

Power in Weakness

“Power is made perfect in weakness.” “Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” Now, on days when I can just barely drag myself around, this sounds encouraging, but also baffling. What in the world does Paul mean here? I am going to argue that there are two things that he *doesn't* mean, in order to clear the way for articulating what I think he *does* mean. This isn't just a matter of valorizing weakness by saying how great it is. Sad to say, a weak performance in a presidential debate doesn't just magically become a kind of strength. Second, it isn't just a matter of turning the tables, of seeing to it that the strong become weak and the weak become strong, however appealing this might be to the weak. Rather, it's about understanding what is needed for genuine strength, a strength that is ever-attentive to need and vulnerability, a strength that serves and empowers the weak.

The 19th-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously accused Christianity of being a “slave morality.”¹ In Nietzsche's view, the weak masses had banded together against the natural, life-affirming philosophy that values health and strength. Instead, they exalted weakness, suffering, and self-sacrifice. This reversal of values was in Nietzsche's view an utter disaster. And we might think that he has a point. Why glorify weakness? Why see it as a badge of honor? Wouldn't we, wouldn't anyone, rather be strong? Healthy? Whole? Isn't there in fact a danger here that this idea will be used to keep the oppressed and marginalized from pushing for social justice and empowerment? Instead of more resources, they are assured, “blessed are the poor,” “blessed are the meek.”

Nietzsche has his finger on something here, but what he has his finger on is only a partial truth. And partial truths are dangerous. Paul's claim that power is made perfect in weakness is not a mere glorification of weakness. So let's dig deeper. Nietzsche diagnoses what he considers a disastrous reversal of values in Christianity. Meanwhile, Biblical scholars have identified a major theme in the Hebrew Bible, continuing on into the New Testament, of the “reversal of fortunes.” So let's look a bit at this reversal of fortunes.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887.

There is a striking pattern in the Hebrew Bible. God chooses the younger sons. God favors the widows. God attends to the childless women. God chooses a weak and insignificant nation as God's chosen people. That is to say, God chooses those lacking in social capital, social power and prestige as instruments of God's plans. And lo and behold, the younger sons get the inheritance. The widows receive care and support. The childless women become mothers. Mary's Magnificat echoes this "reversal of fortunes" theme, forging a connection between God's pattern of unlikely election and Jesus' birth as a poor, powerless, provincial infant:

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1)

Within liberation theology, this theme of the reversal of fortunes is spoken of as the "preferential option for the poor." God loves all of God's children. But God acts to save the hungry, the lowly. And surely, the expectation that God would act as God had acted before, on behalf of the poor and downtrodden, has served to sustain hope, has allowed people to endure hardship and oppression that would otherwise have broken their spirits.

Importantly, though, and contrary to Nietzsche, this is not just a story of passively accepting weakness, suffering, and sacrifice. It is a story of empowerment and transformation. It is a story of how a tongue-tied Moses established a life-giving rule of law, of how timid prophets learned to hold abusive kings responsible for their exploitative deeds, of how fearful disciples came out from behind closed doors, spread good news, set up caring institutions across

the Roman Empire, and began the slow, long work of building a better world, equipped by faith, hope, and love.

Christianity is not, then, about the glorification of weakness. It is about the *empowerment* of the weak. So why, once again, is Paul talking about power being made perfect in weakness? This is not *simply* a matter of the reversal of fortunes. Let's remind ourselves of the details here. Paul starts out by telling the Corinthians of a person who was caught up to the third heaven and given all sorts of exceptional revelations. He tells them nothing of the revelations, however. And while he speaks initially in the third person, he seems to be dropping hints that he is speaking of himself. Yet he distinguishes between the recipient of revelations, of whom he says he could potentially boast, and himself, insisting that he will not boast on his own behalf, except of his weaknesses. He hastens to add, though, that if he *wished* to boast he certainly could do so; he would not be a fool, for he would be speaking the truth. When he goes on to say that he was given a mysterious thorn in the flesh to keep him from being too elated, perhaps we can be forgiven for thinking that he is still rather full of himself, and the thorn in his flesh has perhaps not quite finished doing its work.

But I think in fact that Paul is rehearsing for our common benefit the insidious way in which we become inflated by the thought of ourselves as specially favored, specially endowed, or specially chosen. He is turning the screw one more time on this theme of the reversal of fortunes. For those who once upon a time in one way or another *were* the weak, the poor, the oppressed, are in no way immune from being corrupted by power and well-being. As care ethicist Joan Tronto has noted, and as empirical studies have substantiated, "human beings who enjoy . . . privilege risk becoming less and less capable of competent care, less emotionally comfortable with close proximity to vulnerability and weakness, less attentive and responsive to need, and less responsible for themselves and others."²

² Tronto's view is discussed here by Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Having* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 139. See also social psychology studies discussed here: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-wealth-reduces-compassion/>

Power is made perfect in weakness, in that the kind of power that makes us insensitive to the needs and vulnerabilities of others is a kind of power that *needs* deflating, that *needs* to be punctured by a thorn. The kind of power that is made perfect in weakness, in contrast, is the kind of power that remains sensitive to others, that remains caring, that remembers the ultimate vulnerability and finitude we all share and is not content with private well-being. Cultivating this kind of sensitivity goes beyond any mere reversal of fortunes. It is not a mere turning of the tables, any more than it is a glorification of weakness. It is this that is true empowerment. And it is, of course, the power made visible by Jesus on the cross.

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Proper 9, Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 7, 2024

2 Samuel 5:1–5, 9–20

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

Mark 6:1–13