

Strength In Weakness: *embracing a spirituality of dependence* (2 Cor 1:3-4, 8-9; 4:7-12; 12:7-10).

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors on staff at North Shore Alliance.

In the beginning of February, we are going to begin a teaching series based on the Gospel of John that will bring us up to and through Easter. What that means is that there are a few Sundays in January that are unaccounted for. And while there are an endless amount of things I could talk about, over the next few weeks I'd like to let you in on some of the things God has been speaking to me about.

I probably don't need to say this, but I'm on the same journey that all of you are on. I'd like to say that I'm following Jesus as best I can, but deep down I know that's not always true. I can be stubborn, sinful, and slow to respond to God; pastors aren't in a separate category, we're just people.

Every so often I will be in conversation with someone from our church, and I will get from them the distinct impression that somehow, because I am a pastor, I've "arrived" spiritually speaking. It always catches me off guard. I am more aware today of my need for God's grace than I was when I began pastoral ministry 15 years ago.

Recently, I've been thinking a lot about what sets Christian Spirituality apart from other forms of spirituality. What sets us apart from others in the way we think, experience, and live in the world? How does our fundamental perception of reality differ, say, from my neighbour next door or across the street? If I am truly **in Christ**, then how does Jesus' invitation to follow, affect what I embrace and what I reject?

I know it all sounds very theological or theoretical, but I can assure you it's been anything but for me--it's been deeply personal, with real-life implications. I want to talk with you this morning about strength, weakness, and embracing a spirituality of dependence. What got me thinking about all of this was a surprise encounter with God back in the Summer.

illus: By the time I got to my vacation, I was running on fumes: spent, weary, and enveloped by a low-grade melancholy. I'm glass half-full kind of person, and so I was concerned about the things I was feeling. But before long, playing with my kids, sitting on the beach, and soaking up the sun began to have it's effect...the strain of a long ministry year began to melt away. By the time I began our third week of vacation, I felt I had more than enough in the tank for the Fall season ahead.

One morning I went out for a long run, but I was so weary I stopped running and began to walk. As I slowed down my body, my mind grew still and I sensed the Spirit asking me a question: "*Mark, why is your heart filled with such anger these days?*" My response was to protest: "*Lord, I'm not angry, I'm certainly weary, definitely disappointed, and maybe a little frustrated, but angry?*"

But the Holy Spirit gently ignored my protest, "*Mark, why don't you tell me what you're angry about?*" On that long walk back we had much to talk about. My vacation came and went, but this conversation with God continued; it's still ongoing.

I'm told that anger is a typical response when our expectations are violated. When our expectations go unmet (rightly or wrongly), anger is a natural response. At first, as I dialogued with God about my

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anger, it was easy enough to point the finger outwards. *This impossible situation is making me angry. This impossible person or relationship is making me angry.*

But the more I prayerfully explored my anger, the more I became aware of the expectations driving my anger. I remember the moment when God revealed that some of my anger was directly tied to my own fear and inadequacy. I was angry about “impossible” situations because I couldn’t control the outcome, because “impossible” situations make me aware of how vulnerable, weak, and frail I really am.

Do you ever feel weak, vulnerable, or frail? Of course you do. Your situation is likely different from mine, but our experience is much the same. And so too is our natural response-- the impulse to point outwards, to blame others is strong. So too is the impulse to flee from weakness, to ignore it, medicate it, or wish it away. But none of these strategies are congruent with following Jesus.

I’ve been on a painful journey the last five months, and I’d like to say that it’s all in the rear view mirror. I’d like to say that, but it wouldn’t be real. What I will say is that I have a greater appreciation of how deep my weakness runs. I can also say that Jesus has begun to reframe my thinking and my expectations. And, as I’ve been embracing a spirituality of dependence, I’ve been encountering His strength in my weakness.

I want to warn you in advance that you may not like what you hear from me this morning, in fact, *hate* might not be too strong a word. “*Hate*” is a good descriptor for how most of us feel about our own weakness. It’s one thing to be gracious when we encounter weakness

in others, but learning to receive God’s grace in our own place of weakness, learning to be gracious with ourselves is another matter entirely.

I want to be clear, embracing a spirituality of dependence will kill you. You will die to the illusion of self-sufficiency and control. Some of the expectations you have of God and others will need to die. Embracing a spirituality of dependence will mean dying to an escapist way of praying.

Not many joyfully accept this invitation to die, I know I haven’t. It took months of wrestling with my weakness, months of dialogue with God to bring me to where I am today; I’ve had five months, and this morning you’re going to have about 20 minutes. But to those of you who have been wrestling with pain, difficulty, and weakness, I want to share with you God’s promise: *there is life on the other side of death...abundant life--not easy, but abundant.* This is the way of Jesus--He bids us to take up our cross and follow.

For the next 20 minutes, I want to ask you to do something counterintuitive, instead of ignoring, rejecting, or running from weakness, I want to invite you to embrace it.

Let me encourage you to grab your Bible, paper or electronic, and turn with me to 2 Corinthians (**page 1794** in the Blue Bible). We are going to walk through 4 different texts in 2 Corinthians that speak to a spirituality of dependence, beginning with 1:3-4.

1. 2 Cor. 1:3-4, “*3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,*

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4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

2 Corinthians is Paul’s most biographical letter, and in it we see Paul at his lowest. In this letter, Paul is very *real*, very *raw*; we learn more about Paul’s difficulty, pain, and weakness from this letter than from all the others combined.

Paul begins his letter by ascribing to God two different titles: *the Father of Compassion*, and, *the God of all Comfort*. Paul begins his letter, simultaneously describing God’s character and the state of the world.

Think about it--**compassion** only makes sense in terms of its opposite (indifference and cruelty), **comfort** only makes sense in terms of its opposite (difficulty and distress). God is *the Father of Compassion* in a world filled with indifference and cruelty. He is *the God of all Comfort* in a world filled with difficulty and distress. For most of us, this isn’t a brand new revelation, but it certainly undercuts the dream most of us dream about a pain-free existence.

And sometimes the Christian message has even been marketed to perpetuate this dream. “*The Christian life is a life free from pain and difficulty...come to Jesus and everything will get better, everything will become easier. Follow Jesus and He will make you happy, healthy, wealthy, and successful. Jesus will help you control situations, relationships, and steer clear of pain.*” I have to admit, that messaging is very attractive--but it isn’t real.

illus: I have this conversation with Christians all the time, in fact, Thursday afternoon was the most recent one. The person I talked

with used to attend our church sporadically over ten years ago. He is a sixty year old follower of Jesus, a husband, a father, and an engineer, but he can’t find work, and his wife’s health isn’t good; life isn’t working out the way he hoped it would.

After talking for some time, he posed a question that I could see coming a mile away: *Pastor, my life, the way it’s ended up, is it because I’m not faithful enough? Maybe I’ve disappointed God, maybe I’m not holy enough, maybe I’m not praying the right way...if I do things differently, more faithfully, will God grant me the life I’m dreaming about? Will everything work out the way I hope?*

Perhaps you are asking the same question. But I hope you can see that there isn’t a straight line of cause and effect when it comes to following Jesus. Even the most faithful, the most holy, the most surrendered to God will experience pain, difficulty, and weakness--Jesus did, Paul did, every faith-filled follower of Jesus has and will--this is a part of living in a broken world.

We don’t follow Jesus in the hopes that we will avoid weakness, we follow Him **because** we are weak and He is strong. We don’t follow Him so that everything will turn out alright, we follow Jesus because everything isn’t alright, because right now He is working for what is right and good, and in the end He will put all things back to rights.

God is *the Father of Compassion*, and, *the God of all Comfort*--He doesn’t answer all our questions or prevent all of our difficulties--God comforts us in our troubles, He offers compassion in the presence of pain. [*He*] *comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”*

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2. Lets turn our attention to our second text, **2 Cor. 1:8-9**. “**8** *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. 9* *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 embracing a spirituality of dependence. 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.

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.

Collectively, if we were to be gut-level-honest, laying out our difficulties, what pains us most, our dashed dreams, we would have quite the collage. 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. You see, pain commands our attention but it dulls our senses. All we see and feel is the hurt; we just want it to be over.

But pain can be our teacher. 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.”² 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.

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 *the Father of Compassion* and *the God of all Comfort*; He is the One who can even raise the dead. Let's move on to the third text, 2 Cor. 4:7-9.

¹ Rod Wilson, “*Strength in Weakness*,” 2003 Pastors' Conference.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*,

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3. 2 Cor. 4:7-9, “*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 wonder, have any of you actually worked with clay before? Do we have any potters in our midst? I don't have any personal experience, but I'm told that it is difficult when you first begin working with clay because it's an incredibly fragile material. Once you center 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.³

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. And did you notice that God's power doesn't transform the clay to titanium?...though He indwells, it's still clay, still weak, still frail. But don't forget, it's still standing. Because 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--impervious to weakness/pain/difficulty. His empowering presence enables us to stand in the midst of weakness--and our standing, our

trusting, our hope becomes a radical witness to His presence, His power, and His love.

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...not 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 final text, 2 Cor. 12:7-10.

4. 2 Cor. 12:7-10, “*in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 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*

³ Rod Wilson, “*Strength in Weakness*,” 2003 Pastors' Conference

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my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 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 unexpected, uninvited pain that leaves us feeling crippled. 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 straightening out, we cannot help others--our minds will be riveted on ourselves--not on Christ who is our wholeness."⁴

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 our wholeness in Christ by despising our weakness.

God's promise is not strength instead of weakness (all strength, no weakness). It's not strength in spite of weakness (strength that overshadows weakness). It's strength in weakness; our weakness showcases His strength.

To be honest, five months ago, I was praying escapist prayers that sounded an 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 sorry, and won't ever need to depend on anyone else. *I was praying for independence--how could God ever honor 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."⁵ 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.

⁴ Leanne Payne, *Restoring the Christian Soul Through Healing Prayer*, 31; as quoted by Stephen Seamands, *Ministry In The Image of God*, 127.

⁵ Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, 461.

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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.

As I wrap up this morning, I want to offer three suggestions that will redefine your relationship with weakness:

- **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. Instead of asking God to eliminate all weakness in your life, invite Him to come and indwell every weak place; learn to depend on His grace moment by moment.

As I said earlier, embracing a spirituality of dependence will kill you. But God's promise is that there is life on the other side of this death...abundant life--not easy, but abundant.

Pray

Communion: Strength in weakness, victory in defeat, the all-surpassing power of God in the midst of pain and difficulty...is this not what we see when we look to Jesus and His death and resurrection?

By all accounts, the death of Jesus on the cross seemed to be a crushing defeat; the Son of God was crucified like a dangerous criminal. It would be strange, would it not, to continue to celebrate the broken body and shed blood of Jesus if the grave had the final word.

But it didn't. Jesus died to atone for the sin of the world.

The grave couldn't hold Jesus, the all-surpassing power of God was at work, raising Jesus from the dead. Strength in weakness, glory from shame, life from death.

Every time we eat this bread and drink this cup, we rehearse this story and find our place in it. The Father of all Compassion, the God of all Comfort, sent His Son for our sake; Romans 5:8, 10 says that while we were still sinners, still God's enemies, Jesus died for us.

And so this morning, as you come to partake of the bread and the cup, physical symbols of His broken body and His shed blood, come with thanksgiving. Jesus gladly took on our weakness, so that He could become our wholeness. As you come, receive the grace that He provides (forgiveness, love, the power to endure, hope)--come prayerfully, come expectantly.

At this time I would like to invite those who are serving to come forward and find their place. In just a moment, Alana and the team are going to sing and I want to invite you to come forward at that time. You can tear off a small piece of bread, dip it in the cup and then eat.

Benediction
Prayer