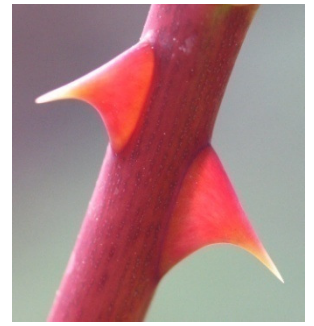


**ST. LUKE EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH-WELS
SERMON BY PASTOR ANTHONY E. SCHULTZ
PENTECOST 7 JULY 19, 2009 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10**



To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me 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.

People of God – rescued from the flaming lake of fire in hell by the innocent blood of the very Lamb of God:

God’s Word is about law and gospel. It’s about life and death – the short time we live in this world and where we will spend eternity. Earthly life can end in countless ways – when you least expect it! If you pay attention to what’s going on around you – you can’t help but notice. In the past few days, a professional boxer – nicknamed The Thunder – was strangled with a purse strap? A man named Daniel was 27 years old. He was running with the bulls – the 6 city blocks from the pens to the bull ring. A bull – name Cappuccino – the color of coffee with frothy milk caught Daniel – as he tried to slide feet first under a protective wooden wall. If he had dived head first he might have survived – but he didn’t! A young woman – working in a gas station died – inside the gas station – when she was run over by a car that came crashing through the wall! Did Harry Potter die this week, too? They say there are some 87 stop signs vandalized to say, “Stop Voldemort!” Voldemort is only imaginary evil – only make believe evil. The real evil in our world today – threatens our heart – our faith – our immortal soul. And so today we have instruction and encouragement from God’s Word:

God’s Grace Is Sufficient For Me!

- 1. Understand thorny problems**
- 2. Lean on God’s strength!**

The part of God’s Word we are concentrating on today – is part of the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the believers in the Greek city of Corinth. Today is the 6th and final week in a row we are reading from 2 Corinthians. Do you remember those Scriptures? **For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake... But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 2 Corinthians 4:5f Again – Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:15f And again – For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new**

creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:14f And last Sunday we heard, **“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.** 2 Corinthians 8:7

And so—the Apostle Paul—writing again—to people in the big city—famous for prostitution—for all sorts of spiritual problems—yet a place where people were among the first to hear, **If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.** 1 Corinthians 13:1f It was the Corinthians who were the first to hear, **Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.** 1 Corinthians 15:55-58 It was to the people of Corinth that Paul wrote, **To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.**

In the verses before our text Paul wrote about the grace and goodness of God to him. **I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ (that would be Paul himself) who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. (Whether this actually physically happened—or whether it was just revealed to him in his mind—it’s hard to say.) And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself except about my weaknesses.** 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 Imagine what it would be like—to take a peek into Heaven itself—to see what it looks like and hear what it sounds like! Imagine actually seeing angels—singing praises and serving their Creator—their Heavenly Father. Imagine what that would be like! It would be pretty tempting to think you were more than a little special. **To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.**

A thorn in my flesh. What exactly was it? Lots of people have made lots of guesses about this thorn—this sharply pointed sliver—this pointed stake! Some people think it was severe headaches—migraines. Do you know how painful they can be—feeling like your head is going to explode—painful sensitivity to light and sound—you literally lie down on a cold floor—sick to your stomach? Maybe it was epilepsy---terrible seizures—that can be pretty scary for the people around you—even more frightening two thousand years ago—when people really didn’t understand such things. Maybe it was ophthalmia. Do you know what that is—ophthalmia? Sympathetic ophthalmia is when you hurt one eye—and the next thing you know—both eyes don’t work and you are left blind. How terrible would that be—when you are trying to travel all over the known world—to preach about Jesus? Some people think the thorn in the flesh was malaria. There are lots of people in Nigeria and lots of people in the Amazon rainforest who have malaria. You can tell by looking at them. Their eyes are sunken. They look like they are going to fall down—and pretty soon they are so weak—they literally fall down. One of the most frustrating things about being sick—is you can’t do the things you want to do

and need to do—but you can't! You just can't! You say to yourself—this is just mind over matter! Get up! Put your robe on! Go into the office and write a sermon. I can do this—I can do this—I can do this—I can't! Some people think this thorn in the flesh was a temptation—a weakness—a painful sinful tendency that Paul struggled against. And some people think the thorn was an actual person who literally harassed him. If we were supposed to know—God's Word would tell us. It doesn't! We can be happy not to know!

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." Paul prayed—long and hard—he prayed for his Heavenly Father—to make this painful, frustrating thorn that seemed to be getting in the way of sharing the Gospel—to go away. Again and again he prayed most earnestly for relief. The answer came back very simply and clearly—that it would be spiritually eternally better for Paul if this thorn was not taken away! The thorn that reminded Paul of his own weakness—made God's power and strength all the more precious and practical and real in Paul's life. When Paul appreciated his own weakness—then and only then was he strong in the Lord! God's power was made complete in Paul's 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. Most of the time most people try very hard to cover up our weaknesses. We don't admit our mistakes. Very small children learn—even when they are caught red handed—deny, deny, deny. Eventually grow-ups grow weary and give up. I have heard countless descriptions of car accidents—from fender benders to terrible crashes—and it's always the other person's fault. I have heard about countless people getting speeding tickets—and it's almost always a speed trap—the sneaky police officers hiding with their radar guns—catching little grandmas on their way to church—instead of catching the real crooks. Things we aren't very good at—we refuse to do at all—because to try and make mistakes would expose us to charges that we aren't perfect—so we don't do them at all. If you don't play golf at least pretty well—you don't play. The same with tennis. If you aren't pretty good—you don't play—at least not in public—where people will see you. If you don't look good in a swimming suit—you keep your robe on. If you don't shoot deer—you don't go deer hunting. If you don't catch fish—your pole is probably getting dusty somewhere in your garage—your hooks have petrified little pieces of a worm from the last time you went. Make a mistake public speaking—and get laughed at—I mean really laughed at—and there is no way to get you to take the microphone! We do whatever it takes—to cover up our weaknesses. Not so—the Apostle Paul. He could actually say—I **delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

When I am weak, then I am strong. It is a miracle—every time a human being is conceived—smaller than a grain of sand—yet alive in their mother's tummy. It is a miracle every time a person is born. How much time we have—how long our time of grace will be—only Jesus knows. I haven't read the obituaries in the *Boston Globe* for a long time—so I did. A man named Edward and his wife Joan died. He was a very good orchestra director—but he was getting old—so old that he was almost blind and almost deaf. How hard would that be—when you loved music so much but couldn't hear it? His wife was a ballerina—but now she was diagnosed with cancer—and didn't want to suffer—so they went to Zurich—where they were put to sleep! That can't be right! How sad—when growing weak—they despaired! A man named Robert—*Bob*—my age—born in Duluth--died—was found dead in his apartment. The paper said Bob was an event planner—before there really was such a thing as event planners. If money were no object—this was the guy to have. He made a Christmas wreath for the Clinton

White House – of noble fir – with 1,500 lights – then dipped the whole thing in blue gel! That’s nothing! He planned a New Year’s Eve party at *Studio 54* – where they had glitter. How much glitter – 4 tons of glitter. They dumped it on the floor – it was 4 even 5 inches deep! It was in your shoes and socks and hair. People tracked it home. Months later – it was still in their houses! A year later – it was still in the night club. People said it was like standing in star dust! As neat as that sounds – tons of glitter – golden palm trees – flowers everywhere – it is absolutely nothing compared to Heaven. And one day we will be in Heaven – not because we are so strong – but because we are so weak. We are so weak we could never save our self! Thanks be to God – **when I am weak, then I am strong** – in the Lord! Amen!

To God alone all glory!

Rev. Anthony E. Schantz