

The Power of Weakness

1. Warm up: We all have personal weaknesses – some are serious, some are petty and silly. What’s one of your petty, silly weaknesses?

2. Some weaknesses are personal, *i.e.*, personal flaws or struggles. Other weaknesses are circumstantial, *i.e.*, as when we find ourselves in a situation that feels overwhelming. This week’s scripture passage talks about how we, as people of faith, should think about and respond to our weaknesses. In our passage, Paul makes reference to a “thorn in the flesh” that made him feel weak and inadequate to meet the challenges of his life. Available biblical evidence suggests that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was severely impaired vision. Multiple times he asked God to heal his sight, but God kept saying that Paul’s physical disability actually allowed God’s power to flow through him in mighty ways. Read II Corinthians 12:1-10, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Tell us about some aspect of your life right now where you are experiencing circumstantial weakness, *i.e.*, a situation that feels overwhelming.
 - b. Tell us about a serious personal weakness that you struggle with.
 - c. God used Paul to work miracles of healing for others, but Paul couldn’t heal himself. How do you think that made Paul feel?

3. Despite his severe sight impairment, God was able to use Paul to author more books of the Bible than anyone else (at least seven), even though Paul couldn’t see to write and had to dictate his books to a scribe. God also used Paul to work mighty miracles for others. And Paul, through his missionary travels, was used by God to almost singlehandedly elevate Christianity from a small Jewish sect to a global faith. God used this near-blind man to change the course of human history. And here’s what Paul learned from all that: **“God’s power is made perfect in my weakness.” I Corinthians 12:9. That’s the big promise we’re studying this week.**
 - a. Paul makes a very similar point in I Corinthians 1:27, when he says, “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty.” In your own life, when have you seen God use a “weak” person to punch above their weight and do awesome things?
 - b. Read the quote from Scott Sauls on p. 3. When you read these words, what thoughts or feelings arise within you?
 - c. Have you ever personally experienced the promise of I Corinthians 12:9, *i.e.*, a time when God’s power flowed through you despite your weakness? Tell us what happened.

- d. Zechariah 4:6 says, “Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord.” What do you think that means?
4. In Sunday’s sermon, Jeff invited us to wrestle with a key question: If God’s power is actually made greater through our weakness, why? Why does it work that way? Jeff suggested it’s because we have a tendency to be naturalists. We get so preoccupied with the material world around us, and the sources of power we can see and touch and handle, we lose sight of all the evidence that there is a whole level of reality beyond the material that is a source of even greater power. But when we’re weak, our weakness forces us to stop being so preoccupied with material power and to instead seek to tap into a Higher Power – Spirit power – God’s power!
- a. When pondering our modernist tendency to be naturalists, James Wood says this, “We are bereft because modern knowledge has stripped us of ancient magic. To ‘understand’ the solar system is to be dead to it. No longer open to the pressing torque of divinities, we moderns are closed off and shut down, buffered and buttressed, marching efficiently through our merely material world, grim-faced assassins of mystery.” What thoughts or feelings does this evoke in you?
 - b. By definition, miracles are rare, but God seems to let them happen just often enough to remind us that there is a power and a reality that surrounds and suffuses our material world that’s greater than anything we can explain by natural causes. Have you ever experienced something that felt supernatural? What happened? How did that affect you?
 - c. Read the extended quote from Pastor Nadia Bolz Weber on p. 3. Do you have a tendency to berate yourself for your failings and defects of character or for not trying hard enough to become your ideal self? Do you think you should? Why or why not? Is self-improvement a bad thing? What’s the right balance?
5. Jeff encouraged us to ponder how we can better tap into God’s unseen power. He suggested three steps: (1) Adjust your mindset. When you find yourself feeling weak, stop and say, “In my weakness, God’s power can be made perfect.” (2) Expect to experience God’s power. When you feel overwhelmed stop and say, “This is perfect. I’m in the ideal place for God’s power to show up.” (3) Act like you believe it. Act like you expect God’s power to flow into that situation!

So let’s go back to where we started. Think of some area of great personal weakness or circumstantial weakness that confronts you right now. Remind us what that is, then tell us your answer to these questions:

- a. Are you prepared to shift your mindset and expect God to flow through into your area of weakness?
- b. What would it mean to act like you believe that promise? Is there something you need to do (or not do) as a step of faith in that promise?

II Corinthians 12:1-10

Although there is nothing to be gained by boasting, I will tell you about visions and revelations I received from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

⁷ Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But God 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. ¹⁰ 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.

Scott Sauls

“Many of the world’s greatest souls became their best selves not in spite of but because of their [weaknesses]. The great hymn writer Cowper wrote hopeful hymns and the great artist Van Gogh brushed epic paintings while contemplating suicide. Charles Spurgeon preached some of his best sermons while depressed. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr. battled melancholy. The great composer Beethoven went deaf. C.S. Lewis buried his wife after a short, cancer-ridden marriage [but went on to write incredible spiritual books]. Elie Wiesel and Corrie Ten Boom survived the holocaust. Joni Eareckson Tada lost her ability to walk in a tragic accident. [Civil rights champion] John Perkins endured jail, beatings, and death threats from white supremacists.”

Nadia Bolz Weber

“When Mary [the mother of Jesus] sang to God in her song we call ‘the Magnificat,’ she didn’t say that God looked with favor on her virtue. She didn’t say that God looked with favor upon her activism. She didn’t say that God looked with favor on the fact that she had tried so hard that she finally had become the ideal version of herself. No. What Mary said is, ‘God has looked with favor on the *lowliness* of this servant. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the *lowly*.’ Luke 1:48, 52. And yet I constantly curse my own lowliness. Obsess about my flaws and shortcomings. Berate myself for my failings and defects of character; for not trying hard enough to become my ideal self. But our failings and weakness and mistakes are God’s perfect entry points. It is in our lowliness and our humility, not our strength and our so-called virtues, where God does God’s very best work. Which makes me wonder if perhaps our obsession with self-improvement is really just a form of atheism disguised as spirituality.”