

A Parent's Journey from Weakness to Power

By Jon Ebersole

I collapsed on my bed feeling like a failure as a father—again. I had become impatient with my daughter, Amanda, while helping with her nightly routine. Hadn't I just recently raised my voice at my other daughter, Jessica, during her driving practice? Feeling like a failure had become commonplace. In my head I understood that Amanda and Jessica's cerebral palsy and premature births had affected their ability to function. But, somehow I couldn't keep this in perspective when it came to showing them kindness and patience. I agonized over this as a father and as a follower of Jesus. I was perplexed by why God wasn't changing me when I had asked him so many times. The Bible makes it clear that God wants every parent to be kind, loving and their child's greatest encourager.

My problem with consistently showing love in my words and actions affected my relationship with my wife, Peggy, and our son, Ryan, as well. I felt discouraged and the situation seemed hopeless. However, over time God began to open my eyes to the timeless truth that only as I recognized and accepted my weakness could I then receive the opportunity to experience his strength.

Disdain for Weakness

I was at the top of my class throughout high school and college. I was elected to lead groups at school and church. I only missed a few days of school due to sickness. Colds were a nuisance to be endured, not an illness that sidelined me. I completed assignments on time and exactly as the teacher instructed. I knew that God was real and I thought my job was to be good and perform according to the highest standards. I believed that working hard, helping people and being liked were the highest goals in life, and going to heaven after death would be my reward. As I aged, I came to realize:

- I was more driven than most.
- My expectations—for self and others—were higher than most.
- My satisfaction came only when I completed a task or reached a goal.
- I was harder on myself than most, focusing on what I could have done differently or what I had missed, and on the next task to be conquered.
- I felt more discontent than most and experienced little joy.

My marriage relationship finally forced me to come to terms with the unrealistic expectations I had carried for 27 years. Although Peggy was an attractive and fun woman, proximity and intimacy made it apparent that I was falling short and that my wife was also failing to meet my high standards. The cracks

were starting to show. Following the premature births of our twin girls, my façade of perfection began to crumble. The mask I'd been hiding behind came off completely when my daughters were diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of one. I was at the lowest point in my life.

I hated disability. It pained me to see my daughters struggle because of it. After our son was born, I saw how it affected him as well. Our entire family was impacted by disability. Our life was not what I expected and my dreams and expectations for an idyllic family were shattered. My frustration came out in impatience and unkind words, fueled by anger. It was all about me, and while I knew that my self-focus was wrong, I could not seem to shake it. Somehow, I had gotten stuck.

Eventually, I began learning about God's sovereignty and His perfect plan. I started to believe it. My view of God began to change—enlarging, broadening. God used *When God Weeps*, by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes, to point me in the right direction. However, I still could not accept weakness. I did not want to accept it. I was hanging on to something that continued to impede me from accessing the joy and contentment that Jesus promises to his followers.

The Allure of Weakness

In Western culture we have a love-hate relationship with weakness. Though we prefer power, we are also drawn to the one we perceive as the underdog in a struggle. We love when weakness is overcome, or people persevere and achieve success. Some may remember Eddie “The Eagle” Edwards, a ski jumper from Great Britain in the 1988 Olympics. His jumps landed him in last place, but he was a crowd favorite. Why? It was about overcoming weakness. Edwards trained on planks compared to the slick skis of his competitors. His training area was far from home and sparse. His jumps were short. Despite all this, the network televised his jumps because people were fascinated by the odds he had overcome to even compete. Edwards was likable and seemed satisfied with his performance because he had done his best. He seemed content in his skin, satisfied with who he was, and embraced his weakness.

Though we love to cheer an underdog, we revel in bringing home the gold. Western magazines and newspapers generally feature those at the top of their game or profession. We have a Hall of Fame for nearly every sport and activity. We are enamored with the rich and famous. There is a natural draw for us as humans to excellence, to beauty. I believe it is God-given. We seek and prefer beauty. Our human nature, especially in the West, twists this innate love of beauty to focus only on the exterior or on the performance.

God's Take on Weakness

King Saul had fallen from God's grace and Samuel, God's prophet at the time, was sent to anoint the next king. Samuel seemed to have lost his focus as the sons of Jesse paraded in front of him. God's chosen spokesperson expressed confidence that he had spotted the next king. As Eliab stood before him, Samuel said, “surely the LORD's anointed stands before me” (1 Samuel 16:6). But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (v. 7). Wow! Talk about a humbling experience. The author of all beauty jerked Samuel back in focus by telling him that David's size, age, or obvious characteristics were not a factor—it was his heart.

Jesus spoke about humility. He modeled it. Note how Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was on the back of a donkey. Jesus was never a homeowner; instead he chose to sleep outside or in the homes of others. He did not defend himself from accusations, but simply laid down what he valued most, his relationship with the Father, in order to die as a sacrifice for us. In Romans 8:34, Paul says Jesus continues his sacrificial service even now as he sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. Humility is a trait we recognize most when it is absent in others. Although the human tendency is to

justify and defend ourselves, the acknowledgment of weakness is essential for accepting God and our need for Jesus. The essence of my salvation is that because of my sin, I cannot connect with God, our Creator. I now understand that I am not enough. Unable to please God, we require Jesus Christ to bridge the gap between us and God. We have to humbly accept our state of weakness.

Humility consists of an honest assessment of ourselves, combined with an accurate understanding that God is who he says he is. We are the created, he is the Creator. We are invited or forced to look outside of ourselves. We can either turn to God or to some activity that distracts us or an addiction that numbs us.

My Daughter Models Humility

Paul tells us in Romans 12:3, “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

Turning to God allows us to say that he is God and we are not. We are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but *accurately*. Apart from Jesus Christ, we are nothing. We are an empty glove. When we invite God into our lives, it is like a hand being put into the glove. Filled, the glove can work and touch and carry. Only the hand can fill the glove, reaching all five fingers as we acknowledge our need—our weakness—without Jesus. This is humility. The task is to be the glove, in which God's presence and power can be displayed (1 Corinthians 4).

People with disabilities who accept their limitations, whether physical, mental, or cognitive, sometimes see their weakness more accurately. Therefore, they allow God's love into their lives more fully. My daughter Amanda says, “I talk with God because I need him more. I am so dependent on him.” My daughter Jessica says, “Even though it's sometimes hard to be accepted by kids my age, I know that God will always accept me and that his love will never change.”

My dependence on God is more important than my ability to perform. Evidence of the fruit of the Spirit is more important than success. I've learned that as a parent my character is more important to God than my comfort. As a follower of Jesus, I am invited to humble myself, recognize and accept my weakness. As I receive more grace and mercy, I am better able to comfort others as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:4, “. . . we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” Pride is dispelled by humility and by an accurate recognition of our weakness and by how BIG God is. I am now able to help other men see God's love for them based on who they are, rather than what they do.

Our God has hidden truth from those who think they are wise. I think of my children when I read Matthew 11:25, where Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.” As caregivers, Peggy and I often get weary. That's when we hear Jesus' invitation to come to him in verses 28–30, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus Christ is where I have found what I need by finding WHO I need. I can now find purpose in suffering, in brokenness. Although Jesus' love for me went only skin deep at first, I eventually tore down the walls to let him penetrate my heart. His power is displayed in me, not in spite of my weakness, but because of it. I can now thank God for the difficulties that force our family to turn to him and desperately need him. Instead of charging forward on my own, I often pause now to seek his guidance and direction.

Weakness Leveraged Is Powerful

Weakness drove me into myself, but ultimately to the end of myself and into the arms of our heavenly Father. While I did not turn away from God or lose my faith when our twin girls were diagnosed with a

disability, I was preventing myself from fully experiencing the love of our Creator. Parents of children with disabilities are often forced to confront this choice because of life's circumstances. The disability can be a help or a hindrance in their faith journey.

Some parents respond to disabilities in their family by taking the victim's role. Others try to compensate as overachievers. And some have learned to accept their child's limitations. I recently heard a Christian woman say that she chose the path of independence and being an overachiever, which resulted in isolation from others and made intimacy impossible.

So, how do we help parents embrace disability and weakness to find God's peace? How do we appropriate the power that God has given us in his Son and Spirit? First, we must connect with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the man of sorrows who took on the most disabling condition ever by becoming human. Next, I believe two keys to the mystery are *gratefulness* and *trust*. I express gratefulness for any opportunity to look to God rather than depending on my own resources. And I trust him to do what he says he will do, which is to be present and faithful with my family.

Embracing weakness is usually a process and is essential in finding calm in life's storms. I was unaware of my weakness for many years, but as I became aware of it, my first response was to try to hide it. And then I tried to compensate for it by working harder. Finally, I moved to a place of acceptance of my weakness, and asked God to change and heal me. People began to comment that my transparency about my struggles and my humanity were helpful. This made it safe for others to honestly examine themselves and God's love for them. It increased the likelihood that they too would lean harder on Jesus. So I shared my weakness with other dads and moms, not because I liked it, but because it helped those around me. Even if my heart and intentions were not pure, God began to open my eyes to his mystery. Now, as I begin to more fully embrace my weakness, I remain tentative but have moments of joy and freedom as I surrender.

God led me through three stages of coming to terms with weakness:

- *Recognize*—notice weakness in a definite way
- *Accept*—endure weakness without protest
- *Embrace*—welcome and include weakness

Keys for parents to remember . . .

- Human resources and effort are never enough.
- Life is a process of working out our salvation with fear and trembling.¹
- Family life is an adventure. It requires boldness.
- Share issues and struggles along the way, rather than waiting until they are resolved.
- Weakness embraced provides the fertile ground for God to work out his perfect plan for your family.

A Mystery Revealed

In Colossians Paul explains why the power of weakness is hidden when he says, “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations . . . is now disclosed to the Lord's people . . . with all the energy of Christ” that “so powerfully works in me . . . the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 1:26, 29 and 2:2, 3).

The mystery of God's power showing up in weakness is revealed in Jesus Christ. Joni Eareckson Tada espouses that people with visible or acknowledged disabilities serve as audio visual aids of God's grace. Disability can be a fast track to recognizing, accepting and embracing weakness and connecting with Jesus. My daughters Amanda and Jessica tell me that as teenagers with cerebral palsy, they need God. They are dependent on God for his peace. They understand and usually embrace their weakness, allowing God to display his power, which manifests as contentment as they lean on Jesus and trust him more.

God's power shows up best in weakness, according to 2 Corinthians 12:9: "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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Some parents of children with disabilities kick and fight all the way to contentment. Many never find it due to barriers of fear and pride. Disability can serve as an accelerant to acknowledging weakness. I know it has in my life. I have learned to quickly acknowledge my limitations and rely on the help of those closest to me. I can more easily accept weakness as a part of the human experience. However, rejoicing in and boasting in weakness as Paul described in 2 Corinthians 12:10 is still a goal. I am not there yet, but I am on the right path—with my Lord and Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ. I am hopeful that I will look back one day and realize that I am not squirming quite as much as I have in the past, as I recognize and accept my own frailty. I look forward to the day when I will share more freely about God's power showing up in my life—not in spite of, but because of my limitations. Perhaps one day more Christian parents will take off their masks and celebrate the incredible power of weakness.

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Notes

1. Philippians 2:12

About the Author

Jon Ebersole has over 25 years' experience working with people affected by disabilities. He and his wife have three children, two with cerebral palsy, making his experience with disability very personal. He served with Joni and Friends for over 15 years, overseeing Joni and Friends' Area Ministry Offices around the United States. Jon earned a Masters in Social Work from the University of Illinois and completed a Seminary Certificate of Biblical Studies at what is now Trinity International University.