

FAILING FORWARD**2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

INTRO: Well, it's Palm Sunday! On a normal Palm Sunday we might give the children palm fronds and have them shout "*HOSANNA!*" as they marched around the sanctuary. More likely, though, we would have a nice bouquet of palm fronds on the communion table at the front of the sanctuary to remind us of the day that Jesus triumphantly rode into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting, "*Hosanna!*"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the king of Israel!" John 12:13.

It was triumphal for the crowds and even for Jesus's disciples, but Jesus knew what was coming. He knew he was on the march to an appointment with the Cross. His Father's plan was unfolding even as his countrymen thought their political deliverer had finally arrived. In their eyes Jesus was on top on Palm Sunday – and he was going to drive the Roman occupiers out and reestablish a Jewish kingdom.

Humanly speaking he continued to surge forward as he powerfully preached all week as some of his most poignant and confrontational teaching happened in those days between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. His disciples were a bit confused as he took the role of servant and washed their feet and proceeded to say some troubling things as they celebrated the Passover in what we know as "The Last Supper".

But Friday was when, from a human perspective, Jesus utterly "failed". In their terror his followers thought their hope was dashed as he hung on the Cross. And in their supposed victory his enemies thought they had defeated the thorn in their side.

What none of them knew was, Jesus's failure in the eyes of the world, was God's plan unfolding and Satan's final defeat. The Friday failure made for a hellish Saturday as his followers cowered in despair, but that same Friday failure rose victorious on Sunday, making Jesus the ultimate example of failing forward.

I want to talk about that today as we continue our Lenten Series on growing in holiness that we have entitled EVERYTHING NECESSARY. By the way we have a couple more messages in this series in the two Sundays after Easter, so our Lenten Series will continue, even if Lent ends this week.

So on this final Sunday of Lent, I want to look at the concept I mentioned a bit ago – the idea of failing forward. To unpack it I want to begin by reading from the Apostle Paul. (**Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10**)

Now, there are lots of interesting things here in this text that I'm not going to cover today. Paul talks about boasting and it is a continuation his teaching in the previous chapter. It's an interesting study – but its for another time.

Paul also talks about going to the third heaven. This always gets people puzzled and asking questions. "What in the world does he mean by that?!" Good question. And it's good to know what he means because none other than the cult of Mormonism teaches that there are three heavens, and they base that false teaching on a faulty reading of this passage. Let me just say, the expression "Third Heaven" is a Jewish expression for the very presence of God. Paul's readers in the church at Corinth would have known what he meant when he used it too. That's all I'll say about that, because I want to talk about Paul's failure.

I mean, I want to talk about what he describes as "*a thorn in my flesh*". And guess what? I'm not going to conjecture what it was, whether it was a sin, or an ailment like blindness or malaria, or baldness, or his wife. These and more are a distraction from Paul's point, and Paul's point is that he grew from this failure, whatever it was – and he used that failure to FAIL FORWARD. Let's learn from it.

First, Paul says it two times – in verse 2 and again in verse 3. . .

God knows

- This is good for us to remember as we experience adversity. GOD KNOWS! We are in the midst of an unprecedented epidemic, at least in modern times. We've been able to rise above the ashes of 9/11 and recessions like 2008. They seemed insurmountable when they happened but we overcame the uncertainty they caused. This COVID-19 is different. We don't have ready answers or solutions. We don't see the light at the end of the tunnel yet. The truth is, we're stumped! This one is beyond us, at least right now. And it shows that humans don't have all the answers. BUT GOD DOES! And God knows. That's why this is the time to hang on to God for dear life, and when he shows us the way through this mess and we are on the other side in the brightness of a conquered COVID-19 we need to keep on hanging on for dear life.

- Remember, as Paul did in the darkness of his persecution (you can read up on that in the preceding chapter) and his thorn in the flesh, we can be assured, God knows. So, get ready to accept . . .

The gift of a handicap

- That is how Eugene Peterson paraphrased Paul’s description of his thorn in the flesh. His exact words are, *I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations.* (v. 7 The Message). How about when we experience an adversity like failure, instead of staying down, we learn from it, and truly fail forward?
- A couple weeks ago we looked at Matthew 11:28-30. I mentioned at that time, in the words of The Message paraphrase, Jesus invited his listeners to, *Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.* That’s exactly what we should be learning from our failures. That’s what Paul did. God’s word to him in the face of his struggle was, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Or, in Peterson’s words, *My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into own in your weakness.* (v. 9 The Message). Amen! God’s grace is enough!
- But remember, it’s okay to pray for deliverance—just realize, as Paul did, God might not deliver you the way you want. So, as we look at these terribly unusual days we are experiencing, look for the deliverance God has in mind, rather than what we think it should be. Norman Hillyer very perceptively writes, *“The Lord’s ‘No’ was a rich positive which empowered the rest of Paul’s ministry”* How can we be empowered by God’s “No” in our own lives? What can we learn?
- F. B. Meyer writes, *“At first Paul prayed for its removal, but as soon as he learned that its continuance was the condition of receiving additional grace, he not only accepted it, but even gloried in its presence.”* Paul gloried as he failed forward. We can too. We can learn as he did . . .

When we are weak, THEN we are strong

- Here’s the promise, in Luke Keefer’s words, *“God does not forsake us in our failure.”* We can actually grow strong in our weakness. Only God can make such a thing happen.
- Instead of running away from falling flat on our face, we need get up and learn from what God is teaching us in it. Fiona and I found Emily’s first two wheel bicycle in our garage. It needs to have a minor repair and then we’re going to start learning how to ride it. It doesn’t have training wheels, but I’m not sure they’re a good thing anyway. What we’ve all learned and what Fiona will learn is that learning to ride a bike sometimes hurts, but in the end it’s worth it. All those times where she might fall over into the grass will be chalked up to the learning experience. Those falls are the living picture of failing forward.
- Luke Keefer rightly points out, *“Experience is the best of schools, though its tuition runs a bit high.”* Have you experienced touching an electric fence? You will, unless you are a masochist, only do it once. Once is enough for you to never intentionally do it again. Yes, experience is a good school if you get up and learn from it.
- Finally, we learn as Paul did, we can learn from our failure . . .

Conclusion: And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. (v. 10b The Message)

- They’re the last words of our text, which in the NIV is, *For when I am weak, then I am strong.* F. B. Meyer powerfully says it this way, *“We reach our full stature only when we are in him. We are but fragments of manhood until the true man is formed in us.”* We are fragments without God. We reach fullness with him.
- So Paul was able to withstand the onslaught the world brought on by knowing that in his weakness he was strong, or as our text puts it, *that is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* (v. 10) I love how Meyer addresses the idea of human insults. He writes, *“How indifferent to the derisions of men is the soul that lives in God!”* It doesn’t matter what the world thinks – I’m living in Christ. I may be a failure in the eyes of the world, it doesn’t matter because I’m in Christ. Even if I fail in my walk with Christ, God doesn’t give up on me and I can learn from it. The weaker we are in the world, the stronger we are in Christ. That’s why Christ’s followers can fail forward and enjoy God’s grace. Amen.