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The Power of Weakness (Part 1)

by David Dunlap

“Therefore, I am well content with weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” —2 Corinthians 12:10

While a medical student, Dr. Helen Roseveare, the famous missionary to the Belgian Congo in the mid-twentieth century, attended a missionary conference in northern England. There, she declared publicly, “I’ll go anywhere God wants me to, whatever the cost.” In her address to the Urbana Missions Convention in 1976, she remembered:

Afterwards, I went up into the mountains and had it out with God. “O.K. God, today I mean it. Go ahead and make me more like Jesus, whatever the cost. But please (knowing myself fairly well), when I feel I can’t stand anymore and cry out, ‘Stop!’ will you ignore my ‘stop’ and remember that today, I said ‘Go ahead!’”¹

At another time in her life, she recounted how God began to deal with her in such a way that she wanted to become nothing in Christ so that God would become all. She writes of herself:

You [Helen] no longer want Jesus only but Jesus plus...plus respect, popularity, public opinion, success, and pride. You wanted to go out with all the trumpets blaring, from a farewell—do that you organized for yourself with photographs and tape recordings to show and play at home, just to reveal what you had achieved. You wanted to feel needed and respected. You wanted the other missionaries to be worried about how they’ll ever carry on after you’ve gone. You’d like letters when you go home to tell how much they realize they owe to you, how much they miss you. All this and more. Jesus plus...No, you can’t have it. Either it must be “Jesus only” or you’ll find you have no Jesus. You’ll substitute Helen Roseveare.²

Through divine appointments such as these, God sought to bring Dr. Helen Roseveare to a place in her life where she would set aside her pride, self-reliance, and strength—rendering herself weak before Almighty God—so that she could receive power and strength in Christ.

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The Beauty of Weak Things

Our world doesn't place much value in weak things. We live in culture that worships youth, strength, athleticism, outward appearance, and personal independence. Our culture finds no beauty in weakness and, sometimes, even discards weak people. If a baby in the womb has a defect, many doctors are quick to abort it. If an adult's body is diseased, they can legally commit suicide through a physician's assistance. If an elderly individual becomes weak with age and suffering, society hides that person away. We do not want to be reminded of our frailty.

The world is terrified of weak things, but God sees beauty in weakness and brokenness. For a plant to rise through the soil, the husk of the seed must break open. Even the fragrance of perfume is possible only when flower petals are crushed and scent is released. Scripture tells us that "God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). Complete humility is what God truly values. Spiritual weakness is crucial if we want greater spiritual maturity, spiritual blessing, and a deeper relationship with God.

Over and over again, God reveals in the Bible that He uses weakness rather than strength, humility rather than pride, and brokenness rather than self-confidence. God used five smooth stones from the sling of a shepherd boy to bring down the mighty Philistine giant Goliath. God used Moses, without an army or weapons, to break Egypt, the most powerful nation in the known world. Jesus was born in an obscure village in a forgotten land and changed the world. Although He never owned a home, never had a bank account, and never did the things associated with human power, He became one of the greatest figures in all of history. Through weakness and humility, he accomplished far more for eternity than all the generals, presidents, educators, and philosophers who have ever lived. We must learn that, from God's point of view, spiritual weakness is essential in the Christian life. But what is spiritual weakness?

A Definition of Spiritual Weakness

Simply stated, spiritual weakness is the work of God by which He strips us of our pride and self-sufficiency so that the beauty of the life of Christ might shine through us. Christ seeks to cultivate in us the disciplines of meekness, forbearance, and kindness. Paul exhorts us to conduct ourselves "with all lowliness and gentleness, with long suffering, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2, *NKJV*). Former missionary to China, G. Christopher Willis illustrates the importance of this verse with a personal story:

*Years ago, I was walking with Mr. Willie Crossly, when he suddenly asked: "Christopher, what is the difference between lowliness of mind and meekness?" I had to reply, "I don't know." He said, "I will tell you. Lowliness of mind will never give offense. Meekness will never take the offense."*³

"True brokenness is God striking a blow at the flesh in such a graphic way that we have no human strength left to repair ourselves. When God blocks every exit out of a situation, forcing us to realize that He alone is our escape, we are on our way to true brokenness."

The Christian life is not a child's party or a perpetual hallelujah festival, for spiritual weakness involves laying pride upon the altar of sacrifice. True brokenness is God striking a blow at the flesh in such a graphic way that we have no human strength left to repair ourselves. When God blocks every exit out of a situation, forcing us to realize that He alone is our escape, we are on our way to brokenness. Spiritual weakness is making the radical discovery that when God is all we have, He is all we need. The Bible teaches that God's power and presence are reserved for those who give up self-reliant attempts to live the Christian life. As the British preacher Samuel Chadwick commented, "It is wonderful what God can do with a broken heart if He gets all the pieces."⁴

The Principle of Spiritual Weakness

Teaching about brokenness or spiritual weakness is not popular among Christians, yet it is important to understand as God requires brokenness for proper spiritual growth. Many wonder why God desires that every Christian experience this weakness, but there is a simple explanation: whether we realize it or not, we are all afflicted with self-sufficiency, a hard shell around us that prevents Christ from shining through our lives in all His fullness.

Self-sufficiency is part of the fallen, sinful humanity we inherited from Adam and Eve, and it clings to us even after salvation because it is embedded in our flesh. We are raised to be self-sufficient, and we glory in our independence. The world may view such traits as desirable, but they are unacceptable before a holy and righteous God. God doesn't give His best to arrogant, proud, and self-reliant people who trust in themselves more than in Him. God looks for people who are broken, humble, and spiritually weak. True spiritual greatness is to serve unnoticed and to labor unseen, and God desires to use those who live out this truth. A preacher once wrote to a friend, "Pride is the greatest of all evils that beset us, and of all our enemies it is that which dies the slowest and hardest."⁵

Importance of Humility and Brokenness

God wants to jolt Christians out of their complacency and self-sufficiency. He does this by bringing them to the place of brokenness in their lives through trials. The Bible is replete with vivid examples of men and women who were stripped of their pride and self-effort as God humbled them.

The following verses show that God values brokenness in the lives of believers:

- "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).
- "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).
- "To this one will I look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word" (Isaiah 66:2).

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Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 996-1053

e-mail
daviddunlap100@gmail.com

web site
www.bibleandlife.org

 Facebook
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bible-Life/139555992799868>

Verses such as these reveal that God distances Himself from proud and self-reliant people but draws close to the humble and broken. Regarding this truth, Martin Luther once said, "God loves to create out of nothing. Until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him."⁶

Since our sinful, human tendency toward self-sufficiency forms a hard shell around us, God must penetrate that shell to bring us to the point of utter dependence on Him. In Isaiah 57:15, we find a clue to the method God uses to break out this shell: "For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" How does God penetrate and break that outer shell of self?

Conclusion

God first deals with the inward man before He begins to work on the outward man. Many Christians want victory over bodily sins and the habits of the flesh without being transformed from within. God tells us, "Walk in the spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16, *NKJV*). When God humbles us, we become spiritually weak Christian—"contrite in spirit." When we begin to yield to the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, we find greater victory over many of the sins that formerly defeated us. Simply stated, God's method is less of self and more of Him. (*To Be Continued*)

Endnotes

1. Roseveare, *He Gave us a Valley*, (Dowers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 181.
2. Roseveare, 181.
3. Christopher Willis, *Sacrifices of Joy*, (Hong Kong: Christian Book Room, 1963), 122.
4. Quoted in *Brokenness* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2002), 27.
5. J. N. Darby, Rochat, "A Letter on 'The Praise of Men,'" Stem Publishers, 130-3.
6. This quote is widely attributed to Martin Luther, although the source is unknown.