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With One Hand Tied Behind Your Back:  
Why Frustrating Limitations Do Not Mean God Has Failed

a sermon on 2 Corinthians 12.1-10  
by David C. Mauldin  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

This sermon is for everyone who feels as if life is a fight, and you have one hand tied behind your back. You feel acutely some limitation. Maybe it is constant. Maybe it only gets in the way once in a while. But there is a frustrating limitation in your life, and you think, "I could be soaring with eagles, but I'm stuck on the ground."

Limitations come in all shapes and sizes. Everybody has some. Some people have many. And, of course, some limitations are worse than others. Some can be overcome; others you have to live with and live around. Here are just a few examples, so you have a clear idea what I am talking about.

Poverty is a limitation. You might be poor. If you are, you know how fast poverty shuts down opportunities. You might be in poor health. Health problems can be major limitations. Maybe you simply don't have the energy to do the things you want to do. Your health holds you back. A physical handicap can do the same thing. You may be painfully shy or insecure, and that holds you back. You might wish you were more attractive, and feel your life would be better or you would have more opportunity if you were.

Maybe your workplace is a toxic environment. You have trouble being a Christian there or being yourself there. Maybe your boss is a jerk. That will crank up your stress level fast. Maybe you have an hour commute each way.

Your limitation might grow out of a broken or strained relationship. Things are not right, and you feel helpless to solve the problem. Maybe your spouse is disagreeable and difficult. Maybe your child is a teenager, or maybe you are the teen and your parents just don't understand. Or maybe your limitation is the opposite of these; maybe it is a lack of relationships. You feel alone. You say to yourself, "If I only had someone who understands ..."

This list is not exhaustive, but I hope you are getting a sense of what I mean when I say "limitations." I mean circumstances that limit your ability to do good things you want to do. Limits that rob you of the happiness you feel you ought to have. Things in your

life that set frustrating boundaries. I am preaching this sermon because I have begun to take a different view toward limitations, a more biblical view, and I hope you will too.

If you feel as if you have one hand tied behind your back, you might wonder, “Where is the power of God in my life?” Why doesn’t God help me overcome my limitations? You have heard me say over and over that salvation means more than just going to heaven when you die. It includes that, but it also means a new way of life now. I preach that Christ is present and powerful. You got that message. You start to look at your life and wonder, “So what’s wrong with this picture?” Where’s that power? Where’s the peace and joy? If Jesus is doing such wonderful things in my life, why is one hand tied behind my back? You might be tempted to assume that your limitations mean he is not at work. Or worse, that he is against you. You start to wonder if maybe you are being punished.

I invite you to consider another possibility. What if God’s power is working through your limitations? The idea is worth considering. And I’d like now to call the Apostle Paul to the witness stand to help us mull it over.

Paul knew something about limitations. Let me ask you something about Paul: Why was he struck blind? You know his story: He had persecuted all the Christians he could find in Jerusalem, so he was on his way to Damascus to persecute those he could find there. Along the way, Jesus knocked him off his horse. Paul saw a bright light and heard the voice of Jesus. You won’t find a more dramatic conversion story. When Paul got up off the ground, he was blind. He remained blind for three days, until God sent a man named Ananias to heal him. I ask you this: Was the blindness strictly necessary? Lots of people in the Bible had visions without going blind. Why Paul?

Obviously, we can’t answer that question. Who knows the mind of God, right? But I believe God had a purpose in it. God was dealing with Paul at the deepest level of his soul, and I suspect the blindness helped in some way.

The blindness was temporary. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was permanent. Let me give you a bit of the behind-the-scenes story about what’s going on in our scripture reading and why Paul wrote the things he did. Paul founded the church in Corinth then had endless trouble with it. That church seemed to have one problem after another. In this case, someone within the church had risen up against Paul and was trying to discredit him. At the same time, outsiders had moved in claiming that Paul had got the gospel wrong. They may have wanted Gentile Christians to adopt some of the practices of Judaism. In any case, Paul said they were preaching a different gospel.

These outsiders were outwardly impressive. They came with letters of recommendation to establish their authority. They were tall, good-looking, with commanding physical presence – natural leaders. And could they preach! Wow! They

were eloquent, witty. They'd have you laughing one minute and crying the next. The kind of preacher who talks for an hour and you wonder how it went so fast.

Paul wasn't like that at all. And they put him down. Where were his letters of recommendation? What credentials did he have? None like theirs! He wasn't as good looking. Not a natural leader like they were. He couldn't preach as well, either. In fact, Paul spent an awful lot of time in prison. He kept getting run out of towns. And where was he when the Corinthians needed him? Bottom line: They were strong. Paul was weak. He was an embarrassment to the church.

Paul did not try to one-up these outsiders. He conceded their points. He didn't have their credentials, just God's call to be an apostle. He didn't have letters of recommendation, except the Corinthians Christians themselves who had experienced God's power when he preached to them. Paul said, "I'm not going to boast. That's crazy. These self-styled 'super apostles' take pride in the flesh. They look at things the way the world does. If I'm going to boast, I'm going to boast in my weakness, because that's where God's power shines through." Paul knew that God's power works through hardship, poverty, suffering, and even his humble preaching. So Paul was not ashamed.

As our reading began, Paul made the point that he could brag if he wanted to about his spirituality. If a spitting contest could help the church, he could stand up to anybody. But that would be foolish. God's power matters – nothing else. And Paul had experienced God's power in his deepest pain and darkest moments. He told them about a thorn in his flesh. Bible scholars have pondered for ages what this was. We simply don't know. All we know is, it was a limitation that pained Paul deeply. He desperately wanted to be free from it. He knew God could deliver him. He knew God had his hand on Paul's life. No question about that. So he prayed, three times, that God would spare him. But God didn't. Instead, God taught him something he could learn in no other way: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

That promise means so much to me, not only as a human being who suffers, but even more as a pastor. I routinely deal with people who have problems I cannot begin to solve. In fact, rare is the person with a problem I can solve. I often lack words that can adequately comfort. And yet I know, no matter how bad the circumstance in this person's life is, God's grace is sufficient. And that gives me strength. And I don't give up because I know God will not.

Sometimes God's power overcomes a limitation. I could tell stories of that. I know one former drug addict who lost all desire for drugs the moment he came to Christ. I know another who struggled for years and leaned hard on church friends before he was free. God can and does change our circumstances.

At the same time, I know others like Paul. Their thorn in the flesh doesn't go away. They're stuck with their limitation – whatever it might be – and yet ... God is at work in it. God uses it to accomplish his purposes. So instead of being evidence that God is not at work; the limitation, the thorn, is proof that God is.

Please allow me to insert a disclaimer at this point. I do not want you to misinterpret what I am saying. I am not saying that everything bad in your life comes from God or that he causes bad things so he can use them for good. Some people say that.

I'm not sure whether Joni Erickson Tada would say that or not, but that's the view she has come to take of her paralysis. You probably know who she is. When she was a teenager, she had a diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. She was a Christian and is a Christian, and she has given powerful testimony for Christ through her art, speaking, and writing. I heard her on the radio recently, and she was explaining how her attitude toward the accident and toward God had matured to the point where she can see his loving hand in it. She said she believes her accident preserved her from a far worse fate, spiritual death. God used that event to preserve her as his own and to teach her and use her for his glory. I would not dispute that. Anyone can look at her life and see evidence of God's hand. At the same time, I would not go into the hospital room of a recently paralyzed teen and say, "God did this for your own good."

You see my concern. I have the same issue with the Heidelberg Catechism. I love the Heidelberg Catechism. If you don't know what that is, please let me acquaint you with it sometime. It comes from the time of the Reformation. It is a list of questions and answers designed to teach people the basics of Christianity. The very first question is: "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" You have to admit, that's a very good question. It gets right to the heart of things right away. I like that. The answer it gives is worthy of such a good question: "That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil."

If you think about it carefully, that really is our only true comfort in life and death. "I belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." And if the answer stopped there, I could just sit back and feel warm and fuzzy inside. But it goes on to say, "that he protects me so well that *without the will of my Father in heaven* not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that *everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.*" Clearly it is claiming that God's care for us is so perfectly complete that nothing happens to us – good or bad – except by God's will and for his purposes. You could take that to mean everything that happens to us, even the bad, comes straight from God. Some Christians have taken that view. I don't. God may permit things to happen that he does not cause. And God may use these things for our ultimate good.

The result is, whenever something bad happens, I am reluctant to say God did it, but I remain optimistic that God can work in it. I personally believe that God never lets anything happen that he cannot redeem. A day is coming, someday – only God knows when – when Christ will return and God will make all things new. New heaven. New earth. All those glorious promises delivered in full at last. When that happens, everything will be put right. And if something cannot be put right on that day, God does not let it happen now. Of course, God’s ability to redeem is so incredibly powerful that lots of things happen that we wish did not. The twentieth century saw more suffering than I would have guessed God could redeem. But God is God, and I am just a human being. His power is beyond my imagination. I know it is because of the cross and resurrection. That’s why I go on trusting him when my limited faculties fail.

So I am not saying God causes everything bad that happens. I am also not suggesting that you stop trying to overcome your limitations. I would never say you should raise the white flag of surrender and say, “Oh, well, I just have to live with this.” Or worse, make your limitation an excuse for wasting your gifts. Joni Erickson Tada could have said, “I am a quadriplegic now. I can’t do anything for God.” But she didn’t. She is limited, but she presses on around her limitation. It does not stop her. No, I would never say you should resign yourself to defeat. That’s not the Christian way. Jesus didn’t pour out the Holy Spirit on us so that we could sit around feeling sorry for ourselves.

Overcome your limitations when you can. Work around them when you have to. Endure patiently. That’s what I am saying. I am saying what Paul said: God’s power is made perfect in our weakness. Paul never used his suffering as an excuse to quit. He kept going, and he gave God the glory.

Most of you know that next month I will begin leading a discussion group about religious themes in some of Flannery O’Connor’s short stories. In preparing for that I have been learning about Flannery O’Connor herself, and I have come to appreciate her as a person as well as a writer. I wrote in the newsletter about some of the things she had to overcome. She lost her father when she was 16. Apparently they had been very close. That loss stayed with her. Many of her stories are about people who have no father. She was unsuccessful in romance and never married. It is hard to tell, from my perspective, how that affected her, but I imagine it was painful at times. Perhaps most difficult of all was her own lupus. Lupus killed her father, and she inherited it. She had grown up in Savannah and Milledgeville, Georgia. She went to college in Milledgeville, but her talent as a writer opened doors of opportunity for her. She was accepted into the Writer’s Workshop, a master of fine arts graduate writing program at the University of Iowa. It was the first of its kind, and through it she honed her talent and met the right people. New doors opened. Before long she had a contract for a book, and she was living in New York among other talented artists and intellectuals. She had good

friends, people who understood her. She was living in and around a lot of intellectual action. It was a rich time for her. But the lupus took that away. She had to return, not just to Milledgeville, but to a farm outside Milledgeville, so her mother could care for her. That's a blow. Imagine it. She had discovered a larger world full of creative, talented people. She had found a place for herself in that exciting world. Then she had to leave it behind for the life of an invalid on a rural Georgia farm.

She feared she would not be able to write anymore in her new, confined circumstances. But she did. She wasn't sick all the time. There were periods of remission and she travelled some. But even when she was very sick, she would still try to write an hour or two every morning. That was all she had strength for. At times she didn't have that much strength. To the very end she kept on writing and rewriting her stories, even in the hospital. Much of her best writing was done on that little farm in rural Georgia.

Flannery O'Connor said, "God's grace must wound before it can heal." When her father died, she compared God's grace to a bullet in the side. Of her own lupus, she said, "I can with one eye squinted take it all as a blessing." And she also wrote, "Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies."

How easy it would be to look at your limitations and conclude that God has let you down. That his power is absent from your life. That's the wrong way to look at things. The truth is: God's power is made perfect in human weakness. And very often God is working through your limitations to shape you in ways you would not allow otherwise.

God's ultimate goal for you is good. He wants to give you new and eternal life. He wants to make you like Jesus. He wants to make you holy like Jesus. He wants to make you beautiful like Jesus. He wants you to share the glory and the joy Jesus shares with the Father. That's your destination, and it is all good. But between here and there, the road has a lot of bumps. You have a lot of dents that God has to hammer out. Very often our limitations are some of God's best tools to prepare us to receive the grace that he would give us.

In conclusion, remember this: Your circumstances, the bad things that happen to you, may limit you, but they do not limit God! He is at work, and he will finish what he has begun. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com