

Jesus Give You Strength in Hard Times

2 Cor. 12:9

Good afternoon! It's another beautiful day and I'm so glad that you joined us in worshipping Jesus this morning. We've been going through a series called "Jesus Gives". We should've been done last week but we took a break for two weeks because of our Memorial Day celebration and then the Pentecost Service at POPLC last week. So now, we're resuming our series and we'll complete this series next Sunday.

Today, I'd like to talk about what Jesus give us in hard times. We are all experiencing hard times. This is one of those times when we are all affected at the same time. I can think of at least two things, two major things that are affecting us, the coronavirus pandemic which is still very much around, and another pandemic which Tony Evans has dubbed the "cultural pandemic" and I'm talking about the racial tension and conflict that has recently gripped this nation. It's in the headlines nowadays and people are talking about it, even children are asking about it.

It's just so interesting and so astonishing what this year has been so far. We started the year with high hopes, you know, 2020 vision, many pastors preaching about looking forward to a bright future including myself. The economy was on the rise, the unemployment rate was at a manageable 3.6%, graduating college students were expecting good job prospects, people were enjoying the cinemas, dinners outside, sports, and even churches were seeing a rise in numbers and now this. Businesses are down, unemployment rate is 13.3%, college graduates find it hard to look for a job, people are binge-eating and binge-watching at home. Well, for some, that's quite enjoyable.

But we cannot deny the fact that our lives have turned upside down. And in the coming months and years, our lives will be different from what they were before.

The frustration about our situation has caused a lot of people to protest in the streets seeking an end to the lockdown. And after that, new protests and some have turned violent, because of one grave and serious incident. It's like one crisis after another. And you start to ask, what next? Where will 2020 take us? It's no wonder that statistics say more people are depressed now than ever before. The suicide rate has come up and there are more domestic abuses reported than prior months. It's just too much to handle. And these things are outside of other crises we experience in our own personal lives like a marriage problem, job problem, problem with our kids, health problem, and what-not.

As such, many people are experiencing what one expert calls "crisis fatigue". It's a phrase coined by Matthew Flinders, a political scientist at the University of Sheffield in England. So, basically, when you feel that the noise level, referring to crises in your life, is constantly at a very high level, you experience "crisis fatigue". Which in turn erodes your ability to cope with difficulties.

Are you experiencing that this afternoon? Or you feel like you are about to experience that? This message is for you. And for anyone else who knows that life is not a bed of roses. Actually, I think life is a bed of roses with all the thistles and thorns.

So, get your pens and papers and get ready to write down some principles I'd like to share with you this afternoon. I've entitled this message, "Jesus Gives You Strength in Hard Times".

It is a message based on a passage that is one of my favorites. A passage that I have hang on to when I myself needed strength in hard times.

I want you to read this verse with me. And make it your own. Like Jesus is speaking to you. BTW, this was written by the apostle Paul.

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” (2 Cor. 12:9)

All right. Let me share with you the first principle. When you’re in hard times, remember this:

1. Real strength comes only from Jesus.

That is what the Apostle Paul is trying to convey here. Although we may regard him as a very resilient and brilliant and focused and purpose-driven apostle, Paul knew where his strength to endure really comes from. In fact, he points to Jesus as the only one who provides him the grace to go on. He writes, **“But he said to me”**. He, of course, is Jesus. This passage we just read is all about Jesus. He wants you and me to understand that in your hard times, Jesus can come to give you the strength to handle what comes your way.

Nowadays, people turn to other things to get their strength from. Those who don’t know Jesus and the power he provides, they turn to less potent means. Like they turn to self-help books. I read that there are literally millions and millions of them and Americans spend over \$10B on motivational products every year. Or they turn to motivational gurus like Oprah or Dr. Phil or who-have-you. Or they become a religious nut or become a hermit. Folks, all these are temporary fixes. Paul claims that only Jesus can give you a permanent solution.

But what led Paul to say these words? It was because he himself experienced difficulties in his life.

Now, we know how Paul was treated harshly by his opponents, he was persecuted, put in prison, tried like a criminal, became hungry, cold, and all that. But he pointed to something in his life that really made life difficult for him. And this was his thorn in the flesh. Let's back up a couple of verses. In verse 7, he says, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given 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."

Scholars have studied this but no one is sure what this thorn of the flesh of Paul was. They guess it could be the unceasing temptations he faced, or his opponents who continue to attack him, or his physical maladies like eye problem, or back problem, or headaches, or something else. No one knows for sure. Paul also says that the affliction came from or by a "messenger of Satan." He doesn't mean that Satan has power over him. He knows for sure that God who is in him is greater than Satan who is in the world. So, he just recognizes the fact that just as God allowed Satan to torment Job, God allowed Satan to torment him for God's own good purpose. What is this purpose? To keep him from being proud or conceited, to keep humble, in short.

You see, if you back up a few verses more up to the beginning of this chapter, you'll read how Paul had a supernatural experience of going to heaven and being brought to Jesus himself. This happened 14 years earlier when he was just a new Christian and the Lord Jesus himself trained and disciplined him. He was also given the spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit like speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc. Add to that the fact that God spoke to him in dreams and visions. Plus he was moved by the Holy Spirit to write much of the New Testament. I mean, all these could have easily puffed him up. And perhaps, he was tempted to feel that way. Like he was special. But God had to humble him in order to use him more effectively.

I remember the time I was undergoing training as a missionary in Russia a long time ago. I had befriended a Russian soldier, Sasha, who was a lieutenant in the Russian Air Force. Toward the end of our outreach, I asked him to allow our mission team to go to their air base in order to distribute some Bibles. He agreed. I was so happy. But at the same time, I became proud. I became proud because I thought I could brag to my teammates that we were able to distribute Bibles to Russian soldiers and their families because of my friendship with Sasha. I didn't tell them that but it was certainly in my mind and in my heart as well. So, when I mentioned to my teammates that we were going to the Russian Air Base the next day and they complimented me about it, I was grinning with satisfaction. My pride went sky-high.

That night, as I was about to go to bed, someone told me to go down to the lobby. So, I went and then the front desk clerk said that someone wanted to speak to me on the phone. It was Sasha. In halting English, he said sadly that we wouldn't be able to go to the air base at all. His boss did not approve our request. My ego was instantly deflated. My pride hurtled down to earth in no time. I was devastated... but I learned a lesson in humility.

Sometimes, God had to intervene in our lives to teach us humility. Or maybe another kind of lesson that would be helpful in our spiritual growth. It may be painful but it is for our own benefit. The writer of Hebrews says, "...God disciplines us for our good..." (Hebrews 12:10) and in the next verse, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Heb. 12:11)

Going back to Paul, he recognized that God was teaching him a lesson. Even when he persistently asked God to take away his thorn in the flesh which was his weakness, God did not. Three times he asked God.

I'm sure those were very intense prayers. Maybe he even fasted for days while he prayed. In the end, when things seemed really unbearable for him, Jesus spoke to him.

Which brings us to the second principle.

2. You matter to Jesus.

In our times of desperation, like when we're at the end of our rope, sometimes we couldn't help but feel like God has abandoned us. But you know what, God never leaves your side. He is always rooting for you. You know why? Because you matter to him.

"But he said to me." Not to him, not to them, to me. That's personal. It was Jesus' personal message to Paul.

You see, even though there are 7 billion people in the world, God could focus his eyes on you. You are special to him. He created you to love you. And he created you for a purpose. He will see to it that that purpose is fulfilled in your life. You may not know it but he is intimately involved in your life. Phil. 2:13 says, "...it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

I believe there's a reason for everything that happens in our lives. There's even a reason why you're listening to this message right now. God wants you to know that there's nothing and no one that can come between you and his love for you. He says in Romans 8:38-39, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

You see, whatever people may say about you. It doesn't matter. Whatever hurtful words you have received, they don't matter.

You may have grown up being criticized for your appearance, or the way you talk, or the way you walk, they don't matter. You may have done something you're ashamed of in the past, it doesn't matter. You may be doing things at present that you're not proud of, they don't matter. What matters is that you matter to Jesus. He loves you for who you are and what you are. He loves you so much that he came to this world to die for you. Because you are worth dying for. **Romans 5:8** says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Your worth as a person is not based on what others think of you or even what you think of yourself but on what God thinks of you. Your identity is not tied to your looks, your intelligence, your achievements, your money, your house, car, whatever. They all are temporary. Your identity is found in Jesus alone who lives and reigns forever. If you believe in Jesus, then Jesus is in you. **Galatians 2:20** says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Whenever God looks at you, he looks at his own son Jesus whom he loves. Your identity is in Jesus.

You see, it's interesting if you think about this. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and alighted on him. And then, God the Father said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

When God said those words about Jesus, did Jesus start his ministry already? Did he already went around doing miracles, preaching, helping the needy, and everything? Did he already perform wonderful works in the name of God prior to his baptism?

What am I getting at? God loved and was pleased with Jesus unconditionally. God loved him even before the Lord Jesus did something for God. God's love for Jesus was not based on Jesus' performance.

Friend, that is how God loves you, too. He loves you unconditionally. It doesn't depend on what you have done or what you haven't done. God's love doesn't change like our kind of love. He doesn't say "I love you more today than yesterday." And we can't say, "You've lost that loving feeling". God's love is not influenced by what we do, by time, events, circumstances, anything. His love is constant. It never changes. That's why you don't have to wonder "Is God punishing me for my sins?" "Has God abandoned me?" "Is God interested in my fears and anxieties?" "What will I do to get God's attention?" You've got his attention already. Because he loves you and nothing can change that

You matter to Jesus.

3. The grace of Jesus is enough to carry you through.

Jesus says to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you." The grace of Jesus is enough to carry you through your most difficult circumstance. I know that's hard to believe when you're in the midst of a very trying difficulty. Like when you have cancer and you just want to die because of the unbearable pain. But you have to believe and trust Jesus. He is faithful. He never goes back on his promises.

Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"

Earlier I said that this is one of my favorite verses. I can say that because of my experience. As many of you know, I have suffered panic attacks in the past. I tell you it's something you don't want to go through. It's a feeling of fear, anxiety, and worry rolled into one and your body reacts to them by being tense all over, from head to foot.

You'll feel paralyzed and get depressed. In my case, it lasted for days sometimes and they came frequently. Even when there's nothing to be worried about, it just came. Why did I have them? To begin with, I was a worrier by nature. I knew that since I was a kid. I subscribed to Murphy's Law that states "If anything can go wrong, it will." And because of that attitude, I grew up as a nervous person. Then, there were other events in my life that contributed to my nervousness. Despite that I didn't have panic attacks. Then, I became religious and became involved with a pseudo-Christian religion, a cult. After two years, I left because I came to know Jesus. However, I suffered setbacks as a new Christian. I thought God had abandoned me. I left my faith. Turned my back against Christianity. Became involved with Eastern religions and New Age movements. Then, became disappointed as well and left religion altogether. I became an agnostic. Eventually, I turned into an atheist. I had lots and lots of religious books including copies of the Bible. I threw them all away.

Soon afterwards, I started to feel the panic attacks. I was in my late twenties. I went to Japan for training and then to Australia to work. How did I manage to do all these when I was suffering from panic attacks? I practiced yoga. It helped. For a time. Because after a year, yoga couldn't control my panic attacks anymore. It wasn't a lasting solution.

Until God met me in Australia. In short, I went back to church, came back to God, and tried to involve myself in ministry again. But the panic attacks were still there. How did I manage the attacks? Well, God managed it for me by his grace. One time, on my way to a prayer meeting, I suddenly felt so tense. I told my pastor about it and he said simply, "You know what Jesus says, 'My grace is sufficient for you.'" That was enough to calm me down. So, every time I felt the attack, I would dwell on that verse.

I remember also one time, I was now working and living in Jersey City, New Jersey. I was going to visit a couple who were my friends but on my way I suffered the attack. I thought of turning around but decided to proceed anyway. I arrived at their place and as I was about to press their doorbell, I saw a card on their door and on it was written, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I felt like God was speaking to me. I felt like at that moment God was telling me that he truly cares for me. And that he was watching over me.

Folks, in your weakness, let the grace of Jesus strengthen you. Hold on to him. Sometimes, the reason we don’t feel his grace is we worry too much. Worry is, I would say, the #1 grace killer.

Put everything in the hands of Jesus. Let him do the worrying, so to speak. He’s the God of the universe and he is in control. He is God and you’re not.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:25-34 and please listen carefully. If you have your Bibles, why don’t you turn to this passage.

What you can do when you start worrying is to stop worrying and start praying. Turn your worries into prayer. Pray for the grace of Jesus to carry you through. It is enough for you.

Finally,

4. Jesus wants to be glorified through you.

The last part of verse 9 says, “...for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Here Jesus is telling Paul, “You know why you should just rely on my grace? So that people will see that I am working in your life. Then, they will be amazed.”

You see, it is the design of the Lord Jesus to make you a showcase for his power. When people see that despite your weaknesses, whatever it is, you are able to endure, when in fact you shouldn’t be able to, then they would attribute that to God. And that brings glory to God.

Remember the time David, a young shepherd, went to battle the giant Goliath? He was ridiculed by the Philistines, their enemies. He was ridiculed as well by his own people. His brothers discouraged him to go because they didn't believe that he could kill the giant. The Bible tells us, that Goliath "looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!"

How did David respond? Did he cower in fear in the face of grave danger? He said bravely, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

We know what happened, in one swoop of his slingshot, David felled the mighty Goliath. The giant was no match for the power of God.

Friend, there's a purpose why you're going through this kind of experience in your life at present. It may be unpleasant. It may be painful. It may be truly distressing. God hasn't forgotten you. The Bible says that he knows the number of your hair. So, he knows exactly what's going on in your life. He wants you to wait, to endure. And as you wait, you can rely on his grace to keep you going.

Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

In the end, Jesus will be glorified in your life. Just hang in there. The grace of Jesus is sufficient for you.