

POWER MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS
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2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Mark 6:1-13

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Last week, the prayer of confession said something about how we're not always convinced that power comes through weakness; and this week, lo and behold, we hear about power coming through weakness—specifically, God's power coming through human weakness, whether it's the disciples going off on their mission without any money or provisions or Paul telling the Corinthians, "I will boast... gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." I wish I could say I planned it that way, but I didn't. Still, it got me thinking.

It really shouldn't be hard for to us to believe that God's power comes through human weakness. After all, we worship a God who chose to enter the world, not as a king or a conqueror, but as a baby. We worship a God who became flesh and dwelt among us as a completely vulnerable, totally helpless infant.

So, that's our first clue. But it's not our only clue. God's power was coming through human weakness long before Jesus came along. Take the story of Gideon in the Old Testament, for example. God tells him to go fight the Midianites, so he starts getting the thirty-two thousand troops in the Israelite camp ready for battle. But God stops him and says, "Whoa, hold on there a minute. That's way too many." God doesn't want the Israelites to have an army that big because if they win they'll say, 'Look what we did! Look how great we are!' instead of giving God the credit.

So, God tells Gideon to tell the troops that if any of them don't want to fight, they don't have to. They can go home. And that's exactly what twenty-two thousand of them do. They pack up and start walking. Gideon goes back to God and says, "Okay, I got the size of the army down to ten thousand troops. How's that?" And God says, "That's still too many. Tell you what, take them all down to the water, and I'll whittle them down

even further." So Gideon takes the remaining ten thousand troops down to the water, and God says, "Put everyone who bends down and laps the water up like a dog into one group, and put everyone who kneels down and scoops the water up and drinks it from their hands into another group." So, three hundred men lap the water up like a dog, while everyone else uses their hands, and Gideon's thinking, "Okay, we've gotten it down to ninety-seven hundred troops. That's still a pretty good-sized army." But then God tells him, "Three hundred—that's perfect. When you beat the Midianites with only three hundred men, everyone will know that it's me, God, who should get all the credit. Your weakness will show my strength."

Another good example from the Old Testament is David. God sends the prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons to be king over Israel. So, Jesse brings in his oldest son, and when Samuel sees him he thinks, "Wow, look how big and strong and handsome this guy is. He's got king written all over him." But God says, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." So, one after another, Jesse brings in six more of his sons, and one after another, God rejects them. Finally, Jesse brings in his youngest son, David, the runt of the litter, who doesn't seem like he's good for anything besides herding sheep. But as soon as David walks in, God says, "He's the one. This scrawny little kid is going to be Israel's greatest king ever."

So, we see this idea that God's power comes through human weakness prior to Jesus, and we see it after Jesus, as well. Take Paul, for example. By all accounts, he was not a very striking figure. One apocryphal book called The Acts of Paul and

Thecla describes him as, “Bow-legged, small in size, eyebrows that met, and with a rather large nose.” He sounds like Bert from Sesame Street.

And according to Paul himself, people in his day described him in pretty unflattering terms. “His letters are weighty and forceful,” they said according to Paul, “but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” Ouch. But none of that stopped him from planting church after church and spreading the gospel all around the ancient world. Whatever weaknesses he may have had—and he seems to have had plenty—God’s power came through him. If anything, his flaws and shortcomings amplified God’s power. They made God’s power all the more clear and evident. The fact that a guy like him could accomplish so much said a lot about the God who was standing behind him.

SO, what does all this mean for you and me? Well, I guess it means that when God calls us to do something, we don’t get to make excuses. We don’t get to tell God we’re not smart enough, or strong enough, or talented enough, or whatever. Because God apparently sees our weaknesses as pluses, not minuses.

So, there’s no getting out of it when we feel that little tug in our hearts, and we know God wants us to do something. And that can be pretty scary because God usually doesn’t want us to do little things. God usually wants us to do big things—things that seem way beyond us. I’m sure Gideon was scared when God reduced the size of his army down to practically nothing. I’m sure David was scared when God plucked him out of a sheep pasture and stuck a crown on his head. I’m sure Paul was scared when God sent him off into the unknown to preach the gospel. I’m sure even Jesus was scared when he was praying in the garden and asking God to take this cup from him.

But the good news is, God doesn’t set us up for failure. God equips us with everything we need to be successful. Like we see in the gospel. Jesus sends the disciples out on their first solo mission, and he tells them they can’t take any money or food or other provisions, just a staff and a pair of sandals. But what he gives them instead is his authority. He empowers them to do the things that he does.

It’s like he’s teaching them to put their trust in him. He’s putting them in a position of weakness and vulnerability so they’ll realize that he won’t let them fail. And that’s the challenge for us, too—learning to put our trust in God. Because trusting God is like the key that unlocks the life of discipleship. Once we know that God won’t let us fail, we can do anything. We can put our fears aside and take on any challenge with confidence. We can even come to see our weaknesses for what they are: blessings. Because they remind us that it’s not by our own power that we do anything; it’s by the power of God that comes through us. And because they turn everything we do into a song of praise, giving all the glory and all the credit to God. Amen.