

Safety Last
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
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8-25-13

I invite you to turn with me in your Bibles, either the one we've made available in the pew rack in front of you or the one you brought with you, to Paul's Second Letter to the Church gathered in Corinth. If you are following along in the pew Bibles we've made available, it can be found on page 171 of the New Testament.

Now by way of a brief introduction and connecting point to our Kingdom Series, I want to say a few things about this letter. Paul the Apostle was a missionary of the Gospel, forming churches around the Mediterranean. And none of them were more cantankerous and conflicted than the one in Corinth. Corinth is a gateway city for intercontinental trade. So as a result, Corinth was a cosmopolitan, hodgepodge of lifestyles and beliefs. There were as many ideologies, philosophies, and lifestyles as any city in all history. So you can imagine how challenging things would have been for Paul to share the gospel in such a pluralistic setting.

Now, we're not exactly sure what prompted the writing of this letter, but most theologians think it safe to say that Paul wrote it as a follow up to 1 Corinthians because his first letter was such a challenging one. Basically, Paul wrote a hard letter that bent a whole lot of noses out of shape. Early in 2 Corinthians, he calls his first correspondence a severe letter. We read in 2 Corinthians 2:4 that he wrote this follow up out of great distress and anguish.

Now what I think Paul is trying to do is backtrack and take things from a more level headed tone. Paul is trying to smooth things over with the Corinthian Church, he's writing to them as a pastor. All along, Paul wanted to make sure that what the people in Corinth heard was not his authority, but his humility and deference to the message of Jesus that completely changed his life. Now because of the gospel, he is standing before them preaching the message of grace and hope that are found in living obediently to Christ. Clearly safety was not a major concern for Paul. In fact, all the terrible things that happen to him, he just lets roll off his back, because there is something much more important than comfort at stake. And that is where we pick up in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, and I invite you now to listen to the Word of the Lord.

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to

keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Father, help us to recognize the depth of our own weakness. And in so doing to run to you, for you are the source of all strength. So this morning be our teacher, this we pray not in our own power, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ who is our shield and our strength. Amen.

Amy and I have one prayer that we pray over and over again for our children, it was prayed over us, and it's this: *O Lord, let them not miss Jesus.* Let us not miss Jesus. Because it is very possible for a person to go through life, and even be in church all along, and somehow still miss Jesus. And one of the main reasons why I think we often miss out and don't experience more of the presence and power of Jesus is described in a story told by the founder and CEO of International Justice Mission Gary Haugen.

Gary talks about being a 10-year-old boy going hiking with his brother and dad on Mount Rainier. As they set out on the trail, he saw a sign detailing all the terrible things that could happen on the trail, and that scared him, but he couldn't admit that, so he told his dad and brother he thought the most boring thing in the world would be to hike on Mount Rainier and he'd far rather stay in the visitor center, which he did.

At first, he thought he had made the right choice. It was warm. He had all the exhibits to look at, but pretty soon he was bored, and the air just seemed stale. When his brother and dad came back filled with all kinds of stories, he felt kind of sad he missed out on a really cool day. I think that is a great metaphor for the church in the West, which has too often become a visitor center.

It's safe, it's warm, and it's comfortable, but we're missing the power of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, and the excitement of following Jesus because we're playing it safe. Let me start by asking you this question: Where might you be playing it safe in life?

We are a culture obsessed with safety

We live in a society that is absolutely obsessed with safety. Parents nowadays, if your kids don't have a helmet, knee pads, elbow pads, and wrist guards when they ride their bikes, you best watch out because Child Protective Services might come a knockin'. When I did youth ministry, I had some pretty fearless kids, my guys who would do just about anything that involved a ball, board, or bungee cord. But ask out a girl on a date, petrified!

Safety is not something that God ever promised. In fact, the Bible is full of stories where unlikely people are asked to do some unimaginable and unsafe things. Abraham and Sarah are told they're going to have kids at the tender age of a hundred. Moses had a fear of public speaking. Gideon had to take on the enemy with about as many people as we have on the rolls of this church. David faced a giant with a rope and five stones. Elijah was too chicken, Jeremiah was too young, Ezekiel had to eat a scroll, and Isaiah had to preach naked...let me just say parenthetically, I've had that nightmare, and so should you. Job went bankrupt, John the Baptist ate bugs, The Disciples fell asleep, Martha worried, Zacchaeus was too small, Paul was too religious, Timothy had an ulcer... AND Lazarus was dead! Is following Jesus safe? Are you kidding me? There's no better place to be, there's no more worthy or noble calling in life, nothing more exciting that will take every bit of faith you've got, but safe...no way.

In fact, that is the whole point of what Paul is telling the Corinthians here. Living in God's kingdom has gotten me flogged, beaten, whipped, stoned, shipwrecked, and thrown in prison. I always find it kind of funny, he says in addition to all the hardships I endure, chapter 11 verse 28 says **that besides these I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.** It's like he's saying, "I've been in prison and I've been tortured, but worse than all of that is being your pastor. And yet I can say to you that even in the midst of my weakness I can boast." Why? Because it is precisely when I am least safe—be it relationally, or emotionally, or physically—that God's presence and power shines most brightly. Paul says, **I'm pressed but not crushed, persecuted not abandoned struck down but not destroyed. We are always carrying around the death of Christ in our body, so that the life of Christ might be revealed even more brilliantly.**

Friends, the surest way to keep God's presence from saturating and impacting your life is to continue to hold up the illusion that you or I have it all together. Weakness, the text implies, is actually a prerequisite for the filling of the Holy Spirit. If you've got it all together, then there's no place for God. If we don't admit and own our weakness in this church, if we don't recognize and own our spiritual and emotional bankruptcies, God cannot send his Spirit of revival. We are weak, we are broken, we are deficient, we are lazy, we are uncaring, unseeing, and undoing. And folks, that goes for the person standing in this pulpit. But are we willing to risk being untidy, risk being poorly mannered, risk being vulnerable for the sake of being totally filled with the majesty and wonder of the Spirit of the living God?

One of Jesus' most powerful promises is this: **"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."**

Dallas Willard writes the place where we find God is precisely when we're at the end of our rope. When we are weak, God is strong. Paul defends himself to the Corinthians, but he does it in an odd sort of way. Did you notice? He said, "I am boasting, as I'm right to, but not in my strength, in my weakness." Odd. Why would someone boast about their weakness unless there is someone else who fills in the empty space and does so with such power, such perfect timing, and with such beauty and wonder and awe inspiring

perfection that it leaves a person completely unable to take credit, yet at the same time so passionately wanting to give credit that they boast about the giver. That's Jesus Christ. He is that giver. Paul tells of his encounter with the Lord where Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So I boast in my weakness."

Prior to this week, none of us knew who Antoinette Tuff was. But because of her bravery and deep faith in the face of one misguided young man with a gun, we now know her as a hero. Hopefully you heard the story. Young man, off his medication, walks into a school office armed with assault rifles and begins ranting about killing police officers and himself. And Antoinette, the office bookkeeper, who wasn't even supposed to be sitting in the receptionist chair, but was filling in, precedes to calmly and deftly talk this man off the proverbial ledge. Do you want to talk about the divine providence of God, that woman was put in that chair for precisely that reason. But that didn't mean she wasn't scared to death. She was. She said the entire time she was shaking—nearly uncontrollably. But as she remarked in subsequent interviews, it was a sermon series on Anchoring Faith that kept her calm. So in her weakness, she recognized that she was still tethered to a Savior who was exceedingly strong.

Antoinette knew that this was a situation that was much bigger than she was. His problems were much deeper than she could ever know. Her ability was miniscule compared to the pressing need. But in her moment of terror, she said, "I prayed to God that God would give me strength." And in that moment, she knew that she needed to connect with this young man at the very core of who he was, a scared and confused little boy. And she assured him that he didn't need to do this and this was not who he was. And slowly his attitude softened and he ultimately surrendered.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." The Christian life is most certainly not safe, but it is good. And when we give God even our small faith, when we give him our weakness, our doubt, our insecurity, it is the living God who able to accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Where are you playing it safe? Where is God calling you to get in the game with what you've got? Maybe your challenge is a family member who is not well emotionally, physically, spiritually, and that struggle is draining you. At the end of your rope, that's where Jesus meets you. Maybe it is a move or a life transition that you don't know what to do or how you are going to manage in a new place or a new way of living. That's where Jesus meets you. Maybe it is an addiction, maybe it's a nagging sense of loneliness or a depression you can't seem to get on top of. That is where Jesus meets you. Maybe you feel called to start a new ministry or go somewhere and do something radical for God and others. Friends, that is where Jesus meets us. When we are weak, he is strong.

We have a saying in our family, and I've shared it with you before. *Do it afraid. Do it afraid, beat the scared.* Jesus' life, death, and resurrection mean he gives us the power to beat the scared, so how are you going to beat the scared inside of you this week? I want to leave you with just a short clip from the movie *Moneyball*, which I love because it's

about baseball, and I love baseball. I want to leave it with you because I think it's a great picture of what I've been talking about in this sermon. Take a look.

Video Clip

It's a metaphor. When Jesus rose from the dead, he hit the homerun. Not even death can stop us, so we literally have nothing to lose. We do not have to cling to the base in fear, just trying to stay safe. We can beat the scared that is inside of us and live larger with freedom and with joy. As the speaker Beth Moore says, the point in life is not to arrive at death in a safely preserved body, but to skid in broadside, completely spent, thoroughly used up, shouting, "Thank you, Jesus! What a ride!"

Jesus did not say, "I have come that you may have safety and have it abundantly." He came to give us a big, bold, messy life where we see God's power unleashed and walk in his authority and live in his victory and shine with his joy. Do not stay in the visitor center. Beat the scared. Live large, skidding in broadside, shouting, "Thank you, Jesus! What a ride all the way home!"