

Contents

1	About Weakness	11
2	Christ and the Christian's Calling	25
3	Christ and the Christian's Giving	55
4	Christ and the Christian's Hoping	89
	General Index	119
	Scripture Index	123

About Weakness

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.

I am weak . . .

WILLIAM WILLIAMS

The Strong and the Weak

In *The House at Pooh Corner*, the second of A. A. Milne's enchanting collections of Winnie-the-Pooh's adventures, we meet fussy mother Kanga, who deems it vital that, whatever else he does, her happy-go-lucky, into-everything offspring Roo should regularly take his strengthening medicine. Why? To grow up strong, of course. And what does that mean? Strength is physical, moral, and relational. Strong people can lift heavy objects, stand unflinchingly

for what is right against what is wrong, lead and dominate groups, and in any situation, as we say, make a difference. Strong people carry personal weight, which, when provoked, they can effectively throw around. Strong people win admiration for their abilities and respect for their achievements. Kanga wants Roo to be strong, as other parents want their children to be strong, and as commandants and coaches want those they instruct to be strong—strong, that is, in action.

This is the way of the world, and from one standpoint it is God's way too, as the following exhortations show:

- God to Joshua, whom he was installing as Moses's successor: "Be strong and courageous" (Josh. 1:6–7, 9), said three times for emphasis.
- Paul to the Ephesians, preparing them for spiritual warfare: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (Eph. 6:10).
- Paul to Timothy, encouraging him for the pastoral role to which Paul has appointed him: "Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1).

Clearly, it is proper to aim at being spiritually strong and improper to settle for being anything less.

But now look below the surface. Why were these exhortations necessary? Answer: to banish, if possible, the sense of weakness that was there before. It is likely that Joshua, listening to God, and Timothy, reading the words of Paul, were feeling panicky deep down. To follow up Moses's ministry as Israel's leader and Paul's as a church planter were two tremendous tasks; it would be no wonder that neither man felt up to the job. In other words, they felt weak. And there is no doubt that in relation to their assignments they really were weak, and had they not found strength in God, they would never have got through.

For what is weakness? The idea from first to last is of inadequacy. We talk about physical weakness, meaning that there is a lack of vigor and energy and perhaps bodily health so that one cannot manhandle furniture or tackle heavy yard jobs. We talk about intellectual weakness, meaning inability for some forms of brainwork, as for instance C. S. Lewis's almost total inability to do math, and my own messiness in that area. We talk about

personal weakness, indicating thereby that a person lacks resolution, firmness of character, dignity, and the capacity to command. We talk about a weak position when a person lacks needed resources and cannot move situations forward or influence events as desired. We talk about relational weakness when persons who should be leading and guiding fail to do so—weak parents, weak pastors, and so on. Every day finds us affirming the inadequacy of others at point after point.

A *Peanuts* cartoon from way back when has Lucy asking a glum-looking Charlie Brown what he is worrying about. Says Charlie, “I feel inferior.” “Oh,” says Lucy, “you shouldn’t worry about that. Lots of people have that feeling.” “What, that they’re inferior?” Charlie asks. “No,” Lucy replies, “that you’re inferior.” As one who loves witty work with words, I plead guilty to finding this exchange delicious. But some, I know, will find it a very weak joke, unfeeling, unfunny, and indeed cruel: vintage Lucy, in fact—no more, no less—mocking Charlie’s gloomy distress and implicitly endorsing his lugubrious self-assessment. It illustrates, however, how easily those who, rightly or wrongly, think themselves strong can

rub in and make fester the sense of weakness that others already have. If people who feel weak did not very much dislike the feeling, the joke would not work at all; and if people who at present have no sense of weakness were more careful and restrained in the way they talk of others and to others, the world might be a less painful place.

Often linked with the sense of weakness—sometimes as cause, sometimes as effect—is the feeling of failure. The memory of having fallen short in the past can hang like a black cloud over one's present purposes and in effect program one to fail again. Christian faith, prompting solid hope and promising present help, should dispel all such fears and expectations, but does not always do so, and the encouragement that one Christian should give to another who needs it is frequently in short supply.

The truth, however, is that in many respects, and certainly in spiritual matters, we are all weak and inadequate, and we need to face it. Sin, which disrupts all relationships, has disabled us all across the board. We need to be aware of our limitations and to let this awareness work in us humility and self-distrust, and a realization of our helplessness on our own. Thus we may learn our need

to depend on Christ, our Savior and Lord, at every turn of the road, to practice that dependence as one of the constant habits of our heart, and hereby to discover what Paul discovered before us: “when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). But I run ahead of myself.

Paul and the Corinthians

Our present purpose is to take soundings in 2 Corinthians to illuminate the truth just stated—that 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. This is clearer in Paul than in any other New Testament writer, and it is clearest in 2 Corinthians, because there, more than in any other of his letters, he is writing out of a situation in which, as we would say, he is up against it.

The Corinthian church was more unruly, disorderly, and disrespectful toward its founding father than any of the other churches that were born through Paul’s apostolic evangelism. The two letters to Corinth that we have show us that the Corinthians had more lessons to learn, and were slower to learn them, than was ever the case with

the Ephesians, Philippians, and Thessalonians. Paul had clearly done his best to explain to the Corinthians what apostolic authority is and why they should shape their lives by his teaching, but it is obvious that they were not fully impressed and were not fully serious in doing what Paul said. Paul loved them and told them so, but found that they were not loving him back. Though he invested himself prodigally in their lives, Paul found that other teachers and other teachings were counting for more with them and that he himself was being continually sidelined by comparison with showier performers. A quick survey of the story so far will make this very clear.

Paul's first visit to Corinth had lasted the best part of two years, probably AD 50–52. Jewish opposition had been strong, but non-Jewish converts were numerous (Luke narrates in Acts 18:1–18). Then, something like four years later, the church sent Paul a letter containing some pastoral queries, to which 1 Corinthians was his answer; and despite needing to rap the church on the knuckles for errors and disorders, he was able at that stage to be basically genial to them. Soon after, however, he had to pay them an emergency visit to look into a

disciplinary problem: someone had gone off track and was leading others astray.

Following that visit, Paul sent them a stern letter stating the discipline that should be imposed on the person causing the problem. (Luke, who was evidently composing Acts to a set word length and whose agenda was to trace the triumphant progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, does not mention any of this, but in 2 Cor. 2:1–11 Paul reviews it in words that show the depth of his distress about it.) Having written thus, Paul was on tenterhooks, wondering whether the Corinthians would take his stern letter seriously or whether by writing it he had lost them.

Out of this anxiety he sent Titus to them on his behalf to see what was happening, and to his delight, Titus reported that the letter had been heeded and the required action taken (see 2 Cor. 7:5–16). But Titus, so it seems, had brought other news too, not so good. “Super-apostles” (2 Cor. 12:11) had descended on the Corinthians and were telling them that much was wrong with Paul’s ministry. So Paul resolved to visit Corinth again to deal with the slanders and the slanderers, and he wrote

our 2 Corinthians (actually, of course, his third letter to the church) to pave the way.

His purpose for this letter was threefold.

First, he wanted to convince the Corinthians that he loved them, so he opened his heart to them and begged them to open theirs to him (6:11–13). Throughout the first six chapters he highlights the pressures he has been under (near death at Ephesus, 2 Cor. 1:8–10; constantly afflicted, 4:7–18; thought mad, 5:13; exposed to bad conditions and bad treatment, 6:4–10; and see 11:23–33). He shows the sincerity of his ministry, he says, by enduring these things, and clearly he hopes that knowledge of them (“all for your sake,” 4:15) will confirm the Corinthians’ respect for him.

Second, he wanted to ensure that by the time he arrived, the Corinthians would have completed their collecting of the promised amount for him to take to Jerusalem for poor relief. Christians in Jerusalem were destitute and needed financial help urgently, and Paul had for some time been collecting money from the Gentile churches he founded to present to these needy brothers, thus cementing Jewish-Gentile Christian fellowship in a

practical manner. When he reached Corinth, he would be on his way to Jerusalem and hoped to pick up the Corinthian contribution at that time to take with him along with the rest of the money. In chapters 8 and 9, his tone changes to one of pastoral admonition as he writes about all of this.

Third, he wanted to counter the influence of the intruders who sought to turn the Corinthians against him. They had been calling him “weak” to express their contempt for him (10:10). Changing his tone again to one of apostolic rebuke, Paul pleads guilty as charged, but declares that when he is weak, then he is strong, and promises that if necessary he will display his Christ-given strength in dealing with gainsayers when he arrives (12:20–13:4).

The Weak Made Strong

No doubt it was the critics at Corinth who prompted Paul to dwell so directly and fully on his weakness as he wrote this letter. His stress on the providentially appointed hardships of his ministry shows that the relative weakness of his position in both the church and the world has been in

his mind all along. So too does his expressed uncertainty about his standing with the Corinthians, which led him to qualify his chivvying of them concerning the collection (“see that you excel in this act of grace also,” 2 Cor. 8:7) with the almost apologetic words, “I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others [which he wants the Corinthians to emulate] that your love also is genuine” (8:8).

In the third section, however, his acknowledgment of the weakness he feels comes to a climax when he reveals that to keep him from pride, “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me” (12:7). What was it? we ask. Eye trouble? Disease? Lameness? Evidently it was something physical and painful, or it would not have been called a thorn in the flesh, but beyond this we do not know what it was, nor do we need to. In three solemn spells of petitionary prayer, he tells us, “I pleaded with the Lord [Jesus, the healer] 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’” (12:8–9).

So Paul went unhealed, though not abandoned. Rather the reverse, as he now testifies: “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” (12:9–10).

A Personal Postscript

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 (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.

2

Christ and the Christian's Calling

Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak. . . . He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:3-4

Is Paul Crazy?

As we are beginning to see, 2 Corinthians is unlike any other letter that Paul wrote. The others are written to churches that will accept without question all that he says as coming with apostolic authority—Christ's authority, in fact. So in those letters Paul is very much the teacher telling it like it is. But here he is writing to Christians many

of whom, he knows, do not respect him as an apostle. He is under suspicion with them of being something of a kook, perhaps a fraud, and so his first task must be to recapture, if he can, their confidence in him and readiness to learn from him.

Paul is not, I think, used to such situations. Certainly, his usual confident, logical flow in unfolding his thoughts is diminished, and there is some to-ing and fro-ing, repeating and going back on himself, as he seeks to achieve persuasiveness. He is a preacher dictating a letter, so naturally he speaks in a didactic fashion; yet all the time he seems to be asking himself what he can say to get under the Corinthians' skin and convince them that he is a person they should love and learn from after all, despite the way the "super-apostles" have put him down.

This needs to be born in mind as we approach the passage that we are to study now, 2 Corinthians 5:6–6:2.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are

at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconcilia-

tion; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped
you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

It can safely be said that all who appreciate Paul's apostleship find this section of 2 Corinthians supremely thrilling, indeed overwhelmingly so. The passage is the climax of the first part of the letter, where Paul is baring his soul in order to reestablish trust, love, and responsive rapport between the Corinthians and himself, and to

that end he is highlighting his motivation as a servant of God.

Understanding how people tick, as we say, is always fundamental to good relationships with them. Think of husband and wife, and parents and children, for a moment, and you will have no doubt about that. Paul presents himself here as a driven man and indicates what motivations are driving him. The Corinthians, he knows, suspect that the enormity of his energy and enthusiasm for the church-planting work he is doing argues mental unbalance—to put it bluntly, insanity, some form of religious mania.

Paul sweeps the idea aside. “For if we are beside ourselves [the Greek word means, literally, out of our mind], it is for God”—that is, it is between us and him, and no business of yours—but “if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (5:13)—and you must take us seriously. (The plural here, by the way, is not the authorial “we” that is commonplace in English-language literature; it designates Paul and Timothy together, the twosome announced as sending the letter in 1:1. From the start of chapter 3 Paul

has been associating Timothy with himself in everything he has said.)

Paul in effect is begging the Corinthians to ask themselves: Is it possible that Paul and his companion are sane after all? Could it be that it is wrong to mock and belittle them? Do we really understand them? Should we not, after all, see them as guides for our faith and life in the way they want us to do? I hope every reader of this book will join the Corinthians in facing up to these same questions.

Paul's Motivations

In any event, Paul is passionate in desiring that the readers of his letter should properly understand him, and he lays himself on the line accordingly. He now explains what drives him in the risky, hazardous, and often pain-laden service of Jesus Christ that has become his life's work. His motivation, he tells us, is threefold. The three operative thoughts are distinct, but they overlap, and blend and bond with each other to form a single rope of response, if I may put it so, to the overwhelming fact of Christ. As a result, we see Christ as God incarnate into

weakness, the baby son of a poor Jewish girl; Christ for three years a peripatetic, disruptive social and religious outsider; Christ crucified in weakness as a revolutionary who had become a nuisance; Christ, Paul's loving Sin-Bearer, absorbing divine wrath against him on the cross; Christ now his risen, reigning, returning Lord, his life and his hope.

The three motives are these:

1. Paul wants to give constant pleasure to Christ.

“Whether we are at home [in heaven] or away [still on earth], we make it our aim to please him,” Paul says (5:9). Pleasing those who in some sense have your heart—a spouse, a sibling, a child, a friend, a mentor, a benefactor, or whoever—is a demanding occupation. It calls for imagination, empathy, and effort; you have to be aware of their hopes and expectations that involve you, their likes and dislikes, and their sense of the bond between you and them.

Is this a major motive in our own lives, I wonder: always and under all circumstances to please our Lord and Savior? It was so with Paul, and this agenda, then for

him as now for us, is demanding. It requires sustained love to Jesus, expressed in adoration of him for all that he is in himself and thanksgiving to him for all that he has done, for the world of lost humanity in general and for us sinners in particular. It requires sustained obedience to all his commands, up to the limits of our understanding of them. It requires constant watchfulness against temptations to self-indulgence, and constant battling against sloth, laziness, and indifference to spiritual issues. It requires respectful and caring treatment of all others as persons created to bear the image of God, and self-denial at all points where self-absorption would conflict with and damp down active neighbor-love. It requires daily holiness, from morning to night, a daily quest for opportunities to bear witness to Christ, and daily prayer for the furthering of Christ's kingdom and the blessing of needy people.

There is joy in laboring wholeheartedly to please Christ, as Paul knew, but there is no denying that, as Isaac Watts put it, "love so amazing, so divine [as Christ's love, supremely displayed at the cross], demands my soul, my life, my all."