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The Necessity for Weakness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 2 Chron. 26:15; 1 Cor. 1:27; 2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 6:10; 3:16; Col. 1:11.

The great importance and value of weakness and conscious dependence is what lies upon the face of those passages when you bring them together. It almost looks like a contradiction: "God chose the weak things..." - "Be strong...", "strengthened with might".

It is always possible to place Scripture over against Scripture and to make it represent a contradiction, but Scripture never really does contradict itself. That must be settled once and for all. The meaning of apparent contradiction has to be looked for deeper down, and when the real meaning is found, apparently contradictory Scriptures are found to be perfectly in agreement. Here is one of quite a number of those apparent paradoxes. If I were to put it in a certain form the paradox would appear all the more acute. If I were to say weakness is right and strength is right, and they are both to exist together at the same time, you would see how acute the seeming paradox becomes. Weakness and strength nevertheless are both clearly represented as according to God's mind, and are to be in the same individual at exactly the same time. Weak, so weak that you can do nothing! Mighty, strengthened with might so that marvellous things are accomplished. A simultaneous consciousness, a simultaneous experience, a simultaneous reality, and there is no contradiction in it. You say, "How can these things be? That is simply confusing!" It needs to be made clear.

We have said at times something about weakness, the necessity for weakness, the importance of a kind of weakness, dependence, consciousness of helplessness, and we have immediately had thrown at us all those Scriptures about being strong, with the intent to undo our argument, as though the two things could not go together in harmony. People have a strange way of getting mentally tied up with Scripture in those seeming contradictions, and it therefore becomes necessary and helpful if we can understand the meaning of such seemingly contradictory states as demanded by the Lord to coexist at one time in the same object.

The necessity for weakness is perfectly plain. Right through the whole of the Scriptures, Old Testament and New, it is made perfectly clear that God begins by undoing men and bringing them down to a place of weakness and emptiness, that He really does empty His vessels before He fills them. The Lord really does break before He makes. The Lord does take away strength before He makes His strength perfect in the same object. There is no doubt about that whatever in reading the Word of God and studying the history of any instrumentality which has served the Lord's purpose in any vital way, and the necessity for weakness and conscious dependence is so real as to come into the realm of Divine value and to seem to be a tremendous value and importance to us and to the Lord.

Where then does this necessity begin? From whence does it take its rise? It takes its rise from the desire of nature for power and strength. Universally man by nature desires strength, shall we say dislikes (that is a weak word) weakness, revolts against weakness, desires power. That desire is in us by nature. It would be difficult to find the person, however insignificant they might seem to be amongst men and women, who really naturally delighted in being at a discount, took pleasure in being set at naught, unable to stand up to others, to hold their own, to possess a measure of dignity. No, that is not human nature and very often even a feigned humility is only a subtle way of trying to draw attention to oneself, and thereby to gain an advantage. We have heard people say boastfully that they were the most humble people in the world, and that was simply self coming out in a form of pride under the guise of a feigned humility. We should never be able to track down every form of self-life which in some way or another expresses itself in the direction of wanting to be strong, aiming at a kind of power, influence, standing, holding one's own, and so on. That is human nature.

The point is this, that in human nature as it is now, what we call "fallen humanity", the whole matter of power has been subverted so that it has become a personal thing, and thereby it has become an evil thing. God never meant man to be an undignified grovelling worm in the earth. He meant him to be noble, magnificent, the highest product of His hand, endued with a great dignity, possessed of wonderful power and strength and influence. But God intended all that for *His* satisfaction, *His* glory, *His* honour, for Himself. The whole thing has become subverted, and it has become a nature of personal interests in some form or another, and that is human nature. It is only when the entire self principle is broken that we can accept gladly a position of being nothing for the Lord's sake.

Herein lies the secret of the necessity for weakness: that man as he is has in him a subverted strength or quest for strength. Back of that there lies that supreme satanic objective. The one dominating objective of Satan is power, strength, and dominion, and he put that idea, that suggestion, into man to be as God, that is, to have power in himself apart from God for himself. Man and Satan thereby came into the awful fraternity of power-seekers for personal ends, and whether we have that in our minds as an objective or not, our natures have that as an objective in spite of ourselves. Even saints discover that in their natures there is that tendency, and that when God

blesses, and marvellously blesses, there is that evil enemy within the old nature which would take hold of the very blessing of God and use it for self-glory; "he was marvellously helped, till he was strong" (2 Chron. 26:15). Uzziah took hold of the marvellous blessings of God as a means of power, bringing him into prominence and carrying him even into realms forbidden. That evil enemy within, which even in saints marvellously helped and blessed of God, from time to time rises up and becomes their undoing. It is the old thing over again. Satan's supreme object, brought into the very constitution of fallen man and manifesting itself ever and always in that realm toward personal power, strength for ourselves in self-interest.

This thing is so deep, so subtle, so secret, that you and I will never get to the bottom of it. You and I will never be, as we say, upsides with it. We shall never be able to lay our hand upon it, to grip it, to comprehend it. It is too deep for us, it is too subtle for us. The ways in which the desire for strength shows itself are so often so deeply subtle that it is thought to be good and right, or it is entirely unseen, and it lies back of more of the mischief, the havoc, the ruin, the limitation even in the Lord's people than we are aware of. Oh, the tremendous antagonism to the interests of the Lord found in this nature of ours along the line of a desire for strength; strength of various kinds, but strength.

Herein lies the need then for weakness; weakening, breaking, emptying, and only one with the full intelligence concerning the depth and range of that thing could deal with it, and you and I have not got that. The Lord knows the full range, and comprehends the utter dimensions of that thing in humanity, and it was *Himself* Who went to the cross to take a fallen humanity to death. The Cross of the Lord Jesus is something far bigger than ever we have discovered, far more than we have any idea of. The depths of our nature have been seen as we have never seen them, and dealt with in that Cross. All the subtle forces which so deceive us as to make us think that they are good, God has seen their real nature and has taken all that of which we are so ignorant to the Cross and has dealt with it, root and branch, from centre to circumference. But we know that that has a practical application, and therein is the necessity for weakness in that realm, that even a mighty apostle, with an opened heaven and a voice from the glorified Son of God, a chosen vessel before the world was, and all that he represented of sovereignty and grace, must of necessity have a stake planted clean through his flesh lest he become exalted above measure. That is an indication of the Divine mind as to the damage of a quest after power, which lies secretly within the old creation, and which would show itself in spite of consecration, in spite of abandonment to the Lord, in spite of being willing to die, and die, and die again in the interests of the Lord.

You have no man more utter for God than Paul, the apostle, a man who will demonstrate that he will die in the Lord's interests, and yet there is a danger in him of the old man, which God recognises. It was an eye-opener to him when the Lord made clear to him why he must have that stake put through his flesh. The thing is so subtle, and it works so secretly, and it works in spite of all that we mean to be for God. It works in the dark where we do not recognise it. Therefore there is this tremendous necessity for God to make the Cross a real thing continuously to the ending of that thing, to the breaking, emptying, and bringing of us to a state of weakness and conscious dependence because of the tremendous value of such a statement to the Lord as in 2 Cor. 12:9, standing over against the tremendous injury to the Lord's interests bound up with such a tendency, with such a trait in our characters.

The True Nature and Realm of Strength

There must be a word said on the other side. Just as truly and equally with the necessity for weakness is there the necessity for strength at the same time. Just as emphatically are the words declared: "Be strong..." But what is the nature of that strength? What is the realm of that strength? "Be strong *in the Lord*, and in the strength of *His might*" (Eph. 6:10). That strength will never be in us as ourselves. It will never be a part of us. It will always be retained and preserved in the Lord, so that our relationship will always be on the basis of faith's dependence. We shall never be able to walk away with the Lord's strength as though it were ours, and use it. "Be strong in the Lord..."

The point is this, that there is a Man in Whom all the might of God can dwell without any danger. There is a *Man* in Whom the power of God can dwell in fulness without any danger. That Man is in heaven. That Man is not here. The power of God cannot dwell in us without danger, "...he was marvellously helped, till he was strong". Oh, what a pity that word "till" had to come in. It indicates such terrible possibilities. The issue in the case of Uzziah was that the Lord smote him. A terrible change in the story. It shows that it is not safe for us to take hold of God's strength for ourselves, and God has put the Cross there, where it can never be done. He can never allow it. If we try it, we shall be broken. We shall come up against the great forbidding of the Cross. But God has found a Man. Yes, I know He is more than a Man; He is God, He is the Son of God. That is one side. We never confuse these two sides. But there is the other side. He is Son of Man, and He is a man in Whom the power of God can dwell in fulness without any danger. That Man will never use that power for His own ends as apart from the Father. You will never have any fleshly laying hold of power on the part of the Lord Jesus. In Him there is none of that subtle working of self which, even unconsciously, uses Divine power and Divine blessing for itself. It is not in His nature. It is in ours. The saintliest man on this earth has it in him. He may be, all unconsciously, gratified that people regard him as good, or as having experience. Oh, yes, it works there in that realm. But here is One Who can have all Divine power, and there is not the slightest trace in Him of anything that would turn that power to personal account; therefore the power can dwell in Him fully.

Two things are clear if that is the position. You can read, if you will, that which will establish for you that it is what God has done. Turn to Acts 17:31: "Inasmuch as He has appointed a day, in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He has ordained". Who is that Man?

Turn to 2 Tim. 4:8: "Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day". Now turn back to Romans 2:16: "In that day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to my gospel, by Jesus Christ".

The Man Whom He has ordained for the judgement of the world in righteousness, the Lord the righteous Judge at that day. Who is the Lord the righteous Judge? Jesus Christ, the Man Whom God has ordained! If you want further evidence, read the whole of John chapter 5. "And He gave Him authority to execute judgement, because He is a Son of man" (verse 27). There is the Man in whom all power rests without any danger.

The two things are these. We are to be strong in the strength which is in Christ Jesus. He is to be our strength. We shall never have that strength in ourselves. It will never be our strength intrinsically, not here at any rate. It is His strength, and therefore it must be, on the one hand, so far as we are concerned, continuous weakness, continuous dependence. So far as He is concerned, He is our strength. What does Paul mean when he says: "When I am weak, then am I strong"? That is a contradiction, surely. In other words, he would say, "When I am weak, the Lord has an opportunity of showing His strength in me!" That is the kind of strength we want, and the Lord's strength can only

be made perfect when we are weak. If we are strong, the Lord stands back and lets us get on with it, and we use up our strength and soon come to a grievous end. "When I am weak, then am I strong". The whole thing is reconciled when you get down inside. Weak and strong at the same time? Yes, but never strong in ourselves, only strong in the Lord.

There is this other thing. There is conformity to the Son of God, opening up the whole process and progress through faith, through dependence, through weakness, by which we come - oh, so very slowly - to the place where the Lord can depend upon us, where the Lord knows we will not take His blessing, His strength, His using of us and trade upon it for ourselves, where He knows that we are becoming trustworthy, with the trustworthiness of His Son, conformed to His image, and as that is so, the power is more abundantly caused to rest upon us. It is those who, most conscious of their own weakness, exercise the greatest faith in the Lord as their strength, who open a way for the Lord to make the greatest measure of that strength manifest in them. The hindrance to the Lord's strength in us is our own strength, so often. The way for His strength is our weakness. So the apostle said that he would glory in weaknesses that the power of Christ might rest upon him, might encamp upon him.

The Lord bring us into the reality of this glorious paradox.