

THE DIVINE POWER IS FINISHED IN WEAKNESS

Hear again the Word of the Lord to His Church on this sixtieth day before the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord:

[God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness is finished." Very gladly then I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that it might dwell upon me, the power of the Christ.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

One of the many things God has taught us here over the past decade and a half is to listen for the divine threads which bind together the Sunday readings. Each week God calls and gathers His elect in congregations like this one so that He might grant us His grace, and show us that His divine power is finished in weakness. God does this through simple means – His proclaimed Word and His administered Sacraments. It is through the Word of God alone – preached and visible – that God has chosen to grant His divine power unto salvation to people like you and me who continue to confess that we are poor, miserable sinners. St. Paul declares as much when he says:

Very gladly then I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that it might dwell upon me, the power of the Christ.²

Today, from our responsive reading of the Psalm, and the inerrant records of Isaiah, St. Paul, and St. Luke at least three strands bind God's word into our sin-weakened ears, hearts, lips, and lives. These three are: the Word of God; the thorns of this life; and, the actual fruits of the Faith. Our readings show that God is the one who sows His Word in this fallen world. Today's texts declare that life's thorns include

¹ II Corinthians 12:9

² II Corinthians 12:9b.

people, things, circumstances, and emotions which attempt to keep the faithful from producing all that God's Word would work in believers' lives. The fruits of the Faith are God's works that come out of us when God sows His Word in us. God is the One Who wills to work all three links in today's readings – Word, thorns, and fruit – to lead His people into humble joy that He has chosen us to be the recipients and instruments of His grace. It is those realities which enable St. Paul to continue to declare throughout the centuries:

[God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness is finished."³

Paul declares God's Word of grace for himself, and from the examples which come before it, for you. The Holy Spirit moved him to record his proclamation of God's grace in light of his then ongoing trials. Yet, from what source did the Holy Spirit open the Apostle's mind and heart to God's truth? You know the source – it is the proclaimed Word of God which Paul as a youth and later as a Pharisee would have had planted in his memory.

The Word of God had been sown in Paul through that which we call the Old Testament. God had taken that Word, and declared it finished for Paul in Christ's New Testament. Christ came to that man, who, on account of his intensive lay education in the Scriptures, was encouraged to believe he knew the Word of God better than most. Before the Good News came immediately to him, the man the Church knows as Paul was

³ II Corinthians 12:9a.

strong in his convictions and his concept of his calling. His life's callings as an Israelite, a descendant of Benjamin, a Pharisee, were all reasons to boast in that era of the Faith.

Yet Jesus showed him how he had read the Word of God in error, that is, sinfully. Paul, as well-read as he was in God's Word, spent his adult life searching for salvation from the Law. He with the others of this select few men of the Faith, read the Scriptures and did not discover the suffering Christ, the Messiah of the Scriptures. To halt that manner of thinking Christ literally blinded Paul from continuing to see the Word as guarded by six hundred thirteen Old Testament ceremonial laws. Then He actually opened Paul's eyes to the joy and beauty of the Gospel – namely that God's divine power is finished in weakness – the humility of God in our flesh to not only be born of a virgin, to fully submit Himself perfectly to God's Law, but to bear the sins of the whole world – including your sins, onto the wood, into death and the grave. Paul needed to learn that the divine power is finished in weakness. And, so do you.

That is why this particular sermon now translates St. Paul's quote of Christ's words: *"It continues to be sufficient for you, My grace, for the power in weakness is finished."*⁴ That very literal translation follows the ancient word order of the letter to the Corinthian church more closely than most in our day. As some of you will recall, the ancients used the word order of their sentences to communicate truths. St. Paul, quoting God, thus emphasizes the continuing sufficiency of that which has been finished. The Lord's words are given to move the faithful that which is *enough* to that which is *completed* centered

⁴ II Corinthians 12:9a.

around His grace. Hear Christ's words again, and note how the proclamation moves into and out of Jesus' grace: *"It continues to be sufficient for you, My grace, for the power in weakness is finished."*⁵

This past week I heard a pastor preach a lot about God's grace – but I did not hear him declare that which bring God's grace to his hearers. That is an error into which even the most faithful preachers can fall. We love to open the texts into your ears and hearts, to teach you what the Lord's words mean. But, if we do not proclaim the Gospel with brings God's grace, we have not fulfilled our calling, we have not granted you the Gift with allows you to boast in your weaknesses. So, with that in mind, hear this teaching about the words of God, and I pray, the Good News proclaimed...

The word which ends that statement is one which is used elsewhere in scripture, notably by the original Speaker of our theme sentence. Can you recall where else Christ Jesus declares all things *finished*? Yes, it was as He hung on the cross, weakened, beaten almost to death, straining for each breath on account of your sins. Jesus spoke with a loud voice one word, the last of those which have been known for centuries as the "Seven Words on the Cross" – one Word which we translate, "It is finished!"

The root of that word is the same for the word which ends the quote you have heard repeated today – "finished." Christ displayed His divine power in weakness. St. Paul, struggling with the "hits" which come for being steadfast in the Faith of Christ,

⁵ II Corinthians 12:9a.

was still learning, a couple of decades after Christ called him to repentance on the road, and granted him forgiveness through the Word and touch of a man named Aquila, St. Paul was still learning that God's power is finished in weakness.

What about you? You are strong in the Faith – because you hear and believe that Jesus died to bring you forgiveness for your sins. You believe that His blood washes you clean. You hold fast to the divine reality that His resurrection from the dead declares you right with our heavenly Father.

Yet, you are an American. You have learned, or are learning, our society's high valuation of the self-made man or woman. You pray for others, you care for them, you help them in their weaknesses. You are confident that, should this be your last minute on earth, you will be with our Lord.

What then happens to you when your human weaknesses are displayed for you, and others to see? How do you think, feel, and act when you can no longer control your reactions to people, things, events, and the world around you? Do you rejoice in your evident weaknesses in the Faith?

At those times in particular, Jesus' proclaimed Word and Paul's following confession are for you:

[God] said to me, "My grace continues to be sufficient for you, for the power in weakness is finished." Very gladly then I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that it might dwell upon me, the power of the Christ.⁶

⁶ II Corinthians 12:9

Think of this, Christ, out of love for the man who had held so much personal pride in his life's callings showed him how much he would suffer for that beautiful Gospel. From a recent estimate one of our Bible study groups made, Paul's learning through suffering on account of the Good News had been continuing for over two decades since he was blinded by God's full glory on the road to Damascus. Since God in Christ so loved St. Paul so much that He allowed him to suffer through thorns in the flesh – from the word used, this is likely a person, perhaps one of the so-called “Super – Apostles” who had come into the Corinthian congregation and declared themselves, and Paul's words to be equal at best, his words much less than theirs at worst. Christ had loved Paul so much that he allowed him to suffer through the thorns of this life – first shown in the temptations which came from his powerful position as a Pharisee; shown most fully in his commission to round up and imprison the followers of Jesus. Then, once the Word had opened his eyes to the Faith of Christ, Paul began to suffer the thorns that come with being a follower of Jesus. These were shown forth in weakness – through labors, whippings, imprisonments, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, arduous journeys, many and various perils, hunger, thirst, and nakedness. Through these things God sustained him.

What about you? When you consider the thorns in your life, and compare them to Paul's – summed up in his daily concern for the congregations of Christ – do you find joy in your weaknesses? When the world, your own sinful flesh, and the devil seem to be hammering you into the ground from which you were made, do you look up and

see Christ hanging in weakness for you that the divine power might be declared anew in your life? If not, repent, turn from your sins, and believe that the Word of God which was spoken to St. Paul, and declared in the first congregations of Christ's New Testament is for you! You are free to give thanks to God that He has considered you worthy to suffer for the Good News of Jesus' death for yours sins, His resurrection for your justification. You are free, through the weakness of God in our flesh to bear all the burdens of this sinful life, sinful world, sinful spirit – the devil. Jesus says to you in your weaknesses on account of the Faith that which He first declared to St. Paul:

*"It continues to be sufficient for you, My grace, for the power in weakness is finished."*⁷

I have declared those to be the words of Jesus. How can that be, for St. Paul has recorded them. Look to the text. Paul is quoting God, in Christ. Then, later, after the Lord's Service or when you go home, take your red-letter Bible and discover that most Bible translators agree that those are Jesus' words. They are His Word, and their declaration over you who are so troubled on account of the sinful thorns of this fallen creation are freed to boldly confess with St. Paul, noting his chosen word order:

*Very gladly then rather I will continue to boast in the weaknesses of me, that it might dwell upon me, the power of the Christ.*⁸

There you have joy in the power of Christ. Enough said for this year.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Sexagesima (Lutheran Service Book one-year series)
Isaiah 55:10-13; II Corinthians 11:19-12:9; Luke 8:4-15
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Pastor Michael L. Merchouse

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⁷ II Corinthians 12:9a.

⁸ II Corinthians 12:9b.