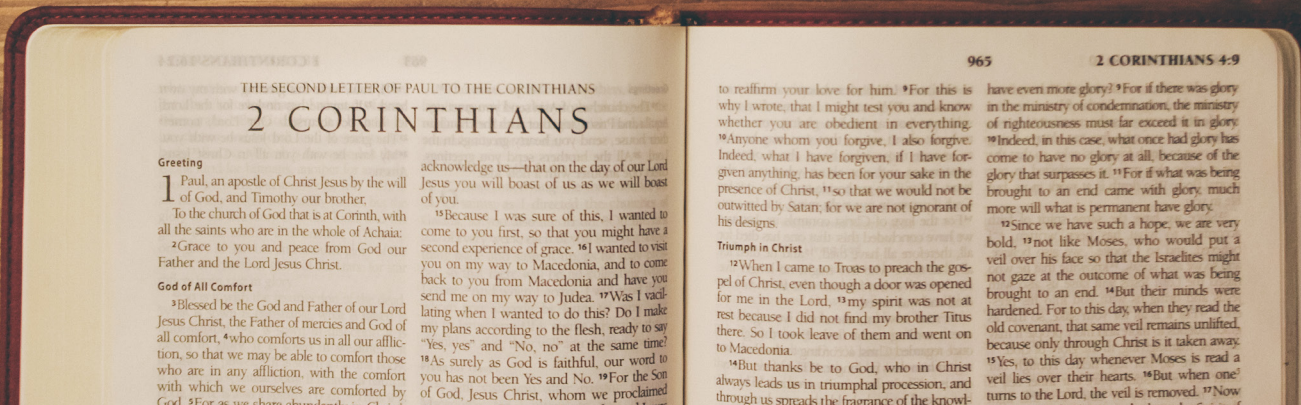


When I am Weak Then I am Strong

Dr Mark Stephens : Senior Research Fellow, CPX



We do live in interesting times.

The temptation right now would be to make everything about the virus.

We could ferret out every passage about plague from the Scriptures – beginning with frogs in the book of Exodus all the way through to plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur in the book of Revelation.

We could talk about plagues. Maybe some of us should do that.

But we also must continue to do life as normally as we can.

Lessons from C.S. Lewis

One of the things that is regularly popping up on my social media feed is an essay by C S Lewis called “On Living in the Atomic Age.” It was first written in 1948.

Lewis was addressing a fretful audience, who were living in the immediate aftermath of World War II. They had witnessed a nation use atomic weapons for the very first time. People were scared and they had every right to be.

Nevertheless, Lewis challenged his audience not to exaggerate the situation, not to overthink it. Indeed, he gets quite pointed in the essay when he says this:

the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

Now, of course, our good friend Clive Staples Lewis would now surely amend some of those recommendations in order to enforce appropriate social distancing, but while the details might change, his meaning stays the same.

In the face of profound threat, we need to be aware, but we also need to keep going.

We’ve got to keep making breakfast with whatever has been left in the supermarket – now’s the time to get inventive – see what you can do with that packet of risoni and some sardines. Get out your blender, get out your Nutri-bullet – and test yo’self.



THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 2 CORINTHIANS

But we do have to keep going. We have to keep putting our kids to bed, taking out the trash, exercising when we can. And we do have to keep hearing from God in his Word – not just playing find-a-verse for this moment – but expecting that God will continue to speak through any and all parts of Scripture, into every part of our lives.

And to that end I want to look with you today at book in the Bible which I find is underappreciated.

2 Corinthians – the shy sibling

The book of 2 Corinthians finishes a long way second to 1 Corinthians. It's the shy sibling in the background of the photo. Upon opening it Christians might say – I've met your famous brother – but who are you again?

2 Corinthians is an incredible book because it is perhaps Paul at his most emotional. That's always hard to judge because in the book of Galatians Paul gets so angry with the Judaisers in that church, that he says "you guys who are so eager to circumcise others – let me tell you – I hope the knife slips" (my loose paraphrase of Gal 5:12). That's reasonably emotive language!

But 2 Corinthians is emotional in another way.

It's when you hear from Paul when he's really struggling.

The NT scholar R P C Hanson put it like this:

Here, broken sharply off, with none of the jagged edges filed down, is a chunk of Paul's life – authentic, uncensored, bewilderingly complicated, but amazingly interesting

If you think that Paul was always happy, that he never got to the end of himself, that he was never acquainted with confusion, anxiety, and even something like depression – then you've never read 2 Corinthians.

Here is a passage that comes right up front in the book:

⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2 Cor 1:8-11)

One of the things about understanding people is how multi-faceted we are – by God's design. Scripture talks about people, about humanity, in different ways. On the one hand, there is this stream of thinking in the Bible about how powerful and effective human

When I am Weak : Then I am Strong

THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

2 CORINTHIANS

beings are. We are made in the image of God – to be the kings and queens of creation – we are made to have dominion, to make something of the world. Human beings are meant to be cultivators of the earth, to make food, to make cities, to make art, to make love in order to make other people.

Royal blood

We are so powerful – because we are royalty.

In the ancient world to be in the image of God was a status largely reserved for the kings, the Pharaohs, and for the mighty.

But in the kingdom of God – everyone's royalty. Everyone's royalty, even if most of us trash our crown.

And so the Word of God speaks constantly about the power we have as God's people. We can quite literally change the world.

But that is not the only facet of what it means to be human. One of the funny things about heresy is that sometimes it happens not because we are misreading a part of the Bible, but because we aren't reading all of our Bible. You can get things twisted not because you say something wrong, but because you say too little.

If you only see humans as made to be powerful, as made to be strong, as made to be world-changers – then you don't understand all of how God sees people.

Because the other great stream of Scriptural thinking about human beings is how fragile we are.

We are made from the dust. We cannot draw breath without the sustaining power of God. Hear well the words of Psalm 103:13-16

*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
14 for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
15 The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
16 the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.*

Humanity is royal dust - crowned with glory and honour, and yet fragile and dependent.

And all throughout Scripture you see this dynamic interplay that human beings understand we are both strong and weak, that we know whose image we bear and yet we remember we are dust.



THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 2 CORINTHIANS

See the story of the Bible is of the God who chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chooses the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (I'm drawing here on 1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

So when God finds a patriarch – he goes and finds a wandering Aramean called Abraham and says – you'll do just fine. Later he goes and gets a Moabite widow and says – you can be the great, great, great, great grandmother of the Messiah.

And as the story tracks through Scripture, you see this dynamic between power and weakness play out.

Whenever Israel thinks only of their strength, God weakens them, he reminds them, you are dust, in order that they may find his strength in their weakness, and then they can be his people again.

We are royalty and we are dust.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the perfect person, our pioneer in humanity, the Lord Jesus Christ, modelled for us true power and weakness. Through the Incarnation the Son of God makes himself vulnerable, even weak, yet this does not threaten his power – it unleashes it.

Miracles and suffering – the two halves of the Gospel of Mark

The Gospel of Mark is the premier text for us to see this. The Gospel of Mark is broken into two halves – 16 chapters altogether – and the first 8 are all about Jesus' miracle-working power. Mark 1-8 has the highest proportion of miracle working stories – more than any other Gospel.

But in the second half of Mark, chapters 9-16, the miracles reduce and the suffering and death of the Messiah become the focus. The first half is about mighty miracles. The second half is about vulnerable suffering.

And you could, if you really wanted to twist things, think that Jesus is no longer powerful in the second half.

But in point of fact it is the cross and the resurrection that are the greatest act of power this world has ever seen. But it is power expressed through sacrificial weakness.

The one who brings the kingdom is the Suffering Servant.

Our resurrected King was acquainted with difficulty, sorrow, and the fragility of what it means to be human.

Remember, you can get things twisted not because you say something wrong, but because you say too little. If you only focus on Mark 1-8, you don't yet understand who Jesus really is.



THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS 2 CORINTHIANS

Therefore, to be a Christian is to delight in one's power and to acknowledge one's weakness. We were made powerful and weak in Adam. But even in walking with Christ now, we remain powerful and weak at the same time.

When Jesus walked a path of power in weakness he left us an example. Within the New Testament – to be Christlike is nothing less than being cruciform. True humanity is found in people who give their lives way for others. True humanity understands that true love is love that suffers with and suffers for the other.

Which brings me back to 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians is addressed to the city of Corinth, a town we know an enormous amount about from the ancient world. One of the chief things we know about this city is its love of status and honour. This was a town where fame was a currency and you earned it through being impressive – impressive wealth and impressive speech.

And into this world comes the good news of a king whose glory is established on a cross. It's the foolishness of God.

You can't make the gospel look Corinthian without emptying the cross of its power. The gospel will not fit our paradigms – Jesus is the most unimpressive Saviour according to the template of the world, because if the gospel is true then everything we thought about power and influence is wrong. It's upended because the kingdom of God is upside down, where the last shall be first and the greatest among you shall be the servant.

When we choose to worship this King we do not merely accept the benefits of his grace, we swear allegiance to his way. There is no believing without following him in his ways of power and weakness. His way of power in the midst of weakness.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul announces that, through God's Spirit, believers are being transformed into the image of Christ with ever-increasing glory. But this is immediately followed by chapter 4, where Paul shows that being conformed to Christ means experiencing weakness. One of the richest passages in Scripture is in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12:

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you (2 Cor 4:7-12)

Power and Weakness – together

For Paul, weakness is not powerlessness. Paul does not speak as a pathetic victim, who cries out with despair that his life and actions are ineffectual. For Paul “[Christ’s] power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9). In Christ, power and weakness are not opposites – rather they hold together.

Right at this moment we feel our vulnerability acutely. To name that, to confess that, is not downer on your faith, it is at the centre of our faith. We are hard pressed, we are perplexed, we are struck down. But we are not crushed, despairing, abandoned or destroyed.

Many of us think that our weakness disqualifies us for Christian ministry. We try and neutralize fragility with all the vigour we use disinfectant wipes on dirty tables.

We believe the lie that the cracks in our life make us unfit for God’s service.

But we are royal dust my friends.

We are meant to be jars of clay because it is even through the cracks that the light of God shines brightest. The glory of God, and the glory of his gospel is seen in the content and not the vessel.

And therefore, we do well to remember we are always both powerful and weak. Indeed, we are powerful in weakness.

The writer Jim Collins talks about “the tyranny of the OR and the genius of the AND.” We are tempted to believe that it is power OR weakness. But in fact the Christian life is a regular experience of authority and vulnerability, an experience of capacity and utter dependence, power and weakness.

The power of the Lamb is expressed through cruciform love.

You can be hospitable at the same time as being hard pressed. You can be generous and still feel vulnerable.

This moment is like many moments in our life – we rarely have a detailed script, but we always have a pattern.

Let me close with the words of 2 Corinthians 12:9-12

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. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

