear, if you find yourself despairing of life, if you consider yourself among the walking dead, let your troubles lead you to God—He is the One who can even raise the dead.

2. At this time, I'd like to invite you to turn to a second Scripture in 2 Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 7-9; allow me to read it for you. Paul writes, "*7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*"

illus: I don't have any personal experience working with clay, but I'm told that it is an incredibly fragile material. Once you centre the clay on the potter's wheel, you have to be extremely careful about how much water you use--not enough water and the clay will never take shape, too much and it will collapse. And once the clay

collapses, you can't use it again, you have to throw it out and start all over.¹

Did you notice where Paul says the treasure is located? It's *in* the jar of clay; God buries His all-surpassing power within something so frail that it could collapse at any time. Notice that God's power doesn't transform the clay to steel—though He indwells, it's still clay, still weak, still frail. But don't forget, the point of burying treasure inside something so weak, is to draw attention to what lies inside.

All-surpassing power draws attention to God, not to us. He comes to indwell us but His presence and power don't make us invincible, independent, or impervious to weakness/pain/difficulty. His empowering presence enables us to stand in the midst of weakness. His presence leads to wholeness and transformation. The difference He makes becomes a radical witness to the people all around us.

We may be hard-pressed, but we will not be crushed. At times we may be perplexed—*we may be unsure of what's going on, and what we should do*—but there is no need to despair, there is always hope because Jesus is always present. We may be persecuted, belittled, rejected, but, we are never abandoned—we are loved by God, He is with us and for us no matter who or what stands against us. We may be struck down—broken and battered—but not destroyed; we are never beyond Jesus' ability to sustain, heal, renew, and restore.

As we walk in the way of Jesus, we stand in solidarity with a broken world. His ministry of comfort and compassion is born in us and

proceeds through us to those all around us. To use Henri Nouwen's words, we are wounded healers; we are those who have died to self-reliance and have been raised to a new life of dependence on God. The *Father of Compassion, the God of all Comfort*, the One who raises the dead, is the God of all-surpassing power, and He lives within us. Let's take a look at our 3rd and final text, 2 Cor. 12:7-10.

3. Paul writes, "*in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' 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. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

No one knows what Paul's "thorn" is, he doesn't elaborate, and perhaps it's better this way—all of us can relate to a painful situation that is beyond our ability to bear, manage, or fix. What we do know is that God allowed this "thorn," and that Paul did what we all do in the face of weakness and pain—he pleaded for God to take it away.

Let me ask you: *do you hate weakness? Do you hate the weakness you see in yourself?* Many of us cannot accept of the grace of God because we are too busy hating ourselves. Leanne Payne writes, "If we are busy hating the soul that God loves and is in the process of

¹ Rod Wilson, "Strength in Weakness," 2003 Pastors' Conference

straightening out...our minds will be riveted on ourselves--not on Christ who is our wholeness."²

Weakness comes to us in every imaginable form, and from every imaginable direction (both within and without); we all have limiting thorns. But we will never embrace the wholeness in Christ by despising our weakness.

God's promise is not strength instead of weakness—all strength, no weakness.

His promise is not strength in spite of weakness—a strength that overshadows weakness.

God's promise is strength in weakness—our weakness showcases His glorious strength.

I've had my own share of painful experiences, impossible situations, and difficult relationships, and the prayers I have prayed sounded awful lot like Paul's: *Jesus, get rid of my pain*. But when I really listened to what I was praying, I realized that I was praying against God's purposes for my life. I was asking God to make me strong and powerful so that I could control outcomes, so that I could be free from weakness, so that I won't ever be wrong, won't ever need to say I'm sorry, and won't ever need to depend on anyone else.

I was praying for independence—how could God ever honour that prayer? I want God to root out my weakness, and God wants to root out my self-reliance.

As Scott Hafemann writes, “Paul’s weakness [became] the place of God’s power.”³ And our weakness, when admitted and submitted to Jesus, becomes the place where we embrace the truth that God loves us (me and you). Our weakness, when admitted and submitted to Jesus, becomes the place of our freedom, the place where (by the power of God) we can let go of the need to please, the need to achieve, the need to be perfect, the need to control every outcome.

Our weakness, when admitted and submitted to Jesus, becomes the place where competition and comparison dies. Our weakness, when admitted and submitted to Jesus, becomes the place where we rely on and anticipate what God can do, instead of relying on what our best efforts can produce. Our weakness can become the place where His glory, His faithfulness, His wholeness is more than enough to sustain our lives.

Ours is a spirituality of dependence. It's not for those who want to look, feel, and sound powerful--those who do quickly give up on Jesus and move on to Tony Robbins. What we have, clothed in weakness, is the power of God--and while the grace that God gives us might not be the grace that we ask for, His grace is sufficient for our lives.

² Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul Through Healing Prayer*, 31; as quoted by Stephen Seamands, *Ministry In The Image of God*, 127.

³ Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, 461.

As I wrap up this morning, I want to offer three suggestions to accompany you on your journey towards wholeness in God:

- **First**, embrace the truth that you are loved by God, weakness and all. If you do this, you will be well on your way.
- **Second**, instead of ignoring, rejecting, or running from weakness, try embracing it. Admit your weakness to God, yourself, and others. And...
- **Third**, allow your weakness to become the place of God's power. We are such a self-help culture, we rarely surrender ourselves and our needs to God. We don't know how to wait, how to listen, or how to depend—we're too busy trying to make things happen. And, we are such a pain-avoid-ant culture that when we do turn to God, we ask Him to eliminate our weakness instead of inviting Him to indwell every weak place. We need to learn to depend on His grace moment by moment.

At one point or another, all of us discover that we are powerless to change ourselves, to change our circumstances, or to change the people around us. When that moment comes, salvation, rescue, the wholeness of God, is closer than a heartbeat.

Silent Prayer

In a few minutes, Dayna and the team are going to lead us in a worship response, but before they do, I want to invite you to enter into silent prayer.

Earlier, I asked you to consider you to take an inventory of your

life—your physical health, your friendships, your family, your work. Is there something you are you facing something that is beyond your ability to change? Are there difficult circumstances that have got you anxious, fearful, angry, or despairing?

Take some time to confess your need for God, to lay your concerns before Him, to entrust your situation to His care—listen for anything He might want to say to you. And in a few minutes, when Dayna begins to sing, please join her in our concluding songs.