

## **Strength in weakness**

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II Corinthians 12:2-10

A few years ago, our former pastor Joe Roos returned from a trip to Sincelejo, Columbia to visit our sister church Remanso De Paz. He reported that he was struck by the fact that despite all the displacement, hardship and violence that they experienced daily, the people there were filled with a deep and abundant faith in God.

Now myself, being the pampered U.S. citizen that I am, I lose faith if I get stuck in traffic or if I run out of jelly. In the passage from Second Corinthians, Paul talks of being “content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties for Christ’s sake.” Am I this way? Not so much. I tend to be weighed down and uncertain during times of trial.

Why can’t I mirror the courageous faith of our brothers and sisters at Remanso De Paz? In this country, I have the freedom to believe and to worship any way I choose. What if I lived in a country which persecutes its’ Christian minority? Would I even have the courage to be Christian? I’m not so sure that I would.

Does the freedom I have to doubt and question lead me to constant doubt and questioning? If my beliefs had to be more concrete, would I have more faith? What if I were to face real adversity? My faith has never been strongly tested. Would all the trivial matters that burden me now seem so important then?

What if my loved ones were killed or disappeared? What if I was the victim of a violent crime? What if I had AIDS? What if I was facing possible starvation? How would I respond? Would I grab onto my faith as if it were a solid oak tree? Or would I try to grab hold and find out that there wasn't much to hold onto?

When people without faith are in crisis, how do they respond? Side note: I use the word "faith" loosely. It can be faith in God, a spiritual faith or a faith in popsicles. They could continue to not have faith. Everything is random and terrible things happen for no reason at all to people who don't deserve them. That is certainly a valid way to think. I've frequently had those thoughts myself.

People who have no faith can discover a whole new faith and become born again in Christ. People who have sinned or struggled can ask for forgiveness and cast off their old selves. They can then start fresh with a clean slate. We see this often with persons who are involved with crime, drugs, violence, etc. A transformation like this is a gift from God.

People with faith can also lose faith in times of crisis. This is understandable. For my best friend from high school, in a period of a few years, his father died, his wife's only sibling died in young adulthood (a death so painful they never even told me what actually happened) and they had a baby who only lived five months due to a heart defect. My friend told me at the time that they were mad at God and taking a break from church.

Of course people of faith can also increase their faith in times of trial. They can lean on their faith and be comforted by it. It can see them through hard times

and just make them that much stronger. This is the reaction I hope for in myself, but I really don't know if I have built a strong enough faith to sustain myself.

The last line of the passage from Second Corinthians, says that "for when I am weak, then I am strong." The idea of strength in weakness is appealing to me, especially in a culture where personal, physical and militaristic strength are so overemphasized as ways of dealing with conflict.

Sometimes the most courageous act is a seemingly weak one. To cry, to make oneself vulnerable, to let down our defenses, to set aside our pride, to admit wrong and to ask for help, these are incredibly brave actions. On a much larger scale, being non-violent when faced with violence also fits this category. And this kind of vulnerability doesn't mean we have to give in or roll over. This can be an honest way of managing conflict to achieve understanding, common ground and workable solutions.

When we are truly humble, we can open ourselves to new ways of being, new ways of understanding and new opportunities for growth. When we can set aside our fears, our pride, our insecurities and our anxieties, we open ourselves to amazing possibilities. If we can just be still and present in the moment, maybe that is when our faith can truly bloom.

On the other hand, sometimes there is just weakness in weakness. I feel this way often when I am lacking faith and overwhelmed. What difference can I make? The simplest of tasks can be too hard and take too much time and effort. Why does everything have to be so hard? Why can't this be easy?

Sometimes it is hard to have the patience to see things through, especially in our culture of instant results. To have the inner faith to serenely persevere through hard times is a quality that can be hard to come by. I can feel very small and insignificant at times. My own problems are overwhelming, much less the problems of the world. Maybe I can try to find strength in the fact that I am not alone and that God is with me.

My anxieties can also be a major roadblock on my path towards greater faith. Sometimes I feel like I am not equipped to deal with the pace, problems and stressors of modern life on this planet at this time. Yet maybe deep inside me there are reserves of great strength of which I am not even aware. So maybe it is a matter of confidence then of trying to acknowledge the strength and resolve that is already there.

So how does it all fit together? Maybe it is a strange concoction of humility and confidence. I need to have humility in opening myself to others and at the same time I need to have confidence in my ability to play an active, but not domineering role in my efforts to effect positive change in myself and the world.

Also in the passage from Second Corinthians, Paul talks about being “most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protections of Christ’s power over me.” I like the idea of our weaknesses being protected by Christ, but am not as optimistic as Paul. Sometimes God protects God’s children but other times it seems like God abandons the children of the world.

For me on a personal level, I often feel the protective guiding hand of God, and on a wider scale, I feel that Christ has a special place in his heart for the

sick, the disabled, the poor, the outcasts of society and so on. He looks after them and they can often feel his healing touch.

In my life, I have been very blessed with a loving family and a comfortable upbringing. I never had to fight or struggle to get what I needed or wanted. I feel that even painful times in my life have led to things that have happened that were meant to be.

I was very shy and socially anxious when I was in college. This was kind of a wilderness time for me when I didn't have many friends or direction for the future. Somehow after college, with never having a previous thought about it, I stumbled upon working with persons with intellectual disabilities. I instantly felt a kinship with my disabled brothers and sisters.

They know what it is like perhaps more than any other group of people to be outcasts, outsiders, ignored, left alone and so on. In a different way, I have felt all those things as well. So I feel incredibly drawn to this work and feel that this is where God wants me to be.

College was a painful experience for me, but if not for that, I never would have met Charlie and the other Jubilee clients who have touched my life. So this is where I am supposed to be and I know that God has played a role. It has to have been more than mere chance.

So I feel Christ protecting my weaknesses and those of my disabled brothers and sisters, but often Christ does not protect the weak. The list is endless: elderly and immobile people who perished in New Orleans during

Hurricane Katrina, children in Africa dying of AIDS, childhood victims of sexual abuse and so on.

I once heard a story on the news about a deaf man riding a city bus whose sign language was mistaken as rival gang signs by some gang members and they assaulted him and carved out his eyes. Where was God then? Where was Christ's protection?

Trying to figure out God's role in the outcome of human events is nothing new. Where is God when innocent people suffer? Why does God sometimes not protect the weak? Why are they exploited and abused? In the passage from Second Corinthians, God says "My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak." If God has so much power, why do the weak suffer then?

I have asked a lot of questions. I haven't answered many. I don't really know that much. I do know that I shouldn't let the overwhelming problems of the world weigh me down to the point of complete inaction. All I can do is help out in my own small way, bit by bit and try to trust in God.

When I go through hard times large or small, God will be with me. God will see me through the hard times. God will see us through the hard times. Our faith will see us through the hard times. If we offer up our weaknesses to each other and to God, we will be strong in faith.