

# Christ Reformation Church

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## *God's Power in Our Weakness* *July 23, 2023*

*Not by Might, but by My Spirit*

**Sermon Text:** 2 Cor 12:7-10

**Scripture Reading:** Acts 9

I was going to speak to you this morning about “Angels, Holy and Unholy,” specifically based upon these scriptures:

Heb 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

Rev 12:7-9 And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. The dragon and his angels waged war, (8) and they were not strong

enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. (9) And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

This subject is one that will be very encouraging for those who know Christ – that the Lord sends His angels to render service, help, and protection to His people. Also that we can become wiser in regard to the tactics of the devil – those evil angels who serve him and will share in his eternal doom in hell.

But we will plan to consider that subject next week and this morning continue one more time with this very, very vital truth from God's Word – *when I am weak, then I am*

*strong...God's power is perfected in weakness. Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord.* And this is a HARD lesson for us to learn, yet the Lord IS going to teach it to us as He always has right on down through the history of His church.

Listen again the to the theme Scripture for this series of messages is this:

2Co 12:7-10 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. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) 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.** (10) 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.**

It is characteristic of the Lord to bring His people into impossible situations. He tests us and refines us for His glory. He wants to teach us this:

Zec 4:1-7 Then the angel who was speaking with me returned and roused me, as a man who is awakened from his sleep. (2) He said to me, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold with its bowl on the top of it, and its seven lamps on it with seven spouts belonging to each of the lamps which are on the top of it; (3) also two olive trees by it, one on the right side of the bowl and the other on its left side."

(4) Then I said to the angel who was speaking with me saying, "What are these, my lord?" (5) So the angel who was speaking with me answered and said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord." (6) Then he said to me, "This is the word of the

LORD to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts. (7) 'What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become a plain; and he will bring forth the top stone with shouts of "Grace, grace to it!"'"

Rebuilding the temple was impossible – or so it seemed. When the work was completed, as a result, all would know it was the Lord's doing, by His power – “grace! Grace to it!”

Listen to Matthew Henry explain it-

His candlestick had one *bowl*, or common receiver, on the top, into which oil was continually dropping, and from it, by seven secret pipes, or passages, it was diffused to the seven lamps, *so that, without any further care, they received oil as fast as they wasted it* (as in those which we call *fountain-ink-horns*, or *fountain-pens*); they never wanted, nor were ever glutted, and so kept always burning clear. And the bowl too

was **continually supplied**, without any care or attendance of man; for (Zec 4:3) he saw *two olive-trees*, one on each side the candlestick, that were so fat and fruitful that of their own accord they poured plenty of oil continually into the bowl, which by two larger pipes (Zec 4:12) dispersed the oil to smaller ones and so to the lamps; *so that nobody needed to attend this candlestick, to furnish it with oil (it tarried not for man, nor waited for the sons of men), the scope of which is to show that God easily can, and often does, accomplish his gracious purposes concerning his church by his own wisdom and power, without any art or labor of man*, and that though sometimes he makes use of instruments, yet he neither needs them nor is tied to them, but can do his work without them, and will rather than it shall be undone.

God will carry on and complete this work, as he had begun their deliverance from Babylon, not by external force, but by secret operations and internal influences upon the minds of men. *He* says this who is the *Lord of hosts*, and

could do it *vi et armis* - *by force*, has legions at command; but he will do it, *not by human might or power*, but *by his own Spirit*.

What is done by his Spirit is done by might and power, but it stands in opposition to visible force. Israel was brought out of Egypt, and into Canaan, by might and power; in both these works of wonder great slaughter was made. But they were brought out of Babylon, and into Canaan the second time, *by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts* working upon the spirit of Cyrus, and inclining him to proclaim liberty to them, and working upon the spirits of the captives, and inclining them to accept the liberty offered them.

It was by the *Spirit of the Lord of hosts* that the people were excited and animated to build the temple; and *therefore* they are said to be *helped by the prophets of God*, because they, as the Spirit's mouth, spoke to their hearts, Ezr 5:2. It was by the same Spirit that the heart of Darius was inclined to favor and further that good work and that the sworn enemies of it were infatuated in their councils, so

that they could not hinder it as they designed.

Note, The work of God is often carried on very successfully when yet it is carried on very silently, and without the assistance of human force; the gospel-temple is built, not by might or power (for *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal*), but by the *Spirit of the Lord of hosts*, whose work on men's consciences is mighty to the pulling down of strong-holds; thus the excellency of the power is of God, and not of man. ***When instruments fail, let us therefore leave it to God to do his work himself by his own Spirit.***

All the difficulties and oppositions that lie in the way shall be got over and removed, even those that seem insuperable (Zec 4:7): *Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain*. See here, (1.) How the difficulty is represented; it is a *great mountain*, impassable and immovable, a heap of rubbish, like a great mountain, which must be got away, or the work cannot go on.

The enemies of the Jews are proud and hard as great mountains; but, when God has work to do, the mountains that stand in the way of it shall dwindle into mole-hills; for see here,

(2.) How these difficulties are despised: “*Who art thou, O great mountain!* that thou should stand in God's way and think to stop the progress of his work? Who art thou that look so big, that thus threaten, and art thus feared? *Before Zerubbabel*, when he is God's agent, *thou shalt become a plain*. All the difficulties shall vanish, and all the objections be got over.

*Every mountain and hill shall be brought low when the way of the Lord is to be prepared,” Isa 40:4.* Faith will remove mountains and make them plains. *Christ is our Zerubbabel; mountains of difficulty were in the way of his undertaking, but before him they were all levelled; nothing is too hard for his grace to do.*

Search the scriptures – you will not find a single child of Abraham who journeys through this brief and

temporal earthly life without experiencing these trials sent from the Lord to teach them this – *My power is perfected in weakness*. Yet many today who profess to know Christ know nothing of these things. They remain popular with the world and they still believe that God's ability to work is dependent upon their strength and power. They build, as a result, with wood, hay and stubble.

Let's consider some more examples-

2Co 4:7-11 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; (8) we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; (9) persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; (10) always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (11) For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in

our mortal flesh.

Treasure in earthen vessels. Jars of clay. What does Paul mean? He means that the Lord chooses to work through the weakness of man. Paul was weak outwardly. He was not exalted – he was demeaned. He was persecuted, not embraced. He was not a celebrity – he was maligned and hated. And he tells us that it was the Lord who was doing this – it was the Lord who chose to work through lowly, despised instruments like himself. Why?

Why would anyone put an incredibly valuable treasure in an old, chipped, clay pot? A pot that caught no one's eye. No one would go by it and exclaim, "hey! Look at this pot!" There was nothing about the pot which would attract anyone to it and the treasure inside. *In fact, the only reason anyone would ever look into that pot and find the treasure (which is the gospel) is because the Spirit of God came upon them and whispered, 'you must look inside that pot.'*

Now, I want all of us to think on this VERY carefully and honestly. Because there is still a remnant of worldly thinking in us which must be rejected. That thinking says, "*if anyone is going to look in the pot and find the treasure, then we must do something to the pot to make it call attention to itself.*" And as soon as we do that, God's power will depart.

Think also about the typical methods of so many churches today. What is it that they are so busy doing? They *are decorating the pot. In fact, they don't want a clay pot at all – no, they fashion a pot that is made of material far more eye-catching.* More attractive to the sinner.

But what do we know about the gospel and about those who faithfully preach it? They are a stench of death to those who are perishing. They are fools in the world's eyes.

Salvation is of the Lord. Sinners are not saved by man's might or power or schemes. Sinners will never look in the clay pot and find

the treasure of Christ unless Something compels them to look. Unless something works on them to drive them to see what is inside that pot. And that Something is, of course, the Spirit of the Lord.

THIS and only THIS is how the Lord accomplishes His work. He uses weak, powerless people – clay pots – to take His priceless treasure, the gospel of His Son – into a lost world. Paul knew this and this truth drove His methods of ministry-

1Co 2:1-5 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. (2) For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. (3) I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, (4) and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

How hard was it for Paul to learn this lesson? Well, we already heard about His first encounter with Christ as recorded in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. *“For I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”*

This is who Paul was before:

Php 3:1-7 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. (2) Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; (3) for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, (4) although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: (5) circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; (6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

That is who Paul used to be. An elite among the Jews. Trusting in his own merit and deeds. But the Lord broke him and saved him and taught him -

(7) But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Most professing Christians and churches today have never yet learned it. How do we know? Because they persist in trusting in their own power and might and ingenuity as they do what they call “the Lord’s work.” But it isn’t His work. Whatever they accomplish is simply a product of the flesh.

Satan will use this kind of tactic to turn us away from the gospel and away from those the Lord has truly called to preach it and away from His true people and true church. Look at this:

Mat 13:19 "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has

been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road.

Have you ever wondered just how Satan snatches away the seed of the gospel? I am sure that this is one very common way – he says something like this:

2Co 5:12 We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, so that you will have an answer **for those who take pride in appearance and not in heart.**

2Co 10:10 For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, **but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.**”

So what happened? The true Word of God came to them by a true Apostle of Christ, but Satan’s emissaries had come in and worked to lead the people away from that Word by getting them to focus on appearances, on outward weakness, and in just a moment the Spirit was quenched and the Word



of God was snatched away.

I have met foolish people who do this. They claim to be Christians and, for example, I introduce them to the sermons and Martyn Lloyd-Jones and they listen a bit and then come back and say, “I just don’t like to listen to him. I don’t like his accent.” So they just rejected a real servant of the Lord and the seed of the gospel was snatched away.

There is IMMENSE pressure upon us, upon any true church and upon any real Christian, to conform to the world, to the flesh – in this regard. To use the phrase from that movie – “If you build it, they will come.” That is to say, if we are going to do the Lord’s work (that work being measured in quantity rather than real quality), then you must “build it.” And if you don’t, they won’t come. You must have an impressive building, impressive décor inside, impressive programs for everyone, comfortable, impressive seating, a full-blown so-called worship team with light show....and if you don’t, they won’t come.

But how do these things mesh with what the Bible is telling us over and over and over again? *Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit.*

Many years ago in our first church in the mountains of Montana, a man and his wife bought a very nice ranch a few miles north of us. I didn’t know him until one Sunday he came to our church service and Sunday School hour. Afterward he came up to me and invited me to go with him to Kalispell the next day where he had to pick up some building supplies.

I went with him and on the way he said to me, “I have been driving all the way to Kalispell (about 60 miles from his house) to go to church on Sunday because I just assumed that your little church in an old log community hall would not be anything helpful to me. I was wrong. The Word you preached was real and I have been very foolish to have not come sooner.”

He was used to big things, you see. He was wealthy and he was James Dobson’s cousin, so he was also

used to some notoriety. A short time later they sold out and moved because the area we lived in was just too isolated for his wife.

But this is exactly how Satan works. The gospel of Christ is foolishness to the world, and you as a Christian are a fool as well. The treasure we have is in clay pots – and WE are those pots. – IF we are truly in Christ.

Jas 2:5 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

And of course the ultimate example of God's power perfected in weakness is this:

2Co 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Think...THINK about this. The way by which we are saved is by

the infinite, almighty God *emptying Himself of glory and coming into this world as one of us.* As a Lamb.

How would we have expected Him to pull off a victory over sin and death and the devil? By coming as a King, with angelic armies – as He will one day come when He returns. But, the only way to save us was this:

Mat 21:5 “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”

And this:

Isa 53:2-5 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. (3) He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him

not. (4) Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. (5) But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

I put a poem on the blog the other day that speaks of how we, in our sin, think that we are able to ascend to God by the supposed merit of our own doings. That is to say, how we naturally want to assume that are acceptance by God is something which we earn ourselves. Listen as we end with this:

O long and dark the stairs I trod  
With trembling feet to find my  
God,  
Gaining a foothold bit by bit, Then  
slipping back and losing it.

Never progressing; striving still  
With weakening grasp and  
faltering will, Bleeding to climb to  
God, while he Serenely smiled,  
unnoting me.

Then came a certain time when I  
Loosened my hold and fell thereby;  
Down to the lowest step my fall, As  
if I had not climbed at all.

Now when I lay despairing there,  
Listen...a footfall on the stair,  
On that same stair where I afraid,  
Faltered and fell and lay dismayed.

And lo, when hope had ceased to  
be, My God came down the stairs  
to me.

[Anonymous, taken from William  
Hendriksen, Commentary on  
Romans, Baker Books]

When I am weak, THEN I am  
strong because His saving power is  
perfected in weakness.