

Help! I'm in a Sinkhole

Philippians 1:12-14, II Corinthians 12:6-10

One of the most interesting, but disturbing phenomena that occurs on earth is that of sinkholes. You know those large holes that form as the surface of the earth collapses and swallows up anything that was above it. Just this past week, a large sinkhole occurred in Florida swallowing up 2 homes and a boat. According to the USGS, about 20 percent of U.S. land is susceptible to sinkholes. The most damage from sinkholes tends to occur in **Florida, Texas, Alabama, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee,** and Pennsylvania. And some sinkholes can be huge. A sinkhole occurred in Guatemala City in May of 2010 when torrential rains from Tropical Storm Agatha and a bad drainage system were blamed for its creation. It swallowed a three-story building and a house; it measured **approximately 66 feet** wide and **98 feet deep**. Can you imagine standing on solid ground one minute and tumbling down a deep hole the other. That is a reality experienced by those who have fallen into sinkholes? These holes open up suddenly, without any indications of what is to happen.

Well, hopefully that never happens to any of us, but I wonder if you have ever felt like your life is resting on a sinkhole. When the circumstances of our lives, and the storms of life cause us to be shaken and sometimes it feels like our whole world is collapsing. And our natural response to these conditions is to ask questions of why and for what reason. Why am I facing all these problems? How am I going to get through this? Why is God allowing me to face so much adversity? And life seems like we are being swallowed up by a sinkhole. The problems, the stresses, the tensions get the best of us and we feel overwhelmed and overcome. And for us as people of faith, we begin to question where is God in all this and what difference does my faith make when I'm facing these trials.

And as hard as it is to see it, our attention to the principles in the Scriptures reveal to us another side to this sinkhole world. Simply put it is this: Part of our faith response is to realize the God is able to use adversity and life's sinkholes to reveal our true weakness and allow us to discover God's strength, God's power and ultimately the ability to be an overcomer.

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If there was anyone who could identify with adversity and trials it would be the apostle and missionary Paul. The writing of this passage in Philippians came at a time when Paul was in chains in prison. And with his missionary zeal, he must have been thinking, why me and why now. There is so much to be done for the Gospel of Christ. This is such a crucial time for the beginnings of the early church and who could have thought that some good could have come out of Paul's limitations. But that is precisely the message of Philippians 1:12. "Now I want you to know, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel." Because it was in these circumstances that Paul had the opportunity to become a witness for Jesus Christ to the whole palace guard. And not only that, most of the followers of the Lord were now inspired to speak the word more courageously and greater zeal. What you have is this man looking at his bad circumstances and rejoicing because he sees who God is using this for good.

Well, this wasn't the first time Paul had learned this lesson. You heard his wrestling with God from today's reading in II Corinthians. He had cried out to God about this thorn in the flesh, which he described as a messenger of Satan. Three times Paul had pleaded with the Lord to take it away. But rather than removing, Paul discovered that God was showing him an important spiritual lesson. From the depths of his heart, this is the message he declares: "My grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness." And isn't interesting that we are not told specifically what Paul's thorn in the flesh was and maybe that was providential, for all of us can look at our lives and identify various thorns in the flesh that challenge us, that tempt us, and may even feel like sinkholes to us. These are the experiences of life common to all of us. For we cannot always escape suffering, pressures, life's heartaches. Being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus does not exempt us from these things. They may even seem more intense to us because we discover we may be in some kind of spiritual battle. But the good news is our trials, our winds of adversity, the storms that come our way; all have the potential to reveal God's power working in us. For when I see my weakness, I can discover God's power and strength.

I guess it comes down to this: When we face these challenges, we have two alternate paths we can take. We go through the trial and adversity and we allow

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it to discourage us or even defeat us or the adversity becomes the means for spiritual growth and a strengthening of our faith. In other words, our response to these difficult situations can make a difference in experiencing the power of God. God can get our attention when we go through these tough times, but we have the choice to allow God to bring us through it.

I think it's interesting that over and over again, this is the message of the Bible. To really connect with God, the challenge is to learn how to completely depend on the Lord for his strength and power. To try to tackle these things in our own strength, will ultimately drain us and may push us into a deeper hole.

One of the biblical stories that make this so clear is the story of Gideon and his battle with the Midianites. It was a time of great despair for the Israelite people. The oppression of the Midianites was so great that the Israelites hid in caves and mountain cliffs. It was a time of great hardship and heartache. They had to wonder: Will this ever come to an end? Will God raise up a powerful leader to destroy this oppressive nation? That's when Gideon comes on the scene. An angel appears to him and this is the message he hears: "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. You are going to save Israel." Gideon must have thought this was some kind of joke. If the Lord is with us, why is all this happening to us. And I'm the one who's going to save Israel. My clan is the weakest in Manassa, and I am the least of my family. And the story goes on to tell how God delivered the people of Israel using the weakness of one of his servants. Early in the morning, Gideon and all of his men are camped getting ready for battle. I can imagine Gideon wondering how his army would be able to fight against the powerful Midianites. And notice what happens next: The Lord says to Gideon: "You have too many men to have me deliver Midian into your hands. I don't want the people of Israel to think that his victory was won in their own strength. Let those who tremble with fear turn back." 20,000 men left, only 10,000 remained. But still that was too many and as the story goes on eventually the army is narrowed down to 300 men. 300 men who reach the edge of the Midianite camp and just after the Midianites had changed their guard, the Israelites blow their horns and break their jars and when the Midianites hear and see all that is happening, they run crying out as they flee the scene. Really the point of the story was the victory

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was won because of the people's showing their trust and dependence upon the Lord.

Well, it happens to us. We are often like Gideon, with our doubts, our complaints. And we wonder why are these things happening to me. And God's response to Gideon is what we need to hear: "I am with you." I will demonstrate my power in your weakest moments. I will show victory when you depend on me. It is a dominant theme of the Bible...these words from the prophet Isaiah: "Do not fear for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you; surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

The apostle Paul found it to be true. He said: "I glory in my infirmities, in reproaches, in insults, in persecutions, in distresses." Why? Because when I am weak, then in the Lord, I am strong. This is the truth we can come to know. That God is with us to help us conquer life's battles. We can experience the power to overcome. To realize God will give us the strength to see us through whatever trial or trouble we may be facing.

I read the story of a photographer for the Seattle news by the name of David Crockett (I don't think related to the famous Davey Crockett). He shares his experience of what happened to him on May 18, 1980, the date of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens. A volcanic explosion that caused so much damage and destruction and death. David said that he had a feeling on that day that this would be the day of the eruption and he wanted to get close to that he could get some spectacular pictures. He drove his car past the restricted zone. He started taking pictures when suddenly a plume of blue smoke shot up from the volcano. Yes, it was really happening, the volcano was erupting and as David quickly took a few more pictures, he realized the whole side of the mountain was coming toward him. He raced away in his car, and as he did he could see the earth following him in his rear view mirror. The speed of the advancing mountain was 150 mile per hour and he could tell the mountain was overcoming him. At that point David found a side road and he looked for a place that looked a little securer than the rest. And there he waited it out, as many hours past with the earth crashing and collapsing

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all about him. He was having a hard time breathing with all the air filling with ash and smoke and he remembered all he could do was pray for God's help and strength to get through this. Finally, David Crockett was rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter.

As I read that story I could not help but think of how there are those times in life when we feel like the world is caving in on us. Sometimes the struggles, the problems, the burdens seem to much to handle.

It is said that a short time after his terrifying experience and dramatic rescue, David read the 46th Psalm. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way, and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea." What a promise for each of us this morning. That God can give us the power to overcome and it's often through our weakness that we truly discover God's strength. Maybe you feel like there's a volcano erupting in your life or it's kind of like you feel you're in a sinkhole and the ground about you is caving in. I heard that one of the methods used to stabilize a sinkhole is use dynamite. The dynamite for us is the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome life's toughest situations. Being a Christian does not keep us from adversity and trouble, but our faith becomes a wonderful resource to face those troubles head on. Jesus said it: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." In our weaknesses, we are made strong. In our toughest battles, with God's help we can overcome.