Book 1

Sunday May 14, 1972

"POWER IN WEAKNESS" II Corinthians 12:7-10

Is there anyone listening who does not have some kind of weakness, some limitation, some handicap. I suppose in each person there is at least one thing that we wish ~~was~~ were not that way. And thus one of the most perplexing problems which each one of us faces is that of facing and handling our particular weakness.

Maybe we're subject to fits of temper, outbursts which we find difficult to control. Or perhaps we have periods of despondency, which we don't like and yet which we are powerless to do anything about. Some of us may have a weak heart, or failing eyesight, or flat feet, or perhaps we think that we're too short or too tall. For each one of us there is probably something which we wish were different.

In other words, most of us have looked at another person and have thought to ourselves, "I wish I was like that. I wish I had his talent, or his looks. Or, I wish I could be that kind of mother, or that kind of wife or that kind of husband."

And there are other kinds of weaknesses and handicaps. One person may have been born a cripple or another has had some crippling disease, or some other illness hits us later in life and our activity is curtailed.

Or here is a man who in youth had all the natural ambitions of young manhood for success, but who now recognizes that he never will arrive at his desired goal. He will never write the poetry or compose the music or preach the sermons or hold the business positions that he dreamed of.

And then some have had serious accidents through no fault of their own and thus are handicapped.

Still others of us may experience some weakness and limitation in our personal relationships. Here is a life that wanted love so desperately and missed it; or here is a home where marriage might have been a thing of beauty but was a tragedy; or here is a family where a child was greeted as a blessing and became an inward agony; and here is a household where death has severed a tie that was the support and glory of the home.

Thus among the things that are true of all of us is the fact that each one of us has some kind of weakness, some limitation, some handicap which he or she must face. And many times life finds us powerless before facts that cannot be changed.

Yet, such weakness, handicaps, limitations, are nothing new as far as human beings are concerned. The Bible speaks of such things over and over again.

As one example, recall our scripture lesson for today. The Apostle Paul, like all the rest of us had his weakness, his "thorn in the flesh," as he called it. I suspect that he had others besides this one, but this particular weakness gave him a great deal of trouble. Many and varied guesses of New Testament scholars respecting Paul's affliction have been made. Some think it may have been defective eyesight; others a recurrent form of malaria, and still others think it may have been epileptic seizures.

Now if Paul had been like some of us, we would know more about his "thorn in the flesh." Think of writing all those letters and telling nobody the symptoms of his troubles! We know nothing about Paul's trouble, however, except that behind the scenes, like all the rest of us, he had to face and deal with a weakness in himself, a weakness that he prayed to escape, but which he could not evade, a weakness that he had to settle down and live with somehow for the rest of his life.

Paul tells us that on three separate occasions he prayed to God for deliverance from his weakness, but the thorn in the flesh remained.

Some of us have also had this experience, that is, we also have prayed many times for God to remove our particular weakness or limitation. And we have thought that God didn't hear us or pay any attention to us. We know from our own experience, as did Paul, that God will not automatically and unfailingly free human beings from every physical illness or weakness.

Let it be remembered, however, that the Apostle's prayer did not go unanswered. Instead of physical healing, instead of the removal of the weakness for which Paul prayed; God gave him something quite different. Paul found a new source of power because of his weakness!

God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." The weakness remained, but it no longer mattered. It was submerged. It was swallowed up. More than that, it became a source and reminder of God's power. Paul could say, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, with insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Another translation puts it this way: "Therefore I have cheerfully made up my mind to be proud of my weaknesses, because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ. I can even enjoy weaknesses, suffereing, privations, persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake. For my very weakness makes me strong in him."

Thus Paul discovered that because of his weakness, he now found new power which gave him victory, not only to accept the malady that harrassed him, but over all the hardships and oppositions that met him. He learned a new style of life--his weakness became power.

Can the same thing happen to us? Can weakness become power? Paul's experience and the message of the Christian faith indicate that it can. Here's how it can happen.

1. Note first that Paul wrote that he had cheerfully made up his mind to be proud of his weakness. That is, he took a positive stance and attitude toward his weakness. This is the first step in letting God turn our weakness into power.

However, before Paul came to this kind of action, he, like most of us felt sorry for himself. You know how it goes--we ask, "why did this have to happen to me? What have I done to deserve this weakness? Why can't I be like other persons? What great things I could have done if it were not for this handicap?" These are our instinctive reactions to our weaknesses and handicaps. But as Paul discovered, it's not a very efficient or helpful way for dealing with our weaknesses.

Paul discovered, as we can discover, that a person can rather say to himself--"Do you suppose that you are the only one in the world with some kind of weakness? Few people get their first choice. Whoever yet had a chance to live his or her life under the ideal conditions that he would've chosen.

Fosdick tells the story of a great violinist who while giving a concert in Paris, had the A string break in the middle of the compositon. The violinist transposed the music and finished it on three strings. Fosdick went on to say, "That is life, to have your A string snap and have to finish on three strings." How many here have had that happen in one way or another! Some of the finest things in human life have been done that way. While it would have been a great thrill to have heard the violinist in a normal concert, it would've surely been a greater thrill to have heard him at that concert when he had to finish on three strings.

As soon as a person begins to take a positive attitude toward his failures, his weaknesses, they begin to present themselves as opportunities, always challenging, sometimes fascinating. It is a good cook who after the dinner has been burned, knows how to make a fine meal out of the leftovers and a good cook will be challenged to try.

Thus we can begin to see here a possible technique for dealing with our weaknesses. We can begin to say to ourselves: There are two kinds of elements in every situation, first, the thing we cannot help--if the dinner has been burned, it is burned; if the A string has broken, it has broken. But second, there are the things we can help, our attitude and corresponding action. Rebellions get us nowhere. But to see what can be done with the weakness, there's the fascinating part.

Paul did not want his thorn in the flesh, his weakness, whatever it was. He rebelled against it. "I prayed three times for the Lord to remove it," he said. But I suspect there are qualities of understanding and sympathy in Paul and a deep and moving music in some of the great passages of his letters that never would have been there if he had not had to finish on three strings.

2. A second step for letting God turn our weaknesses into power is related to what we have just said. We have to learn to accept ourselves as we are, with our weaknesses. Recall the first sentence of that well-known prayer by Rheinhold Niebuhr, "O God give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed."

I have a friend, a minister, who was born with out any arms at all. Later in life he wrote a little book about many of the difficulties he had in facing his limitations.

He said that his first and most important battle was that of accepting himself as he was and not as he wished that he was. He found the serenity to accept what could not be changed. Once this was done, he found he could do more good for others than you or me who do not have such a serious limitation.

Much of the reason that so many of us get upset over our weakness or limitation is that we keep comparing ourselves with others and wishing that we could be what they are and do what they do.

We habitually measure ourselves by other people and assume a responsibility for being as fortunate, as useful, and the same in every way. It's a great day in a person's life when he makes up his mind that he has the responsibility, not to be like anybody else, but to handle his own special situation as well as he can.

I think the Apostle Paul must've said to himself at one point--"I Paul hereby accept myself with the thorn in my flesh, and I do hereby throw off all responsibility for dealing with any other Paul than myself, and having thus accepted myself with my weakness which I cannot change, I will now fall to and see what good thing can be gotten out of myself in my special situation." And this is what happened. As a result of Paul's acceptance of himself and his own weakness, his weakness was on the way to becoming a source of power.

We are not to despise our weaknesses and handicaps. God does not judge us in crowds. God wants to know what we are doing in our own special situation. That is all. If you say, "I am just as good as so and so, you have missed the point. Perhaps so and so had many more severe handicaps. You should've done better. Or if you say, so and so beat me, I am a failure; you have missed the point. God may say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, you had a desperate situation and you handled it superbly.

3. There is yet one more step which the experience of the Apostle Paul gives us in regard to our weakness and what that weakness can do for us and how it can become power.

Paul discovered that his weakness was a constant reminder to him that he was not self-sufficient and once he admitted this, he found that God's power truly flowed through him. It's as if our own feeling of self-sufficience block's God's power in our lives. We don't let God in because we're

sure we don't need Him. But our weakness can be a reminder to us that we are not self-sufficient. It becomes therefore a source of God's power.

To put it another way--our own thorn in the flesh, our own weakness, or some kind of crisis can bring us face to face with our own inadequacy and the realization of our own inadequacy in turn can open us to the inexhaustible sufficiency of God. This is the power of weakness, the power of helplessness. It's a principle written into the very fabric of life. Once Paul acknowledged his own powerlessness; once he accepted his weakness, then God said to him--"My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is perfected in weakness. Or as Moffatt translates it--"It is in weakness that my power is fully felt!"

Paul even said earlier that he thought God gave him his thorn in the flesh in order to prevent his becoming absurdly conceited. "I was given a physical handicap to harrass me and effectually stop any conceit." And it can work and does work that way for us. Again, our very weakness and our admission and acceptance of it, can lead us to trust God and it then becomes a source of power.

Many persons have testified that the most spectacular answers to prayer have often come following a period when they could do nothing for themselves at all.

So like Paul, our weakness can be a constant reminder to us of our own inadequacy and thus it can also become a source for God's power to flow in and through us. Thus it should not surprise us that creativity, the great things in life, often arise out of the pit of life, the weakness, the helplessness, rather than the high places. For creativity is the ability to put old material into new forms. And it is only when old molds and olds ways of doing things are forcibly broken up by need, or by suffering, compelling us to re-group, to re-think, to begin again, that the creative process starts to flow. Our weakness in this way can become the source of creativity.

Our weakness, our helplessness actually becomes power. When I am weak, then I am strong. In fact, God seems to work this way throughout our world. Paul wrote in another place, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the

world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

So in your weakness and mine, we can let God's word come to us as it did to Paul--God's word is, "My grace is sufficient for you, for where there is weakness, my power is shown the more completely. And then we can say with Paul--"I have cheerfully made up my mind to be thankful for my weakness, because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ. I can even enjoy my weakness, suffering privations, persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake. For my very weakness makes me strong in him."