

Ps 139:1-18; 2 Cor. 12:2-10

***Sufficient Grace*©
July 8, 2018**

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

Weakness. Who among us likes to show our weaknesses? Don't you just love those job evaluations that ask you to name your strengths and weaknesses? Like Paul, we are often a little hesitant to boast about our strengths, but on the other hand, we know we'd better be convincing that we have some and know what they are.

But weaknesses? In truth, we are all too aware of what our weaknesses are. But we usually aren't too keen on telling the people we work for, lest it comes back to bite us sometime. The truth will set you free, they say. Yea, that's what we're afraid of!

And really, in today's world (and probably in the past as well) being strong is desirable. Being weak and dependent is not. Women are told to show confidence in our abilities and strengths. Those who coach us in getting a good job in leadership tell us to wear our "power suits." You know, tailored clothes that are bold in color, like red or navy or black. If you wear something soft and pastel in color it might reveal your more feminine, softer side. Heaven forbid we show that!

There is that song from a few years ago that says "I am woman, hear me roar!" In other words, "I got the power!"

With all the super heroes of today, we see boys and girls wearing superhero capes and watching those movies and playing computer games – games of power and conquering.

And sometimes, probably not anyone here, but sometimes, some people walk around feeling like they are not truly representing themselves to the world because they are so afraid to show any sign of their true weakness. They put up a front; try to live up to an image they want the world to see. But inside they feel inadequate and sometimes maybe not authentic.

Yet, Paul seems to be saying the only thing he will boast about is his weakness – not all the strong points of his background or his experiences or his personality.

There is plenty he could brag about. Paul was well educated, he could have been a Jewish rabbi, with no financial worries at all. He knew the law of Moses, and all the Scriptures by heart. He was an outspoken man, he could be forceful, conceited, critical, his words could bite when he was angry but he got his point across. He was successful in building churches and bringing people to Christ, even though he had never actually known Jesus himself.

He had spiritual experiences, which were looked at by people in that day as something to brag about. We know that Paul (who was known first as Saul) was a powerful man – a Jewish stronghold who was someone to fear if you were a Christ follower. He had people killed for following Jesus. He had Steven stoned to death and he was on his way to Damascus to have more Christians thrown into prison and ultimately executed for their blasphemy against God.

His first spiritual experience was on that Damascus road where he was struck down by the blinding light of Christ. He heard the voice of Jesus asking “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” When Saul had this conversion experience he completely did an about face. God changed his name to Paul and his new life began – a life of winning people to Christ instead of persecuting them because of their faith.

Paul put his own life on the line – now he was one of the sought-after Christians and he faced much opposition and danger himself. He was beaten and imprisoned repeatedly, yet he traveled and started numerous churches, including the one in Corinth.

He talks about knowing a man who had a spiritual experience – who was taken up to “the third heaven” and heard things he was not allowed to repeat. All the scholars I’ve read agree that this man Paul is talking about is Paul, himself.

Paul is trying not to boast on himself but obviously there were some in the church who seemed to want to compare Paul to some false apostles who were speaking against Paul. Their claim to be better seemed to have something to do with spiritual experiences. Paul tells about this to say he knows about it but it isn’t something that is to be bragged about.

In fact, he goes on to say that God allowed Satan to put a thorn in Paul’s flesh to keep him humble. We are not told what that thorn is – it could have been a handicap of some kind – something that caused him physical pain. Some have suggested perhaps he had epilepsy or migraines, or a speech impediment or problems with his vision.

Some suggest it could have been depression or perhaps it was a temptation he could not shake.

Whatever it was, Paul says he asked God to remove it from him. He asked him several times but then he heard (in some way) Jesus say, “My grace is sufficient for you, Paul, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.”

In other words, Christ is saying, when you are relying on me and not on yourself, not on your own perceived strengths, that’s when my power is able to be at work. You get yourself out of the way and let me do the work; you rely on me to work in you, to be your guide, your strength, your power, your wisdom. Then we will accomplish great things.

Yes, we try to hide our weaknesses – especially our faults, the things that tempt us most, our ungodly thoughts – but as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 139 that we heard:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.

And as we sang in our first hymn:

*“Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;”*

We cannot hide ourselves from the God who created us and who holds us in the palm of his hand. He loves us as we are. In Christ, He has given us grace that covers those faults; those sinful ways.

Paul says he can only boast about his weakness. In the chapter before this he referred to Christ’s own weakness on the cross. He talks about the foolishness of the cross; how in that weakness there was great, amazing grace that was sufficient for us all. In that weakness God’s power was revealed.

Remember Flip Wilson’s character – Geraldine – saying: “What you see if what you get!”

When we admit to having weakness; when we are honest and authentic with ourselves, and with others, we are able to say that God is the one who is strong, not me. In my weakness, I am nothing unless God works his power through me.

Often times it is when we are in our weakest moments that God accomplishes great things through us. The beloved song we are about to sing – ***Precious Lord, Take my Hand*** – was written in one of those weak, very low moments.

Thomas Andrew Dorsey (not to be confused with the popular big band leader and trombone player – Tommy Dorsey) was a black musician who was born in 1899 in Georgia. His father was a Baptist preacher and his mother taught piano. Dorsey composed African American gospel music and combined it with jazz and blues. He became known as the Father of Black Gospel Music.

In 1915 He moved to Chicago so he could study at the Chicago College of Composition and Arranging and soon he began playing in nightclubs under a variety of names including, "Texas Tommy," "Barrelhouse Tom," and "Georgia Tom."

After a serious illness Dorsey became a committed Christian and began composing gospel music and directing the church choir. But then, at a young age, tragedy struck and it knocked him down. This is his own account of what happened. He wrote:

"Back in 1932 I was 32 years old and a fairly new husband. My wife, Nettie and I were living in a little apartment on Chicago’s Southside. One hot August afternoon I had to go to St. Louis, where I was to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. I didn’t want to go. Nettie was in the last month of pregnancy with our first child. But a lot of people were expecting me in St. Louis ...

"... In the steaming St. Louis heat, the crowd called on me to sing again and again. When I

finally sat down, a messenger boy ran up with a Western Union telegram. I ripped open the envelope. Pasted on the yellow sheet were the words: YOUR WIFE JUST DIED ...

"When I got back, I learned that Nettie had given birth to a boy. I swung between grief and joy. Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together, in the same casket. Then I fell apart. For days I closeted myself. I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn't want to serve Him anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well ...

"But still I was lost in grief. Everyone was kind to me, especially a friend, Professor Frye, who seemed to know what I needed. On the following Saturday evening he took me up to Malone's Poro College, a neighborhood music school. It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. I sat down at the piano, and my hands began to browse over the keys."

He remembered an old melody from his Sunday School days and he used this tune, adding his own words. And *Precious Lord* became the most famous of his many gospel songs.

The following Sunday that song was introduced to the choir at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where Martin Luther King, Sr. was the pastor. It became Martin Luther King Jr.'s favorite song. This song, *Precious Lord*, was sung at the rally in Memphis the night before the civil-rights leader's assassination. And it was sung, at the request of President Lyndon Johnson at his funeral.

In one of his weakest moments, God worked through Thomas Dorsey and a very inspiring, moving gospel hymn was written that has been comforting to many through the years since.

My grace is sufficient, Jesus says. For power is made perfect in weakness.

© Copyright 2018. All Rights Reserved.