

The Power of Weakness

We're going to look at "Making Weaknesses Work for You". Every one of us has weaknesses. You have all kinds of weaknesses: physical, emotional, relational, financial, intellectual. There are things you can't do. (How many of you can do this with your fingers? How many can do this? How many can go back and forth with them this fast?) We have all different ones. The real issue is what will you do with yours?

What we normally do is deny and defend, excuse and explain, hate and hide them – we usually don't want to reveal our weaknesses. But God wants to do something with your weaknesses - God wants to use them.

Now that doesn't make a lot of sense in human thinking. We think God should want to use our strengths. We say to God: "I can do this. How come my strength is sitting on the shelf. How come the things I'm good at and love to do aren't being taken advantage of? Use my strengths, God."

And God does use your strengths, obviously. But in Isaiah 55:8-9, God told the people, *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. 'And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.'* God was saying, "I'm smarter than you." God doesn't want to work around your weaknesses and God doesn't want to work in spite of them. God actually wants to work through your weaknesses.

1 Corinthians 1:27 NIV says, *"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."* God chose these! It's not by accident that God uses your weaknesses. God purposely chooses to use them and God chooses to work through weak people. Why? Because it reveals God's power.

We're really impressed with strength, brawn and might, but the Bible says in Zachariah 4:6 *"It is not by force nor by strength, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies."* God likes to choose and use weak, ordinary people because that's when God's glory, God's grace, God's strength, God's power shine through the most effectively."

That's really good news, because most of us aren't extraordinary people. We're just normal people – OK, some of us more average than strictly normal. But that's ok because God doesn't choose to only work through our strengths. God chooses to work through our natural weakness and then God's power shines through.

So this week and next week, we're going to look at how not to avoid, excuse or resent your weaknesses, but how God can use them in your life. But first let me make it clear that by weaknesses I'm not talking about sins or about character flaws you can change (like overeating, impatience, greed, laziness.) The weaknesses I'm talking about are limitations in our lives you inherited or can't change. There are many kinds of limitations like that: circumstantial ones you were born with and don't have control over and can't change; disadvantages and external pressures that you can't control; financial limitations when money becomes a problem due to something completely out of your control. Have you ever had unexpected expenses that weren't your fault? Sure you have.

There are emotional and relational limitations. Some people have a heart for God but a spouse who's spiritually apathetic or isn't even a believer. Some have a difficult child or a parent with issues that have to be dealt with. Some of us tend to become depressed or have a predisposition to worry or be fearful. That's no sin, it's just a natural inclination. Now when we make bad choices and give in to that inclination, it can become sinful.

We all have talent limitations. Some things you'll never do as well as someone else. And of course, we have physical limitations. You have a certain amount of possible energy and no matter how much you work out you're never going to have more than that. Maybe you deal with a handicap or bad back, or some other kind of physical limitation in your life.

All of these things God purposely chooses to work through. Why? 2 Corinthians 4:7 says, *"We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves."* God put God's treasure in you, but you're just a clay pot. And a lot of us are cracked pots. Every pot has inherent flaws and weak spots; it's not indestructible. That shows that the great power in our lives is from God, not from us. God puts great gifts in ordinary containers like you and me.

Some people think, "God could never use me in a great way. I'm just an ordinary person." Think again! That makes it MORE likely that God wants to use you! God puts great gifts in ordinary containers. God uses ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Don't say you're too weak or too old – God LOVES using people like that – just check out the Bible.

Today we're going to look at making weaknesses work for us. How? The Bible says there are three steps. We'll go over two today and finish up number three next week. The first is: **1. I Am Open About My Weaknesses.** That's the starting point. I stop pretending I've got it all together, because I don't. Nobody does. I stop hoping my weaknesses will go away if I ignore them. They won't. I stop making excuses. I stop blaming other people for my weaknesses. I stop denying them. I just admit I have them.

God wants you to own up to your weaknesses, so sometimes God uses something into your life to get you to admit it. There's a word for that something: It's called a "crisis." When you go through a crisis can force you to acknowledge the faults in your life, the failures, the weak spots. Don't wait for a crisis. It's far less painful to identify your weaknesses and admit them without having to go through crisis after crisis to learn you're not God.

It's important to know and understand your weaknesses. If you start a business you sit down and figure out what you're good at and you build on your strengths. But you also look at weaknesses... what you're not good at - or really bad at. Then you find people or systems to compensate for your weakness; to go beyond what you might be able to do. Sometimes you actually find better ways to do things because of you weaknesses and finding ways to work with them.

Churches work that way too. It can't be based on the talents of a few people. It can't be based on the talents of a pastor. I served a church in New England that had this one family that became the focus of the congregation. The church had been declining and they were the only younger family still in the church and the father was a really talented guy. Anything that happened in the church was based on the talents of this one guy. Then one day his uncle died and left him a bed and breakfast up in St. Stevens, on the Canadian border and he picked up his family and moved away! So of course the church went into further decline, right? Wrong! It turned out that when all those untalented, run of the mill, older people pitched in together, for the first time in 32 years the church began to grow!

There's a word for the wise there: Too many of us are waiting for some talented person to come solve the problems and do the work – but it's ordinary people that God wants to work through. Remember what I said a few weeks ago: Many people in churches are waiting for the someone to come who will turn things around; waiting for people to provide meaningful programs and ministries; waiting for the time when people will come and step up and make it all work.

Well, the time has come... and we are the people we've been waiting for! It's not going to be some super program, person, staff member or pastor who will turn things around - that's not how it works. It's God's people, in all their weaknesses, being who God means for them to be.

Once you've admitted your weakness, go to step two: **2. I Am Thankful About My Weaknesses.** You say, "You've got to be kidding! I don't feel grateful, I want to know how to be freed from them! I want you to tell me how to magically get rid of them." But God wants you to learn to be glad about weaknesses. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 tells us, God had said to Paul, *"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."* Paul said, *"So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

Instead of wasting time acting like you've got it all together, like you're composed and in control, instead of wearing a mask, just start focusing on God's power and discover a deeper experience of the power of Christ.

I've been a Christian for a long time now. I've been around thousands of believers and most of them by far have never truly discovered a deeper experience of the power of Christ. Why? Because they haven't accepted their weaknesses and don't have a grateful attitude about them.

Instead of resenting your weaknesses be glad and grateful for them. Why? Because there are benefits! The weaknesses and limitations you have that you can't control are actually blessing in disguise. There are a lot of ways they are blessings, but let's look at four benefits just to demonstrate:

First, it requires God's help. When I have weaknesses in my life, it motivates me to look for God's help. When you attempt to face any challenge or solve any problem on your own power, God will often let you go ahead and fail so that you can learn your limitations. But when you come to God and say, "God, I'm weak. I don't have what it takes for all the pressures in my life. I need you." God knew that. God wanted you to realize it. Then God works in you to give you power and direction so you can have a deeper experience of God and find resources you would never have on your own. You don't just survive, you thrive.

In 2 Corinthians 12, God said, *“My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”* In a lot of ways we could stop right there and go home because that’s all you need to hear this week. God says, “No matter what you go through next week, I have all you need.” Some of you have something major to accomplish. Some have a problem to solve. Some have conflict to resolve at home, work or school. Some have a difficulty that seems insurmountable. All you really need to know are two things. God’s with you. And God’s grace is what you need. The problem is, we often won’t accept that God’s all you need until God’s all you’ve got. So sometimes God allows all those props and gimmicks that give you a false sense of security to go by the wayside until God is all you have. When God is all you have, you turn to God and realize God’s all you needed in the first place.

You know, sometimes the mission God has given me and is giving this church isn’t easy, it isn’t comfortable or safe. Frankly, some people would rather not do it – they don’t see the need for it in their life or the lives of those who matter to them... and I can’t blame them. There are days I’d love to just be a happy pastor of a church that I love and not have to challenge people or worry about all those other people out there – after all, they’re not paying my salary or meeting my needs or supporting me in prayer. Frankly, I have to work hard to meet new people – I’m actually a bit shy. But God has made it abundantly clear that this is our mission – God cares about those thousands of people out there in our community who are hurting, who are aching for something meaningful. Listen carefully to this: they are more important than I am! I already have the benefits of a relationship with God – they don’t. If you haven’t realized the same thing about yourself, you need to do some serious Bible study and a lot of thinking. Being a Christian is like being a part of a really strange club – it’s the only club where non-members have more rights and are more important than the members! In fact, the longer you’re a member the more responsibilities and the fewer rights you have.

I can hold on to our mission despite any opposition or resistance, despite our weaknesses as a congregation and my weaknesses as a person. Why? Because God said to do it and God made it abundantly clear in the Bible. I can hold onto what God commands because if God’s on my side, it doesn’t matter who’s against me.

Paul says, *“...when I am weak, then I am strong. In fact, the less I have, the more I depend on Him.”* That’s a lesson I have to learn over and over. And so do you. We have short-term memory when it comes to this. We’re in a tight situation and God comes through; bails us out, gets us through, and the next day we’re acting like it never happened. We forget how many times God’s worked in our lives, helped us, gotten us through.

We resent our limitations. My natural reaction is “Why me, God? I’m a good guy. I’m trying to live for you. Why did you allow this?” God says, “My power shows up best in weak people.” If that’s true, why should God take away your weakness? That thing you’ve been praying about – “God, please take this away!” and it hasn’t happened – it may be God’s saying, “My power shows up best in your weakness.”

If you didn’t have weakness in your life, if you could solve every problem and meet any need, how much would you depend on God? Zip! Not at all! If you could do that you’d think **you** were the master of your world and no, you’re not.

So the second benefit is, **It Limits Our Pride**. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul continues, *“I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, ...to torment me and keep me from becoming proud..”* God blessed Paul’s life so much. He’d learned so many things. He’d had great revelations. Hey, he got to write most of the New Testament! That’s something for the resume! But God gave him a thorn.

What’s a thorn? It’s a weakness; a limitation I’ve inherited or can’t change that causes pain and limits me. It was given to Paul as a reminder. If Paul could have changed it, he would have. In fact, he prayed three times, “God, take this away.” And God said, “I’m not going to because my grace is sufficient for you.” That thing you’ve been praying to God to take away in your life but God hasn’t... It may possibly be your thorn. Some are temporary; some are for a lifetime, like Paul’s.

Thorns keep us humble before God. Rick Warren is a very successful preacher – perhaps the most successful of our day in many respects – but he has a thorn in his life. He was born with a brain dysfunction. Top neurologists can do little about it and it has a number of consequences. One is it makes public speaking extremely painful. His body doesn’t process adrenaline correctly. Any time he gets a shot of adrenaline his vision blurs, his body overheats, and he has a sense of physical panic. When you’re speaking, right before you speak your body gives a shot of adrenaline to give you energy and the passion to speak. Anytime Rick gets up to speak, for the first 15-20 minutes, his vision blurs so much he has difficulty seeing the people he’s speaking to. He looks normal to others

but can't see. His body overheats and then panic sets in. It takes an enormous toll. When he started his church in 1980 he told the folk that he could handle preaching once a week but could never do two services. When they went to two he thought he could never do three. When they went to three he thought "I could never push myself to do this four times."

This isn't stage fright. Crowds don't scare him. He's spoken in the superdome to 50,000 people. It's a physical thing that produces emotional results. Sometimes after speaking he goes home and just goes to bed wiped out.

So isn't it amazing that God chose public speaking as a main way Rick serves and he's one of the most successful speakers in history? It's his thorn. He's asked God to take it away but God hasn't and his greatest pain in life has become his greatest blessing because it keeps him dependent on God. People say, "Do you ever get full of pride speaking to 30,000 people on a weekend?" It's the last thing he's thinking about. He's thinking, "God, just get me through this!"

If God is ever going to use you in a great way, don't be surprised if there's a thorn. It may not be physical – It may be relational, emotional or something else. But it reduces pride.

Third, **It Builds Up Our Connection.** One of the dangers of strength is that it tends to create an independent spirit. Without weaknesses, I tend to think, "I don't need anybody! I've got it all together." But God made us to value each other and wants us to work with each other and care for and help one another. So nobody gets all the gifts. Nobody gets all the pieces of the puzzle. You need other people.

In the New Testament, Paul repeatedly refers to us; refers to the church, as a living body. 1 Corinthians 12:22 says, "...some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary." In the church - the body of Christ - God allows each of us to have weaknesses, so that all the parts will recognize their need for each other. 1 Corinthians 12:20-21 says, "Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'" We need each other. God allows us to have weaknesses so we see the value of other people.

If you want to make a strong rope you make it strong by putting a lot of strands together – strands that are weak be themselves. When you take a lot of weak strands and weave them together to work together, you get a strong rope.

You're pretty weak and I'm pretty weak, but all of us together can do things stuff that would be impossible otherwise. That's a value of unity in a church family. A person who doesn't work together with their church family is a weakling. They don't have support or the other pieces they need. I'm not talking about just coming to church, listening to the sermon and going out. I'm talking about getting involved, developing relationships, so when crisis hits there's someone there to support you and you're there to help others when they go through crisis, because crisis is inevitable.

Fourth, **It Inspires Ministry.** God didn't put you on earth just to live for yourself, but to help other people. Most times our greatest ministries will flow out of our weaknesses. The message that God wants to say to the world through you, your greatest life message, can come out of your deepest hurt. The very thing that causes you the most grief and pain, God can use as a ministry and a message to other people to encourage them. The thing you don't want anybody else to know about, that you want to hide, forget, push out of your mind – God wants to use that. Pain sensitizes us to the hurts of others. If you want a Christ-like ministry, it means people are going to be helped, encouraged and even healed by the wounds in your life. Jesus Christ, received wounds and we all benefited from it. The pains in your life, if you'll share what you've learned, will benefit others.

2 Corinthians 1 says, "*God comforts us in our troubles so that we can comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received.*" Who could better help someone who's just been devastated by unemployment than someone who's went through that? Who could better help someone with an addiction than someone who's had an addiction and God helped them? Who could better minister to a family who's had a teenager get into trouble than someone who went through that sort of experience themselves?

God will use the thing in your life that you are most ashamed of, most embarrassed by, most heartbroken over to encourage other people if you'll see what God wants to do in it, be healed and begin to share it with others.

Everyone's hurting somewhere. There are situations in your life that limit you and cause pain. You can either resent it and live in self-pity or see what God wants to do through it to help other people. It's your choice. Don't waste your hurt.

What causes pain in your life? What weaknesses do you have? I invite you to create an altar in your mind and place on it the weaknesses of your life that you can't change and didn't ask for. Say "God, I give you these weaknesses. I ask you to use my weakness and in my weakness for you to be strong. You've said that your power shows up best in weak people. Would you show your power in my life this week? Because I'm making a Declaration of Dependence, on you."

As I look out on this congregation, this Christian family, I see people who have the potential to become world class Christians, spiritual giants. You have no idea the impact God can have through you. God does extraordinary things through ordinary people. Everything in your past has brought you to this point. Some of the things that have happened hurt and some were bad, but God can turn them around and use them for good. Next week we'll go further and talk about the details of sharing our weaknesses. For now, let's pray that God will use us in our weakness. Let's pray.