

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

have men seen or imagined a character which it would have been better worth their while to detain on earth, if they could, age after age, to be a fountain of health for our worn humanity. *It is certain that this very Man lives on, unchanged, in God.* To Him, therefore, will we still pray. Not now from the pebbles of an earthly beach through the scant light of dawn does his figure loom or his voice reach us where we toil disheartened like the Seven. But when we faint at our long task and look up like them, or when we kneel heart-broken for sin, or when we lie crushed and weeping in utter loneliness, how often does there come floating down across the wide spaces, and past the close array of the pure and blessed, the same familiar Voice that used to speak on earth,—“Fear not: it is I. Thy sins are forgiven thee. Let not your heart be troubled.” And our heart whispers back again, “It is the Lord!”

J. OSWALD DYKES.

---

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS.

2 CORINTHIANS XII. 9.

WHAT St. Paul's “thorn in the flesh” was, or, rather, what his “*stake* in the flesh” was,—for so the word ought to be translated,—it is still impossible to determine. The Fathers of the early Church concluded it to be some bodily ailment, as, for instance, “a severe headache.” Some of the later Fathers supposed it to be the opposition he encountered from the enemies of the faith, such an opposition as they themselves had constantly to brave. The monks of the Middle

Ages pronounced it to have been that sting of sensual desire by which they were tormented in their solitary cells. Luther thought it was the spiritual conflict, the conflict with the great enemy of souls, which he himself had to wage. And now, again, the Commentators are, as a rule, reverting to the original theory,—that of some severe and disabling physical malady.

No other theory seems to meet the requirements of the case. For St. Paul's infirmity was "an infirmity *in the flesh*." It must have caused him the most severe and excruciating pain, or he would not have represented himself as writhing under it in an agony comparable with that of a hapless wretch impaled on a stake. It must have impeded him in his work, or threatened to impede him, by exciting disgust in those who saw and heard him, for he thanks his disciples in Galatia for not despising and loathing him for it, for not turning away from him and his message, but, contrariwise, receiving him as though he had been an angel of God. In short, from what he himself tells us of it, it could not have been any inward or spiritual trial; it must have been an excruciating pain, a pain he could not master and conceal, a pain which he loathed lest it should make him loathsome to others; a pain which hindered him in his work and threatened to disable him for it; and, moreover, a pain closely connected with, if not arising from, the abundance of his visions and labours.

These being the chief conditions to be met, it is impossible to assent to the hypothesis, else so

reasonable and welcome, that the malady to which he refers as "a stake in the flesh" was physical blindness; for that could hardly have kept him in a torture so keen and excruciating as the phrase implies: it is much more likely to have been, as the best modern Commentators incline to believe that it was, some pronounced and malignant form of nervous disease. No man could have lived his life of perilous adventure and impassioned service, no man could have had his heart in such a tumult of excited, and often conflicting, emotions, no man could have passed through ecstasies like his,—seeing visions which rapt him into the third heavens and rendered it impossible for him to tell whether he was in the body or out of the body, without making dangerous and exhausting demands on his nervous and branular energy. The nervous trouble may have shewn itself in various ways, at different times,—as, indeed, it is apt to do,—in racking pains, in melancholia, in paralysis or partial paralysis of the organs of speech, by enervating the muscles, by simulating various forms of organic disease, by perilously depressing the vital force, or even in frightful epileptic or cataleptic seizures. When he rose into his most earnest and impassioned utterances, when his spirit was most moved within him and his whole frame glowed with excitement, he may have been suddenly unable to articulate his words, or he may have fallen to the ground with foaming lips and writhing limbs, like a man smitten of God and afflicted. His liability to such seizures, and his dread of the horror and perplexity and disgust they could not fail to excite in those

who witnessed them, may well have constituted the burden which he felt himself unable to bear.

But whatever his malady was, and whatever terrible or loathsome forms it took, to his sensitive mind it was as a stake in the flesh. He felt that he had "the sentence of death in himself," so that he often "despaired of life." And, worse still, he could never be sure that his "infirmity" would not shew itself while he was urging men to be reconciled unto God, and so impede him in the work to which he had devoted his life. Hence he thrice solemnly besought "the Lord," *i.e.*, the Lord Jesus Christ, that this infirmity in the flesh, which was also, at least, in his eyes, a spiritual impediment, might depart from him. And thrice his prayer was at once refused and granted. Instead of delivering him from his agony, the Lord Jesus replied, "My grace is sufficient for thee : for strength is perfected in weakness." This was a new light to the afflicted Apostle. He had conceived of his infirmity as a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him ; Christ teaches him that it is an angel of God sent to minister to him. He had conceived of it as an indisputable and well-nigh fatal hindrance ; Christ teaches him that it is an indisputable and effectual assistance to him in his work ; that the strength which shines through weakness is the more conspicuous and the more impressive for the weakness through which it shines. But no sooner is St. Paul convinced that this *is* the meaning and purpose of his affliction than he begins to glory even in infirmity. He accepts, welcomes, rejoices in the very burden which but now seemed utterly intolerable to him.

From the Greek of this passage it is quite obvious that the words, "*strength is perfected in weakness*,"—there is no "my" in the Original,—are an axiom, or proverb, and that they are intended to convey a law of the spiritual life. They are intended to teach us that, at least in the spiritual province, and for all men as well as for St. Paul, there is a certain finishing and perfecting power in weakness. Not that we are to cherish our infirmities, to remain children when we ought to be men, to continue weak when we may be strong. To be weak is to be miserable. It is not weakness which our Lord commends, but strength struggling against and striving through weakness. Weakness of itself will perfect nothing. But when strength and weakness are combined in the same nature, the weakness may prove a fine discipline for the strength; it may induce watchfulness, prayer, a humble dependence on God, a tender consideration for the weaknesses of our fellows. Perfect strength is apt to be very far from perfect. It is apt to be rude, self-sufficient, untender. But a strength which has to contend with weakness, to pierce through hindrances, to shew itself through reluctant and imperfect organs, is likely to become a gracious and a friendly strength. If it is good to have a giant's strength but not to use it like a giant, then there is no discipline for strength like that of weakness.

In many ways we may see how weakness helps strength, and even becomes a kind of strength. What is it that makes every man ready to defend a woman or a child? Is it not their very weakness mutely appealing for help? Their weakness is in

some sort their strength, then ; and they are safe where a man, able to defend himself, might be in danger.

What is it that makes Peter even dearer to us than John, and David than Daniel, and Jacob at least less insipid than Isaac ? Is it not because in the former we see weaknesses such as we are conscious of in ourselves, and yet a divine strength striving through their weaknesses and transforming them into its own image ? Jacob and David and Peter have a stronger hold upon us than if they had never sinned—not *because* of their sins, however, but because of their passionate repentance and renunciation of their sins ; because, in them, we see strength slowly perfecting itself through weakness.

So, too, with St. Paul himself. He, if any man ever had, had the heavenly treasure in an earthen vessel ; but the excellency of the treasure was only the more clearly seen because of the earthliness, the flaws and imperfections, of the vessel that contained it. He was a very man, a man such as we are, and yet how much better and braver than we are ! We see our own weakness in him, but we also see a strength beyond our own perfecting itself in and by his weakness, and yet a strength which is not beyond our reach, since it is in the gift of Christ. This very infirmity, for example, against which he prayed, keen as a stake driven through the body, only endeared him the more to those who knew and heard him, and made the power that was in him the more evidently Divine. Insignificant in presence, feeble in speech, assailed by a cruel malady which would have rendered another man loathsome and despicable,—how should

*he* have spoken with such force, such passion, and to such wondrous purpose, had he not have been inspired from on high? how should he have compassed sea and land to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ, how have stood before king and governors, how have answered all gainsayers with a wisdom and spirit they could not withstand, how have pierced the hearts of myriads with compunction and have drawn them from their sins to the obedience of Christ, if God had not spoken by his mouth and wrought by his words? It was not his weakness that achieved these marvels; it was, rather, the strength of the "strong Son of God" which dwelt in him and turned his very infirmities to use. To the Galatians and the Corinthians he must have seemed as seems to us the skilful artist who draws the most exquisite and entrancing sounds from some rude instrument which will yield only harsh discords to our unskilled touch or breath; or, rather, he must have seemed like the rude pipe, or zithern, itself, played upon by some unseen and celestial power.

And to us he shews not less marvellous than to them. Traces both of his infirmity and of his strength are to be found in the Epistles that bear his name. Abrupt, rugged, often uncouth in style, they throb with a force of thought and passion such as we meet in no other writings. Lay your hand upon them, and you feel the Apostle's heart throbbing beneath them. No merely human words have won the ear and the heart of the world like his. Why? Because in him the strength of the Christ, who had been formed and cherished in him, was made perfect in and by his weakness; because we see how the



whole man was mastered and possessed by the power that dwelt in him, a power greater than he could adequately express. Shakespeare, paraphrasing St. Paul, says,—

“He that of greatest works is finisher,  
Oft does them by the weakest minister.”

But it is equally true that God often accomplishes his greatest works by ministers who, great in themselves, are all the greater because their greatness is cleft with infirmities through which we see the Divine power working within them.

And here we can hardly fail to remember that the axiom, the paradox, “Strength is perfected in weakness,” which fell from the lips of Christ, is true even of Christ Himself. *He* was “made perfect by the things which He suffered” when He “took our infirmities upon him and carried our weaknesses.” It is the glory of God shining through the humanity which He assumed that endears Him to us. He was greater when, for us men and our salvation, He laid aside the glory which He had with the Father before the world was, than when He was clothed with that glory. We should never have known God as He is had not Christ become less than He was—less, and yet more; God *in* man, but also God *and* man. It was by bringing God into the weaknesses of our mortal flesh that he brought God near to us, and home to us, and made us “partakers of his divine nature.” And though, in one sense, God is always the same, though his being and glory admit of neither diminution nor increase, yet, in another sense, is not God the greater and more glorious when his glory is reflected by a world which He has

redeemed, and we are made of one heart and one will with Him? Shakespeare would have been as great if he had never have written one of his poems or plays; and yet would he have been as great? As great a man, perhaps, though even that is doubtful, but not so great an influence. And God would have been as glorious in Himself had He never come down and revealed his glory to us; but his glory would have been unseen, unreflected: and is it nothing to Him that we should see and partake his glory? Looking on Christ, then, we may say, that even the Divine Glory was perfected in human weakness.

Again: if nothing even in the life of Christ became Him like the leaving it, nevertheless his mortal weakness was most apparent on the Cross. In that He shared our death, as well as our life, He shewed Himself to be in very deed a man such as we are. And yet, here also strength was perfected in weakness. The Cross of Christ draws and dominates the world. In the death of the Cross, in which He most shewed Himself a sharer of our infirmity, He also showed a Divine strength, a love stronger than death. It was by thus abasing himself that He won his power over us. As we contemplate the Sufferer hanging on the tree, dying that we might live, we are more profoundly touched and moved and impressed than as we conceive of Him sitting on the throne of heaven amid "the quirings of the young-eyed cherubim." We cannot say that his weakness *was* his strength; for had He died weakly—reluctantly, complaining of the injustice of God and the ingratitude of men—we could not have honoured

Him as we do. But we may say that in Him strength was perfected in weakness. It is because He humbled Himself to death, because He endured death so meekly, so willingly, for us, that we try to live for Him, and count it shame if we do not love Him who so loved us.

And as it was with Him, so also it is with those who truly believe in Him. It is not their weakness which we admire, but the strength which is exercised by weakness and triumphs over it; it is not the cloud, but the sun that shines through the cloud; it is not the veil, but the divine beauty which shews through the veil; it is not their infirmities, but the Grace which is able to subdue their very infirmities to its own quality and complexion. Just as all men admire the constant resolute spirit which triumphs over the languors of a sickly frame and exacts from it well-nigh impossible achievements, so we admire the gracious spirit which masters and subdues the lusts of the flesh, the gusts of passion and self-will, and forces from a poor and ungenial temperament the "white flower of a blameless life" rich with the fragrance of a genial charity. We expect wisdom from the wise, and courtesy from the well-born, and service from the strong, and a gracious bearing from those who have been reared amid the refinements of culture. But when we see, as in the Church we often may see, men and women who are gentle and kindly, serviceable and wise, although they are simple and unlettered and have known no culture save that of the School of Christ, how can we but admire the grace of God in them? It is these "little ones" who are really great; it is these weak

ones who are truly strong. Strength is perfected in their weakness.

And as in their life, so also in their death, they often move us to wonder and admiration, to self-abasement, and yet to hope. We see them lingering on through weeks or months of pain and weakness with an unforced and cheerful patience; longing to depart, yet ready to remain; grateful for the slightest alleviation of their sufferings, yet unmurmuring however sharp their pangs may be; welcoming every kind word or word of comfort that may be spoken to them, but quite unconscious that, in their cheerful resignation and uncomplaining meekness, they are preaching to all who stand by them homilies of a more pathetic and impressive eloquence than the tongue of the orator can frame. Who that has ever witnessed such a spectacle as this, and seen the frail yet constant spirit pass into the great darkness radiant with the light of faith and love and hope, has not thanked the God who has given such gifts to men as can perfect strength even in the hour of mortal weakness? Who has not blushed that, in the vigour and pride of life, *he* should be doing so little for God and man, while even the weak and dying were doing so much? And who has not conceived the hope that the Grace which makes them more than conquerors over death may prove sufficient for him when *his* strength shall be turned to weakness, and death, the angel with a veil, shall be sent to summon him away? CARPUS.

---