



Weakness

## MY WEAKNESS, HIS STRENGTH

GEORGE OHLSCHLAGER & TIM CLINTON

(1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

amed preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote of God, "When you can't trace his hand, you can always trace his heart." These have been words of comfort to countless Christians during times of weakness, times when God's presence is not clear. Our weakness—which shows itself in our natural human frailty, doubt, and fear—usually brings us to the end of ourselves. This either causes anxiety or it can be the beginning of a special life with God.

### GOING ON TO MATURITY

Possibly the greatest paradox of the Christian life is the way God's power comes alive in our weakness. Living out this sometimes confounding spiritual truth requires that we set aside our normal orientation in living—using and emphasizing our own personal strengths—and concentrate instead on admitting and living in our vulnerability.

Living out this truth is a major marker of spiritual maturity. When we live where we are weak in order that God may be strong, miracles happen and lives are changed for the sake of the kingdom. Furthermore, it is God who is seen doing the work—He is the One who is glorified.

On the other hand, this truth is often quite maddening to the spiritual novice, as it makes no logical sense according to the way of the world. We spend far too much of our lives thinking carnally rather than spiritually—believing that we will give our best to God and do the work of His kingdom all by our own powers. This is, in fact, a good and zealous thing to some degree, and God uses it. The problem is that we tend to cave in when our own effort is exhausted during times of serious trial. We forget that during those times of weakness, God can still work mightily. And, if we succeed, we realize that the feat was accomplished by God.

### LEARNING BY LIVING

God is able to take every effort, no matter what the motivation, and make it work to His glory. Giving ourselves to the work of the kingdom, for instance, is the way that we learn that our best efforts often don't get the job done. We must depend on God.

Why are so many Christians so much like the world when we should be ablaze with the light of God and alive with His power? The answer, of course, is human weakness. Weakness in our love, devotion, and desire for Him; weakness that is all too human; weakness that cannot be overcome without the Spirit of God working in and through us.

Worse yet, we become weakest when we don't admit, or won't admit, that we have any weaknesses. The desire to be strong blinds us to our need to see and admit those weaknesses. So we end up trapped in a paradox—we stay weak because of our denial of our weakness. We remain weak in our false projection of strength.

### PAUL'S EXAMPLE

The apostle Paul struggled mightily with this confounding trap. He hated the "thorn in the flesh" that afflicted him. He begged God over and over to remove it (2 Cor. 12:7-10). God did not. Instead, God told Paul that he would be just fine living in

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God's presence, and that His power would come alive in Paul's weakness.

You know how most of us respond when we are in Paul's position. We whine, we bargain, we curse, we turn away, we keep begging God to do it our way instead of His. We would prefer not to hear God say, "Live with it by living deeper in Me."

What did Paul do? Paul realized that God was not going to remove his weakness, despite his best efforts to convince Him to do so. Paul surely told God that he would be much more effective at preaching and teaching, and much more effective for the kingdom without his weakness. But God said no. So Paul changed his approach, realizing that he could be glad about his weakness and even boast about it, knowing that through it, Christ would be glorified. Therefore, he would be content in the midst of his "thorny" suffering.

Paul was so full of the Holy Spirit, so imbued with the presence and power of Christ, that no experience of pain and suffering could dent its delightful impact. He did the counter-intuitive thing—he embraced what he, and we, would normally reject. Not only weakness, but insults, hardships, disasters, and persecution could be embraced. Nothing adverse or painful could overcome the power of living fully in Christ. Instead, those difficulties became the very doors to a life of intimacy with God.

Paul grasped something that few of us know: God's grace was, in fact, fully sufficient for the trial of suffering he was facing—in fact, it was sufficient for any trial he faced. And this knowledge changed Paul's life, made him delight in the Lord, and filled him with praise and thanksgiving. It brought to life the truth that the joy of the Lord—not good circumstances, not good health, not lots of money, and not spiritual perfection—is our strength.

Make this your fervent prayer: "Lord,

You are so great that Your mere presence is sufficient for me—that alone will change my life completely." When I am weak, then I am most strong in Christ. Nothing will ever be the same again.

#### **FURTHER MEDITATION:**

Other passages to study about the issue of weakness include:

- > Joshua 1:8, 9
- > Psalms 28:7; 31:7; 46:1; 138:7
- > Isaiah 43:2
- > Nahum 1:7
- > 2 Corinthians 4:8, 9
- > Philippians 4:13
- > Hebrews 4:15, 16; 12:3

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To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on weakness at 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10 on page 1533. See also the personality profile of Mark on page 1438.

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<sup>16</sup>But be that *as it may*, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! <sup>17</sup>Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? <sup>18</sup>I urged Titus, and sent our brother with *him*. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did *we* not *walk* in the same steps?

<sup>19</sup>Again, do you think<sup>a</sup> that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But *we do* all things, beloved, for your edification. <sup>20</sup>For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and *that* I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest *there be* contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; <sup>21</sup>lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.

#### COMING WITH AUTHORITY

**13** This *will be* the third time I am coming to you. "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established."<sup>a</sup> <sup>2</sup>I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write<sup>a</sup> to those who have sinned before,

and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare—<sup>3</sup>since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. <sup>4</sup>For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.

<sup>5</sup>Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified. <sup>6</sup>But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.

#### PAUL PREFERS GENTLENESS

<sup>7</sup>Now I<sup>a</sup> pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified. <sup>8</sup>For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. <sup>9</sup>For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I

12:19 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text reads *You have been thinking for a long time.* . . . 13:1 <sup>a</sup>Deuteronomy 19:15  
13:2 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text omits *I write.* 13:7 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text reads *we.*

#### KEY PASSAGE



### STRENGTH BUILDERS

(12:9, 10)

To be perfect, strong, and capable—or at least to be perceived that way—is the desire of the human heart. Because God sometimes turns a person's life upside down, however, the pursuit of perfection can be a bad thing. Too often, "perfect," strong, and capable people try to do everything on their own; they don't feel a need for God, or they forget to rely on Him for the results.

Those who see their dependence, however, fully realize that they can accomplish nothing on their own. They need God to work through them. In that way, the task is accomplished, and God receives all the glory. That is why Paul could say, "I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul could even take pleasure in those weaknesses, because only when he was weak could he really be strong in Christ.

Every person has areas of strength and weakness. How wonderful that God can use both! He equips us with strengths to serve Him humbly, and He works through our weaknesses so that we never forget His power.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about weakness on pages 1494, 1495. See also the personality profile of Mark on page 1438.

been sent. <sup>27</sup>For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled *them* in condemning *Him*. <sup>28</sup>And though they found no cause for death in *Him*, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. <sup>29</sup>Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took *Him* down from the tree and laid *Him* in a tomb. <sup>30</sup>But God raised Him from the dead. <sup>31</sup>He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are His witnesses to the people. <sup>32</sup>And we declare to you glad tidings—that promise which was made to the fathers. <sup>33</sup>God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm:

*'You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.'*<sup>a</sup>

<sup>34</sup>And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus:

*'I will give you the sure mercies of David.'*<sup>a</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Therefore He also says in another Psalm:

*'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'*<sup>a</sup>

<sup>36</sup>For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was

13:33 <sup>a</sup>Psalm 2:7 13:34 <sup>a</sup>Isaiah 55:3  
13:35 <sup>a</sup>Psalm 16:10



**Weakness**

## MARK—GOD'S WORK IN WEAKNESS

(ACTS 13:13)

God takes special delight in turning those who fail into faithful disciples. He is apparently not so concerned about helping those who help themselves as He is about helping those who realize how helpless they really are! One glowing example of God's work can be seen in the life of John Mark—the assistant of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5).

Barnabas probably invited Mark, his cousin, to join the team. Barnabas had an eye for people who needed encouragement. He had helped Paul prove to the other apostles that he really was a follower of Jesus, not a persecutor working under cover (Acts 9:26–30). Barnabas may have also known about Mark's shameful cowardice on the night when Jesus was arrested, if indeed Mark was the young man who had fled in such a hurry that he left his clothes behind (Mark 14:51, 52).

Paul, Barnabas, and Mark made the island of Cyprus their first missionary destination. When they traveled on to Pamphylia (southern Turkey), Mark left the team and returned to Jerusalem. Paul concluded that Mark was unreliable. Later, when Barnabas and Paul were about to depart on their second missionary journey, Barnabas insisted on giving Mark another chance. Paul refused. The team split and Barnabas took Mark with him back to Cyprus.

Events proved that Barnabas's approach with Mark worked. He became a dependable disciple. He eventually wrote the Gospel that bears his name, probably recording Peter's account. Even Paul later recognized Mark's maturity. Three times in letters, Paul mentioned his appreciation for Mark's ministry in his life (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). God doesn't give up on weak people. Christians ought not to give up on one another. As Paul discovered, those who are weak today may become those on whom we lean tomorrow.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about weakness on pages 1494, 1495. See also the key passage note at 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10 on page 1533.

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- 10 Then adorn yourself *with* majesty and  
splendor,  
And array yourself with glory and  
beauty.
- 11 Disperse the rage of your wrath;  
Look on everyone *who is* proud, and  
humble him.
- 12 Look on everyone *who is* proud, *and*  
bring him low;  
Tread down the wicked in their place.
- 13 Hide them in the dust together,  
Bind their faces in hidden *darkness*.
- 14 Then I will also confess to you  
That your own right hand can save you.
- 15 "Look now at the behemoth,<sup>a</sup> which I  
made *along* with you;  
He eats grass like an ox.
- 16 See now, his strength *is* in his hips,  
And his power *is* in his stomach  
muscles.
- 17 He moves his tail like a cedar;  
The sinews of his thighs are tightly knit.
- 18 His bones *are like* beams of bronze,  
His ribs like bars of iron.
- 19 He *is* the first of the ways of God;  
Only He who made him can bring near  
His sword.
- 20 Surely the mountains yield food for him,  
And all the beasts of the field play  
there.
- 21 He lies under the lotus trees,  
In a covert of reeds and marsh.
- 22 The lotus trees cover him *with* their  
shade;  
The willows by the brook surround him.
- 23 Indeed the river may rage,  
Yet he is not disturbed;  
He is confident, though the Jordan  
gushes into his mouth,
- 24 *Though* he takes it in his eyes,  
*Or* one pierces *his* nose with a snare.

- 41 "Can you draw out Leviathan<sup>a</sup> with a  
hook,  
Or *snare* his tongue with a line *which*  
you lower?
- 2 Can you put a reed through his nose,  
Or pierce his jaw with a hook?
- 3 Will he make many supplications to  
you?  
Will he speak softly to you?
- 4 Will he make a covenant with you?  
Will you take him as a servant forever?
- 5 Will you play with him as *with* a bird,  
Or will you leash him for your maidens?
- 6 Will *your* companions make a banquet<sup>a</sup>  
of him?  
Will they apportion him among the  
merchants?
- 7 Can you fill his skin with harpoons,  
Or his head with fishing spears?
- 8 Lay your hand on him;  
Remember the battle—  
Never do it again!
- 9 Indeed, *any* hope of *overcoming* him is  
false;  
Shall *one* not be overwhelmed at the  
sight of him?
- 10 No one *is* so fierce that he would dare  
stir him up.  
Who then is able to stand against Me?
- 11 Who has preceded Me, that I should pay  
*him*?  
Everything under heaven is Mine.
- 12 "I will not conceal<sup>a</sup> his limbs,  
His mighty power, or his graceful  
proportions.
- 13 Who can remove his outer coat?

40:15 <sup>a</sup>A large animal, exact identity unknown

41:1 <sup>a</sup>A large sea creature, exact identity  
unknown 41:6 <sup>a</sup>Or *bargain over him*

41:12 <sup>a</sup>Literally *keep silent about*

#### SOUL NOTE



**The Answer** (40:1-5) During suffering, a natural response is to question God. In distress, people either cry out to God, or at Him. Fortunately, God is not put off by questions, weak faith, or anger. Job had cried out, but God did not answer Job's questions. Instead, God revealed His sovereignty over all creation, including Job's life. God did not explain Job's suffering, nor will He necessarily explain ours. Very simply, God is the answer. When we have nothing else but Him, we have all that we will ever need, now and forever. His presence is enough. **Topic: Weakness**

## GREETING

<sup>1</sup>Paul, called *to be* an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes *our* brother,

<sup>2</sup>To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be* saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS AT CORINTH

<sup>4</sup>I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, <sup>6</sup>even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, <sup>7</sup>so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup>who will also confirm you to the end, *that you may be* blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## SECTARIANISM IS SIN

<sup>10</sup>Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. <sup>11</sup>For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. <sup>12</sup>Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." <sup>13</sup>Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

<sup>14</sup>I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup>lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. <sup>16</sup>Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. <sup>17</sup>For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

## CHRIST THE POWER AND WISDOM OF GOD

<sup>18</sup>For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup>For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
And bring to nothing the understanding  
of the prudent."<sup>a</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; <sup>23</sup>but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks<sup>a</sup> foolishness, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

## GLORY ONLY IN THE LORD

<sup>26</sup>For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. <sup>27</sup>But God

1:19 <sup>a</sup>Isaiah 29:14 1:23 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text reads *Gentiles*.

## SOUL NOTE



**Perfect Strength** (2:1-4) Paul had not come to Corinth to impress anyone with great oratory. Instead, he had come "in weakness," seeking to demonstrate only the power of the Holy Spirit so that people would put their faith in God.

When God calls people to serve Him, He will often use their areas of strength, but He sometimes surprises them by working through their weaknesses, even their pain. When we have a task to do for God but feel too weak or fearful, we might remember that His strength "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). **Topic: Weakness**

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because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, <sup>14</sup>to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>15</sup>Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

<sup>16</sup>Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, <sup>17</sup>comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.

#### PRAY FOR US

**3** Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run *swiftly* and be glorified, just as *it is* with you, <sup>2</sup>and that we

may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men; for not all have faith.

<sup>3</sup>But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one. <sup>4</sup>And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you.

<sup>5</sup>Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.

#### WARNING AGAINST IDLENESS

<sup>6</sup>But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he<sup>a</sup>

3:6 <sup>a</sup>NU-Text and M-Text read *they*.

#### SOUL NOTE



**Follow the Leader** (3:3–5) Believers are engaged in a spiritual battle. As part of God's army, we have God as our Commander and Satan as our avowed enemy. The battle rages in the spiritual realm and constantly affects the earthly realm, where believers have great victories but also face difficult trials, temptations, and persecutions. At times the difficulties become so intense that we feel weak and vulnerable. At those times, we need to remember Paul's advice: "The Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one." God's Word and work will never fail. When we feel weak, we must remember God's faithfulness. **Topic: Weakness**

#### KEY PASSAGE



#### Work

### OFF TO WORK

(3:10–12)

Some of the Thessalonian believers had stopped working. It seems they were relying on the generosity of their fellow believers, supposedly for the sake of being spiritual and waiting for the second coming of Christ—or maybe they were just being lazy. Whatever it was, Paul had harsh words for such an outlook.

Work is good for us. Upon placing Adam in the Garden of Eden, God gave him the work of caring for it. God provides work in order for people to provide for their families. To refuse to work when one has the ability and the opportunity is wrong, and the church should not support such people.

When we see our work as God-given, we have a whole new perspective. It is not a necessary evil that takes time away from "spiritual" things, but a gift from God through which we are to grow spiritually and minister to others. God needs people in all walks of life in order to reach those who have not heard the Good News of salvation.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about work on pages 1590, 1591. See also the personality profile of Aaron on page 87.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR HIGH PRIESTHOOD

**5** For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. <sup>2</sup>He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. <sup>3</sup>Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. <sup>4</sup>And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.

**A PRIEST FOREVER**

<sup>5</sup>So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him:

"You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You."  
"As He also says in another place:  
"You are a priest forever  
According to the order of Melchizedek";"

<sup>12</sup>For teachers again and you and your food, milk is for him. He suffered. <sup>9</sup>And having been perfected, He offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, <sup>8</sup>though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. <sup>7</sup>And having been perfected, He came High Priest, but it was He who said to

5:5 <sup>a</sup>Psalms 2:7 5:6 <sup>a</sup>Psalms 110:4

KEY PASSAGE

COME BOLDLY

(4:14-16)

An amazing fact of the Christian faith is that the infinite God became a finite human being. Although without sin, Jesus Christ as a man experienced the weaknesses, temptations, pain, and difficulties of human existence. Thus, we have a Savior who can "sympathize with our weaknesses." He understands temptation, because He faced it. He understands weakness, because He experienced it. He understands pain, because He felt it.

People who live with chronic or acute physical or emotional pain have a Savior who truly understands. Far from sitting in the heavens simply feeling sorry for sick and sinful humanity, He clothed Himself with our humanness. When we come to Christ with our hurts, He reaches out with human arms, truly understanding how we feel. He is able to help us. Christ does not always take away the pain, but He does tell us to bring it to Him. Whatever our pain or difficulty, we are encouraged to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

To Learn More: Turn to the article about pain on pages 1534, 1535. See also the personality profile of the man at the pool of Bethesda on page 1378.

SOUL NOTE



**Hidden Strength (4:14-16)** Most people try to hide their weaknesses and failures. God knows all our weaknesses, however, and He sympathizes with them. Even more, He offers mercy and grace to help us. Christ understands because as a human being He experienced the challenges and temptations we face, "yet without sin." He knows that we are weak and need Him. He wants to give us the strength to endure our weaknesses and confront our temptations. We can "come boldly to the throne of grace," knowing that He wants to help us. **Topic: Weakness**