

**Introduction:**

Bill Withers topped the billboard charts in the summer of 1972 with his best known hit, "Lean on Me." Most of us know the song and recognize its memorable lyrics.

*Sometimes in our lives  
we all have pain we all have sorrow  
...Lean on me when you're not strong  
and I'll be your friend I'll help you carry on  
...Please swallow your pride  
if I have things you need to borrow  
for no one can fill those of your needs  
that you won't let show  
Just call on me brother when you need a hand  
we all need somebody to lean on*

It is an anthem for us to recognize we all need help sometimes. Withers, however, recognized most of us have a certain amount of pride. We don't like to lean on others. We like to be able to claim we are independent and can handle our own problems. The problem is we actually can't do anything on our own. **Acts 17:28** says without God, we cannot even live, move or have being. Considering that, how do we think we can possibly have spiritual victory on our own? We do all need somebody to lean on. That somebody is God. But what must we do to lean or rely on God? In **II Corinthians 12:7-10**, Paul talked about his own bout with weaknesses and his need for God's grace. He was an example of leaning on God. In that text, I believe we find four keys to leaning on God and gaining the victory through Him.

**Discussion:**

- I. Recognize your personal weakness.
  - A. We face an interesting paradox in our own actions. When most of us are asked to name our strengths, we hem and haw because we fear we will sound arrogant and conceited. However, most of us really think we are or should be strong enough to make it on our own. Thus, while most of us are modest enough not to boast of our perceived strengths, few of us realize how truly weak we are. Paul, on the other hand, recognized his weaknesses. Further, in **II Corinthians 12:7-10** he said he would be content with his weaknesses and would even boast in them (cf. **II Corinthians 12:5**).
  - B. Paul could have very easily boasted in the great things accomplished through him. He had just mentioned a man being caught up to the third heaven and also into paradise. While he speaks as if this is some other person, the concluding thoughts about the need to be humbled leads me to believe he is actually speaking somewhat tongue in cheek about himself. How easy it would be to boast of such things. However, what good would it do to boast? In what could he actually boast? Was it his strength that took him into paradise or the third heaven? Of course not, it was God's grace. Paul could boast of the miracles he had performed and the great signs. But again, was it his strength that accomplished those things? Absolutely not. God had done those things with Paul as the instrument. No vision, no miracle ever said anything about how strong Paul was, they only said how strong God was and how amazing He was for using someone as weak as Paul to do the work.
  - C. Therefore, Paul said, he would not be upset about his weaknesses or even try to hide them. Rather, he would boast of them and glory in them. He was well-pleased with them. Only when he recognized how weak he was, could he be the tool God wanted to use. Only by recognizing his own weakness could he actually be made strong by God's strength. In **Philippians 4:13**, he said he could do all things through the one who strengthened him. The problem was, if he kept thinking he could do anything by his own strength, he knew he would not accomplish anything.

- D. I think one of the greatest examples of this is Moses. When he thought himself a deliverer and thought everyone would recognize him as one (cf. **Acts 7:25**), he ended up fleeing in fear. However, when he saw himself as weak and unable, making excuses of inability, then God was able to use him to accomplish amazing things (cf. **Exodus 3**).
- E. We need to recognize our weaknesses. We need to realize how truly unable we are to do anything. Look again at **Acts 17:28**. Without God we could not live. Without Him we could not move. We walk, we talk, we get out of bed, we breath in and out. Not a single one of us does any of that from our own strength. We do that because of God's strength. It doesn't seem that way to us because of the way God has established the world, but the truth is, without Him, we could not even do the simplest of tasks. As we said in an earlier lesson, we must remember it is God's air we breath. It is God's strength we use to move and exist. How much more is it God's strength we must use if we will have spiritual victory? How much more must we recognize our own weakness if we wish to be victorious over Satan? Consider **Ephesians 3:14-21**. God can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think according to the power working in us, but we must be strengthened by the Spirit and by Jesus Christ within us. Do you struggle with sin? You can't beat it, but God can. Do you deal with depression and anxiety? You can't overcome, but God can. Do you face enemies who would discourage and bring you down? You can't beat them, but God can. However, as long as we rest in our own strength, thinking we can win these battles or we can win them with just a little nudge from God, we will never lean on Him. When we come face to face with how weak we are, then we will completely throw ourselves over to God hoping for His strength in us.

## II. Acknowledge God's grace in your life.

- A. When Paul asked for the thorn in the flesh to be removed, God responded that His grace was sufficient for Paul (**II Corinthians 12:9**). Hand in hand with recognizing our own weaknesses, we need to acknowledge God's grace in our lives. In fact, it will be only natural. When we understand how little we actually have the power to do on our own, we can't help but thank God for all He has done for us. **Proverbs 3:6** says to acknowledge God in all our ways. The point is that we need to see God's hand in everything in our lives from our living, moving and existing to our earthly successes to our spiritual victories.
- B. For this reason, we give thanks for the food we eat (**I Timothy 4:4**). We may have worked, we may have budgeted, we may have paid. However, it is God who has continued the life cycles that allow for food (**Matthew 5:45**) and it is God who has given us the ability to work, think and plan. In any moment, God could remove those abilities from us. We must acknowledge His grace in all our life from the smallest to the greatest of things.
- C. Having said that, there is another side to God's statement. God was telling Paul that the grace God had already given him was all he needed. He did not need further grace. Basically, he was telling Paul not to get distracted by the blessings he had not received but rather focus on the blessings he had received. Too often we get caught up in what God has not done for us that we seem to forget all God has done for us. **Ephesians 1:3-14** is a litany of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. What more does God owe us? Did He even owe us these blessings? If we suffer physically as Paul did, how can we be angry with God? He has already given us far more grace than we deserve. We need to spend our time acknowledging the grace God has given us instead of complaining about the grace He hasn't. God is not obligated to remove all our thorns.
- D. There is actually one more point that comes from this and it leads into our next key for leaning on God.

## III. Find God's grace in the thorns.

- A. We have no idea what the thorn in Paul's flesh was. However, if he prayed three times for its removal, I can imagine it wasn't pleasant. Perhaps it was some health problem. Maybe it was some physical limitation. Who knows? What we do know is Paul wanted it gone. He wasn't happy with it at first. Further, we also know that it was actually a messenger of Satan sent to harass him. That means it was something Satan was trying to use to cause Paul grief and come between him and God. I think we need to understand Satan has plans for the thorns we face. He is harassing us. He is trying to drive a wedge between us and God. He knows he cannot turn

God away from us, but he hopes to turn us away from God. He hopes to make us upset with God so that we will not lean on Him. Satan's messengers are around us every day.

- B. Paul, however, was able to see more than Satan's messenger sent to harass him. He recognized God had a goal for Satan's messenger. God allowed it to harass Paul, because the very thing Satan was using to turn Paul against God, God could use to keep Paul close. This messenger could help keep Paul from being conceited. He needed that. With all the great things God had done through Paul, he might be puffed up. If he became puffed up, he could become self-centered and self-satisfied. Then he would be no better than the Pharisee of **Luke 18:11**. He would be lost. If the messenger kept Paul's head deflated, it would actually be a means of God's grace helping save Paul in the end.
- C. However, the key is that Paul had to recognize the grace God was extending him through this thorn. He had to be able to find God's silver lining in Satan's storm cloud. Whatever we face in life, we need to examine what lessons they hold from God. What thorns do you face? Do you have financial pressures, physical illness, death of loved ones, the agony of fallen children, trouble finding a job, back taxes weighing you down, debt burdens, betrayal of friends and family, struggles with temptation, depression, anxiety, enemies? The list could go on. Some of these thorns are caused by our own actions, some not. However, in any case, we need to examine what message or discipline God might have for us in these things. If nothing else, each and every one of them reminds us of our own weakness and inability to deal with all our thorns on our own. We rarely view our difficulties as blessings from God, but often they are. Consider **James 1:2-4**, which explains our trials actually produce faith and endurance which in turn help us become complete and mature. If we will lean on God, we need to look for God's grace even in Satan's messengers.

#### IV. Allow God's strength to work through you.

- A. As we conclude this look at leaning on God, we must recognize that leaning on God is a choice. God will not force us to lean on Him. Being able to accomplish anything by God's strength is also a choice. Please, do not take anything from this lesson to mean that we simply let go and God will take over our wills to make us work or perform great things. Paul did not simply say, "I'm weak God, you take over and I'll just kind of sit in the background twiddling my thumbs." No, instead, Paul said, "I am weak. I can't do anything on my own. So, God, I'm just going to do what you have said." Paul had to make this decision every day. That was his point in **I Corinthians 9:27**. Leaning on God was not a one-time recognition of weakness and then God takes over. It is a daily decision to quit relying on our own strength and ideas but to rely on God's will.
- B. I have no doubt God can use us against our will. I have no doubt at times, such as **John 11:49-51**, God may use even those who are not submitting to Him to accomplish His will. If nothing else, as the great poster on demotivators.com suggests, "It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others." I am not denying any of that. I am merely pointing out that if we want to be like Moses or Paul, if we want to be able to do all things through Him who strengthens us, if we want to be strengthened by the Spirit in our inner being, if we want God to do far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think by the power working in us, then it takes the daily choice of submission to God's will. This kind of strength only comes when we can say with Paul that we have crucified ourselves and the life we now live is done so by faith in Jesus Christ (**Galatians 2:20**). Only in this way do we allow God's strength to work in us. Of course, this takes us full circle to our first key, because we will never do this if we do not recognize our own weakness.

#### Conclusion:

As I think about the word picture of leaning on God, I imagine a someone trying to lift themselves from a wheel chair and walk on atrophied legs. Without someone to lean on, the task is impossible. However, as someone provides strength, the person's legs grow stronger and stronger. Sadly, many of us have no idea we are in the chair. We think we are walking but have no idea our atrophied legs are not carrying us anywhere. We need to lean on God for support and gain strength through Him. On whose strength are you leaning?