

Russell Kelfer

The Blessing of Weakness

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Series: Joseph and the Sovereignty of God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230 • (210) 226-0000 / 1-800-375-7778 • www.dtm.org • dtm@dtm.org

The Blessing of Weakness

The world is looking for strength. It is the byword of the era in which we live. Nations want to bargain from a position of *strength*. Attorneys want to go to court with the *strongest* case. Football teams want to be *strong* enough to win. Parents want their children to be *strong* and healthy. To us, strength is synonymous with success. The company with the strongest balance sheet is the most coveted. Those with the strongest product are the most likely to succeed. Companies with the strongest benefits get the employees. The key is that you never want to operate from a position of weakness. Never. Or so the story goes.

Can you not imagine then, how confused the world must be when the Christian begins to *glory in his weakness*? Of all the key concepts of the Christian faith, perhaps this one is the least understood. Even the church of our age feels that to be effective, it must operate from a position of strength. It seems to think it needs to out-world the world—bigger buildings, bigger budgets, more publicity, more performances.

But Jesus didn't do it that way. Paul didn't do it that way. Peter didn't do it that way. These men were all living demonstrations that for God to be glorified, He usually chooses to reveal Himself through the weakness of men, rather to share His glory with their strengths. He usually chose men who, in and of themselves, were nothing, in order to bring to nothing man's claim to fame. And those who were more than nothing, he usually had to bring down to nothing before He could use them. That way, if any man would glory, he had to glory in God.

The natural mind cannot grasp that truth. Never will. It is *spiritually discerned*. Like all of God's ways, it is as much higher than ours as heaven is higher than earth. So if you are not a believer, don't try to understand it. It is a truth that has been revealed by the Spirit to those who belong to the Son.

If you are a Christian, however, comprehending and appropriating that truth is at the core of Lordship. Misunderstanding it is at the root of many problems, causing

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you to glory in your performances as a believer; or in your works as a believer; or in your knowledge as a believer. The truth is, none of those things impress God. And as you look at your past, and try to evaluate who you are and where God is taking you, *if you do not grasp that principle, you will miss it all.*

The less successful you have been; the more problems you have had; the less self-sufficient you are...the more chance God has to use you. And no concept runs more at cross-purposes with the world, and *even by and large with the church* than this.

THE PRINCIPLES

Let's begin by looking at the basic principles that make up this doctrine. In our last study, we looked at Joseph's life and saw that God took the very things you and I would consider as life's tragedies and worked them together to accomplish His will. In today's study, we are going to attempt to see *why* He chose that particular course, and *how* that affects our ability to live a life free from bitterness over the past.

I believe that there are five principles revealed in Scripture that must be memorized and understood before we can grasp the reality of this truth. Let's take them one at a time.

The Principle of Unshared Glory

Principle number one involves the glory of God. It is the reason God chooses to use weakness rather than strength. We have just finished a study of this concept, so we will not review it.

I am the Lord, that is my Name, and my glory I will not give to another. (Isaiah 42:8)

Now why does God not share His glory? Is He selfish? Of course not, His very name is Love...the antithesis of selfishness. He so loved us He *gave Himself for us*. Is He proud? Of course not. He is the antithesis of pride as well For our sakes, *He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death*. So God cannot desire glory because of anything it does for Him. God will not share His glory, *because to do so would be detrimental to us*.

To the degree we share God's glory, *to that degree we are less dependent on Him*. And since we were created in His image, (to be perfectly obedient to His character and totally dependent on His power) any deviation from that dependence causes us to

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miss God's best. Jesus said "I do always those things that please the Father." He was never independent of Jehovah; therefore, He always experienced God's best.

So the reason God does not share His glory with us is because to do so would make us co-gods and rob us of the very reason we are here. We are here only to reflect God's glory through total dependence and praise. Anything we can do apart from God robs Him of that glory, makes us *independent*, and cheats us of joy, peace, power, and victory. It would have been far easier for God to have let Adam share His glory. It would have been far easier to let Eve share His glory. But to do so would not have been fair to them. They weren't God. And to act as though they were took them out of the center of the protective sphere of God's grace and robbed them of their rightful inheritance. He loves us too much to let that happen.

So God made us to reflect glory, not to wear glory. And that premise is once again, at the center of this doctrine.

The Principle of Choosing Weak Ones

The second principle then, builds on the first. Because God's glory was not meant to be shared, He chose to build His church *primarily* by choosing men and women who, in and of themselves, had nothing to boast about. That's why His Son worked as a carpenter. That's why He chose common fishermen, tax-collectors, shepherds and farmers to bring in the kingdom. He could have chosen princes and kings and rabbis and priests. But He needed men who were not impressed with themselves, so they could be impressed with Him. Let's let Paul say it. He does it so much better.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom the world?

For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

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Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom,
But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews
and foolishness to Gentiles

But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks,
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and
the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called.
Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many
were influential; not many were of noble birth.

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the
wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the
strong.

He chose 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 (or glory) before Him.

It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has
become for us wisdom from God-that is, our righteousness,
holiness and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written: "let him who boasts (or glories) let
it be in the Lord."
(I Corinthians 1:18-31)

There are your credentials for greatness, beloved. The less likely you were to succeed, humanly speaking, the more likely you were for God to choose to use you. If you are too impressed with your wisdom to recognize His, you're useless to the kingdom. If you're too influential with men to need the acceptance of God, you'll never come to that state of dependence needed for Him to work through you. So He deliberately reached out to those who were *nothing* in order to bring to nothing the world's concepts of what something is.

So your parentage was insignificant by the world's standards? More than Mary and Joseph? Try being born in a stable to less than noble parents while the world whispered about the very birth itself. So your childhood was marked by the absence of the spectacular? More than being raised in a carpenter's shop? So you suffered rejection among your own? So did Jesus. "He came to His own, but His own received Him not." So your most trusted friends let you down? Try being arrested for a crime you did not commit and have the men you poured your soul into all flee for

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their lives; your appointed spokesman deny he ever knew you. So you haven't had the best accommodations The Son of Man had no place to lay His head. Nothing to boast about? That's what God ordained for His own Son. By man's standards, Jesus was nothing. Attractive? Isaiah wrote of Him "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." A happy life? Isaiah went on "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering, Like one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, and we esteemed him not."

Beloved, that's how God chose to reveal His Son, and that's who God chose to build the kingdom. The weak, the foolish, the average, the unsure ones. *That no flesh should glory in His presence.* If, therefore, you are angry with God because of who your parents were or weren't, how you were treated as a child, the injustices life has allowed, your looks (or lack of same), your education, (or lack of same), your popularity (or lack of same), you've missed it. *Those are your credentials for greatness.*

God is looking for men and women who haven't made it on their own, so He can remake them *just like Him.* What better deal can you ask for? That means that the very things that you put yourself down for, are the very things that qualified you for spiritual usefulness. They created a need. And until you knew you had a need, you had no need of God.

He painted a portrait of this concept in the Old Testament by choosing tiny, insignificant little Israel to be His representative to planet earth. He could have chosen a mighty empire, supported by a strong government, capable leaders, and an unbeatable army. But instead, He wrote in these words to Israel:

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people; for you were the least of all peoples.

But because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers.

(Deuteronomy 7:7)

That's the basis for your calling and mine. It was not the we were the most desirable from man's point of view. We may well have been the least. If the world were choosing up sides for the game of life, we might well have been the last ones chosen. We might have been voted "least likely to succeed" in the yearbook

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of Wonder World University. Praise God. Now if we succeed at *anything*, who's to get the glory? So our undesirability and apparent unusability is in fact God's mark of ownership in our lives. We are to praise Him the more for every sign of human weakness, that every kind of divine power might be ours.

The Principle of Losing Strength to Become Strong

But it goes even beyond that. Not only does God choose the weak, the foolish, the unknown, and the despised to be His mirrors to reflect His grace, He chooses even to remove from us some of the very things we tend to glory in to further heighten our need of Him. Paul, of course, was once again, our primary example. But if you watch Moses, Abraham, Elijah, Elisha, Gideon, Joshua, and all the others God mightily used, you will see that principle just as clearly. Paul, however, not only typified it, He explained it.

Once again, He was writing to the Corinthians. Oh, praise God for the Corinthians. Without their bent for error, we would not know all of the practical truths that so penetrate our consciousness as we read those two letters. These guys were weakness personified. If you could do it wrong, the Corinthians did it. They interfered with God's building the body of Christ at every turn and *never even knew it*. They were filled with pride and contention. They thought they were the model growing church of their day. Trouble was, they were the model. But they were the model of "how not to do it". So Paul spent what seemed to be half of his journalistic journeys trying to confront them with the error of their ways and point them to the truth. "Oh, foolish Corinthians" he wrote. "Oh foolish Corinthians" indeed. And oh how many of us would have felt right at home in Corinth.

It was in II Corinthians 12 that Paul explained the weakness principle in its fullest. In chapter 11, he was explaining just how God had made his life trouble-free, worry-free, and problem-free. That is, how the Christian life is supposed to be, isn't it? Of course it's not. Here's his description of a typical month in the life of a carefree Christian.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in

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the open sea.

I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

I have labored and toiled without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food. I have been cold and naked.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

(II Corinthians 11:24-30; 12:5b NIV)

Paul is saying, "Life isn't easy; and I'm nobody special. The only thing I have to boast about is how weak I am apart from Christ." But, Paul goes on, "I had some spiritual experiences that were pretty great, and God's begun to use me. And subtly, ever so subtly, my nothingness began to fade into something. And so God had to do something about it."

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of satan, to torment me.

(II Corinthians 12:7)

Paul said, "God had to do something to put me in my place. I was beginning to lose consciousness of my nothingness. So God turned satan loose and let me receive an affliction. It was apparently both painful and humiliating. But without it, Paul would not be weak enough for God to be strong enough to do what He wanted to do through His life." Now I can relate to Paul. He didn't like it. And he complained about it to God. (Just the way we do) He goes on:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

(II Corinthians 12:8)

On three different occasions, Paul went into the prayer closet and claimed the power of God to remove the sickness. And he wasn't at all bashful or lacking in faith. He simply said, "Lord,

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take it away!” (That’s clear enough) But here’s God’s answer:

But He said, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness... (II Corinthians 12:9)

God said, “Paul you don’t understand. The weaker you are, the more you need Me. And the more you need Me, the more of my wonderful grace you experience.” Paul’s response?

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 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. (II Corinthians 12:9 continued)

Now if you are not into memorizing long passages, why not just try those last nine words. Say them over and over and over. “For when I am weak, *then* I am strong.” Literally, it might read, “When I am in pain, when I am sick, when I am tired, when I am under attack, when I am tested, when I am financially under pressure, emotionally under pressure, in any way under pressure, *then I am in the process of appropriating God’s strength as never before.* Therefore, I get excited about pressure. It means more grace. And more grace means more victory. And more victory means a greater ministry. And a greater ministry means more glory to God, which is why I am alive.

But it isn’t automatic. We have to choose. The very moment we awaken in the morning, and our legs won’t walk, and our bones creak, and our head aches, and our eyes won’t focus, and we don’t think we can face another day, we are on the brink of greatness. We are so weak, we can’t *in and of ourselves do anything.* We have two choices. We can mumble and grumble and moan and groan and try on our own to make it. Or we can cry out to God, “When I am weak, then I am strong. Dear God, pour your strength through me.” He will. He delights to. He said so. He said, the weaker you are, the better off you are, spiritually speaking.

So that’s the third principle of weakness. The first is that God will not share His glory, because it’s not good for us for Him to do so. The second is that, because of that He chose out some of life’s “weak ones” from which to build His church that no flesh should glory in his presence. The third is that as those who were nothing begin to see Him at work and begin to share His glory, He often must send us thorns in the flesh; sharp objects that

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bring about despair and dependence, *until we come to rest in Him once more*. So important is this in His scheme of things that He has told us to “glory” in them...to get all excited about them, because they are His tickets to spiritual success.

We Then, Are to Actually Glory In Our Weaknesses.

Now if you are paying attention, our loving God just removed 100% of our justification for complaining in this life, and by making the “spiritual switch” replaced it with a “reverse” weapon. A reverse weapon is anything satan uses against us turned back on him. If every time we are weak or discouraged or defeated, we cry out “When I am weak, then I am strong”, the very things satan designs to destroy us cause us to appropriate the very power he is hiding from us. And if, as a result of that release of divine authority we begin to praise and adore and glorify God, satan is a goner. He means it for evil. God means it for good. And the second we turn the curse into a blessing, satan is crushed once again under the foot of Messiah.

So that’s the fourth principle. It is that we should actually glory in our weaknesses, that the power of Christ might rest upon us. Not only do we come to accept our difficulties with peaceful resignation, we begin to look forward to them with joyful anticipation, for they are road signs along the highway of life that say “Caution: Blessing Ahead...Do not interfere!” It’s not a “Praise the Lord Anyway” theology. It’s a praise God *especially* theology. It takes the “all things of life” one step further and shows us why God does it. *These “weaknesses” become the foundation of our message and thus of our ministry.*

So then, not only are we not to complain about our weaknesses, we are to actually glory in them, *because these very weaknesses, according to Paul, are the foundation stones of our unique life message and the stepping stones to our unique life ministry.*

Paul’s ministry was one of encouragement and edification. That ministry developed out of a life filled with imprisonments, beatings, sickness, rejection, and weariness. Had Paul been catapulted into prominence as the Pastor of the First Church of Jerusalem, noted for his great oratory genius, his physical attractiveness, and his charismatic personality, his message would not have been the same. God needed a man who could

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relate the blows of Satan to the grace of God. So he made him weak, so he could make him strong. And when Paul finally figured it all out, he began *to actually glory in it*. He actually began to see that who Paul was, was the result of what Paul had suffered. And who Paul was, was God's man of the hour for a particular ministry. Had Paul not understood his calling; had he become a spiritual dropout, assuming that God had forsaken him by letting him suffer, you and I would not have that gigantic portion of Scripture we call the epistles, or that incredible example in Scripture of the deeper Christian life.

THE PROCESS

How about you? Where are you today in your understanding of the principle of the blessings of weakness? Do you grasp the fact that the very things you tend to hate about yourself or about your past are the very ingredients God has designed to make up the message of your life? Have you yet discovered that your strengths are potential stumblingblocks to God's strength? Have you come to realize *experientially* that the natural talents and abilities God has given to you sometimes must be taken away, or rendered ineffective *until you come to see them as nothing*? Only then can He give them back to you, and allow you to use them; for only then will the glory belong to God. Do you not see that the degree to which you glory in your good looks, your education, your religious training, your athletic ability, your personality, *even your spirituality*, to that degree you are interfering with God's working in your life?

The Apostle Paul understood this principle well and described how others felt about him,

For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.

(II Corinthians 10:10)

Paul's physical attractiveness and physical abilities did nothing for his ministry. Nothing that is, but point to the awesomeness of God. When they looked at him, they saw the grace of God. Why? God's strength was made perfect in weakness.

As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.

Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if

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I were an angel of God.

(Galatians 4:13,14)

Paul was God's man because of the presence of God in his life; and he admitted that the presence of God in his life was proportionate to his understanding that in and of himself there was nothing worthy of the world's acclaim. So God gave Paul a thorn; a discomfort, and apparently a noticeable distraction as well, just to be sure what men saw when they saw him was Jesus.

Now, do you still wish you looked like a movie star? Do you still covet the brain of a genius? Do you still wish for the talents you do not have? Why? It is *your weaknesses God is after*. And the more of them you have, the more God has to work with. Praise Him for how you are; it is by divine design. Praise Him for what has happened to you; it was to get you to your knees. Praise Him for your unfulfilled dreams. They have given you the vision to see His purpose beyond yours.

You say, "But you don't understand. I have no testimony; I've gone bankrupt" or "I've failed by the world's standards". What a beautiful empty vessel you are, then, ready to be filled with the God of grace. Listen to Hebrews 11:34. There we are in the midst of reviewing God's hall of faith...the listing of the Holy Spirit of those whose lives have become living legends because their confidence in God made them glorify God when all else failed. There was a common denominator, and it might not be what you would suspect. It reads like this:

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets:

Who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,

Quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed armies.

(Hebrews 11:32-34)

Here is the honor roll of Scripture. They were called by God, *not because of who they were; but because of who they weren't*. They couldn't. Their only hope was to trust in the one who could. *And as they did, their weakness turned to strength...and they became powerful in their God.*

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Their lives were not the success stories of their day. Verses 35-38 describes their common lot in life:

...others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.

Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.

They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.

They were too good for this world, wandering over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.

(Hebrews 11:35-38)

God called men and women who couldn't; then took them into the dungeons of life where the fact that they couldn't was crystal clear. And then, just as their weaknesses became pitifully apparent, God infused them with a strength so supernatural they moved mountains, divided waters, conquered cities, stopped ferocious man-eating lions in their tracks, and stood before princes and kings. And because they were weak, a God of infinite strength delivered them and received all the glory.

Paul clarified it in of II Corinthians 13, where he said this:

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in Him, yet by God's power, we will live with Him to serve you.

We are glad whenever we are weak,

(II Corinthians 13:3b,4,9a NIV)

To the world, the cross was a symbol of weakness. God came to earth to set up a kingdom, and then just as that kingdom was on the verge of attaining its apparent goal, God was killed. What could be weaker than the death of God? That's what the world was asking.

Paul answered. Had God not died, man could not live. So what *appeared to be weakness, was, in effect, the greatest strength ever known.* And had your dreams not died; your aspirations; your self-confidence, Christ in you could not have come alive as He has. Yes, to the world it is a sign of weakness. But that

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weakness is only the reflector through which they can eventually see the power of God. So He must increase. You must decrease. He must grow more prominent. You must grow less so. He must become everything. You must become nothing. His life must glow. Yours must fade into His.

The flesh hates it; because the flesh does not understand the concept of the blessing of weakness. It would rather imitate the world's strengths and attempt to give some of the credit to God in an act of magnitude. God will have none of that.

And your ministry is no exception. If you are masterful in your style, marvelous in your skills, magnanimous in your works, it means nothing. Paul wrote of his own ministry:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,

so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

(I Corinthians 2:1-5 NIV)

This man who we now look to as the greatest single example of God's power in a minister, may have had the ability to sway crowds and influence people apart from Christ, but when he began to be used of God, he became nothing. He came in weakness, with no knowledge of any power apart from God. His messages were not an example of man's wisdom, but of God's power through weak men.

And so this one, whose very life was the epitome of weakness became a giant portrait of the power of God. Like those in God's hall of faith in Hebrews 11, in his weakness, God became strong.

So take stock of your life today. Take *reverse inventory*. You say you're not awesome with words? You're not attractive to see? You're not strong in body? Your IQ is lower than all your friends? Your accomplishments on this earth amount to nothing? You, beloved, are a prime candidate for spiritual greatness. All those

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areas of nothingness give God a clear vessel to fill with Himself. You say your child isn't the star of the team or the belle of the ball? Don't complain. He or she may well be the next Apostle Paul. The voids in their lives are arenas of grace just waiting to be filled with God. And in heaven, it won't matter how rich they were, or how prominent they were. All that will matter is how wonderfully the strength of God poured through their weaknesses.

The choice is yours. You can spend the rest of your life seeing even your Christian experience through the lens of the world, coveting strength and power and riches, and striving to become what you aren't. Or you can come to understand at last the doctrine of the blessing of weakness. And understanding that, you can actually begin to *glory in your infirmities, your undesirable physical traits, your absence of charisma; the absence of physical abilities or mental capabilities.*

You can actually begin to say "Thank You, Lord" for the very things you've always wished were different, setting God free to take those very weaknesses and pour His strength through you.

The weaker we are, the stronger He is. The less of us there is to boast about, the more of Him there is to glory in. The less prominent we are, the more prominent He can be in us. Therefore, the less we think we have to be thankful for, *the more we have to praise God for.*

Yes, His ways are higher than ours. And aren't we glad they are?

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Oh, the blessing of weakness,
The joy that will be ours
When God takes these useless weeds
And turns them into flowers.

When God takes this "average" soul
Who has no claim to fame,
And, filling it with His great power,
Brings glory to His name.

Oh, the blessing of weakness,
When we have nothing to give,
Then God moves in and men see Him
And we begin . . . to live!

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Let's pray,

Father,

This is so difficult to grasp. It runs at odds with what the world around us tells us. But we choose to believe Your Word—the weaker we are the stronger You are.

Let us therefore learn, rather, even to glory in our weaknesses that the power of God may rest upon us.

In Jesus' name,

Amen

dtm DISCIPLESHIP TAPE MINISTRIES, INC.

10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230

210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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