

“Your Greatest Weakness”

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¹When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”— ¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.

¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else’s scrutiny. ¹⁶“For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:1-16)

It is said that William Shakespeare once wrote, “**Your greatest strength begets your greatest weakness.**” Admittedly, I don’t know if he actually wrote that. I looked into it a little, but I couldn’t find a source other than a few quotes on the internet. And I don’t want to freak you out, but in my experience, there are times, when the internet is wrong. So, I have to admit it is possible that someone may have just asserted that William Shakespeare wrote the words “Your greatest strength begets your greatest weakness,” and then everybody just kind of figured, “Yeah, that sounds like something Bill would say.”

In a way, the uncertainty actually feels right to me, because that is exactly how I felt when a mentor of mine first said it to me. Uncertain. We were having a conversation about life – successes and failures – and after a pause he said, “You know, our greatest strengths can often be our greatest weaknesses.” In that moment, I was polite -- I **hope** I was polite – because what I was really thinking was, “Well, that’s a bunch of nonsense.” A strength is a strength. something we are good at, something we rely on when the chips are down. Strengths get us wins. Strengths pull us out of jams; they don’t get us into them. A strength is a pro, not a con.

Still, in that moment, the nugget wedged its way into my consciousness, and I kept turning it over, wondering whether it could be right. And at some point down the line I realized that, yes, there are indeed times when a strengths upon which we have relied faithfully can actually become **counter**-productive. At times, our go-to strategies can make a situation worse, not better.



Take, for example, a perfectionist. They work at every detail... adjust every corner... step back and take stock... then step back in to work on even the smallest blemish. Perfectionism strives for excellence at all times. But that strength can become weakness when it becomes obsessive... when we cannot ever finish a project, because we can always find something to fix... when we can never be satisfied with our work, because we fixate on the one little imperfection that no one else can see.

The great figure of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, had this strength, especially when it came to faith. As a practicing monk, he worked on himself for ten years. He strove to be perfect, as his heavenly Father is perfect. And the whole time he was tortured by one, persistent, nagging, terrifying thought: the fact that, no matter how hard as he tried, he could not achieve perfection. He went to confession whenever he could, but as soon as he would leave the booth, he would remember some little flaw or misstep that he had left out. He feared that even the smallest, most insignificant blemish on his spirit – if it was missed or went unrepented, would condemn him forever. He became obsessed with his sins and potential sins, spending hours making lists of every thought and action.¹ His striving was driven by an amazing strength of faith, but it quickly became a great millstone around his neck. When he finally realized that all of that striving was holding him back -- when he finally freed himself from the burden of his perfectionism -- he arrived at the epiphany that sparked a global spiritual revolution: the knowledge that it is God's grace, and not our own striving, that truly saves us.

And that is certainly not the only example. We might have an uncommon gift for patience. We wait for the right moment while fools rush in. We seek out wisdom before gambling everything on a whim. But then again, if we wait too long to act, our best instincts may be left unheeded, and the window of opportunity may close before we can claim it.

Perhaps we have a keen analytic mind. We can look at a situation, see all the angles... ask all the right questions... and forecast every way that a thing might go wrong. But that strength becomes weakness if we get so paralyzed by questions that we miss all the ways that the thing could go right. As Dostoyevsky once said, "I swear to you, to think too much is a disease, a real, actual disease."²

My guess is that the apostle Paul, who penned today's passage in his correspondence with the church in Corinth, saw all of this clearly. He certainly knew his own weaknesses. He often wrote of what he called his "thorn in the flesh" ... some weakness that was holding him back. Whatever that weakness was (and we don't really know what it was), Paul repeatedly asked God to heal him of it. But when those prayers were not answered, and as Paul lived and worked with this weakness, he came to realize that this perceived flaw actually had a purpose. Its purpose was to keep him humble and grounded, to prevent him from thinking more of himself than he ought to think. And over time, Paul even came to believe that this thing he had thought was weakness was actually proving to be a strength, a benefit, an asset in his work. "*I am content with my weaknesses,*" he finally wrote. "*I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for **whenever I am weak, then I am strong.***"³

Looking at the passage we read today, we see that Paul has quit being embarrassed

¹ Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985, pp. 16-17.

² Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*.

³ 2 Corinthians 12:10.

by his weakness. Instead of denying it or avoiding it, he is embracing it, even leading with it. Just listen to how he opens his address to the Christians of Corinth: *“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. [No,] I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”*

It’s right there: Paul led with weakness. He didn’t bust in large and in charge. He came humbly, even trembling with nervous trepidation. He was actually betting on the *converse* of where we started. If strengths can become weaknesses, then perhaps the converse is also true. Perhaps even our greatest weakness can also be our greatest strength.

Funny thing, while I could not find a primary source for Shakespeare’s purported comment that *“Your greatest strength begets your greatest weakness,”* I know for a fact that Shakespeare wrote these words in his play *“Measure for Measure”*: *“They say [the] best men are molded out of faults, and, for the most, become much more the better for being a little bad.”*⁴ In other words, Shakespeare, like Paul, observed that (a) even the best of people have obvious faults, and (b) it is often in the wrestling with and overcoming of those very faults that they become better people.

Again, it seems counterintuitive, even nonsensical. Why would you ever lead off with weakness? Why would we expose our vulnerabilities right from the start? A baseball team puts its strongest hitters at the top of the order. A basketball coach sets the starting lineup with her best five best players, or at least the five who play best together. In a negotiation, we understand that we want to negotiate from strength, not weakness. And yet, in the kingdom of God, that does not always seem to be the winning strategy.

Over the millennia, Jewish rabbis have mastered the art of biblical teaching, and their primary tool is called *“midrash,”* which in Hebrew means *“exposition,” “investigation,”* or *“interpretation.”* It often takes the form of stories that help to answer difficult questions or fill in the blanks of our understanding of biblical text. Long ago, the medieval French rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, who is today known as *“Rashi,”* was teaching on the leadership of Moses and Aaron. He focused on a passage in Leviticus when Moses instructs Aaron to *“draw near”* to the altar to offer a priestly sacrifice of atonement. Moses has been acting as the chief priest, but he believes it is time for Aaron to step up and take on that very important role.

According to the midrash, Moses gives the instruction to *“draw near”* to the altar because Aaron cannot bring himself to step up. He is experiencing what we might call *“imposter syndrome.”* Aaron does not feel worthy or qualified to be anyone’s priest, and the problem is much deeper than nervousness or a lack of self-confidence. Aaron is haunted by his greatest failure, which then became Israel’s greatest failure. Aaron had been left in charge while Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive God’s revelation of the law. Down in the valley, Moses had been gone a long time, and everyone convinced themselves that God was not showing up. It was then Aaron’s idea for everyone to go get their gold ornaments out of their packs so Aaron could melt it all down and cast a massive Golden Calf, an idol they could worship so they might not die in the wilderness. It was a seemingly unforgivable error. Of all people to become chief priest, Aaron seemed the worst possible choice.

And yet here was Moses, asking Aaron to take the mantle of high priest. When it is clear that Aaron is hesitating, Moses gives him a clear instruction. *“Draw near”* to this altar.

⁴ William Shakespeare, *“Measure for Measure,”* Act 5, Scene 1.

“Get up here, Aaron. It is time to lead.”

Aaron still cannot move. The task of the high priest would be to atone for the sins of the people. It would be he who would stand before God’s altar and ask God for forgiveness not just for his own sins, but for everyone’s sins. “I am ashamed,” Aaron says meekly.

“Why are you ashamed?” Moses answers. “It was for this that you were chosen. You are the one, because you know what sin is like. You know what it is to feel guilt. You more than anyone else understand the need for repentance and atonement. You have felt the cry of your soul to be cleansed, purified and wiped free of the stain of transgression. *What you think of as your greatest weakness will become, in this role you are about to assume, your greatest strength.*”⁵

No one knew this truth better than Moses, who had initially resisted God’s call because he feared his own greatest weakness. Three times he tells God to send someone else. “I am not eloquent,” Moses says. “I don’t know what to say. They will never listen to me.” And three times God reassures him, “I will be with you. I will teach you what to say.” In Moses, God chose a weak speaker to take on the most challenging speaking role in Jewish history.

In this same tradition, Paul came to Corinth not in strength, but in weakness, with fear and trembling, and it was that very weakness that allowed the people of Corinth to know that, if someone like Paul could speak with such power, then it must be from God. “*My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom,*” Paul wrote, “*but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.*”

Here’s the thing I hope we will carry away today. When we are seeking to be the person God wants us to be... when we are open to the call of God to learn, to serve, and to love in God’s name... God can take what we think is our greatest vulnerability and transform it into amazing strength.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that “The world breaks everyone, [but] afterward many are strong at the broken places.” It was true for Moses, who became the greatest prophet and spokesperson of the Old Testament. It was true for Aaron, whose great failure prepared him for greatness as the high priest of Israel. It was true for Paul, who came to Corinth in fear and trembling, and built there a congregation that is still standing thousands of years later.

So, maybe we should not be so afraid of the things we call weaknesses. Maybe we should trust the lesson that Paul learned -- that whenever he was brave enough to be weak, God made him strong. May we, with courage and in faith, trust this wisdom, and may it beget in us our greatest strength, to the glory of God. **Amen.**

⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “When Weakness Becomes Strength,” <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shemini/when-weakness-becomes-strength/>