

## My Strength Is Most Perfect in Weakness

### 2. Corinthians 12:1-10

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Ever since I have been the director of the Hildesheim Mission to the Blind and have been involved in the support of blind children and young people in Southeast Asia, one thought has been running through my mind again and again: We are born into this world without anyone asking us if we want to be or not. We are born into a family we did not choose. Into a country we did not choose. Into a body we did not choose. We can accept all of this as plain fate. But we can also look at this life differently. As Christians, we put it this way: our life is a gift from God, and we can live in the freedom that God gives us. That is why we talk about God's love for all people, no matter if they are disabled or not, no matter what country they are born in, no matter what family they grow up in. ....

Last year I met Phoebe. She is 10 years old and lives on the Indonesian island of Nias, an island in North Sumatra. Phoebe is blind and has other disabilities. She has never seen a doctor since she was born. Her parents are just too poor. She does not play or talk with other children. She did not attend kindergarten and has never been to school. Phoebe's story challenges me. I agree: I consider life to be a great gift from God and I am convinced that Phoebe is loved. But this does not change the fact that she has had no chance to develop and get an education to make the most of her possibilities. The love of her whole family is no substitute for this. So how do we deal with this? The answer of the passage from the biblical text we have just heard is clear: our Christian faith is a way of dealing with disability, illness and crisis. It speaks of the apostle Paul in a deep crises.

His congregation expected the apostle Paul to be filled with a mysterious power that would protect them from all evil; that he would spread happiness in life, heal the sick. And what did they find out? That the apostle himself was sick, a broken figure. And what was his disease? Paul speaks of the fist of a satanic angel. A thorn in his flesh.

The Greek church fathers who still heard the subtext in his words were unanimous in their diagnosis: the apostle had headaches, insane headaches. Attack headaches. Pain like blows against head. Pain like a nail piercing the brain. Migraines of the worst kind.

Paul was not always able to work. And this was supposed to be an apostle? Oh God, oh God! An apostle was supposed to win people - and how could he do that when he sometimes presented the very picture of human misery? An apostle was supposed to heal the sick! But how could he do that when he was sick himself? An apostle should act positively, think positively, speak positively. Paul was not positive enough.

And what does the apostle respond? He writes: He also had positive things to offer. Great religious experiences. An intimacy with God that cannot be surpassed. Ecstasies to the third heaven. But he does not want to boast about it. He would be a stranger to these top experiences - as strange as if they had happened to someone else.

I can well understand that he talks about himself in such a detached way. At the summits of life, we are often out of ourselves, not with ourselves. There is music that is so beautiful that you float away. There are spring days when life begins anew, even if it seems to be exhausted. There is an erotic fascination that puts us in another state: Second-class feeling of heaven. But when do we feel most that we are unmistakably ourselves, bound to this one body? We feel it when life becomes hard, when our own or someone else's pain

hits us, when an illness knocks us down! Then we don't want to be ourselves anymore, we want to be different, to have another body, another life. And then we have to learn: This is your life. This is your body. This is you.

I know there are people among us who have reason to wish, "If only my life could start over again. I wish I could have a different body than the one that might not last. Or the one I don't like.

Paul was such a person. He wanted to be someone else. His disease was a thorn in his body. An open wound. And this is where his critics in his congregation hit him hard. They wanted another apostle.

That was basically what he wanted. Secretly, he agreed with them. Three times he had prayed to God: Let me be healthy! It is not fair that you give me this great challenge - and not the body to carry it out!

But he had received only one certainty, only one answer: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Or literally translated: My power is made perfect in weakness or sickness. The Greek word for weakness is the same as for sickness. And he wrote all this to the Corinthian church to defend himself against the reproach that he was so little positive, convincing only in letters, puny in speech, repulsive in appearance. How did the congregation respond to this letter? Let us listen to three voices. First, Scolops, a critic of Paul. Then Luke the physician, his friend. Finally, Apollos, his colleague, friend and critic at the same time.

First of all, Skolops. We must not think of him as a cruel man. He was very engaged in the congregation. But this letter made him indignant.

Such moral blackmail again, he grumbled. This Paul always wants to be first. Even then, when he was still living as a Jew, he wanted to outdo everyone. And now he's doing the same thing in our Christian congregation: he rebuked Peter, he criticized Apollos, and now it's the turn of the missionaries we've received. He just cannot deal with the fact that they are in some ways more attractive than he is. He always has to be on top. Always the first. That's why he can't stand to be sick and weak.

We take care of the sick and the weak in our church. We also take care of the sick Paul. I just mean: Such sick and weak people do not necessarily have to be the leaders of the church. We need people who can speak well. People who are resilient and healthy, people who can be shown to the outside world.

No, we really have nothing against Paul. But when he uses his illness to extend his influence, when he wants to suggest to all of us: Look, I am closer to Christ with my suffering than you are, when he misuses compassion as an argument against his critics - then I protest.

The second to speak is Luke, the physician. He defends his friend. He says: "You are troubled by his illness? Paul is disturbed and tormented much more by his disease! He learned to accept it with difficulty. It has been a long learning process. As a physician, I observed that this process took place in three phases:

In the beginning, he saw only the enemy in this illness. There was a satanic angel behind it, an evil entity that was tormenting him. Such an enemy can only be fought, not accepted.

Then he learned to understand his illness as a kind of education. Perhaps it was meant to protect him from overconfidence, to awaken in him the willingness to be the last and second-to-last - which, to be honest, had always been difficult for him. But that is exactly why he was given this thorn in his flesh.

Paul reached the third stage, however, when he fully accepted his illness.

He realized that he had to live with it. Then he understood the illness as an opportunity to bear witness with his body to a power that does not come from him: the power of God that lives in him.

Please respect Paul! He is a man like us. How can he accept his illness if we do not accept him?

The last one to speak is Apollos, a philosophically trained man who always discusses everything thoroughly. And this time he wants to do the same.

Dear congregation, he says, the apostle's illness reveals a truth that is important for every individual: God's power is not conditional. It applies not only to those who are strong, but also to those who are weak. It applies not only to those who succeed in everything, but also to others whose lives have been broken. Not only to those who come, see and conquer, but to the many who are in the shadows. Not just the great, but the little ones.

God's power is mighty in the weak - this is also important for the church: A Christian church is not a community of the perfect, but a community of different characters. We need people to lead the church who know from their own experience that there are crises in life. This is one of the fundamental truths of Christianity: You don't have to go to heaven to be close to God. We find God down here - in real life, in every human being. His power is in weak people. Therefore, we should not start a competition in the church about who has climbed the highest on the ladder to heaven to be close to God. But in the same way, we should avoid a competition about who has climbed down the ladder the most. God is everywhere, in the heights and in the depths, where we celebrate the ecstatic heights of life and where we descend into the depths.

God's power is mighty in the weak - this is important for the whole world. Especially because we live in a world where the weak have a hard time. The big animals eat the little ones. The rule is: if you're not fit, you get a kick in the behind. But we humans have taken a step into a new world that is already beginning in the middle of this old world. This rule no longer applies. There, the weak are being helped. There, everyone is equal, the great and the small.

Often we doubt that we have really taken this step. We doubt it when we hear how much more is spent on arms than on development aid, how disabled people are increasingly mistreated. Or when we see pictures from Ukraine. There we meet the old rule again: If you're not fit, you get a kick in the behind.

If you doubt that we can go beyond eating and being eaten, remember that we are called to a life in another spirit. In every human being, we see an image of God. In this sense, we are all equal before God. No chancellor, no minister, no boss is more in the perspective of God than each one of us. You are all God's children, called to His freedom, which no one can take away from you. You all remain God's image even in sickness and crisis. You all have this mission: Seek my face! And you will find God's face: in a little child, in a beloved

person, in the strong and the weak, in the near and the far, in the happy and the unhappy, everywhere in the world - in Germany and in Indonesia.

And what about Phoebe? The truth is that she will not have an easy life. But it is also true that people on Nias Island visit her and take care of her. It is also true that people in Germany are donating money for her to see a doctor. It is also true that her family loves her. It is also true that whoever looks at her meets God. And when she starts singing and rejoicing, there is no doubt about it.

Amen.