

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Half-way around the world in America, where I come from, Lutheran Christians just like you gather together in churches as you are gathered here today. Like you, they come to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. Like you, they come to sing His praises. Like you, they come to receive His body and blood. They come, as you come here today, to be forgiven of their sins. And the Jesus whom they worship in America is the same Jesus you worship here today. The Jesus who forgives them all of their sins is the same Jesus who is here today forgiving all of your sins. The body and blood of Christ which the Christians in America take into their mouths is the same body and blood of Christ you receive today at this altar. You and I, we are one in Christ. And so it is a joy and privilege for me to have the opportunity to stand here in this pulpit in Baguga and preach Jesus to you this day. Let me read again for you the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.

I don't know of anyone who wants to be weak. Children want strong legs to run with. Young men and women want strong arms to work with. Mothers want to be strong in order to take care of their children. Young people, old people, even those who are sick, none of them want to be weak. We all want to be strong.

The Apostle Paul wanted to be strong also. He was a missionary. He traveled all over the world preaching Christ. He did not want to be weak. He wanted to be strong. But Jesus had something else in mind for him. He allowed the devil to torment Paul. This torment made Paul weak. It was a thorn in his flesh, he said, and it made him weak. Paul did not want to be weak. He wanted to be strong. So three times he prayed to the Lord to take his thorn in the flesh away from him. But Jesus said, "No." "No, Paul," He said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

It is not fun to be weak, but like with Paul, this is not something you and I have much control over. As I flew into Yambio last week I became very sick and very weak on the airplane. And it was not fun. I did not want to be sick and weak but the Lord allowed this to come to me for a little while.

Also with you—there are many days when you become weak. Perhaps you become sick. Perhaps you become weak from sorrow, from crying many tears at the death of a loved one. You know that for many years all of you were very weak—when the war was raging; when enemy soldiers were killing your people; when your young men and children were forced to become soldiers and fight in the war, you know how weak you were. You felt helpless. You did not feel strong. You were weak.

It is not fun to be weak. We want to be strong. But sometimes Jesus has something else in mind for us. And we too, like Paul, may pray again and again that God would take away whatever it is that makes us weak. Like Paul we may pray again and again that God takes away from us our thorn in the flesh, whatever that thorn may be—sickness, pain, sorrow, war, death. And while He may take one thorn away from us, He allows other thorns to remain. He may end the war, but He allows sickness to go on. He may remove pain from us, but He allows death to keep bringing tears to our eyes.

Friend, do not think that God has abandoned you. If He allows your thorns to remain in your flesh, do not fear that God does not love you. He knows the thorns in your flesh. He

allows the thorns in your flesh because He loves you. The Apostle Paul prayed that God would take away his thorn in the flesh, but He said, "No." Jesus wanted Paul to remain weak. He wanted Paul to learn day by day that God was his strength. Paul's thorn in his flesh became a blessing to him. It taught Paul to trust in Jesus and not in his own strength.

And also with us. When I became sick and weak on the airplane I learned to trust not in my strength, for I had none, but in the strength of Jesus. And Jesus helped me. The Lutheran Christians in Yambio helped me to get off the airplane. They did not laugh at my weakness. Jesus used them to help me. They gave me words of comfort. They gave me a place to lie down. They gave me water and juice to drink. They brought a doctor to me. I was weak but Jesus is strong, and through the Lutheran Christians in Yambio He taught me to depend upon Him.

And isn't that the same thing Jesus teaches you? When you become sick God is not punishing you. He is teaching you to trust, not in yourself, but in His strength for you. When you bury your loved ones Jesus knows how weak you are. He knows your tears. He knows your sorrow. But He is your strength. He who died for you also lives for you. He lives as your Savior and Redeemer. He lives to forgive your sins. He lives to give you life even in the midst of death. When your loved one dies in Jesus Christ, Jesus strengthens you with the certain truth that all who die in Him live with Jesus in heaven. He dries your tears. He calms your fears. For in Jesus, and because of Him, we will see each other again on the great Day of Resurrection.

Friend, Jesus wants you to take your eyes off the thorns in your flesh and put your eyes on the thorns in His flesh. They led Jesus to Pontius Pilate. They put a crown of thorns on His head, and for Him, it was not fun. It was very painful. It brought tears to His eyes and sorrow to His heart. But Jesus did not say, "No!" He allowed the soldiers to hurt Him. He allowed the soldiers to beat Him. He allowed them to spit on Him. He allowed them to laugh at Him. He allowed them to pierce His flesh with those large painful thorns, and He allowed them to crucify Him.

Jesus became weak on the cross for you. He took your weaknesses and sins, and died your death. Why? Because He loves you. Jesus took those thorns for you. You may feel the pain of many thorns in your life, but you will never feel the thorns that Jesus felt. He was pierced for your sins. He was beaten for your wrongs. He suffered the pain of hell in your place. He died the death you and I deserved.

Jesus was no sinner—we are the sinners. Jesus was no adulterer—we are the adulterers. Jesus was no thief—we are the thieves. Jesus was no murderer—we are the murderers. The beatings they gave Jesus were our beatings. The thorns they placed on His head were for us. The nails they drove into His hands and feet were our nails—they were for us. The hell Jesus suffered is the hell you and I deserve.

But friend, Jesus took all these things in your place. You will never feel God's punishment. Jesus was punished for you. You will never suffer in hell. Jesus suffered hell on the cross for you. You, dear baptized Christian, are forgiven. Every one of you is forgiven. Jesus died for each one of you. Jesus rose from the grave to be your strength. No matter how wicked you are Jesus loves you. No matter how sinful you are Jesus

forgives you. Now, right here and now, you are forgiven of your sins, and in Jesus Christ, heaven belongs to you.

Knowing this, believing this, we can endure with whatever thorns come into our life. We can endure sickness and pain. We can endure sorrow and tears. And yes, we can even endure war and death. Why? Because Jesus is your strength. His grace is sufficient for you. We are weak, but He is strong. We can trust Him. We can depend on Him. We can lean upon Him. He is your God, your Savior. He became weak on the cross for you, and there He died. And so He takes your sins away and gives you life. He takes your punishment away and gives you heaven.

And so, with the Apostle Paul, we can say: Let the thorns in my flesh come. They cannot keep me away from Jesus. For He is my strong Savior, both when I am strong, and when I am weak. Amen.