

# Disability and Biblical Weakness

*By David Deuel*

## Introduction

Disability often, although not always, results in an experience of weakness. Weakness is central to the redemptive plan of our all-powerful God. It is the means of *success*, not failure, for when a Christian is weak, then he is strong. Strength through weakness might seem paradoxical, but in fact it reveals the glory of God and crushes human pretension. God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, confounds earthly powers and refutes worldly wisdom through the weakness, not strength, of his chosen vessels. It was through weakness that the forces of evil were defeated and judged; and it is through weakness that the mission of God is advanced today.

As King over all creation, God is carrying out his mission plan for this world through his messengers. To make them successful agents, he commissions and empowers them, but often he must first reduce their strength in order to infuse his power. This is biblical weakness. Many of God's messengers experience weakness, sometimes as a result of disability, including Paul, Moses, Gideon, David and those whose stories are told. To a group of beaten-down and weak captives, Isaiah the Prophet said, "He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength" (Isaiah 40:29–31, NLT). This common thread of weakness among God's servants assures us that God will meet our inadequacy with his strength, in whatever task he calls us to accomplish. Moses, Isaiah and Paul were all called by God to deliver his words and perform his works, but Paul perhaps gives us the fullest picture of weakness in the life of God's servants.

The common pattern of God working in weakness is epitomized in Jesus who was sent to earth in weakness and died on the cross in weakness. God humbled him in the form of a servant to complete the greatest mission of all time: to bring salvation to a lost and dying world. God uses weak messengers. It is therefore not surprising that weakness is a common experience in God's mission. Biblical history leaves us a record of responses to disability, both good and common experience in God's mission.

## Disability and Weakness in Biblical Times

Misunderstanding about weakness has often led to people with disabilities being stigmatized. In Israel's early days, religious leaders misunderstood God's law, believing that the same law that required God's people to provide for and protect persons with disabilities also prohibited priests with disabling conditions from serving. This error was rooted in the misunderstanding that priests with disabilities who were restricted from offering sacrifices should not serve as priests at all. In short, it assumed that people with disabilities

should not undertake leadership roles. This prejudicial mindset often isolated and alienated them by stigmatizing them. This was carried to an even greater extreme later in Israel's history when people with disabling conditions sometimes were not allowed to be present in the synagogue when the Torah was read, or to enter the Qumran community of ancient Israel near the Dead Sea.<sup>1</sup>

Acts of exclusion of the seemingly weak find no place in Jesus' teaching and practice. Jesus' care for people with disabilities shocked the religious establishment, and continued to do so into the period of the early church. Instead of being kept out, some with disabling conditions directly approached Jesus or were brought near to him on stretchers. In one case, a man was lowered through a hole cut in a roof. These acts mark the dawning of a new day for inclusion of people with disabilities in the Church. Jesus breaks down barriers of isolation and invites them to come to him. He provides them with dignity and sees their true value, as treasures created in the image of God for his purposes and glory. So why now do churches and mission boards reject "weak" people with disabling conditions from serving as pastors, missionaries, and in other forms of leadership?

## Biblical Weakness

Weakness is a loss of strength or ability that affects everyone, and changes through our lives. Disability terminology changes over time, but with each new term one characteristic remains: namely that some ability is lacking. This negative framing of disability is a reason why the church struggles to understand it and appreciate it. Seeing weakness and strength through a biblical lens brings a different perspective.

The Bible teaches that to be human is to be weak (Genesis 1; Psalms 19; and Romans 1) for we are frail, transitory, and mortal beings (Romans 5:6; 6:19; 8:26). From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture recognizes the weakness of humankind or the "flesh."<sup>2</sup> As David Alan Black writes in *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, "Weakness is not simply an occasional experience of sickness or powerlessness, but a fundamental mark of the individual's worldly existence."<sup>3</sup> As Solomon explains in Ecclesiastes, while we may experience temporary strength, to pursue strength is ultimately a chasing after the wind. We all eventually become weak. The apostle Paul taught, in a nutshell, that our "whole being is dependent upon God and that as creatures of God (like Adam and Eve) we are all susceptible to limitations."<sup>4</sup>

Owning our weakness can lead to biblical strength, which is rooted in dependence. Because God created the universe, he depends on nothing, but God designed man, indeed all creation, to depend on him. In the Fall, mankind sought independence and power, and, sadly, became weaker as sin weakened the creation. Ironically man's unquenchable thirst for independence and power resulted in weakness that would ultimately crush him. In contrast, as is evident from the Bible, when we depend on God we allow him to enable us with his strength. True biblical strength is a consequence of a right and dependent relationship with God. God's plan of redemption is to bring man back into perfect dependence upon, and union with, him. Therefore, paradoxically, it is in our weakness (human) that we are strongest (most dependent on God). And when we are disabled we are perhaps more likely to be dependent on God; to be God-abled.

Ultimately, God, in his grace, overcomes our human weakness, caused by separation from him, by sending his Son in weakness as a babe, to die as an adult in weakness on a cross, at the hands of human power. In Christ, the paradigms of power and weakness were turned upside down. Through this weakness of the cross God restores our relationship with himself, allowing us to depend on Christ dwelling in us, and giving us true biblical strength. The cross nullifies the root cause of weakness by restoring us to relationship with God in astounding ways.

## Weakness as God's Theatre

Our weakness shows us our need for God—the creator and sustainer of the universe—to enable us. Moses,

with his speech disability, was God's weak vessel to display God's might. In our small-minded ways, we might question why it is important to God to use weakness in order to display his strength. Our weakness is God's theatre for displaying his strength before a watching world. Even the angels are watching God's theatre of weakness. This explains why God chooses to work through weakness. But why do we need weakness?

*First*, God uses disability and any resultant weakness as part of our growth. To comprehend this, we must look at weakness from two points of view: our own weakness, and weakness in others. We will understand weakness in others by first understanding it in our own experience. From our self-study, we will learn to share empathy with those who are weak. Then we will be ready to help them from our position of weakness (1 Corinthians 1:3–5).

*Second*, weakness in others is our opportunity to serve them and to help them grow. Crucially, the apostle Paul says, "you must help the weak" (Acts 20:35) because Jesus meets the needs of the weak through faithful fellow-believers. Helping others in sincerity before a watching world is a critical part of God's plan for weakness. In this way the weakness of those with disability is in fact a part of their ministry to the world. Their weakness is an opportunity for others to serve God through serving them. In this way those people are bearing witness to Christ.

How does weakness help us and others grow? God uses weakness to create a healthy vulnerability, which then allows spiritual growth. Like the Apostle Paul, the Prophet Jeremiah came to realize that he suffered at the hands of his enemies because he followed the Lord's leading. Today, we might say with hesitation, the Lord caused his sufferings. But we would be only partially correct because God allows us to experience weakness in the form of attacks in his and our best interests. Jeremiah similarly came to accept God's plan for his weakness through those who devised schemes against him.<sup>5</sup> In short, our weakness is a battle that God will win as his power and purpose are displayed through our vulnerability.

## Paul Experiences God's Use of Weakness

Throughout Paul's ministry, God chooses to work powerfully through his weakness; this weakness is a celebration of [God's] triumph through disability and hardship.<sup>6</sup> The triumph of weakness can be won against various forms of resistance, opposition, or inability. These are God's battlefields on which he claims the victory. For the Apostle, weakness often comes through people who challenge him. But he also experiences weakness in the form of personal suffering, a thorn in the flesh. Opposition from without and fear from within weaken Paul. He is afflicted on every side with conflicts and other forms of opposition, and with fears and weakness within.

Paul's weakness from the outside came from those opposed to him and his ministry. Some opponents had entered the Corinthian church while he was away, and sought to undermine his ministry. Their chief criticism was that Paul was weak, particularly when he was present! He didn't look like an Apostle or teach like one. Paul was just not impressive, using their measure of strength. Interestingly, before Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he is known as Saul, a strong man who used his power to persecute those of 'the Way.' But Paul was changed. These opponents were using popular ideas of what a leader should be from Corinthian culture, and setting them up as biblical standards. In the face of this opposition, Paul articulates his views about weakness in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Pastors, missionaries, and other ministry leaders will relate to the Apostle's challenge. Paul writes to the Corinthians to defend himself against their criticism. The approach that he takes in the letter is a beautiful picture of accepting criticism then turning it on its head with biblical teaching. Rather than denying weakness, Paul argues that he is most certainly weak, and that weakness is ideal for an Apostle, indeed for anyone in Christ's church. The weaker the better!

Weakness from the inside was Paul's thorn in his flesh. The thorn was likely some sort of infirmity as suggested by the idea of an object causing pain, and of 'flesh' in its most literal sense, body. This was the most common meaning of the term weakness in Paul's world. The imagery is probably more precisely a stake in

Paul's flesh, large and very painful! That the stake is some form of physical obstruction to Paul's ministry seems clear. It may also have formed one of the points of accusation. The fact that he sought the Lord in prayer three times to remove the thorn, but was not cured, may remind us of our own suffering. Those of us who have a disability or some other form of suffering find comfort in the fact that even the Apostle Paul who healed others in his ministry could not heal himself. Nor would God heal him, although he could have.

Paul described his weakness as a messenger of Satan, but God sovereignly uses the messenger for his own purposes, just as he did with Job. Paul does not state the relationship between the messenger and the thorn. In fact, the Apostle carefully uses the passive construction, 'there was given to me,' to avoid identifying a sender. But who gave it? We can surmise that Paul does not identify a sender because it is not easy to explain responsibility when it comes to describing God's and Satan's roles in physical infirmities which led to his weakness. This was true with Job too.

Whether the thorn is from God or Satan, clearly God intended to use it. Paul sees God's purposes in his weakness, particularly when he makes statements like "for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses" (2 Corinthians 12:10). Weakness is God's design, not bad luck or random chance. Paul gives three reasons for his thorn, all of which may apply to us as children of weakness in this world. It served:

- i. to cut off his flow of pride for receiving the revelations;
- ii. to position him in need, so that he could receive Christ's help; and
- iii. to help him see the power of Christ's working in him that he might otherwise miss.

These three reasons are not in Satan's best interest. Paul's spiritual weakness, that is, his propensity toward pride in receiving the revelations that give him apostolic standing, was tempered by his physical weakness. This leads us to conclude that our weakness causes us to depend upon God and not on ourselves. We cannot appreciate God's strength and his glorious purposes unless we first experience our own weakness. What can we draw from this?

When the Church lays hands on someone to perform its work, this special blessing affirms and celebrates a call and giftedness in that person. Sadly, people with disabling conditions have usually been last in line to experience such affirmation and celebration. Sometimes, they are excluded from being in line, either by local church leadership or by mission agencies. Imagine what it means for a young girl or boy in a wheelchair, or someone who is hearing- or sight-impaired, to realize that they too can take part in the Church's mission if they are called and gifted?

What the casual reader might miss is that Paul describes his conflict as all-out spiritual war.<sup>7</sup> Opposition had moved beyond persecution to a full-scale attack. He was 'afflicted inside and out: conflicts without, fears within' (2 Corinthians 7:4). What is crucial is that the Apostle treats the internal and external opposition as one. Paul's opponents—Satan being the chief—had power that they used against him and the mission that he was trying to conduct. But God's matchless power overrode the opposition in both the attacks and Paul's physical diminishment.

## The Sphere of Christ

It is in the "seeming weakness of the world" that the foolishness of the world is confounded by God's wisdom. Men are not called because of their wisdom, their talents, or their status and stature. God calls out of his strength and provision (1 Corinthians 1:26).

God explains his ways to Paul in these clear words, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). The imperfect strength of this world cannot compare with what God offers Paul. And beyond human comprehension, weakness perfects God's strength.<sup>8</sup> No wonder Paul can say with conviction, "for when I am weak then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). Yes, it is as easy

as that. Let us remind ourselves that Paul's transparent look at himself and his own weakness is done in the context of his mission to the Corinthian church, which was probably the church which brought him his greatest challenge. Weakness of all sorts is most prevalent where the battle for new converts and new local churches is hottest. For those of us who love the Lord's mission, this comes as welcome encouragement.

It is beautiful to think of Paul's weakness operating in the sphere of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:13–15). To understand this, we must picture the distinction between heaven and earth. Having prepared the way for us through his death on the cross, Jesus waits for us in the heavenly places. In our earthly realm, characterized by worldliness, believers are subject to all forms of weakness. We feel pain, experience disability, suffer spiritual confusion, and meet all of the darkness of the world's chaos. But as believers in Christ, we already have access to the heavenly places, the sphere of Christ, and this world's darkness begins to lift. The stench dissipates. In Christ, Paul ascends to the heavenly places, the sphere of Christ (Ephesians 1:3, 20). And the apostle invites those of us who are weak to join him. The sphere of Christ offers unlimited power, comfort and peace.

### What Characterizes Paul's Weakness?

Paul describes weakness more precisely and thoroughly in 2 Corinthians 10–13 than anywhere else in Scripture. Although he does not intend to present his Corinthian readers with a complete theology of weakness, he offers us enough detail to understand it, and what it accomplishes for him and his opponents.

**What is weakness like in Paul?** Paul shows that although weakness is humble and gentle (2 Corinthians 10:1), it can be bold (10:1–5), confident (10:7), and can have authority (10:8). It manifests itself consistently whether he is physically present or writing from a distance. Weakness is unimpressive (10:10), but is not inferior (10:15).

**What does weakness do for Paul?** Weakness does not allow Paul to compare himself with others (10:12); does not boast in accomplishments (10:13–15); elevates others (11:7–9); does not judge by appearance (10:7); brings glory to God (11:30); and gains strength from the cross of Christ (12:9).

**What does weakness do to Paul's opposition?** Powerfully, it demolishes strongholds, arguments and pretension (10:4), and shames the strong and the proud (1:25–27). David Black summarizes:

... if being weak means acting like a father instead of like a ruler, speaking with simple instead of proud words, preaching the gospel free of charge instead of demanding apostolic wages, humbling oneself instead of boasting in oneself, leading the churches by example instead of forcing one's will upon them, then Paul is happier to admit, "I am weak."<sup>9</sup>

Weakness transforms Paul. No wonder he uses the analogy of the human body to teach the value of weakness in the church (1 Corinthians 12:22–23):

Even the least attractive and most inconspicuous members of the church are important and should be treated with respect. The weaker members not only have a proper place in the church, but are in fact "much rather necessary," for all the members of the body are interdependent and interrelated. Therefore, because they are actually indispensable, Paul says they only "seem to be" (*dokounta ... hyparchein*) weaker and unnecessary.<sup>10</sup>

In short, "God not only places the necessary weaker members in the body, but also gives more honour to them (1 Corinthians 12:24)."<sup>11</sup>

## Paul's Exposé of Weakness

People with disabilities can bring a dependency that the Church lacks and desperately needs. Too often our churches condone, or even adopt, the dominant societal narrative with independence or autonomy as our ultimate goal. Yet, our earthly journey is a classroom to learn dependency upon the Lord. Paul wrote this exposé to give us a clearer picture of how dependency works out in his own life, and therefore, how it might work out in ours. His conclusion? Our weakness displays our vulnerable humanity and thus our need to rely upon God. This allows God to work in and through us to achieve his mission.<sup>12</sup> This leads to the inevitable conclusion, that “there are many people in ministry too strong to be useful. There are no people in ministry too weak to be useful.”<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, then, weakness transforms lives. What does it mean for us to be weak? It means that we must become weary and wait for God's strength. It means that we must suffer before he can heal us. It means that we must fail so that our Lord can succeed for us. It means that we must lose so that he can win. It means that we must die weak so that he can give us new and perfect life. How we need weakness!

## Conclusion

By God's design, he chooses Moses, Isaiah, and Paul in weakness and disability, then sends them on their missions. Is this mission sabotage? By no means. God uses this weakness to disable pride, dismantle opposition and display his power to a watching world.

If the Church's mission needs weakness, the Church needs to allow people with disabilities to express their call and giftedness for the glory of Christ. They will demonstrate the value of weakness, as well as the need for weakness. Shouldn't we pray for a greater presence of disability and weakness in the Church? Let's include those whom St Lawrence saw as the Church's treasure, in the Church's mission.

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## Notes

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1. Lynn Holden, *Forms of Deformity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 214; see the discussion of 1QSa 2.5–6 in D G Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 39–40.
2. Regarding the Old Testament term ‘flesh’ (*basar*), see Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 30–31. For a treatment of the Greek term ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) see David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 146.
3. Black, *Apostle of Weakness*, 154.
4. Black, *Apostle of Weakness*, 151.
5. See Jeremiah 15; Susan Niditch, *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 64.
6. Moisés Silva, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis, s.v. ‘asthenia’* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:316.
7. Lisa M Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 190–194. Bowens argues that Satan attacks Paul by sending a thorn and that the ongoing conflict with false apostles should be viewed collectively as a cosmic battle over which God triumphs.
8. Black, *Apostle of Weakness*, 161.
9. Black, *Apostle of Weakness*, 90.
10. Black, *Apostle of Weakness*, 81.
11. John K Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 178.
12. Ralph P Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 382.
13. Spoken by Dr. John MacArthur at Together for the Gospel conference, X post by Richard Gregory, April 12, 2018, <https://x.com/RichardPGregory/status/984504149978042369>

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