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***Relying on Grace***  
***2 Corinthians 12:5-10***

<sup>5</sup> *On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.* <sup>6</sup> *But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me,* <sup>7</sup> *even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep<sup>[a]</sup> me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.<sup>[b]</sup>* <sup>8</sup> *Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,* <sup>9</sup> *but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power<sup>[c]</sup> is made perfect in weakness.”* *So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.* <sup>10</sup> *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

Today is a ***beloved national holiday***, and for good reason.

Today, we remember those who have gone before us to secure our incredible freedom.

We remember that people have died to secure our freedoms.

We also remember those who are serving our country now.

And we are grateful.

Deeply grateful.

As we should be!

It is our ***freedom that allows us to gather here for worship*** each week, without fear of persecution or death.

What a gift! What a blessing, right?

We should never lose sight of these gifts and opportunities.

It's why ***pride swells*** within our hearts

as we sing patriotic songs and see the waving flag.

And yet, ***Independence Day is NOT a liturgical holiday*** for the Christian church. Why?

It's because our allegiance is first and foremost to God--- the ***God of the universe***, not just of America.

National allegiance and Christian allegiance are *not one and the same*.  
 We have received many blessings from God,  
 but we cannot claim that God's love and favor rest upon this country alone.  
 The kingdom of God is much bigger than that.

*We can and should give God praise* for all the blessings and freedom we enjoy,  
 but we are also called to see God's blessing upon *all people*,  
 and we are called to work on those areas where *we might be weak*,  
*relying on God's power and help*.

And one of those areas we might call attention to on this Independence Day  
 is our *dependence* upon God.  
 Being dependent is not exactly a popular topic for rugged individualistic people  
 like Americans,  
 but it's definitely something that people of faith should consider.

We are *not our own*,  
 And we are *not ON our own*.  
 We are all here by the *grace of God*,  
 and we rely upon the grace of God—  
 for literally everything in our lives,  
 especially the *power to keep going when times are tough*.

*Our nation has seen tough times* recently,  
 and we continue to see struggles all around us.  
 So, what are we as *Christians called to do*, in times like these?

One thing that never fails is a return to the *basics*.  
 And for us, that's our *relationship with God*.  
 Then the #1 question becomes—  
*How can that relationship with God, and walk with Jesus Christ,*  
*help us through the tough times?*

Paul gives us some pretty straight answers here in 2 Corinthians 12.  
 And he starts by urging humility.  
 That's an important message on a day like today.  
 And then he explains *how and why we rely on God*.

Paul's context is familiar.

He is surrounded by disagreement and contention among different groups.  
 He's been hearing of church fights, and divisions,  
 how some 'super-apostles' have been vying for leadership,  
 So, he steps in with his letter,  
 to remind them that they are *looking for strength and power*  
 in all the *wrong* places.

He starts 2 Corinthians 12 ironically with a description  
 of someone's *heavenly vision*—  
 but we're pretty sure it was his *own vision*.  
 But instead of boasting about this vision,  
 he chooses to *distance* himself,  
 step away from the power struggles in Corinth,  
 and direct them back to their *true strength*—  
 which is found *ONLY in Jesus Christ*.

And in case we forgot, that strength of Christ can be found—  
 believe it or not—*in our times and places of weakness*.

Paul knows this all too well,  
 because God allowed him to have some kind of *thorn in the flesh*,  
 some kind of disability, and God *did not relieve him* of that pain.  
 Rather, God said "*my grace is sufficient for you,*  
*My power is made perfect in weakness*".

See, the *power of God* was *revealed* to him through that weakness.  
 It was Paul's *reminder* that all power is really *God's, not ours*.

Can you even imagine if words about strength in weakness  
 were spoken across *our news? Or our media?*  
 But friends, that is the Gospel.

God's *power* IS made perfect in our weakness.  
 God's *grace* IS sufficient for us when we are weak.  
 This is the *only way* Paul can go on to say,  
*When I am weak, then I am strong*'.

So do we *believe* that? Do we *live by that*?  
 It's not easy.

But it's **GOOD news**, isn't it?

It's just not a message that proud, independent Americans want to hear--  
We want to do it all ourselves,  
We we want to **avoid** dependence and weakness.

But Paul is saying that  
**Weakness, vulnerability, suffering---**  
God can and does use all these things for our good!

Why?  
**Because they remind us that we are not God.**  
And we need to rely upon God.

Many people have speculated on **what Paul's thorn** in the flesh really was,  
and why Paul doesn't say.  
Maybe it was because the people in Corinth **already knew?**  
But it really doesn't matter, and it's probably good that we **don't know.**  
Instead, we can read these verses and see our own trials and challenges,  
the things that we've asked God to take away in our own lives.  
Only, I have to admit that I've asked God to remove them,  
**way more than three times!**

What is **the thorn** in the flesh for you?  
*pain? illness? Addiction? Family struggles? finances? Job?*  
We all have a thorn or two or three,  
But----we also have something **amazing we can learn from it—with God's help.**

That is **NOT to say that God creates** the thorns.  
Paul himself is very clear—the thorn is **from Satan, not God.**  
God is **not the author** of all evil, pain, and suffering.  
Rather, God is the **one bringing good out of it!**  
There's a big **difference,**  
and on it hangs the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We **CANNOT say that all suffering is a gift.**  
And we should not say, **just grin and bear it, to those who suffer.**

What Paul is saying is that **God is always with us** in our suffering.

And we can find God's *grace and power* in times of weakness.

For Paul, God's grace and power is like *AIR*.

Can you picture that?

God's power in your life---being like the AIR you breathe?

Helping you—that much?

This is one reason that *Streams in the Desert* by L.B. Cowman, is one of the *best devotional* books I've read.

Because its pages are saturated with these *paradoxes of our faith—strength in weakness, power in the broken places*.

In the July 3<sup>rd</sup> devotional, the author talks about seeing a beautiful *meadow* of lush grass and flowers.

Then the next day he was shocked to see it completely *plowed under* by a farmer—leaving only barren dirt.

That's when God revealed a *vision*—of a *field, ripe with delicious corn*, and then he realized, “*God's purpose is to yield a harvest*”.

*Out of seeming destruction, comes beauty and life!*

The prophet Isaiah in chapter 53 spoke about a *suffering servant*, a passage that many looked back to after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

It says: *Surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*

<sup>5</sup> *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, by his bruises we are healed.*

In *Philippians 2*, Paul says that Jesus ‘emptied’ himself in love, as a servant, going all the way to death on a *cross*!

***THAT'S what revealed his power***—the suffering, the cross!

We *saw his strength* because of that time of weakness!

***Sufficient grace, power in pain, strength in weakness-***

you can hardly read through the Bible without seeing these truths on almost every other page!

The heroes of our faith are all examples-- *imperfect, lowly, broken and sinful*.

Every single one.

And Jesus, though perfect, was *also lowly, and broken* upon the cross.

But *what happened* because of that cross?

The *resurrection!*

That cross was the *pathway to new life, and joy!*

You know what we see in our secular world that's similar?

The *12 step program.*

The steps are about being *real, vulnerable, and admitting weakness—*

About turning it all over to God,

because that's when we *find real strength!*

It's that *reliance upon God—*that's the key.

*When Jesus sends out his disciples*, as we heard in Mark 6 today,

He sends them out telling them to take *nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money; <sup>9</sup> only wear sandals and one tunic!*

*They have nothing---except their faith.*

Except *Jesus' own power* inside them.

And without money and materials, they are able to do *ministry and miracles!*

Think of what we can learn from that!

*To rely upon God—*is our calling.

*Especially God's power in our weakness*, and brokenness.

Ernest *Hemingway* famously said:

*"Life breaks all of us,*

*but some of us are strong in the broken places."*

It's kind of like the Japanese art called Kintsugi.

It's the art of putting *broken pieces of pottery* back together—*with GOLD.*

So that the cracks in the pottery are *not something to be hidden,*

but rather *BEAUTY to behold.*

I love that.

Do you know the professor and researcher Brene Brown?

She talks about this in her work, because she studies *vulnerability.*

She in fact believes that the biggest problem we all face

is our *lack of* vulnerability.

So much of the time, *we want to be strong*,

or *numb ourselves* with all kinds of things—addiction, overeating, overspending--  
so we *won't be vulnerable* anymore.

But living *a meaningful life requires* being *real, vulnerable,*  
*and open* to both the pain and the joy of life.

(see brenebrown.com, and her youtube and TED talks)

That isn't easy.

Most of us *prefer to put on a good face* and hold it all together,

Or at least, look like we know what we're doing.

But sometimes inside, we are *falling apart*, right?

Like a lot of the time.

And when people ask 'How are you'?

If we're honest, we could go on for days, right?

But if we choose to *acknowledge our weakness, our brokenness,*

If we choose to *be real*—we can find true life, and joy.

I've always believed the saying

*That the deepest pain can lead to the deepest joy.*

I've certainly witnessed that truth, time and again.

*Paul* was so adamant about us finding God's strength in weakness,  
Because it leads to life, and joy!

If you read through Paul's letters of the New Testament,  
you'll find lengthy descriptions of the suffering he endured.

But-- it was precisely those times of pain and suffering  
that led him to the *greatest joy*.

It enabled him to say he was completely *content* at all times, like in Phil. 4:11.

He said *I can do all things—through Christ who strengthens me*, Phil 4:13.

So the question is,

*What do we believe?*

Do we believe that *God's power is made perfect* in our weakness?

Do we believe that *God's grace is sufficient* for us in times of pain?

Are we able to see the *thorns in our flesh*,  
And give them to God, saying  
*You can do something great with this!*

Friends, hear the *Good news* today.  
*Christ's power IS made perfect* in weakness.  
*God's grace is sufficient*—we can rely upon it, no matter what we face.  
And *those thorns* in our flesh?  
They may just be windows  
to the *joy and peace* we seek.

May we rely on God, the source of all power and strength,  
And for that gift, all God's people can say, Amen.

BAPTISM