

The Glory of Weakness

By George Davis

Man loves to boast himself in his strength and adequacy, not only in word but in action as well. He has an unconscious drive to be individually sovereign. All that he does, he does with a view toward this end. In self-reliance he seeks to make himself utterly autonomous while at the same time seeking to deprive that autonomy from others. He thinks of himself as self-starting, self-directed, self-governing, self-supporting and self-sustaining. He builds his stores and garners to himself whatever he perceives will bring and sustain the perfect cornucopian existence. All is done as an insurance against weakness and vulnerability. His greatest fear is weakness. His greatest shame is his mortality. He looks at himself in the mirror, recounting the victories of the day, like Julius Caesar reporting his victory over the king of Pontus, "Veni, vidi, vici"--I came, I saw, I conquered! He will not be embarrassed by any apparent lack of aptitude or skill so he constantly seeks to better himself, adding new "power words" to his vocabulary in order to be godlike in both intelligence and persuasiveness. His world is an apple ripe for the picking. The answer to any lack in his universe rest squarely upon his shoulders.

When it comes to relating to God, man has an inherent weakness, and that is that he thinks he is a god. And as he thinks, so he acts. But in his little, finely tuned universe man is constantly running up against obstacles, threatening the illusion of his godhood. For a few moments at least this gives him pause to rethink his utopian ideal, reminding him of his mortality. However, having a very short attention span, especially as regards these matters, it is not long before any lessons learned are forgotten and it's back to business as usual. He resumes his efforts to pull himself up to new heights by his own boot-laces. This is why it always takes crises to bring man to Christ. He has to meet with the immovable, the unmanageable, the unachievable before he can be fully broken. If he retains any hope that he might do it himself, he will certainly keep trying. Therefore, when it comes to salvation, the first lesson man must learn is that he cannot save himself. The crisis of salvation has as its base understanding that **"There is none righteous, no, not one"** (Romans 3:10). Salvation 101= "nobody good." One must consent to this fact before he or she can truly repent.

But this is just the beginning. Our Christian walk is marked by crisis after crisis after crisis. The reason for this is that we tend to bring to our new Christian walk our old human tenacity, expressed in a new christianized ambition to be a "Good Christian." In fact, to be better than the rest. Although this may sound admirable to some, the flesh takes great pride in being a good Christian. Like humanistic man, religious humanistic man also tends to place the emphasis on what he has, can, and will do, rather than what God has done and is doing. He asks questions like, "What must I do to be saved? How can I work the works of God?" God's answer, given through His Son so many years ago, yet rings true today. ". . .This is the work of God, that you believe on him (Jesus) whom he has sent" (John 6:29). What? Only believe? What an affront to our humanness! Surely there must be more I can do! A divine work of breaking is required before we can yield our Jacob-like ambition to manipulate our surroundings, to increase our herds by craftiness. God must touch us in our thigh, in our soulish strength that we learn to depend on His life--that we might learn the glory of weakness.

In considering the title for this article I had some difficulty deciding between, "The Glory of Weakness" and "The Myth of Christian Sufficiency," both of which are descriptive of the same truth. The idea that as a "Christian" I am sufficient is simply not true! I am no more sufficient as a Christian than I was as a sinner. The thought that I can attain a Christian walk where I have finally grasped, through devout discipline, a more perfect state of Christianity, is not just flawed, but destined to bitter failure. It is a myth and a cruel one at that. It promises much but delivers little more than frustration. The dispelling of this myth is key to our participation in God's sufficiency. As long as we view others and ourselves as strong and capable Christians we will continue down the path of Spiritual bankruptcy. Christ's teaching, in what is now called "the Beatitudes," bears this out conclusively. In fact, this is where our Lord begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). This brokenness must precede all else! It all begins with the knowledge of our weakness. We must know the depth of our inadequacy before we will admit our utter dependence on God. The strength of the flesh must be vanquished from our Christian lives, like Tobiah from the temple (Nehemiah 13:8).

Contrary to popular opinion, all true ministry is dependent upon weakness. Surely everyone would agree that the apostle Paul was a "strong Christian," but in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we discover the source of that strength. Paul had been given an "abundance of the revelations," and we should all be very thankful for this! However,

the danger of receiving great revelation is that one tends to be exalted beyond measure, both, in their own thoughts and the thoughts of others. Thus a little reminder of mortality is in order. Enter "a thorn in the flesh. . ." (verse 7). Now Paul did just as many of us do today, he asked the Lord to rid him of this pesky weakness-exposing thorn (verse 8).

Paul didn't give up easily. Three times he asked the Lord to remove it from him. Then God revealed to Paul another truth, one that has served as a source of hope and comfort to the thorn-laden masses from his day to ours. "My grace is sufficient for you: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (verse 9).

Paul responded in a manner that might be consider strange and even irresponsible today: "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." What? Isn't he going to claim his rights in God? Resist the devil and all? Surely Paul is not going to embrace just anything that comes down the pike, is he? This was a "messenger of Satan" after all. We know that the good things are of God, but when it comes to unpleasantness we should use discernment, right?

Christendom today is so deeply affected by humanism that many either despise or fail to understand Paul's attitude here. Something about it debauches what they deem to be noblest in man. It smacks of rolling over and giving up without a fight. In a day when the shelves of the "Christian bookstore" sag from the sheer weight of the self-help books on them, Paul's attitude is a mystery indeed. Paul was glad to suffer for Christ's sake. No! He even took pleasure in it--finding a sense of God's purpose in it all. "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (verse 10). Paul reasoned that if in weakness God's power were perfected, he would embrace weakness with great fervor in order that the power of Christ might rest on him. He stopped praying for God's help in avoiding the very thing sent to perfect God's strength in his life. But more, Paul would dispel any myths of his own perfection by glorying, out loud, in his weakness. This mentality impacted every area of Paul's life and ministry, greatly effecting the result. Some times I think we have the wrong image of Paul--viewing him as a self-assured competent giant of a man, his very presence commanding, no, demanding respect. This is not how the early church saw Paul. In fact the opposite was true.

For his (Paul's) letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible (2Corinthians 10:10).

Paul had so effectively gloried in his weakness that his bodily presence was perceived as weak and his speech contemptible. Something so profound had happened since those days that the very thought of him caused the Christian community great consternation. His bodily presence was not weak then. But now his appearance had so changed, reflecting the humility and lowly form of his dearest friend and Lord. Regarding himself and his fellow workers in the gospel, Paul wrote, "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). Out of Paul's weakness God's sufficiency was manifest. He had learned not to think of anything as being from himself. He had long since died to that fantasy. What had happened to Paul? Why such a drastic change in his deportment and demeanor? Here is the answer in Paul's own words. "I am crucified with Christ nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

It came as quite a shock to learn that my successes and failures look alike to God! They both appear as filthy rags in His sight! However, my failures do at least have some value, for in them I am learning of my weakness and His strength. The first crisis, the crisis of salvation, brought to me the knowledge that there is none good, that I had nothing I could offer God for my salvation and therefore could not save myself. I was hopelessly lost and in need of a Savior. The second and ongoing crisis of my Christian life brings the knowledge that "in my flesh dwells no good thing" (Romans 7:18). There is nothing in me that God desires. What is born of the flesh can be nothing but loathsome flesh (John 3:6) "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63). Just as I could not save myself, neither can I live the "Christian life." A substitute is needed for both. He was my substitute in death (I am crucified with Christ), and He is also my substitute in life (Christ lives in me).

On that monumental day 2000 years ago when Christ said, "it is finished" and commended his spirit back to God, that very day, I died. On that darkened hill of Calvary, I died with Christ, and if you are a believer, so did you! "If One (Jesus) died for all (you and I), then all (you and I) died" (2 Corinthians 5:14). When they took Jesus' body down and laid it in the tomb, we also were buried with Him. When Jesus

raised to life, by the power of God, we also were raised in newness of life (Romans 6:4). The secret of the Christian life is that Christ must live His life through us! All else, no matter how good it looks, even though accompanied by the warm accolades and commendations of men, is flesh presuming to do the works and live the life that only Christ can do and live. Because the flesh has failure built right in to it, our best efforts along with our failures must be nailed to the tree! All that this little personal pronoun I implies must be crucified with Christ that He might do the living and succeeding. We are responsible only for the residual failures--our sins. Only the mistakes are ours. No grounds for pride here. When the cross has done its work we will say as Paul did, "when I am weak then I am strong." Only then can we know Him in the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10). Only "in the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death," can we know His sufficiency. Only those who know a radical circumcision in their flesh--having no confidence in the flesh--can "worship God in the spirit." (See Philippians 3:3) In this way we see the glory of weakness. No flesh shall glory in God's presence! The weaker we are in our flesh, the more His glory rests upon us. For this reason God has chosen "the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise." Paul who was once wise in his own eyes had to become a fool for Christ. "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" (1 Corinthians 3:18). God has chosen "the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." God has chosen the "despised, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). It is through dying that we live, in becoming a fool that we are made wise, in weakness that we are made strong. So let us with equal enthusiasm embrace the cross and the thorn, that the power of Christ may rest upon us!