

EVERYDAY WEAKNESS – ABUNDANT STRENGTH

By Laurie Price

Grace Immanuel Bible Church Ladies Spring Tea

April 22, 2017

It was 3:15 am and the alarm was going off. Thankfully, my husband did not wake up. I slipped out of bed and quietly got ready for my day. The night before I laid out my uniform so I could find it in the dark. It was imperative that Gary stay asleep until 8:00 am when I would return from my opening shift at Starbucks. This particular day, I had a migraine. I would end up sick at work, but since I was one of two openers, I had to be there until a replacement arrived. 2 hours later they came and I went home, feeling miserable. I was 56 at the time, and every one of my coworkers were younger than my daughters. The pace was fast and hard for me. I felt out of place and exhausted at work. At home, my responsibilities had doubled because my husband, Gary was changing, and so our world was turning upside down. We were being led down into a dark valley, forcing changes we never would have wanted or imagined. In that valley, I came to see my weakness. Every day. AND in that same valley, I came to know strength that I had never known before. Today, I get to tell you about those weaknesses, and how Christ uses our suffering to display His power in us.

10 years ago, life was rolling along. We'd been married 32 years. We had a small electrical contracting business, and were serving with College ministry at church. We were living in the same house since we got married. We were enjoying our grandkids and occasional travels to visit family and friends. But around this time, Gary began to have difficulty with his thinking, particularly with problem solving. This showed up in his work first and then other areas. We wrote it off to being over-worked and super busy, but his cognitive problems got worse so we went to the Doctor. After months of testing it was determined that he had Early Onset Alzheimer's Type Dementia. He was 57. (Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia. It's like reverse development, from Adult to Youth to Child to Toddler to Infant.) I would guess that most of you have been impacted in some way by this illness, so you understand. Gary was sick for 9 years until he went to Heaven 2 years ago. For 3 of those years, I was caring for my sweet parents (both in their 90's) who moved in across the street. At one point I was managing 9 caregivers between their house and ours. It was like we had our own Assisted Living Complex.

Since I was one with my husband, this trial was for me too. Taking on Gary's responsibilities was a crushing weight and we both had to give up so much. The transition was difficult. Could I be unselfish enough? Could I keep home with me? Would I love him enough if he didn't know me and couldn't love me back? We shed many tears together. We were weak and we knew it.

Would Gary be belligerent, violent, and inappropriate, towards me, or would he be a wanderer? Would our love degenerate into insults and anger?

Forced to close our business meant tremendous financial needs, and I worked at Starbucks for the medical insurance. Liquidating Gary's inventory and equipment, and prepping our house to sell at the same time was a daunting task.

Life was so hard – Leaving our home, and ministry, and not being able to help our family or babysit our grandkids was painful. All the while, Gary was growing more confused about who I was.

What is distressing to you? What about your life is difficult, impossible to fix? Do you feel helpless? What do you dread? Are you Rejected, Alone, Persecuted? No one is exempt from the hard seasons of life, those times when you are at the end of your own abilities. Everyone here has a story to tell. Everyone's suffering is intense TO THEM. I get to tell you how God worked through our trial, but we are in this together ladies.

Today, we get to look at someone who has gone before us, into the valley of suffering, weak and helpless and found strength there. So let's go together to the One who loves us, to God's holy word, where all the answers lie.

We're going to be mostly in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 but first let me give a little background. The Apostle Paul wrote this particular letter during the most painful time in his life. He needed to defend his authority and ministry to the Corinthian church, because false teachers were lying about him, and discrediting his ministry and were preaching some kind of a "different" and therefore false gospel. The people he loved and had poured his life into, were questioning his motives and what he had taught them. In order to protect them from error, he had to defend himself, even though he hated to do it.

THROUGHOUT CHAPTER 11:

Paul gives multiple reasons to trust him because he was afraid they would be deceived. (v.3) His character, humility, honesty, love (v.9-11) contrasted with the false teachers who "enslave, devour, take advantage and exalt themselves." (v.12-20) His suffering for the sake of the gospel, proved his integrity (v. 23-27), and his daily concern for them showed his caring heart (v. 28).

FINALLY, IN CHAPTER 12:

In order to convince them, he BOASTS. Boasting is "to glory in", "be proud of." Why would this humble apostle be boasting?

In v. 1 he said, "Boasting is necessary, (to protect them), though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord."(v.1)..." Fourteen years before, (v.2) he had been "*caught up into the third heaven, (v.3) paradise, and heard inexpressible words...*" (v.4) He could have boasted in all these things, but he wouldn't.

Being transported to Heaven set him apart from all of the false teachers. But even though the vision experience was amazing, it was all God's doing, and not his, so he refers to himself in the third person, saying "*On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast except in regard to my weaknesses.*"(v.5) The only thing in HIS LIFE he WOULD BOAST about, was his WEAKNESSES. That's where God's power was displayed most clearly, and the best evidence that Paul could be trusted.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Here's where Paul begins to boast about his weakness...and I'm going to boast about mine too as we look at this passage together. Paul's situation was unique to him. Mine was different, but I want us to follow Paul's example and glean principles to help us in our trials. There is much for us to learn from the Lord, as we face difficulties, and even though trials come in different forms and for different reasons, if we seek Him, the reward is the "*peaceful fruit of righteousness.*" Heb. 12:11

HUMILITY FROM PAIN

v. 7 “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself!”

Paul could have easily become proud because of his vision so God gave him a thorn to keep him from exalting himself. In particular, a messenger from Satan influencing and driving the false teachers in this church. This thorn was painful. Greek for “thorn” indicates “sharp, painful, irritating; like a splinter or even a stake. It was extremely painful for Paul.

When things are going well, we are all susceptible to pride. We love our autonomy and self-sufficiency, but God hates pride. He’s “*opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*” (1 Peter 5:5b) He gifted us with a trial. Our painful thorn was dementia. Gary gradually lost all control and I needed to accept help and seek advice. Not easy for a couple of ‘do-it-yourselfers.’ Our self-reliance gave way to beautiful ways to display grace in our lives.

ADMIT YOUR NEED FOR HELP:

There were so many big decisions to be made, and my husband couldn’t lead or help me. For example... Should I continue going to church without Gary? Should my parents move to assisted living? How many caregivers could they afford to hire? What about “end of life” planning? What would Gary want? How long should my mom be on life support? After my Mom died, should my Dad live with me? etc., etc. Hooray for James 1:5. “*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach and it will be given to him.*” Absolutely true! Every time I faced a big decision, the Lord gave me the wisdom I was asking for.

GO TO YOUR SHEPHERDS:

In the early stages, Gary was confused about my identity, and was unsure if he could trust me to sign a Social Security form I’d asked him to. He went missing one day and 45 minutes later I got a call from one of our pastors. Gary was in his office getting his advice, making sure it was ok to sign. Pastor Rick reassured him and Gary signed and came home. That incident, laid the groundwork for me the following years. I will never forget it. GO TO YOUR ELDERS! (Heb 13:17) “*they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.*”

INTIMACY WITH GOD

v. 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

Paul begged God to remove the painful trial 3 times. For Paul to ask repeatedly, and then mention it, it must have been extreme.

I too, prayed intensely for God to please remove our “thorn.” The Alzheimer’s would not go away, but we both prayed for relief and strength to endure. I repeatedly poured out my hurts to the Lord and was reminded of His incredible love for us. I too was driven to deeper intimacy with Christ. Others were drawn close too.

Gary's "I love you" eventually stopped, and when the feelings of loneliness rose up, I called a family member or friend, to ask for prayer. God heard every cry of my heart and provided encouragement every time I needed it; in the form of a special verse, note from a friend, or remembrance of something Gary had said in the past. God gave me more love than ever for Gary and reminded me that He loved Gary even more than I did. And now as a widow, God is my husband. God is replacing the loneliness in my heart with Himself.

(1 Peter 5:6-7) *"Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you."* God is planning to lift us up as result of our hard times, (either by removing the thorn or giving us grace to flourish) so bring all your hurts to Him, because He cares.

GRACE FOR WEAKNESS

v. 9a And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness.'

God answered Paul's prayer. Not with "OK, your trial is ending now," but with more than enough grace to strengthen Paul in the MIDST of it.

What exactly is Grace? In greek: charis. Defined: God's undeserved favor to us through Christ freely given to us for salvation, and for every other spiritual blessing. (Eph. 1)

Paul was no stranger to Grace. He wrote...

- We are **saved** by grace... (Eph. 2:8) *"For by grace you are saved, through faith; but that, not of yourselves, it is the gift of God..."*
- We are **glorified** by grace...(Eph. 2:7) *"...so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."*
- In between, we **live** by grace... (Titus 2:11-12) *"...the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age..."*

We are completely dependent on GOD'S GRACE to live our Christian lives.

It's MULTI-COLORED grace: (1 Peter 4:10) *"manifold [multifaceted] grace of God."* We need...

- Grace to believe the Gospel
- Grace to understand the Word
- Grace to trust God instead of ourselves
- Grace to be assured of our salvation as we persevere
- Grace to obey
- Grace to endure with joy, and more

My pastor, John MacArthur, says *'Grace is like the air we breathe.'* Sometimes God sovereignly intervenes in some way independent of our actions, but Paul told Timothy to *"...be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."* (2 Tim. 2:1) We are expected to live lives pleasing to God. But how do we do that in the midst of difficulty, confusion, and sleepless nights? The Holy Spirit is in us, infusing us with grace as we engage with Him in four ways.

1. Draw near to the THRONE OF GRACE. – PRAY

(Heb. 4:15-16) "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Good news... For believers, this is not a throne of judgement, but a throne of grace. Jesus, your Savior is there, listening, caring, making intercession for you, He is going to help you live a godly life as you draw near and ask Him for help.

Jerry Bridges writes: *"So Jesus does fully understand and sympathize with us in our times of trials. We can be sure, whatever the nature of our hurts, they are not new to Him. Because Jesus can enter into our hurts, and does sympathize with us, we can approach God's throne with confidence, without being ashamed to lay our weaknesses before Him. He understands and He cares."* (p. 215 TBG)

- Thank Him for His love and salvation.
- Admit you are weak.
- Ask for the spiritual strength to say "yes" to this situation.
- Ask for help with specifics; practical AND most importantly, character.

2. Absorb the WORD OF GRACE - BIBLE

"...word of grace to build you up." (Acts 20:32) Like eating healthy food, sustains your physical body, assimilating God's word makes for a healthy spiritual life. Sermons, Notes, Memorized verse that apply to your situation. Not just reading it, but doing what it says. Hiding it *"in your heart"* (Ps. 119:11) for a rainy day makes it available for the Holy Spirit to recall for you.

There were times when I really needed truth. As Gary gradually stopped reading, talking, smiling and understanding it was heartbreaking, even depressing at times. But God used His truth to display His grace and give me comfort and even JOY. (Romans 8:32) *"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"* This verse became precious to me because, if God gave the very greatest gift (Jesus Christ) for our good, then everything else He gives is good for us too. It became my go-to verse when tempted to despair. By (Phil.4) "thinking about what is true." God healed my broken heart and not just once! Facing the fact that this trial was not going to go away, God gave me grace to think of ways to give Gary a meaningful life. (i.e. making his flip book, memory books, PVC and screwdriver board) This has turned into a way to help others on my website. When we take God at His Word, and believe him, we find JOY!

3. Embrace GOD'S PLAN for you. – SUBMIT

Because we believe God is sovereign and good we accept our situations. Be humble like Joseph *"...it was not you who sent me here, but God....God meant it for good..."* (Gen. 45:8 & 50:20) Be encouraged. Your exaltation is coming if you *"humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you."* (1 Peter 5:6-7)

Shortly after Gary's diagnosis, Gary asked me to find the Alzheimer's Association website so he could read about what he was facing. (Memory Loss, Confusion, Personality changes, Repetitive behavior, Loss of communication, and the ability to walk, sit or control his body. Eventually he would need full time assistance with everything.) I watched him read the list, with tears in his eyes. He never asked about it again but a few days later he prayed and asked God "that during his

illness, he never do anything that would dishonor the Lord.” He feared that as he would lose control of his mind, he would do something sinful, but Gary didn’t panic, get angry at God, or beg Him to take it away. Gary was content with the biggest, scariest trial he would ever face. He submitted himself to God’s plan for him. And God did answer Gary’s prayer.

4. Be open with the Body of Christ. – BE VULNERABLE

Be willing to accept help from Christians AND non-Christians.

- **Practical Help:** Humbling to let someone into your “kitchen.” Remember, there are many ways to do things.
- **Spiritual Help:** Be vulnerable to others and cultivate a small group (including spouse & elders) you can really trust.
 - Need their prayers
 - Need their help applying scripture
 - Need their objectivity

One of my good friends, reminded me about some scripture that helped me in a big decision regarding my dad in the final days of his life. (tell incident)

“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion.” (Ecc. 4:9-10)

POWER FROM WEAKNESS

v. 9 And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Paul didn’t love the pain, but he did love the amazing grace that lead to spiritual power. He had to be weak in order to be powerful.

What does “Perfected” mean? Greek: telos = accomplish, complete, finish

GOD’S STRENGTH ACHIEVED IN HUMAN WEAKNESS.

Anyone who thinks they are “strong” are fooling themselves. The phrase: “You’re such a strong person” is a joke. It’s God’s strength we need and that is a byproduct of the grace He displays in our human weakness. As Christians we want Jesus Christ to be lifted up and not ourselves.

(Cor. 4:7-10) “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.”

GOD’S STRENGTH IS UNLIMITED: Paul prays that the Colossians be “...strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” (Colossians 1:11-12)

You can put your confidence in God.

“Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.” (Isa. 41:10)

“For I am the LORD your God, who upholds your right hand, Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'” (Isa 41:13)

“He gives strength to the weary, And to him who lacks might He increases power.” (Isa. 40:29)

I want to draw attention to two different types of God's power that I've noticed:

Example of INTERVENING POWER:

About 5 years in, as Gary was losing his physical strength...God did an amazing thing. During the day, he would sit in his recliner and listen to music or work with his "gadgets," but helping him move was hurting my back and shoulders. Something needed to change...I told the family: *"What we really need is someone to help for 10-15 minutes, sporadically throughout the day. Caregivers?...too costly with nothing to do 90% of the time. College student?... gone to classes when I need them during the day... Impossible, right? We ended the discussion with "We'll just have to keep praying about it, and see how the Lord will work it out."*

LITERALLY, just a few days LATER, our answer had come. Of course you know this guy. Jason, being part of the ministry here, had been praying for us, and offered to help us with no prompting. Well, God prompted him independently. He was perfectly suited to help in every way. Working from our home, a trained nursing assistant, and STRONG! Jason was with us during a very important transitional time and served us wholeheartedly during those months. Jason will always be a reminder that... *“God is intimately acquainted with all my ways.” Ps. 139*

Example of DAY-TO-DAY POWER

In my soul, that will always be a monument to God's strengthening grace, but so are the day-to-day, moment-by-moment graces that enable us to put “one foot in front of the other.” At the start of our Alzheimer's journey I didn't know when the end would be. But I did know that Gary needed to have a smile from me, and my family and friends needed my prayers and love. The Holy Spirit helps us live by grace, strengthening us for every task. *“So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Matthew 6:34.* We may not have tomorrow. We are only guaranteed the breath that is currently in our lungs. How will we live in the next moment? Elisabeth Elliot often quoted an old Saxon Poem:

Do it immediately; Do it with prayer;
Do it reliantly, casting all care;
Do it with reverence, Tracing His Hand,
Who placed it before thee with Earnest command.
Stayed on Omnipotence, Safe 'neath His wing,
Leave all resultings, DO THE NEXT THING

EVERYDAY WEAKNESS BECOMES ABUNDANT STRENGTH

v. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul's example...Because of the refining process due to the weaknesses in his life, for Christ's sake; he was "well content" (that means well pleased) with all of it. He had experienced the spiritual benefits so he embraced the hurts with deep joy and peace. *"Suffering is the path to spiritual victory."* John MacArthur

How often are we well-content with our trials?

I came to love how Gary's illness displayed God's grace and power in our lives. I found out that when we were the weakest, we were the strongest.

Forty-two years ago I said "...till death do us part." Two years ago God parted us and I said "good-bye" to my Gary. Gary is in Heaven with his Savior. He is fine now, "extremely fine." He is finally "home" and I am so relieved and thrilled for him. His mind is whole. He is experiencing joy like never before.

At the beginning of his Alzheimer's, he carried a letter he wrote to himself so he wouldn't forget...

"I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ...to be all He represented Himself to be in the Bible. The Christ, the Son of God. I believe Him to be the soon and coming King. I am not a believer by birth, nor can I be without God enabling me. Jesus has forgiven all my sins, and has made me a member of His family." G.P. Half way through his illness, Gary shared the Lord with our 4 year old granddaughter. Though he was barely speaking during those days, he very clearly said to her... "When you get to know my Jesus, it's gonna be great!"

If you DON'T have a saving relationship with Christ, you might be asking, "What's so great about knowing Jesus? God wants to show His strength and glory through people, and so he gives them something painful." If you look around you, you'll see that suffering, loss, pain are part of the human condition. Everyone is subject to them. Way back in the Garden of Eden, sin was unleashed in the world because man and woman (and all men and women since) chose to assert their own will over God's. God made the universe and everything in it. He is holy and perfect. It is SIN that has brought the curse of suffering into the earth and eternal punishment and separation from God.

If you are unsaved, I am sad to tell you, the grace of God is not available to help you with life's hurts and struggles and this is the best life you will ever have, and any sufferings during this life are nothing compared to the eternal torment that that awaits you after you die. Our sins separate us from God, BUT long ago, God made a plan born of His love. Here's the GOOD NEWS! BY GRACE, He would freely offer to mankind, a perfect substitute (that's Jesus Christ) who could bear the punishment for the sins of any who would repent and believe. His anger satisfied, and the gap bridged. So GRACE is being offered to you today, by God Himself.

I want you to hear this in God's own words...

- *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Rom. 3:23)
- *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Rom. 6:23)
- *"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* (Rom. 5:8)
- *"that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."* (Rom. 10:9)
- *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Eph. 2:8-9)

If you don't know Jesus, and have not yet turned from your sins, and submitted to His Lordship in your life, please don't delay in making things right with God, through Christ. "...now is the 'acceptable time,' behold, now is the 'day of salvation'..." (2 Cor. 6:2)

There is no victory, no success apart from Him. Will you humbly admit that you are helpless to please God, turn away from your own efforts to do so, and believe what He says in His word?

GRACE FOR SALVATION – GRACE FOR LIFE – GRACE FOR GLORY

For believers, the grace of God is available to help you suffer "well" knowing that God is your loving Father, and these sufferings will be nothing in light of the glories of eternity where there will be no suffering; only joy in His presence. If you are hurting or weak today, BE ENCOURAGED! GOD WANTS TO GIVE YOU HIS ABUNDANT STRENGTH. Sometimes it comes in surprising ways, sometimes, day-to-day, but His grace is "super-abundant" and He doesn't waste anything. Every single thing in our lives are for His glory and our good. So see your weaknesses as a good thing, bring your troubles to God, to know Him better, and then keep relying on His grace and power working in your lives. Will you thank Him for the grace to endure it with joy?

"God is able to make ALL grace abound to YOU so that ALWAYS having ALL sufficiency in EVERYTHING, you may have an ABUNDANCE for EVERY good deed" (2 Cor. 9:8)

WHEN I AM WEAK THEN I AM STRONG

I'm right there with you Ladies. I have to remember these things too. Widowhood has its own unique thorns and struggles as I find my footing in my new role.

My hopes of Gary smiling at me, or saying a word, or noticing if I walk through the room, are over. I will never have that again. But I am so happy for Gary. I can't wait to see him again, in Glory, where he and I will be face to face with the One who gave us the power to keep our vows and love each other "no matter what." I'm forever grateful to God for that. And grateful to you for letting me BOAST about His wonderful grace!