

Getting to the end of ourselves: Weak to be Strong

While conducting a school inspection in a neighboring county last fall the custodian who was taking me through the school relayed an incident involving a dumpster that had recently happened to him. Senior day for the boys soccer team was approaching and his boss told him to move a dumpster to the edge of the parking lot closest to the soccer field in order to make it easier for the area to be cleaned up after the senior day activities. He moved the dumpster and everything went according to plan for the boys senior day. A day or two later the custodian got a phone call at the beginning of the day. It was the maintenance dept supervisor telling him that he had received a phone call from the local state representative wanting to meet with them at the dumpster in the parking lot. The three of them met at the dumpster and the state rep told the custodian that senior day for the girls soccer team was that night and because his wife parks in the spot and sits in her car next to where the dumpster was located he wanted the dumpster moved so she wouldn't be bothered by the dumpster next to her car.

The custodian told the state rep that his boss told him to put the dumpster there and he would not move the dumpster unless his boss told him to move it. The state rep then said, "Do you know who I am?" and tried to use his political power to force him to move the dumpster. The custodian told me he replied in a kind and humble way by saying, "I don't care who you are. Unless my boss tells me to move the dumpster it will stay where it's at". The state rep got angry and asked him for his boss' name and phone number. He gave him the information and they left. Later that morning the custodian got a call from his boss telling him to move the dumpster before the soccer game and he did.

Perhaps you have been on the receiving end of another person's arrogance like this custodian, who by the way, is a godly minded man and who takes great pride in his work. **That day his importance and value as a human were minimized almost like he belonged in the dumpster.** The state rep behaved like so many in the world who cannot see their own arrogant pride and self-importance.

Getting to the end of ourselves means that we understand the limitations of our own strength and in response to our weaknesses we live a humble life. This is about understanding that self-exaltation leads to destruction, while taking a

position of *perceived weakness* makes room for God to fill us with His strength. **The way to be strong is by being weak.**

Weakness is typically viewed as a bad thing. And in some instances it is, but the teaching of Scripture clearly indicates that self-abasement is preferred over self-exaltation.

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” **James 4:6**

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” **Jam 4:10**

The scriptures also seem to indicate that weakness was a big deal to Jesus. Even His birth was a demonstration of this, **but maybe we’ve built up an immunity and can’t hardly see it.** Just think of all the Christmas cards you’ve received with a manger scene on the front. And how many mini-mangers have we seen in yards during the Christmas season.

Jesus came in appalling weakness. He was born to a poor teenage girl with very little going for her. And Joseph & Mary couldn’t even pay for a sacrificial lamb at their child’s birth as the Law of Moses required. They had to choose the cheap alternative of offering two birds.

The sweet image of a manger scene has caused many to forget that Jesus was laid in a **feed trough for livestock**. It was the dirtiest delivery room imaginable. And it probably didn’t smell too good either. This reminds me of some scented candles I’ve heard about. They’re called **“Nativity-Scented”**. I bet it doesn’t smell like the feed lot. Any candles that smell like the place where Jesus was born would need to be called something like “Donkey Dookey”.

The parents of the sacrificial Lamb of God couldn’t offer an ordinary sacrificial lamb. **Is there some irony here?** The Prince entered as a pauper and proceeded to grow up in a nothing little town called Nazareth.

Why?

Why does the King of Kings enter the world this way? Perhaps because God **chooses weakness as the best setting to display His strength.** Weakness creates the space that God fills with His strength.

Folks, the way Jesus entered the world in the flesh was **no accident**. God had planned every detail before the foundation of time, so this wasn't a mistake, as if God forgot to make reservations at the inn for His son. Everything associated with the birth & life of Jesus was according to the purpose of God.

He could have been born into a wealthy family and people would have said,
"Look at what money can do".

He could have been born to an earthly ruler and people would have said,
"Look at what political power can do".

He could have been born to famous parents and people would have said,
"Look at what fame can do".

He could have been born in one of the great cities of the world and people would have said, "Right place at the right time. Look at what fate can do".

Instead, He came in poverty, weakness, obscurity and all we can say is
"Look at what God can do".

Again, the idea of weakness being something to celebrate isn't the norm. In fact, it is countercultural to our world. **Strength is valued, not weakness**. This was true in the first century world as well. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he knew the idea of celebrating weakness would be hard for them to accept.

Corinth was known for its lavish lifestyle. It was a place of strength and accomplishment. A place recognized for success, self-reliance, self-indulgence. Once people live this way they cut themselves off from the things only God can offer.

Paul had some experience with this and he learned the hard way that weakness is the way to experience the strength of God. So, now he wants to communicate that to the Corinthians, but he knows in order to be heard he must speak to them from a position of strength. But how?

Paul decides to boast of his position in Christ **(2 Cor.10:1-3)**

- notice that his boasting is not with arrogance, but with meekness
- this is not the typical position of strength seen by the world

He goes on to explain that his boasting is in contrast to others who are boasting in the flesh (2Cor.10:12-18)

- my boasting is in godly things to benefit you and others beyond Corinth
- it isn't wise to compare yourself w/others and elevate yourself above them
- seek the commendation that comes from the Lord

Now that Paul has established the truth that boasting is only appropriate in Christ, notice what he says next in 2 Cor. 11:18-23a, 30

Maybe Paul uses some sarcasm here, but I think he is also bringing up his fleshly credentials to establish some credibility with them. I think he is telling them that he can boast too, but it is foolish to do so.

Then in chapter 12 he continues speaking of his spiritual credentials and he drops a bomb on them.

2 Cor.12:1-5

Imagine the Corinthians reading this letter from Paul, and when they get to this part it grabs their attention. And someone says, "Wait a second. Did he just say that he was caught up to the third heaven? And did he say it was 14 years ago? Why haven't we heard about this?"

From my perspective, if the kind of experience that Paul had ever happened to me I wouldn't make it 14 yrs without telling people about it. That would be like being a state representative for 14 yrs and never bringing it up in conversations with others! Never saying "Do you know who I am".

Especially in our world of social media. Most of us would post it ASAP.

Visited the 3rd heaven today -Paradise
#awesometrip ; #whatdidyoudotoday

We'd find a way to mention it in nearly every conversation we had with others. Yet, Paul didn't see fit to mention it for 14 years. His social media post would read #slaveforchrist.

Can you see what Paul is saying here? He is saying, “Sure, I’ve got the background and Hebrew heritage. I’ve paid my dues –shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, imprisoned, cold and hungry. So, if you’re looking for someone to go around lecturing with a lot of swagger, I could do that. And I’ve done it before. But let me show you a better way.

2 Cor.12:6-8

How do you stay grounded after being caught up to the 3rd heaven? In Paul’s case he had to deal with some kind of physical problem he couldn’t shake. You can’t live with your head in the clouds when you’re dealing with struggles.

There has been a lot of speculation about what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. Whatever it was, it was more than just a common cold or a minor cut on his hand or foot. He suffered enough that he didn’t just ask God to remove it –he begged.

Of course God’s answer to Paul was “No. My grace is sufficient for you. **And my power is strongest when you are weak**”. Once Paul understood that he was not smart enough, strong enough, or talented enough and his source of strength was from God and not from himself, his thorn in the flesh was no longer a hindrance.

This is so hard for us to understand and accept because from childhood we are taught that strength is good and weakness is bad. What Paul is talking about is the difference between having strength and relying on it. The world says to grow strong, be strong, **and depend on your own strength**. God says to grow strong but to know that His strength is what really matters, so rely on Him.

We’re taught to believe, “I can do anything I set my mind to.” The Bible says, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me”. Phil.4:13

Don’t miss the point here. God doesn’t demonstrate His strength by working around our weaknesses. He demonstrates His strength by using our weaknesses.

Just look at the 12 disciples that Jesus chose. Did He hold auditions or interviews, looking for the most articulate, most talented, most influential? No.

Jesus saw some fishermen and a few others and asked them to follow Him. And as a matter of fact, it turned out to be their weaknesses that made their testimony so powerful.

“when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus.” **Acts 4:13**

God was glorified, not despite their lack of education or talent, but because of it!

They were ordinary, unimportant men. But when they did spectacular things people had to take notice. It was their weakness that made space for God’s power to be demonstrated.

In a book titled “Tramp for the Lord”, Corrie ten Boom writes about a woman with great weakness who demonstrated the strength of God working through her. Corrie met this woman in Russia during the Cold War, when Christians were being persecuted. The old woman was suffering from multiple sclerosis. Her body was twisted in every direction and she depended on pillows to prop her up. She had no mobility, except for the index finger on her right hand. She could move nothing else. But with that finger she typed on a typewriter all day and late into the night, typing out the Bible and other Christian books into her Russian language.

Her husband watched her type letter by letter with that one finger. Corrie looked at the twisted, skeletal frame of this woman and was moved with compassion. Her husband noticed how deeply moved Corrie was and he said, “God has a purpose in her sickness. Every other Christian in the city is watched closely by the secret police. But because she has been so sick for so long, no one ever looks in on her. They leave us alone, and she is the only person who can translate, undetected by the police.”

It would be inaccurate to say that God worked despite her weakness. The truth is that **God was glorified through her weakness in a powerful way**. All of us would feel sorry for someone in her condition. But the very thing we’d wish and pray to be taken away, was the very thing that allowed a weak woman to become a pillar of strength in God’s kingdom.

It reminds me of the last few years of life for our sister Sylvia McGuffey.

As followers of Christ, may we come to realize that our deficiencies set the stage for God to proclaim the message of the gospel and demonstrate His power.

How many times have we turned away from an opportunity to be useful to the Lord because we were afraid that we didn't have what it took and we were afraid of our weaknesses?

How many blessings have we missed out on, not because we weren't **capable**, but because we weren't **vulnerable**? Rather than delighting in our weaknesses, we want to pretend they don't exist.

Look back at how Paul begins the second letter to the Corinthians - **2 Cor.1:8-9**

He was recalling the challenges faced in Asia and says they were more than they could bear. He was admitting that they didn't have what it took because they were too weak, but instead of quitting, they put their trust in God who raises the dead!

When we fail, when we're too weak, when we're at the end of ourselves, **it's then** that we have nowhere to go but to the Lord. And it's there that we discover God waiting to use His strength to work in us. May we come to realize what Paul understood:

"When I am weak, then I am strong." **2 Cor.12:10**

If you've been waiting until you get some things worked out in your life before you come to the Lord. Or if you've been waiting until your knowledge of the Bible is better, or until you are a stronger Christian before you allow yourself to be vulnerable, you're preventing God from demonstrating His strength through your weakness.

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6

"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up." Jam.4:10

If you have a spiritual need that should be brought to God before the church, please make yourself vulnerable this morning by coming to the front as we sing the invitation song.