

A Theology of Weakness

“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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

Paul deliberately presented Christ plainly to gentiles, unadorned with human rhetoric or compelling emotion, so that the power and the glory of salvation would be entirely God’s. Paul understood from Scripture that human weakness is God’s strength. The entire Bible narrates a theology of weakness. Consider at least the following examples:

- Abraham and 318 men chased after and defeated what must have been a massive armada of several kings each with his own army (Genesis 14).
- Joseph assumed the most powerful position in Egypt by interpreting a dream (Genesis 41).
- The midwives of Israel (women!!!) defeated the will of the immensely powerful Pharaoh of Egypt (Exodus 1) with clever words.
- The Israelites overcame attacking Amalekites by Moses holding his hands up to heaven (Exodus 17).
- The Israelites conquered Jericho by walking around the city and blowing trumpets (Joshua 6).
- Gideon defeated a massive army of Midianites with 300 men armed only with trumpets and torches.
- David brought down the giant, Goliath, by slinging a stone at him.
- Hezekiah defeated the army of Sennacherib by doing . . . nothing (2 Chronicles 32).
- Daniel and his 4 friends excelled beyond all the wise men of Persia by eating lentils (Daniel 1).
- Esther brought down powerful Haman, the prime minister of Persia, by . . . reclining on a sofa.
- Jonah brought the entire massive city of Ninevah to repentance by walking its streets.
- By voluntarily submitting to the torture and death on a cross, Jesus defeated sin, Satan and all evil and made reconciliation, justification, sanctification, etc available for a lost humanity.

But this too: At the end of Israel’s monarchial era, despite Judah having a vastly superior army, the Chaldeans were able to defeat Judah because it was God’s will that Judah’s monarchy end and the nation go into Exile. God can reverse what we think is our strength.

Notice that in all the above examples, the individuals who accomplished great works thru weakness were serving the Lord in some specific way. Scripture screams at us: If we’re serving God, which is our creational responsibility and our duty as His elect, God’s strength is expressed thru our weakness.

Something else. In Jeremiah 21 we read the most astonishing statement by God: “Furthermore, tell the people, ‘This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; he will escape with his life” (21:8-9). The way of “life” for Judah is to humbly submit to the Gentile Babylonians by surrendering, and so be taken into Exile, only to be able to return to the Land later in time when the Messiah-King comes to restore and to rule. To stay in Jerusalem and fight will mean certain death.

Surrender (weakness) is “life” because it anticipates a resurrection. The need here is to trust God that what He says will happen. Jesus fulfilled this text when He surrendered to the Roman cross and lived (resurrection). We do the same: We surrender to the hatreds of the ungodly, even if it means suffering loss, trusting that in the resurrection we’ll be eternally blessed. This is radical, yes, but it’s the Bible’s theology of weakness.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul models weakness for the Church, so that believers would adopt weakness as their way of life also. We’re not to feel sorry for Paul, nor admire him. We’re to be like Paul. As Paul imitated Christ, we’re to do the same. But weakness is not merely something to think about when we read 2 Corinthians. We need to understand that weakness is the very center of Christianity, and without weakness, a profession of faith may be nothing more than self-deception.

Jesus said that we’re to take up a cross daily and follow Him. That’s weakness. Paul said, “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . ,” and then he described Jesus humbling himself to go to a cross so that we can be saved and blessed. That “mind of Christ” is weakness. We’re to “put on the new man” created in weakness. Forgiving others is

weakness. Self-sacrificially serving others is weakness. Loving the unlovely, that's weakness. Sharing the Gospel with unsaved people is weakness (and anyone who disagrees with me on this obviously has never tried to share the Gospel with someone who despises Christ). Repentance is weakness.

But now I ask, Why? Why is weakness so important? The answer is manifold.

- God glorifies himself by involving himself in the works of His elect as they fulfill His purposes, and it's our weakness that proclaims that God is at work.
- We dare not live as if we're Deists. If we're fulfilling God's revealed will, we can count on His active, loving participation and rejoice at His presence in our lives.
- Depending on the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did, for ministry and sanctification, means that we are becoming Christ-like.
- Weakness is also deliberately choosing to live our lives according to the Word of God, and not according to our own lights.
- There's no faith without risk. Trust is only trust if there's an element of risk, if the trust involves the possibility of suffering loss of some kind. Weakness exposes us to the risks necessary for trust to be real. See James 2.
- Love is not love without personal sacrifice. Weakness reveals our love for God because in some way weakness entails self-sacrifice. See Luke 21:1-4; that poor widow loved God more than her own life, which she was willing to lose.
- Weakness is a choice. It's not something that happens to us, such as an accident or illness. We do it knowingly, voluntarily, and in love. The consequences are for God to determine. To reject weakness clearly says to God, "I don't trust You, nor Your wisdom, nor Your goodness. Jesus can be weak, but not me. I'm strong."
- Weakness reveals to others as well as to God that we're the real thing. The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted a sword-bearing Messiah on a white horse, not a weak, humble man dying on a cross. For all their knowledge of Scripture, they didn't really know God at all. "My ways are not your ways, nor my thoughts your thoughts, saith the Lord." Jesus was the real thing and His followers knew it, as I today know it.
- Weakness acknowledges reality. We are totally dependent on God for our next breath and heartbeat, let alone for food and health. We're dependent on God for the righteousness necessary to be with Him. To assume a stance of self-sufficiency, of being independent of God, is delusional. Embracing weakness in all the ways it's expressed is our way of glorifying God.
- Weakness is humility, without which no one can be saved. The opposite of weakness is pride. There is no neutral or in-between stance. Persecution keeps us humble. Living dependent on God, as missionaries do, keeps us humble. The proud believer who eschews weakness presumes upon God and makes sanctification (if even his justification) impossible, and all that's left is self-righteousness and performance.

We can go even further in a study of weakness:

- I suggest that prayer is enjoined on the Church because it's in the very nature of prayer that we acknowledge our inadequacy. There are 3 kinds of prayers: prayers of petition, of confession, and of thanks. All three types assume a stance of weakness before God. Whether God answers our petitions as we seek or not, we learn His will, submit to it, and (hopefully) have peace about whatever the circumstance is that triggered the prayer. The Christian whose life is devoid of prayer (other than traditional perfunctory ones) is probably a proud person who is relying on his own strength to get thru life.
- I suggest further that wealth is spiritually exceedingly dangerous precisely because wealthy people always rely on what their wealth can buy, and so they never experience biblical weakness. Wealthy people live out a fantasy of great strength. They can do as they please regardless of God's revealed will, and they pursue power over others in the delusion that they're superior people. The Hebrew word for wealth (*hayil*) implies power and strength. Wealth is antithetical to biblical weakness.
- We're all to be serving Christ in some revealed way. That necessarily keeps us in a position of weakness. Paul's awareness of weakness came in the experience of serving Christ. We will invariably encounter circumstances (or God will surely send them) while serving that demand we look to God for strength or for wisdom. Christians whose lives are self-centered, who are not serving Christ, avoid such circumstances and so miss the blessing of seeing God's activity in their life. (See 1 Corinthians 2:3.)
- Weakness is built into the human race. Our bodies decay, break down, and fail. That's not merely the outworking of the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, as atheists would claim. That's so that we, in a stance of profound weakness, look forward to a new, resurrection body. The offer of life only becomes our deepest desire when our body's failures remind us of how weak we are. (See 1 Corinthians 15:43.)
- We were made limited. We have, by creational design, limitations. God made us out of dirt. (Paul's metaphor of "jars of clay" is brilliant.) We are limited to this physical world that we experience only by means of the five senses. The spiritual realm is invisible to us. We are finite beings. God however is an infinite Being. He knows all things, we don't. He knows the

future. We don't. He can do all things. We can't. He is morally pure. We're not. Acknowledging these limitations necessarily puts us in a position of weakness and if we look to God for help, we honor Him. God is glorified not only when we seek His strength for some need, but when we merely acknowledge our weaknesses.

- The Gentile nations universally celebrated strength. They had contempt for weakness. Where'd they get that? From Satan (or from the ruling *elohim*, the "principalities and powers"). When we voluntarily assume a position of weakness, we're overcoming Satan and the forces of this world. In weakness, Jesus overcame Satan, and we participate with Jesus in that spiritual warfare by adopting weakness.
- The Church Age is not the millennium! The Church Age is the 1st Advent continuing in the life of His Body. I'm sure that God is pleased when He sees the Son's core attributes (humility, weakness, trusting obedience) being expressed in us.
- Jesus as High Priest intercedes for us because we are weak (Hebrews 4:15). If we thank Him for doing that, we acknowledge our weakness. All the OT saints in Hebrews 11 knew what weakness is (v. 34).
- Weakness means we can be at peace. Striving for power creates turmoil in the soul because if our goal is power, whatever power we have is never enough. There's always the need and desire and will for more. Being contentedly weak, trusting in whatever God provides, in contrast, results in peace.
- The one who consciously adopts weakness is free to love others. The one dominated by a will to be strong is in love with self, so much so that love for others is completely crowded out. It's only by adopting weakness that there can be love for God, saving trust in God, and love and blessing for others.

Weakness is both a voluntary stance for us to take out of trust and love, and something inherent that we need to acknowledge. We voluntarily adopt weakness when we take a biblical worldview for our own in defiance of worldly modernism's rationalism/humanism/scientism. The world's elites and intellectuals mock us for our "superstitions, myths, and backwardness." Great! We should rejoice that we're with Paul fulfilling 1 Corinthians 1,2. Thus . . .

We believe in a literal, 6 days ex-nihilo, recent creation, in a literal Adam and Eve, and in a literal global flood. We hold that homosexuality is sin, that divorce and remarriage is adultery, that hell is a real place, that males and females are the only two sexes, and that God controls earth's climate. We believe that the ten plagues on Egypt really happened and that Israel passed thru the Red Sea with a wall of water on the right and on the left. We believe in the universality of sin, that sin controls all humanity. We believe in a wicked supernatural being, called Satan. We believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead and lives today and will return to earth to rule. We believe in truths.

Modern society laughs at us for every one of these things we believe to be true. In this, we're weak. And vulnerable; we may have to suffer in the coming years for these beliefs. But we trust God to vindicate us in His time and in His way. Liberal denominations eschew some (or all) of these beliefs in order to be "strong." When individual Christians compromise on these beliefs, they do it to appear "strong." They're afraid of being weak. May God have mercy on them.

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We can't fully grasp what weakness involves unless we have a good grip on its opposite, power. Let's think about power and try to understand it, because the lust for power is universal and deadly. And ugly. The lust for power also is subtle, yet is itself powerful and it easily controls us. We therefore need to know to recognize it and then not only refuse to seek it but despise it.

The world, controlled as it is by Satan, tempts us with a host of lusts. It's the lust for power that is most heinous because it seriously harms others. That's because the lust for power is a zero-sum project. This means that the one who gains power necessarily gets it at the expense of others. If I get more power, you get less, and that's what the sin nature craves. The outworking of Satan's pride is lust for power. Power over whom? Over God! If Satan accrues power, he supposes, God has less. So Satan's cosmic project is to get and exert power—wicked power—in God's created world in the proud expectation he will rule the world instead of the Son ruling. And we humans are necessarily involved in this deadly conflict. All existence, I would hazard, is a great power encounter. Creation is the stage, the platform, on which this power encounter occurs. We are *necessarily* involved.

I'm supposing that this is what happened in the Garden: The woman, seeking power, gave the forbidden fruit to her husband so that he would disobey God. She was exercising power—power not given to her by God. She was imitating Satan, lusting for power over others. All humanity follows Eve's wicked desire ever since.

Pride isn't merely a character defect. Pride always expresses itself, and its most abhorrent expression is the exertion of power over others. The Book of Job narrates a power encounter in which Satan exerted his powers to force God to admit defeat. Job wasn't merely collateral damage, but the very focus of the power encounter and the agent whose will determined which supernatural being would be victorious. I submit that the Book of Job is canonical precisely because it reveals the plot-line of all human history.

Autonomy from God is a position of power. Humans are the agents in this world who can either in pride seek to live by their own desires and values or, deny a lust for power and embrace weakness in humility, taking the side of God to defeat proud Satan and all evil. Humility is weakness. Humility repudiates power; it repudiates and defeats Satan and evil.

"Woke" is a lust for power. Women seeking to dominate their husbands and to teach and preach in churches; violence, cruelty, contempt for others and conflict in modern society; refusal to forgive others; crass disobedience to the Word; self-righteousness; these are a few examples of proud lust for power. A common yet unrecognized lust for power is being critical of others, because we do it to boast of our superior values and understanding of things. Another is posing as an intellectual, because such people are assumed to have power. Yet another is engaging in politics—which is not merely lust for power but a socially acceptable form of warfare.

Many evangelicals allow a lust for power subconsciously to control their thinking: "I disregard God's norms and standards because I have my own. I live according to my own lights, my own values, desires and interests. I regard the Scriptures as truth and as God-given, but they don't control me. I believe that God exists, that Christ died on the cross so I can have forgiveness of sins and not have to be in hell when I die. But this is my life and I'll live it as I please. God doesn't run my life, I do." In these ways, we seek to live as a god, exerting god-like powers.

Things are not what they seem. The sin nature is a controlling force we forget about because it's invisible. Satan is an invisible being whose domain is power; and he seeks to enlist us or use us to fulfill his wicked agenda. We need to be at work with Christ overcoming sin and Satan. We do that by living out a theology of weakness, to the glory of God.

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Weakness is how we identify with God and His purposes. Aware of the devastation that sin has caused and that death—the death of the individual, the death of the Son, the death of this cursed world—is the only escape from it, the only way to end it, we accept and submit to death in the hope and expectation of resurrection to new life. We deliberately take risks, whatever risks are necessary to obey God, trusting in Him for the consequences even if the consequences are death, knowing that what really matters is the new life that awaits us on the other side of death. This is the story of Christ, who embodied both Israel and all the elect of God. And it's to be our story, as we're the Body of Christ continuing His work. At the core of Pauline weakness is trust in God to raise us from the dead to blessing and new life in a new world, a world that knows only God's goodness.

The will to be strong is the default state in fallen humanity. To be strong is another expression of our hateful sin nature. And the will to be strong—even if it's subconscious—is deadly. A will to be weak so as to allow God to work His will regardless what the consequences are for us, is voluntary, conscious and deliberate. It's the outworking of the indwelling, empowering Holy Spirit, available only for those who are following Christ, pursuing sanctification.

Let's conclude. Weakness is in the context of serving Christ, of obeying His teachings and commands. It is Christ-likeness, radical trust in God, and taking the side of God in His cosmic conflict with evil, sin, and Satan. It is being dependent on God for fruit-bearing and for life itself. It is Christ re-living His Person and work in us and thru us, the 1st Advent continuing in the life of His followers, fellow servants, defeating evil and rescuing the elect of God, anticipating and preparing for the Kingdom.

In Paul's metaphor of the "jars of clay" (2 Corinthians 4:7), the "treasure" is Jesus. Humans are finite, mortal, fallible, and limited; we're only made of dirt. God is infinite, with great, transcendent purposes that include us as His servants. We know the glory of God by knowing Jesus, by being in a loving, trusting relationship with Him. The Spirit of Jesus joins our spirit to create a new unity, like Himself, by which His purposes are fulfilled and we are blessed.