



How Does the Weakness of the Cross Make Us Strong?

"When I am weak, then I am strong"; "power made perfect in weakness." Such verses are often cited as key to spiritual growth, but do we really understand what they are talking about? Can anyone ever understand?

Yes. If we couldn't understand it at all, God would not have told it to us. God does not waste words. It is a great mystery, but a mystery is not something we cannot understand at all, but something we cannot understand by our own reason, without God's revelation. It is also something we cannot understand wholly, but something we can understand partly. Partial understanding is not total darkness. "We see through a glass, darkly."

The key to the mystery of strength made perfect in weakness is the cross of Christ. Without the cross it is not a mystery but an absurdity, a darkness.

But non-Christians like the great Chinese mystic and poet Lao Tzo seem to have understood the mystery of strength made perfect in weakness quite profoundly, at least in some of its aspects, without knowing Christ or the cross.

Perhaps they understand a similar and related mystery but not quite the same one. Or perhaps they understand it through Christ and his cross too, though not consciously and explicitly. How do we know where the boundaries of the cross extend to? Its arms are very wide. Christ is "the light that enlightens every man who comes into the world" (Jn 1:9) by natural revelation, natural wisdom, and the natural law known by conscience. When a Lao Tzo, or a Socrates, or a Buddha arrive at a profound knowledge of some eternal truth, they do so by the light of Christ the eternal Logos, the pre-incarnate Word or revelation of God. He is the same *person*, but not with his human, incarnate *nature*. All truth is his truth.

But the *incarnate* Jesus is God's definitive revelation, God's face turned to us in utmost intimacy. We know far more of a person through his face than his back or his feet. So let's look at that final, definitive, total revelation of God that we have—Christ and his cross—to try to shed some light on our paradox of strength coming from weakness. Our question is: How does weakness make us strong through the cross? or, How does the weakness of the cross make us strong?

There are two questions here, not one. The first is theoretical and unanswerable. The second is practical and answerable.

The first question is: How does it work? By what supernatural, spiritual technology does the machine of weakness produce the product of strength? How does the cross work?

Theologians have been working on that one for nearly two thousand years, and there is no clear consensus in Christendom, no obviously adequate answer, only analogies. St. Anselm's legal analogy is of the devil owning us and Christ paying the price to buy us back. The early Church Fathers gave a cosmic battle analogy: Christ invaded enemy-occupied territory—first earth, then, on Holy Saturday, the underworld, and defeated the devil and his forces of sin and death. Then there is the Southern Free-Will Baptist preacher's delightfully simple Americanism: "Satan votes agin' ye, an' Jesus votes for ye, and ye cast the deciding vote." These metaphors are helpful, but

they are only symbols, likenesses. We hardly know how electricity works, how can we know how redemption works?

A second question, however, is more definitely answerable. That is the practical question: How should I live; how should I behave in relation to weakness? How should I enact the cross in my life? For the cross is in my life. It is not a freak but a universal truth incarnated, not merely a once-for-all event outside me in space and time, in Israel in A.D. 29, separated from me by eight thousand miles and two thousand years, but also a continuing event within me, or rather I within it.

There are two equal and opposite errors in answering the question: How shall I enact this mystery of the cross in my life? They are humanism and quietism, activism and passivism. Humanism says that all is human action, that we must fight and overcome weakness, failure, defeat, disease, death, and suffering. We must overcome the cross. But we never do, in the end. Humanism is Don Quixote riding forth on a horse to fight a tank.

Quietism, or fatalism, says simply: Endure it, accept it. In other words, don't be human. *Go* "gentle into that good night," do *not* "rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Christianity is more paradoxical than the simple no of humanism or the simple yes of fatalism. There is the same paradoxical doubleness in the Christian answer to poverty, suffering, and death. Poverty is to be fought against and relieved, yet it is blessed. Helping the poor to escape the ravages of their poverty is one of the essential Christian duties. If we refuse it, we are not Christians, we are not saved (Mt 25:41-46). Yet it is the rich who are pitied and pitiable, as Mother Teresa so startlingly told Harvard: "Don't call my country a poor country. India is not a poor country. America is a poor country, a spiritually poor country." It is very hard for a rich man to be saved (Mt 19:23), while the poor in spirit, that is, those willing to be poor, those detached from riches, are blessed (Mt 5:3).

The same paradoxical double attitude is found in Christianity toward death. Death is on the one hand the great evil, the "last enemy" (Cor 15:26), the mark and punishment of sin. Christ came to conquer it. Yet death is also the door to eternal life, to heaven. It is the golden chariot sent by the great king to fetch his Cinderella bride.

Suffering is a paradox too. On the one hand it is to be relieved, on the other hand it is blessed. The saints are saints mainly for two reasons: they have heroic love and compassion for their neighbors, that is, they give their all to *relieve* others' sufferings. But they also love God so much that they *accept* and offer up their own sufferings heroically and even joyfully. They both fight and accept suffering. They are more active than humanists and more accepting than quietists. All three—poverty, death, and suffering—are forms of weakness. The problem of weakness is the more general, universal problem. Suffering, for instance, is not in itself as intolerable as weakness, for we willingly embrace pains like childbirth if only they are freely chosen, in our power—but even small pains and inconveniences, like late planes or stubbed toes, we find outrageous and intolerable if they are imposed on us against our will. We would rather run a mile freely than be forced to run a block. Kierkegaard says, "If I had a humble servant who, when I asked him for a glass of water, brought instead the world's costliest wines perfectly blended in a chalice, I would fire him, to teach him that true pleasure consists in getting my own way."

Freud's maverick disciple Alfred Adler parted company with his teacher on the central issue of what the most basic human desire is; it is not pleasure, as Freud thought, but power, Adler discovered.

Even St. Thomas Aquinas implicitly agrees, for when he reviews and eliminates all the idolatrous and inadequate candidates for the position of supreme human happiness, all the things we pursue instead of God, he notes that we are attracted to power because it seems most godly. (This, however, is deceptive because God's power *is* his goodness.) Power is St. Augustine's answer to why he stole hard, inedible, and unsellable pears as a boy. He wanted not pleasure or money but power—the power not to be under a law of "thou shalt not steal," the power to disobey the law and apparently get away with it. We rankle under restraint.

Ah, but our very being is restraint. We are, after all, only creatures, not the creator; finite through and through, not infinite; mortal, not immortal; ignorant, not all-knowing. All these are forms of weakness, and not accidental and avoidable weaknesses but weaknesses innate and essential to our very being as creatures. In resenting the restrictions of weakness we resent our own being.

Before we even begin to try to get *out* of our problem of strength out of weakness, we must first look more deeply and clearly *into* it. There are three related but distinct weaknesses to look at.

First, there is the weakness of being second, playing second fiddle, responding rather than initiating, following rather than leading, obeying rather than commanding. Our resentment against this is totally foolish, for God himself includes this weakness! From all eternity the Son obeys the Father. What he did on earth, he did in eternity. "He did, in the wild weather of his outlying provinces, what he had done eternally in home in glory," as George MacDonald put it. No one was ever more obedient than Christ.

Therefore obedience is not a mark of inferiority. To respond, to sing second voice, to play second fiddle, is not demeaning, for the Christ who is very God of very God, was the perfect obeyer. In this we have one of the most astounding and radical revolutions the world has ever heard, and has not yet understood. Women still resent being women, that is, biologically receptive to male impregnation and needing male protection and leadership, because they think this makes them inferior. Children resent having to obey parents, and citizens resent having to obey civil authority, for the same reason: they think this obedience marks their inferiority. It does not.

Christ was and is equal to the Father in all things; yet Christ obeyed and is even now obeying the Father. Difference in role does not mean difference in worth. The "weakness" of obedience comes not from inferiority but from equality in value.

Children are also to obey parents. Yet children are not the moral or spiritual inferiors of parents. The command to obey does not demean but liberates—*if* we are talking about the obedience "in Christ." In the world, power rules, and the strong impose themselves on the weak. There, obedience is indeed a mark of inferiority in power. But not in the church. Here, everything is different: "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:25-28).

Jesus was equal to the Father, yet obeyed. If that simple but revolutionary fact were understood and appreciated, we would have a new world—not the ancient world of slavery and oppression,

nor the modern Western world of uprootedness and disorder, of unnatural levelling and resentful competition. We would have instead *love*.

Love makes strength. The "weakness" of Christ in obeying the Father made him strong because it was the obedience of love. Had Christ disobeyed the Father's will, as Satan tempted him to do in the wilderness, he would have lost his strength, as Samson did, and weakly succumbed to his enemy. His obedience was a mark of his divinity. And we too: if we obey the Father completely, we are transformed into participants in the divine nature. For repentance, faith, and baptism, the three instruments of that transformation, are all forms of obedience. We are *commanded* to repent, believe, and be baptized.

A **second** form of "weakness" is proper only to us, not to Christ, but this second form, too, is not to be resented. It is our finitude, our creatureliness. We were created. We are therefore dependent on God for everything, for our very existence and all that flows from it. Nothing we have is our own because our very being is not our own. God owns us. (Suicide is therefore theft.) We have no rights over against God. No creature does, not even the greatest archangel.

No creature is omnipotent, nor is any creature totally impotent. Even an angel cannot create a universe or save a soul, and even a grain of sand can manifest God, can irritate a toe and a mind, and can decide a battle and a war.

Not even in eternity will any creature exhaust God and finish the exploration into his love. God will always be *more*. We will never lose the incomparable pleasure of humility, of hero-worship. How silly to resent that "weakness."

And how silly to resent God's and nature's compensation for that weakness, namely mutual interdependence, solidarity, cooperation, unselfishness. We bear each other's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). I think the phrase "law of Christ" means more than just obeying Christ's commands; I think it means living Christ's life. I think the law of Christ is like the law of gravity rather than like the law of the land here. Falling apples fulfill the law of gravity, and bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ.

Marriage is the prime example of bearing each other's burdens. Men need women, as God observed at creation: "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). And women need men. Both often resent that need today. That is rebellion against the law of Christ, which is inscribed in the law of human nature. The very image of God is identified in Genesis 2:27 as "male and female."

Finally, there is a third form of weakness, which it is right to rail against: the weakness of sin and its effects. It is good to be finite, but not to be fallen. We are all abnormal, not in our natural state. We do well here to rebel against what we are, for what we are is not natural, not what God designed. Our dissatisfaction with our moral and spiritual weakness implicitly testifies to our knowledge of something better—of a standard by which we measure ourselves, our lives, and our world, and find them wanting. It is our memory of Eden that causes our present lover's quarrel with the world, with this wilderness "east of Eden" (Gn 3:24).

It is because we are morally weak that we are commanded to pray "lead us not into temptation," that is, into trials and difficulties. For we all have our breaking point. Unless God had shortened the days of the Great Tribulation, even the saints would not endure and be saved (Mt 24:22).

We are not only morally weak but also intellectually weak: ignorant, foolish, stupid. Sin is not *mere* foolishness as Plato taught, and certainly its cause is not only ignorance as Plato taught, but while ignorance is not the *cause* of sin, it *is* the *effect* of sin.

Also our body is weak because of sin. Once the soul declared independence from God, the source of all life and power, the body became weak because it became more independent from the soul, the source of its life. Death is thus a necessary result of sin. It is like a magnet. God is the magnet that holds two iron rings, body and soul, together. Take away the magnet, and the rings fall apart. Once we are apart from God, what should we do but die? And once we are with God, what should we do but live forever?

We should accept obedience to the Father as our first "weakness," and we should accept being finite as our second "weakness," but should we also accept our third "weakness," our sinfulness? Yes and no. Sin is like cancer. When we have cancer, we should accept that fact with our intellect but not with our will. We should accept the truth, but not the goodness of the cancer, because cancer is *not* good. Accept it theoretically, but not practically. On the practical level we should fight it. The same is true of sin.

People are often confused about this simple point. Even a great mind like Carl Jung seems to descend into this deadly confusion when he tells us to "accept our own dark side, our shadow." No! God had to die and suffer the horrors of hell to save us from that dark side. How dare we "accept" it when the Holy One has declared eternal war against it? How dare we be neutral when God takes sides? How dare we play Chamberlain at Munich to the inventions of hell? Only one fate is proper for such spiritual wimpiness. Look it up in Revelation 3:16. What God has vomited up, let no one try to eat.

I now venture into deeper, more perilous areas of our problem.

Our weakness becomes our strength when God enters into our weakness. Like a doctor anesthetizing a patient so that he ceases to be an agent and becomes a patient, becomes passive, so that he does not hop about on the operating table, God weakens us so that he can perform operations on us that would otherwise be impossible.

This is especially true of death. Death is radical surgery, and we must be radically anesthetized for it. God wants to penetrate into our heart, our innermost being. Our heart must stop beating for that operation to take place.

The same principle works in lesser ways before death, in little deaths. God has to knock us out first in order to rescue us from drowning, for we flail about foolishly. He has to slap our hands empty of our toys to fill them with his joys.

So far, so good. That principle is fairly well known. But when we turn to the mystics and read their strange language about "becoming nothing," the consummation of weakness, we shake our heads in incomprehension and suspicion. Yet the mystics' sense of "nothingness" before God is nothing but the same principle taken to its logical conclusion. If God's strength fills us when we are weak, and God's greatness fills us when we are little, then God's all fills us when we are nothing.

But we must distinguish two kinds of "nothing." Oriental mystics seem to say that the soul is "nothing" because it is not real. They see through the "illusion" of individuality. They seem to say we are not really creatures at all, but God. For all is God if you are a pantheist. That is simply false, for God has created us distinct from himself.

Instead of this, the "nothingness" of the Christian mystic is the nothingness of no self-will and no self-consciousness. "Thy will, not mine, be done" is the fundamental formula for all sanctity, not just that of the mystics. There is nothing particularly mystical about it. But when, ravished by God in a foretaste of heaven's beatific vision, the graced mystic also loses all consciousness of himself, he seems to himself to be nothing, because he is no longer looking at himself, only at God. But, of course, he is still there, for there must be a self to exercise the act of self-forgetfulness. Who's forgetting? Not God, surely, for omniscience does not forget.

The Christian mystic experiences a bliss in this total weakness to the point of nothingness, for it is total trust, total relaxing in God's arms, being grasped by Abba, Daddy. All worry and self-concern melt away. This is total humility. As pride is the first sin, the demonic sin, so humility is the first virtue.

Pride does not mean an exaggerated opinion of your own worth; that is vanity. Pride means playing God, demanding to be God. "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven," says Satan, justifying his rebellion, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. That is the formula for pride. Pride is the total "my will be done."

Humility is "thy will be done." Humility is focused on God, not self. Humility is not an exaggeratedly low opinion of yourself. Humility is self-forgetfulness. A humble man never tells you how bad he is. He's too busy thinking about *you* to talk about himself. That's why humility is such a joy and so close to the beatific vision, where we will be so fascinated with God that we forget ourselves completely, like the mystics. Combining these two things—the will's total "not my will but thine be done" and the mind's total self-forgetfulness—we can perhaps begin to understand how the mystics find incomparable joy in becoming nothing. It is the mysterious thrill we feel when we sing to the Holy Spirit, "Blow, blow, blow till I be/ But the breath of the Spirit blowing in me."

It is very hard to talk about this, about ecstasy. It sounds silly sometimes. It is easily misunderstood. It cannot be explained in ordinary language. It is like being in love. It *is* being in love. It is not an idea, to be explained. It is an experience, to be lived, or at least empathized with, open-mindedly and open-heartedly.

How is the cross related to this? In addition to saving us from sin, the cross manifested the nature of God's Trinitarian ecstasy, the Spirit of self-giving love between Father and Son, the very secret of God's inner life. The cross which God planted like a sword in the earth of Calvary was held by the hilt in heaven. Heaven forged its blade. The cross made war on sin and death in time, but it expressed peace and life in eternity.

"Thy will, not mine, be done" is not only the hardest thing we can do (that is what sin has done to us), but it is also the most joyful and liberating thing we can do (that is what grace has offered us). A trillion experiments have proved one point over and over past all doubt: that whenever we aim at happiness as if we were God, by exerting our power and control, we end up in unhappiness, whether we get the thing we wanted or not. For if we get it, we are bored; and if we do not, we are frustrated. But whenever we become nothing, become utterly weak, whenever we

say and mean with our whole heart, "Not my will but thine be done," we find the greatest happiness, joy, and peace that is ever possible in this world. Yet despite the trillions of experimental confirmations of this truth, we keep trying other experiments with happiness outside of God and outside of submission to God, thereby repeatedly selling our birthright of joy. In other words, we are insane. Sin is insanity.

The heart of Islam is the powerful truth we have just seen. "Islam" means two things: "submission" and "peace" (cognate with "shalom"). Submission to God ("Allah," "The One") is the way to peace. Dante put it into five words in a line T.S. Eliot called the most perfect and profound line in all literature: "In his will, our peace."

This weakness is the very power of God, the secret of God's omnipotence. God is not omnipotent because he can create a universe or perform miracles. God is omnipotent because he is love, because he can yield to himself, because he can be weak. No theist but a Christian understands the secret of omnipotence. A God who is only one cannot be totally omnipotent.

Only the Trinity, only the God who can continually empty himself to himself, can be omnipotent.

We usually think of the Father as the source of omnipotence, but all three persons are necessary for omnipotence. Omnipotence arises only when we come to the Spirit, who *is* the love between Father and Son for each other. When this Spirit enters us, the whole Trinity enters us, and lives his life in and through us. The glorious cross of the eternal Trinity and the bloody cross of Calvary mingle in our souls and lives as we participate in the joy of divine love and in the suffering of divine redemption.