

Strength in Weakness (Part Two)

“My power is made perfect in weakness”

Reflection 15 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

God’s healing truth is that grace is sufficient for us. The things that matter most are not done by force. So we don’t force decisions, or issues, or relationships, or conversations, or outcomes. We don’t try to force people to think what we think, or to say only what we want them to say. We don’t force our sense of the way things ought to be. We don’t even force Scripture. We have learned what Paul learned, that when we are weak, then we are strong, that power – the only power that has lasting results – is made perfect in weakness. You see, Jesus came to show us a new way, not to impose a new creed, but a new way to live, a life of love. And at the heart of it is this: that power is made perfect in weakness.

In a very real sense, this is the one human story, that God’s power is made perfect in weakness, that those who are proud are brought down, and that God lifts up the humble. It’s the story of Babel. It’s the story of Jacob, the younger twin. It’s the story of Joseph, the eleventh of twelve sons, resented and despised by his brothers. It’s what the two spies knew that the ten didn’t. God’s power is made perfect in weakness. It’s how Jericho is captured. It’s the story Gideon’s 300. It’s David and Goliath. It’s the way of Elijah not Ahab. It’s Daniel in the lion’s den. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

It’s the birth of Immanuel in a stable in Bethlehem. It’s the temptations of Jesus. The devil takes him up on a very high mountain, and offers him all the kingdoms of the world. And Jesus answers, Not that way, not by force, not by power. It’s the whole Sermon on the Mount. It’s not calling down fire from heaven to destroy a hostile village. It’s Jesus walking away from the 5000 who wanted to make him king by force. It’s Jesus washing the feet of his feisty disciples. It’s Jesus dying on a cross, in excruciating pain, and throbbing wounds with flies buzzing, and passers-by hurling insults at him, gasping out his last agonizing breath. And all that time “He could have called 10,000 angels To destroy the world and set him free.”

But God’s grace is always sufficient – whatever happens, and God’s power is made perfect in weakness. All this is such an important part of learning to live a life of love. So we learn to realize: People can say the most outrageous things about us, and that’s O.K. We don’t need to have the last word all the time. We don’t need to lash out at whatever or whomever we disagree with. We don’t have to be “right” and acknowledged as right on everything. Even friends can confound us, and do what we would never do to friends, but we will realize that they may still be loving us the best way they know how. We don’t have to get our own way; things don’t have to go this afternoon, or this week, or this year, or even in our lifetime, the way we want them to go. When we are weak, then we are strong. And we will have time and space in our lives for love.

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 is a remarkable passage. It’s Paul seeing past the stabbing pain – the stake in his flesh – to a life of love, because, even in the midst of personalized attack and his own pain, he remembers. He remembers the vision – the vision of God’s kingdom

of love filling the earth. He remembers that far across the distance and spaces between us God has come to show we go on.

But God's power is always made perfect in weakness. I think of five missionaries who died for Christ in 1956, speared to death by Huaorani warriors on a sandbar in an obscure river in Ecuador. Some of you will remember this story. It's a story to remember to tell our children and our children's children.¹ The story is told by a son of one of the murdered missionaries, Steve Saint. His father Nate with four fellow missionaries – Jim Elliott, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderain – took seriously Jesus' command to take the gospel into all the world. Their passion came to center on the Huaorani tribes in the Ecuadorian rain forest, a particularly bloody people, given to savage intra-tribal blood feuds and known to have massacred all strangers whether sixteenth-century conquistadors, or seventeenth-century Jesuits, or nineteenth-century gold diggers. Now in 1956 these five men – family men, fathers – felt that the Huaorani had to hear the story of peace through Jesus.

So they flew in a little Piper aircraft many times over Huaorani territory, dropping gifts, including machetes and metal axes. And they finally landed on the sandbar and waited for the Huaorani. Four days later six Huaorani warriors came out of the jungle and with wooden spears killed Nate and Jim and Ed and Pete and Roger, who were armed with guns. They fired their guns in the air, but shot no one, and they did not run.

We know in detail how each died, though there were no survivors. How? We know it because less than three years later Rachel, Nate's sister, and Elizabeth, Jim's widow, were living among the Huaorani, practicing basic medicine and studying their language so as to translate Scripture. And Steve Saint, Nate's son, heard the blow-by-blow account of the murders from the murderers. Now by the grace of God gentle men, amazed and transformed by Christians who would not defend themselves with guns against death by wooden spears, who out of their love for others, absolute strangers, would just trust God and let his power be perfected in weakness.

In the end, there is no other way to win the battle for hearts and minds of the world. There is no other way to break down the anger and fear all around us. There is no other way to save the world (as has always been God's intent). But also in the end, there is no other way – but the way of God's power made perfect in our weakness – to save our friendships, our families, our neighborhood, our community, our nation.

Listen carefully to life. We are always being called to this weakness that perfects God's power. Yes, it's embodied in baptism, this ritual burial in water, this trusting yourself to drowning, this form of dying. It's the way of the cross. It's the way that makes people think again, that breaks down pride, and over time creates trust. It's knowing that God's grace is sufficient for us, that when we are weak, then we are strong. It's part of learning a life of love. And it's the way to Paradise. It's the way that leads us one day to the third heaven and beyond.

¹ *Christianity Today* (16 September 1996)