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The Power of Weakness (Part 2)

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

Sanctification is simply the process of spiritual growth by which God progressively makes us more like the Lord Jesus Christ. It begins the moment that we are saved and continues until the day that we die. God wants to transform us through weakness and humility so that we may be completely new men and women in Christ.

In the process of sanctification, God transforms us from the inside out. This transformation begins inwardly, first with our spirits, then with our souls, and continues outwardly with our bodies. This order is important because we will never be all that God wants us to be simply through our own performance and self-effort (the outer man). Once God regenerates our inward selves, then the transformation will affect our outward actions.

Consider this illustration: The problem with a thief isn’t in his hands. The problem is in his mind or spirit, which tells him that he needs to steal. After he steals, his mind tells him to rationalize his behavior. The police can arrest him and put him in handcuffs, but on the inside, he is still a thief. A problem of the heart is the heart of the problem. Therefore, if his mind and spirit are transformed, then his hands will follow.

God Will Do Whatever It Takes

God wants his power to be expressed in our lives, but He knows that this is only possible if we are spiritually weak. The apostle Paul expresses this truth when he writes, “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The Old Testament character Jacob is an excellent example of how God does whatever it takes to bring us face to face with our need for spiritual weakness (Genesis 32). Jacob did not come to wrestle with God, but rather, God came to wrestle with Jacob. The object of wrestling is to force an opponent down until the person is unable to move and yields to the victor. Although Jacob has great physical strength, God brought him to

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the point of total surrender. Defeat is defeat. Jacob looked up to God, motioning to Him that he had come to the end of himself, and said, “I yield. God, You win!” God wants us to do this in each of our lives, but our flesh hates to yield—our flesh wants to wrestle even further with God. God may overthrow our plans again and again, but we still will not admit defeat. Jacob did not give up in just one battle; he took many years to yield to God. In our flesh, we think that we can do better than God, and so, we try harder and harder to resist God. The flesh does not give up easily.

However, one day we must acknowledge defeat, confessing that we know nothing at all and can do nothing at all. The apostle Paul describes this conviction in Galatians 6:3: “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” Wrestling illustrates God’s way of dealing with us. His way subdues the self-sufficiency and pride in each one of us. Jacob was stronger than most, but God conquered him. Jacob battled hard, but when he would not yield, God “touched” him (Gen. 32:25). With a single touch, God did what physical strength could never do.

The thigh, which holds one of the strongest muscles of the body, is a fitting picture of fleshly strength. A day must come when God dislocates that thigh muscle in each of us, totally undoing our fleshly strength. While our personal strong points may be very different from Jacob’s, we each have our own fleshly strength, whether it be ambition, boasting, emotion, greed, prestige, or self-love. But, in each of us, God must one day do this dislocating work.

Our Fleshly Strength Must Be Subdued

With one touch, Jacob became lame. He could no longer wrestle; he was powerless. Dawn came, and he said to God, “I will not let Thee go” (Gen. 32:26). In reality, Jacob had no say in whether God would stay or leave; God did not want to leave Jacob but to show him that now God would be his strength. When our “thighs” are touched and we have no strength left, we hold God closest. As 2 Corinthians 12:10 declares, when we are weak, then we are truly strong. We must learn that only in God’s strength can His work be done. There was a day that George Müller, the founder of Ashley Down orphanage in England, discovered the important truth himself. He writes:

There was a day when I died, utterly died, died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will, died to the world, its approval or censure, died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends, and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.¹

Believers’ responses to God’s hand in their lives differ greatly from one to the next. One Christian may collapse in tears yielding to God’s way; another will kick like a wild bronco at a rodeo. Jacob was in the latter category before he yielded. God had to ride Jacob like a bucking horse until Jacob was literally face down in the dirt. At that moment, independent Jacob became dependent Israel, utterly reliant upon the Lord. We need to know that God will do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to bring us to the

point of true spiritual weakness so that the life of Christ can break forth in us. We can help the process move forward by choosing to have positive responses to God's discipline in our lives. We will never mature, never grow as God desires, and never see His fullest blessing in our lives until we yield completely to God.

Becoming Spiritually Weak

The principle of spiritual weakness is associated with a process in which God breaks our self-sufficiency. His desire is that we would learn, as Paul did, that His "grace is sufficient," for His "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

As Christians, we often say that God will not give us more than we can bear. This remark is not necessarily true, though. It is true that God will not tempt us to sin, nor will He overwhelm us with the devil's ploys. But, when it comes to trials and discipline from the Lord, God will give us more than we can bear when He is producing spiritual weakness in us. God will keep us in the refiner's fire as long as it takes to burn away the dross of the old self and reshape us. Sometimes, God wants us to hit rock bottom so that we will discover that He is *the* Rock at the bottom. He will do whatever it takes to bring us to that place.

God does this in a number of ways. At times, He uses Satan and his temptations as a tool for molding our lives into a form that is more Christlike. Satan may be a roaring lion, but he is a lion on God's leash (1 Pet. 5:8). The patriarch Job is a classic example of the way in which God permits Satan to afflict one of His children. Job was a blameless, upright, God-fearing man who turned away from evil (Job 1:1). Yet God used a painful bout of boils and the loss of children, animals, servants, and home to teach Job more about himself and God. At the end of his trials, Job said, "I repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). What was God doing? Why did a righteous man need to be humbled? These experiences were not discipline for sin in his life. No, God wanted Job to understand his need for and dependency upon God clearly. If Job, the most righteous person on earth in his time, was not exempt from testing, then our need for humbling and spiritual weakness is much greater.

The Power of Spiritually Weakness

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In Judges 8, the Israelite judge Gideon discovers the link between these terms during his great victory over the Midianite army. Gideon faces enemy forces of 135,000 troops with 32,000 men, of which 22,000 are fearful soldiers who leave when Gideon offers them the chance (Judges 8:10). But God isn't satisfied yet. All except three hundred men are finally

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weeded out of the Israelite army. The remaining 300 men attack the Midianites with clay jars, lamps, and trumpets and win a tremendous victory.

Back at the beginning of the story, God tells Gideon what He is doing. He explains, "The people who are with you are too many for me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me'" (Judges 7:2). God desires spiritual weakness above all else.

The Psalmist said, "It is good for me that I was afflicted" (Psalm 119:71). After Moses was thoroughly broken in the desert, he appeared before the most powerful ruler in the world, performing unbelievable miracles and demonstrating God's power in a way that could not be missed (Exodus 10). Such displays of God's strength are possible in ordinary men and women when they acknowledge their powerlessness before God.

Believers discover that the Lord Jesus Christ is all they need when God has stripped away their self-sufficiency and brought them to the end of themselves. As Corrie ten Boom, the Christian writer, watchmaker, and prisoner at Ravensbruck, once said, "When we are powerless to do a thing, it is a great joy that we can come and step inside the ability of Jesus."²

Conclusion

God's plan for spiritual weakness, or brokenness, involves believers yielding their hearts, their ideas, their wisdom, their cleverness, and all their strength before the living God. If we, as believers, want to see God's all surpassing grace and power, first we will have to die to our own self-reliance and pride. Then, like Paul, we will discover the power of weakness.

Endnotes

1. A. T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol*, (Old Tappan: Fleming Revell, 1950), p. 367
2. This quote is engraved at the Corrie Ten Boom Museum in Haarlem, Netherlands.