



Introduction

Our purpose today is to examine one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life: **Strength Through Weakness**. In his book, *Weakness Is the Way*, J.I. Packer provides us with perhaps the best explanation of what this paradox means:

"The way of true spiritual strength, leading to real fruitfulness in Christian life and service, is the humble, self-distrustful way of consciously recognized weakness in spiritual things."

At first glance, it seems to be contradictory. After all, didn't God tell Joshua "to be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them"? (Josh. 1:6).



Understanding Paradoxes

The NTC's *Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a **PARADOX** as "a statement that, while apparently self-contradictory, is nonetheless essentially true." Expanding on this definition, the *OED* adds that it is "an apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition, or a strongly counter-intuitive one, which investigation, analysis, or explanation may nevertheless prove to be well-founded or true."

Consider the following examples:

- "Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed" (Emily Dickinson).
- "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (Henry David Thoreau).



Understanding Paradoxes

• "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The two become one while remaining two.

Before we approach the texts of Scripture which present the idea of strength through weakness, it would be helpful for us to listen to J.I. Packer as he writes about biblical paradoxes in one of his earlier works (1961), Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God:

"A paradox is a figure of speech, a play on words. It is a form of statement that seems to unite two opposite ideas, or to deny something by the very terms in which it is asserted."



Understanding Paradoxes

Packer offers additional illustrations of paradoxes from Scripture, such as "God's service is perfect freedom;" "sorrowful, but always rejoicing;" "having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

Now what is the point of a paradox? Since Packer offers such clarity on this subject, let's listen to him further: "The point of a paradox is that what creates the appearance of contradiction is not the facts, but the words. The contradiction is verbal, but not real...The employment of paradox is an arresting trick of speech, but it does not imply even an appearance of contradiction in the facts that you are describing."

Paradoxes are always comprehensible, making ideas memorable and provoking us to think about them.

Paul's Paradox About Weaknesses

"To keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Cor. 12:7-10).



What Does It Mean to Be Weak?

- Asthéneia, n., "weakness" (Arndt & Gingrich).
- Greek scholars Liddell & Scott further define it as "want (lack) of strength, weakness, feebleness, sickliness."
- The word group, in general, "signifies weakness or impotence of different kinds" (Kittel).
- The weakness may be physical, religious, moral, mental, volitional, emotional, relational, inner poverty or incapacity, or economic.
- "The idea from first to last is of inadequacy" (J.I. Packer).

Word Usage in the New Testament

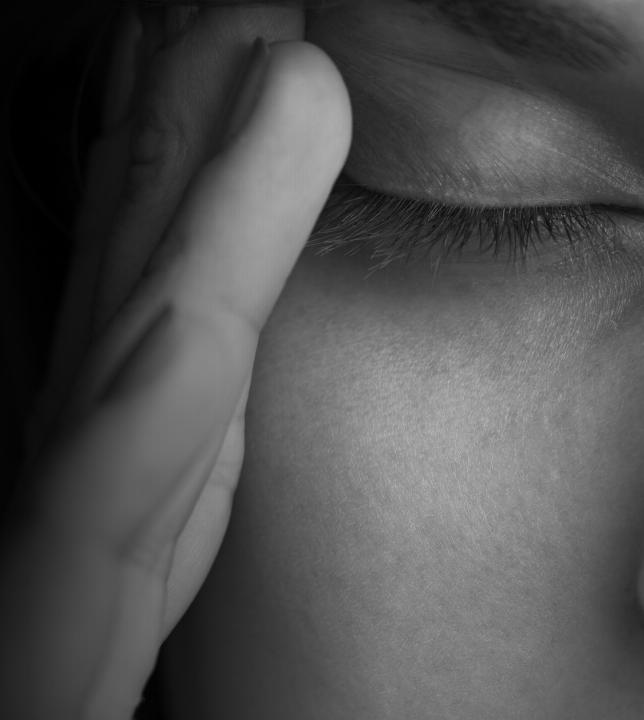
- Linguistically, there are four Greek words in this group:
 - 1. An adjective (e.g., "a sick man," Acts 4:9; a weak conscience, I Cor. 8:7).
 - 2. A noun (e.g., "He Himself took our infirmities," Mt. 8:17; "I was with you in weakness," (I Cor. 2:3).
 - 3. A verb (e.g., "Lazarus was sick," Jn. 11:2; "we are weak in Him," II Cor. 13:4).
 - **4. Another noun** (e.g., "we who are strong ought to bear the weakness of those without strength," Rom. 15:1).
- In the New Testament, the adjective appears 25 times; the primary noun, 24 times; the verb, 36 times, and the second noun, 1 time. **The total number of occurrences is 86.**



General Weakness

"We should notice that weakness is a general term which covers both the infirmity of our nature and all the outward signs of humiliation."

- John Calvin







Our Bodies Are Weak



- "I am speaking in human terms because of the **weakness** of your flesh" (Rom. 6:19).
- "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (I Cor. 15:42-43).



Other Kinds of Weaknesses

- We have already said that the Scripture speaks of various types of weaknesses which differ from person to person.
- These weaknesses "imply the absolute authority of the Lord" (Kistemaker) over every aspect of our lives.
- "And I (Paul) was with you in **weakness** and in fear and in much trembling" (I Cor. 2:3).
- "And in the same way the Spirit also helps our **weakness**; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

A Catalogue of Paul's Weaknesses

"...with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from the Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (II Cor. 11:23-28).

Paul's Response to Weaknesses

- "If I have to boast, I will **BOAST** of what pertains to my **weakness**" (II Cor. 11:30).
- "On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not **BOAST**, except in regard to my **weaknesses**" (II Cor. 12:5).
- "And He has 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, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Cor. 12:9-10).

Our Example: The Incarnate Christ

- "For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you" (II Cor. 13:4).
- "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).





Accepting How Weak We Really Are

"The more I fail, the more liberally does the Lord provide of His strength all that He sees that I need. The strong-mindedness praised by philosophers is only stubborn insolence or mad frenzy typical of fanatics. But the man who really desires to be strong must not refuse also to be weak; he must be weak in himself in order that he may be strong in the Lord....If the Lord had not inflicted such trials upon Paul, he would never have been so clearly aware of his own weakness." God uses many things "in making us aware of our own weakness and in bringing us to distrust ourselves and be humble."



A *Peanuts*Cartoon

Charlie: "I feel inferior."

Lucy: "Oh, you shouldn't worry about that. Lots of people have that feeling."

Charlie: What, that they're inferior?

Lucy: No, that you're

inferior."



Our Preference for Our Strengths

- We naturally prefer to emphasize our strengths rather than our weaknesses. "Boasting about weaknesses runs contrary to the human psyche" (Kistemaker).
- The *OED* defines *strength as* "power or resilience, whether physical, mental, or due to the possession of resources; capacity for effective action or resistance; efficiency, vigor."
- But weakness (asthéneia) can be the place where the divine 'power' is revealed on earth, as in II Cor. 12:9. 'The power is fully expressed in weakness' (Kittel).
- "Weakness as a form of manifestation of the divine on earth is a mark of honor for the Christian" (Kittel).

Power in Weakness: Concluding Thoughts

- 1. God will not share His glory with us. "My glory I will not give to another" (Is. 48:11).
- 2. God is in control of every aspect of our lives and knows what we need to keep us from exalting ourselves.
- 3. God may keep us from the deadly sin of pride through affliction. Paul continued to suffer physically for the rest of his life, and his acute "thorn in the flesh" was never removed, even after entreating the Lord three times that it might be removed.
- 4. Paul accepted God's negative response to his prayers for the removal of his thorn. He was satisfied with Jesus' answer.



Power in Weakness: Concluding Thoughts

- 5. What was the Lord's answer to Paul? "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."
- 6. "Paul demonstrates gladness because he is fully aware that divine grace will be more than sufficient for him to cope with his malady. He cheerfully endures his human frailty knowing that Christ functions within him" (Kistemaker).
- 7. Paul totally submitted to Christ's will. Will we? Do we believe that Christ's power will be more effective through our weaknesses?
- 8. "When a man can do much, the effects of divine power may be attributed to our efforts. When man can do nothing, the effects of divine power are recognized as such" (Alfred Plummer, Oxford).

J.I. Packer's Personal Story

"My own recognition that the Christian way of life and service is a walk of weakness, as human strength gives out and only divine strength can sustain and enable, may well be rooted in my youth. A solitary and rather somber child, I had to wear at school, for ten years, a black aluminum patch covering a hole in my head, the result of a road accident, and hence I was unable to play outdoor games. During those years I felt out of most of what mattered, which is of course one form of the feeling of weakness.

This sense of things, sinful as it is in many ways, has hovered in the background throughout my life, and it has certainly been deepened over the past three years by the experience of a hip disintegrating



J.I. Packer's Personal Story

(two years of hobbling and wobbling discomfort, leading to a year of steady but slow recovery from its surgical replacement). I was told that since the surgery was invasive, its initial impact would be to shock the system – like being knocked down in the street by a truck – and full recovery for mind and body would take time, with creativity (in my case, power to write) at first noticeably in abeyance. During these three years, my firsthand awareness of physical and cognitive weakness has grown, as has my acquaintance with Satan's skill in generating gloom and discouragement. My appreciation of 2 Corinthians has also grown, as I have brooded on the fact that Paul had been there before me, and this little book is the result. Its contents have helped me, and I hope will help others too."