

Historical Reflection

Strength In Weakness

by Charles Haddon Spurgeon



My dear brethren - I greatly value your prayers, and I feel intensely grateful for that Benjamin's share in them which is ever my portion. I never consciously needed your intercessions more than I do just now, for I may say with the psalmist, "He weakened my strength in the way." After my severe illness, I am trembling like a child who is only just commencing to use his feet. It is with difficulty that I keep myself up; what can you expect from one who can scarcely stand? During the last six weeks, I have considered from day to day what to say to you, but nothing has come of my consideration. My meditations have been a failure. I have gone to the pits and found no water, and returned with my vessel empty. My brain has been so occupied with sympathy for the poor body that it has not been able to mount aloft with the eagle, nor even to plume its wings for the lower flight which I must needs attempt this morning. One thing, however, is clear,—I am in special communion with my subject, and can speak, as the good old people used to say, "experimentally." I cannot, however, draw much aid from that fact; but I cast myself upon the power Divine, which has so many times been displayed in weakness. "The Lord hath been mindful of us: He will bless us."

I draw my subject from the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10. "When I am weak, then am I strong." I shall not be guilty of uttering anything fresh upon my theme, neither shall I be able to say anything forcible upon it. The weak side of the experience will come out most observably; I can only pray that the strong side may not be hidden. My own feelings supply me with a commentary upon the text, and that is all the exposition I shall aim at. Our text is not only written in the Bible, but it is inscribed upon the lives of the saints. Though we are not apostles, and shall never be able to claim the inspiration of Paul, yet in this one particular we are as instructed as he was, for we have learned by experience, "When I am weak, then am I strong." This sentence has passed into a Christian proverb; it is a paradox which has; ceased to perplex any child of God; it is at once a warning and a consolation, bidding the strong behold. the weakness of power, and setting before the feeble the strength of weakness.

Let it be understood, at the commencement, that OUR TEXT IS NOT TRUE IN EVERY SENSE IN WHICH IT MIGHT BE READ. Some brethren are weak with an emphasis, and always so; but I have never yet discovered that they are strong, except in the sense of being headstrong and willful. If obstinacy be strength, they are champions; and if conceit be strength, they are gigantic; but in no other respect are they strong.

Many are weak, and yet not strong: we must alter the text concerning them, and say, "When they are weak, they are weakness itself." There is a kind of weakness which we may well dread, it may steal over us insensibly; but it brings no strength, no honor, no virtue with it; it is evil, only evil, and that continually. With it; come unfitness for holy service and want of success; and unless infinite grace shall avert the calamity, there will arise out of it failure of character and defeat in life. May we never know the weakness which befell Samson after he had told his secret, and had lost his locks! He could not say, "When I am weak, then am I strong;" but rather, "When I am shorn, I am weak as other men." See what befalls him! "The Philistines be upon thee, Samson!" He cannot now smite them; he cannot protect his own limbs; he cannot guard his own eyes; he cannot obtain his own liberty. Blinded, he toils at the mill; the hero of Israel is become a slave to the uncircumcised Philistines! Alas, that such weakness should be possible to a man who had slain his thousands, and laid them heaps upon heaps! Oh, that such weakness should be possible to a man who had carried the gates of Gaza away on his shoulders, posts, and bars, and all! And yet it was so, and it may be

so with us. "Howl, fir tree; for the cedar is fallen!"

Brethren, we must strive against all weakness which leads to sin, lest to us also some Delilah should bring destruction. Samson's unshorn locks denoted his Nazarite consecration, and *if we ever become weak through failure of consecration*, such weakness will be fatal to true usefulness. If the man who had "none of self, and all of God," grows downward till he craves for "some of self, and some of God," he is in a sad condition. If he, who once lived to win souls, now lives to win silver and gold, his money shall perish with him; if he, who once was famous for devotion to his Master, becomes his own master, he shall be infamous; for I trow that, even if we do nothing wrong in the eyes of man, it is wrong enough to have declined from whole-hearted service for God. It is this that demons laugh at, and that angels marvel at;—a man of God living like a man of the world! Even the Lord Himself stays a while to ask, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" The holy and the zealous grieve if they see a minister of Christ ministering to his own ambition. We are only strong as our consecration is perfect. Unless we live wholly for God, Gut strength will suffer serious leakage, and our weakness will be of that kind which degrades the believer till the ungodly scornfully inquire, "Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?"

We must, dear friends, never become weak in another sense, namely, *in our communion with God* David slackened his fellowship with God, and Satan vanquished him through Bathsheba; Peter followed afar off, and soon denied his Lord. Communion with God is the right arm of our strength; and if this be broken, we are weak as water. Without God, we can do nothing; and in proportion as we attempt to live without Him, we ruin ourselves. Alas! that the man who has seen the face of the Strong One, and has been made mighty, should forget where his great strength lieth, and so become sick and enfeebled! He who has suspended his visits to the banqueting-house of hallowed fellowship will be ill-fed, and will have to cry out, "My leanness! My leanness! Woe unto me!" He who walks not with the Well-beloved will soon be a Mephibosheth in the feet, and a Bartimaeus in the eyes; timorous in heart, and trembling at his knees. If we are weak in communion with God, we are weak everywhere. If a man can be strong without God, such dangerous strength may fall to the lot of the man who is out of communion; but if it be true that only as we hang upon the Lord are we strong, then broken fellowship will soon bring broken strength.

And, dear friends, there is a kind of weakness which I hope none of you will ever cultivate, though it seems greatly in favor at the present day, namely, *weakness of faith*; for when I am weak in faith, then I am not strong in the Lord. When a man doubts his God, he weakens himself. A little time ago, persons who were full of distrust and unbelief were regarded as the possessors of a deep experience; but I hope the age has for ever gone by in which unbelief shall be regarded as a qualification for eminent saintship. If the gospel message were, "He that doubteth, and is not baptized, shall be saved;" there are many who have made their calling and election sure; but while ours is a gospel of faith, unbelief can never be regarded with complacency. Faith is our battle-axe and weapon of war; woe to the warrior who forgets it! Therefore, brethren, let us separate between weakness and weakness,—the weakness which is the token of strength, and weakness in faith which is the indication of spiritual decay.

I pray that we may' never be *weak in love*, but that we may become like Basil, "pillars of fire." Love is the greatest of all the powers which can possess the human breast. I must not compare love with other graces so as to depreciate any virtue; yet, of all active powers, love is the most forceful; for even faith worketh by love. Faith does not overcome men's hearts for Jesus until it takes to itself this wondrous weapon, and then believingly loves them to Christ. Oh, for a passionate love, a love which shall be a pure flame, burning to a white heat, and consuming us! May this sacred fire burn in the very center of our being! May we love our God intensely, and love the people for His sake! Brethren, be strong there! Depend upon it, if you leave off loving the people to whom you preach, and the truth you are ordained to proclaim, the state of the church will be "as when a standard-bearer fainteth." There may remain to you strength of passionate temper, strength to offend, and strength to scatter; but: the power of God will be withdrawn. You will, like Phaeton, try to drive the horses of the chariot of the sun; but they shall only hurry you to swift destruction.

We want, brethren,—oh, how we would pine for it!—*to be delivered from all weakness of the spiritual life*. We want to outgrow the weakness natural to us as babes in Christ, so that we may become young men who are strong; yea, we need to go beyond this, and to become fully-developed men in Christ Jesus, "strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might." If we are weak in that respect, we are strong nowhere. As

ministers, we ought to covet all the spiritual strength which God is ready to bestow. Would to God that the Holy Ghost, who dwelleth in us, found nothing within to impede Him, and nothing to restrain His influences! Oh, that the full Godhead of the blessed Spirit might as much manifest itself in these mortal bodies of ours as once the Godhead of the second Person of the Trinity manifested itself in the person of Christ Jesus, the Son of man! I mean not, of course, miraculously, nor in any way to make us rival the incommunicable glories of our Divine Master; but even to its fullness I would that our nature, like the bush in Horeb, were aglow with the indwelling Deity. Never mind though the bush should be consumed; it were well to be consumed so long as the Spirit of God would dwell in us, and manifest His power.

Thus, you see, there are senses in which we flatly contradict the text, and thereby establish its true meaning. If it were true that all who are weak are strong, we might straightway find a vigorous ministry by ransacking our hospitals, enlisting a troop from our idiot asylums, and calling together all persons of weak brain and garrulous tongue. No, no; it is not given to the fearful and the unbelieving, the foolish and the frivolous, to claim that their mental, moral, and spiritual weaknesses are a fit platform for the revelation of the Divine strength.

A second observation must be brought before you before I actually come to the text. THERE IS ANOTHER FORM OF IT WHICH IS CLEARLY TRUE. "*When I am strong, then am I weak.*" That is true, almost as true as Paul's declaration, "*When I am weak, then I am strong;*"—of course, not true in all senses, but so nearly correct that I would recommend its acceptance as a proverb worthy to be quoted with the text itself.

Look at the tyro who has just commenced preaching in a village chapel or in a mission-room, and admire his boundless confidence in his own strength. He has collected certain, anecdotes and telling metaphors, and he propounds these as if they were the *Summa Theologia*, the very flower and essence of wisdom. He is voluble and energetic, though there is nothing in what he says. See him stamp his feet, and clench his fists! He is a wonder unto many, for they see no sufficient cause for his powerful self-assurance. Possibly he comes to College; he enters the classroom feeling that, for once, a *man* treads the College floor. The inhabitants of London shall know that verily there is a prophet among them. We hear about this gentleman very soon, for he is not appreciated; his brethren are not "willing for a season to rejoice in his light;" they even show a disposition to snuff him out. Yet how perfectly self-satisfied he is! I have heard such a brother deliver himself of nothing at all at extreme length, and sit down full to the brim with satisfaction. I have almost envied and altogether grieved over him. Many an abler man is weeping over his shortcomings, while this poor soul is glorying in his own imagined triumphs Like Cowper's poor believer,— "Pillow and bobbins all her little store," he knows this much, and nothing more,—his abilities transcendent and his knowledge vast. How self-content he is! But he is not strong for all that. Did you fear him when you first came into contact with him? Did you look upon him as an ironclad, utterly impregnable? The delusion did not last long. "Man being in honor abideth not." If I remember rightly, you who were in the college classroom began to try your prows upon this man-of-war. You found that it was only a wooden ship after all. There is a grim pleasure in seeing the mighty collapse; and that fell to your share. We felt a degree of happiness in seeing the great man lose, ounce by ounce, his boasted strength, till he {tied outright. We never buried the body of vainglory, for we never knew precisely what became of it; but we were glad to find, in its place, a diffident youth, who needed cheering lest he should too much depreciate himself,—a lowly spirit, whom; in due time, the Lord exalted. As he grew consciously weak, he became strong, and discovered that, when he was strong in his own opinion, he was in many ways weak.

Since we left the college benches, we have seen many strong men. I think I see one sitting down in his study. He has been reading the Reviews and Quarterlies, and a little of the latest modern thought: now he is looking out for a text. He perfectly understands it, whatever it may be. At any rate, if he does not understand it, who does? When he falls upon his text, he interprets it, not at all desiring to know what the men of God who lived before him have said upon it, for they were of a darker age, and he lives in the nineteenth century, that world of wonders, that region of wisdom, that flower and glory of all time. Now you shall see what you shall see when this cultured divine comes forth from his chamber as a giant refreshed with new wine. No dew of the Spirit of God is upon him, he does not require it; he drinks from other fountains. He speaks with astounding power, his diction is superb, his thought prodigious! But he is as weak as he is polished, as cold as he is pretentious; saints and sinners alike perceive his weakness, and by degrees the empty pews confirm it. He is too strong to ask to be strengthened of the Lord, and therefore he is too weak to bless a congregation. He seeks another sphere, and another, and yet another; but in no position is he powerful, for

he is too strong in self. His preaching is like a painted fire, no one is either cheered or alarmed by it.

We have known other men, who were not so strong, who felt that they could not even understand the Word of God without Divine illumination, and who went to the great Father of lights for that illumination. Trembling and afraid, they have asked to be helped to speak the mind of God, and not their own mind; and God has spoken through them, and they have been strong. They were weak, for they were afraid lest their thoughts should stand in the way of God's thoughts, they were fearful lest their mind should darken the Word of God; and yet they have been truly strong, and humble people have listened to them, and said that God spoke through them; and sinners have listened, and though they have become angry, they have come again, and at last have yielded themselves to Christ. Verily, God spoke through that man.

I have known preachers who have been very weak, and yet they have been used of the Lord. For many, many years, my own preaching was exceedingly painful to me because of the fears which beset me before entering the pulpit. Often, my dread of facing the people has been overwhelming. Even the physical feeling, which came of the mental emotion, has been painful; but this weakness has been an education for me. I wrote, many years ago, to my venerable grandfather, and told him of many things that happened to me before preaching,—sickness of body, and terrible fears, which often made me really ill. The old gentleman wrote back, and said, "I have been preaching for sixty years, and I still feel many tremblings. Be content to have it so; for when your emotion goes away, your strength will be gone." When we preach and think nothing of it, the people think nothing of it, and God does nothing by it. An overwhelming sense of weakness should not be regarded as an evil, but should be accepted as helpful to the true minister of Christ.

Look at *the preacher who has no burdens*. His sermon is in his pocket; there cannot happen any mischief to it unless a thief should steal it; he has rehearsed all his action, he is as safe as an automaton. He does not need to pray for the Spirit of God to help him in his preaching; and though he uses the form, one wonders what the prayer can mean. He surveys the congregation with the complacency of a gardener looking at a bed of flowers. He has something to say, and he knows what it is going to be, every word of it, and therefore he says it with ease, and comes down the stairs as pleased with himself as heart could desire; the notion of trembling is far from him, he is not so weak. Yonder is a poor brother, who has been tugging away with his brains, wrestling on his knees, and bleeding at his heart; he is half-afraid that he may break down in the sermon, and he is fearful that he will not reach the hearts of the people; but he means to try what can be done by the help of God. Be you sure that he will get at the people, and God will give him converts. He is looking up to God, for he feels so feeble in himself. You know which of the two preachers you would sooner hear, and you know who is the really strong man of the two; the weak man is strong, and the strong man is weak.

An American divine, who says a great many things that are wise, and a few which are otherwise, says that the best preparation for preaching is to get a good night's rest, and to eat a good breakfast. According to his opinion, a fine constitution is a most efficient help to preaching the gospel. If you know nothing of the headache, and nothing of the heartache, and never allow anything to disturb the equilibrium of your mind, you may expect to be a very successful minister. It may be so. I would not depreciate health, appetite, a bounding spirit, and a good Saturday night's sleep; but these things are not all, nor much. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, by all means; but where that has been a good deal relied upon, it has displayed itself in fine sensational sermons; but, brethren, I question whether the next generation will say that it has proved itself fruitful in spiritual teaching which will feed the soul or move the conscience. Many of the noblest specimens of our sermonic literature have come from men who were patient sufferers. Men who have had the most touching pathos, the highest spirituality, the most marvelous insight into the deep things of God, have often known little of bodily health. Calvin labored under many fierce disorders, yet shall we ever see his like? Robert Hall was rarely free from pain, but who ever spoke more gloriously? And here I would mention one whom all of us love, Charles Stanford, who grows sweeter and sweeter as he grows weaker and weaker, and who sees all the more clearly now that his eyes grow dim. My brethren, physical force is not our strength; it may be our weakness. Health is to be desired, and carefully preserved where we have it; but if we lose it, we may count it all joy, and look forward to be able to exclaim with Paul, "When I am weak, then am I strong." In some form or other, we must be tried. A preacher who has no cross to carry, a prophet of the Lord without a burden, is an unprofitable servant and a burden to the church.

It would be a dreadful thing to be a pastor without cares. I do not address any such, I am happy to believe; but I do address some who, as pastors, are overloaded with cares, and overweighed with sorrows. Perhaps the largeness of your church, or, more likely, the smallness of it, may be to you a daily trouble. Do not ask to be otherwise than troubled. The shepherd who can always go to bed regularly at night, and who is able to say, "I do not have much trouble with my flock," is not the man to be envied. He coolly says, "A few lambs died last winter; we must expect that kind of thing. It is true that some sheep died of starvation; but if the meadows failed, I could not help that." That is the kind of shepherd who deserves to be eaten by the next wolf; but the man who is able to say with Jacob, "In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night," is the true shepherd. He is most irregular as to his rest; the only thing regular about him is his labor and his disappointment, and yet faith makes him a happy man. When you grow very weak as a pastor, and your charge utterly overcomes you, do not repine at such weakness, for then you will be at your full strength; but when you are strong as a pastor, and say, "I think that, to be a minister, is an easy matter," you may depend upon it that you are weak.

Permit me here to say that, *whenever a brother gets to be so strong as to talk much of his own holiness*, then also he is weak. I have not observed yet that anybody who has had grace to make into flags has won the more victories in consequence. I have required, as far as I am concerned, all my grace to make into a sword; I have wanted all my power for real fighting; but, as to making a single banner out of it to display before men, I have not yet attained unto that, and must still take a very lowly position among the servants of God. Coleridge was once asked whether he believed in ghosts, and he said that he did not, for he had seen too many of them! If anyone asked me if I believed in perfect men, I should have to say that I have seen too many of them to believe in them. A ghost is a wonderful affair, and when you see it at first, it makes each particular hair of your head "to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porcupine." But this does not occur a second time, for a suspicion of hollow turnip and candle steals over you. We heard of one, the other day, who even dared to squirt carmine over a spirit which had been conjured from the vasty deep at a *séance*. I have sometimes ventured to oppose a perfect man, and the warmth of his temper has been evidence to me that, while he may have been upon the verge of perfection among his own friends, he had not absolutely reached that consummation when exposed to the colder judgment of strangers. The pretender to perfection has usually avoided me from a distaste to my Protestantism against his holiness; and I have not bewailed my loss. I am not in love with that perfection which talks about itself. There is little virtue in the beauty which calls attention to itself; modest beauty is the last to extol its own charms. A number of persons, in company, were boasting of their graces and attainments, and only one brother sat silent. At last, one said to him, "Have you no holiness?" "Yes," he said, "but I never had any to boast of." All the holiness that can be had let us have, and let us press on toward perfection; but let us still recollect the fact that, when we are strong, then we are weak; that, when we think we have reached perfection, the blue mould of pride is coming over us. We have not afforded ourselves a complete inspection, or we should have found some fault to repent of, some evil yet to struggle against.

Hitherto, we have been going round the text, after the example of Rowland Hill; now let us come fairly up to it: "When I am weak, then am I strong."

I. Here is, first, A DEPRESSING EXPERIENCE: "When I am weak." When is that? Truly we are so always. Is there ever a time when the strongest Christian is not comparatively weak?

But there are certain seasons when we are consciously weak. Take Paul's case as an illustration. He had been caught up to the third heaven, but he could not bear revelations so well as John, who had enough of them to fill a book, and yet was never elated by them; but Paul was not so well qualified to be a seer, for he was more at home with arguments than with visions; and, therefore, when he saw a vision, he set great store by it. He kept his secret for fifteen years; but it was such a very remarkable thing for him, and so much out of his natural line of things, that the tendency in him was to "be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations;" and therefore the Lord sent, not Satan, but "the messenger of Satan,"—a mean, despicable spirit,—not to fight with him with sword and buckler, but to "buffet" him, as boys do, their playmates. Have you never had an insignificant thing to vex you, like a fly buzzing around you? Have you not felt the trial to be intensely worrying, and yet meanly trifling? You could have girded yourself to meet a lion; but this trouble was a mere yelping cur, and it irritated you to the last degree, and inflicted a pain upon you. Paul does not describe his trial as the cut of a sword, else he would have bound it up; it was only the prick of a thorn; he could scarcely see the cause of the pain, or he would have taken a needle, and

extracted it; but it was a little thorn which had buried itself in the flesh, and festered there.

This was Paul's worry, and it was sent to keep him humble. Paul might have gloried in wrestling with the devil; but this "thorn in the flesh" was a wretched business. To grapple with a great temptation, and to hurl it to the ground, has a grandeur in it which inspires you; but; it is very different when you are assailed by a thing so small that you despise yourself for taking notice of it, and yet it frets your soul. You say to yourself, "How weak I am! Why am I thus irritated and disturbed? If anyone else made half this fuss about a little thorn, I should say, 'You ought to know better;' and yet here am I, a preacher of the gospel, greatly tried by a trifle, and beseeching the Lord thrice to take it away from me, for I cannot bear it." Do we ever get into such a condition? I wish that, at such a time, we would confess our abject weakness, and cast ourselves upon God, for then should we be made strong.

This festering of the thorn does not afflict us all, because it does not happen to all of us to see visions; but many servants of God are made to feel their weakness in another way, *by an oppressive sense of responsibility*. Brethren, I speak to you as unto wise men, who will not: misunderstand me. I hope you will always feel your responsibility before God; but do not carry the feeling: too far. We may feel our responsibility so deeply that we may become unable to sustain it; it may cripple our joy, and make slaves of us. Do not take art exaggerated view of what the Lord expects of you. He will not blame you for not doing that which is beyond your mental power or physical strength. You are required to be faithful, but you are not bound to be successful. You are to teach, but you cannot compel people to learn. You are to make things plain, but you cannot give carnal men an understanding of spiritual things. We are not the Father, nor the Savior, nor the Comforter of the Church. We cannot take the responsibility of the universe upon our shoulders. While vexing ourselves with fancied obligations, we may overlook our real burdens. I could sit down, and meditate, until I felt the responsibility of the whole South of London upon my back, and this would render me unable to look after my own church. What is the practical result of making yourself, as one man, responsible for the work of twenty men? Will you do any more? Will you do it any better? I saw a horse, this morning, which was pulling at a three-horse load. How he tugged! How he strained himself! I thought to myself, "There is a good horse being ruined. His master ought to take off part of his load, or else put more horses to pull with him." Does our Lord and Master treat us in this fashion? No; we overload ourselves. We get tugging away as if the salvation of the world depended upon our straining ourselves to death. Now, I do not want you to get away from feeling a due measure of responsibility; but then you are not God, and you do not stand in God's place; you are not the rulers of providence, and you have not been elected sole managers of the covenant of grace; therefore do not act as if you were.

But, dear brethren, having said this much by way of caveat, lest I should lead any of you to despair, let me now ask, Have we any of us fully felt the measure of our responsibility? If there be one such here, let him speak; but I shall not believe him. We have not done what we should have done, what we could have done, nor what we ought to have done, nor what we will yet do in God's strength. Perhaps we have worked up to the full of what was expected of us in quantity; but how about the quality? It may be we have attended quite enough meetings, and delivered quite enough sermons; but then, has this been done in an apostolic spirit, and night and day with tears have we warned men, and pleaded with them as in the sight of God? Our responsibilities, when they are thoroughly felt, crush us, and then are we weak indeed; but this weakness is the road to strength. "When I am weak, then am I strong."

And do we not often feel weak *in the sense of utter unfitness for being ministers at all by reason of our own sinfulness*? Paul said of his calling to the ministry, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" We can say that, too; yet, sometimes, we feel as if we would speak no more for Christ, and we should sink into silence were it not that His Word is as a fire in our bones; and we cannot refrain. Then we think we will go away into the far West, and in some log cabin teach a few children the way of salvation, for we do not feel fit for anything higher. Our shortcomings and our failures stare us out of countenance, and then are we painfully weak; but this also is the highway to strength: "When I am weak, then am I strong."

Sometimes we grow depressed and weak *because our sphere of labor seems specially difficult*. This is not the time to dilate upon the peculiar trials of our pastorates. Ministers in London could tell a tale that would astonish you, for they see things which are their burden day and night. As for our country brethren, what some of: them have had to put up with! They cannot move the deacons and the church at all, perhaps the

deacons wish to move them; they cannot get at the people, and though they preach their hearts out, they preach to empty pews. If we could only put certain men into the positions which their brethren faithfully occupy under great discouragement, they would know themselves better, and leave off boasting, and instead of finding fault, they would wonder that so much has been accomplished under such circumstances. By that way also we become strong; when God makes us feel that our work is impossible to us without His aid, then are we driven to His strength.

Some of you are *quite alone* as to the helpful fellowship of kindred spirits. This is a trying deprivation, and may well depress you. Beside this, many of you are *poor*. and you hardly know how to support your families. As I listened to the prayer of the brother who led our devotions just now, and remembered what he is suffering, and how he has actually worked in the harvest-fields, with working-men, so that he might earn his bread, and preach the gospel, I felt that I could rejoice in him. Still, I know that poverty often makes a man feel sadly weak; when his children are without shoes, and the wife's dress is nearly worn-out, and he knows not where any more are to come from, his heart sinks within him.

In addition to this, it may be that *reproach comes undeservedly*. A scandalous story from the father of lies may be forged against you, and you may be quite unable to defend yourself'. You fear lest, in trying to erase the blot, you might spoil the page. Hearts are broken over this matter. Oh, how weak a man becomes when this is the case; he may half feel himself guilty after having heard the accusation repeated again and again; although all the while he is as pure as the driven snow. This brings a weakness which may paralyze a man. Oh, to be strong in the Lord at such times!

I suppose you do not think *that I ever get dried up* and find it difficult to say anything fresh in my sermons; yet so it is. Think, dear brethren; I have already so many volumes of sermons in print. It grows harder to say anything new as those volumes increase. "Where will the next sermon come from?" is the question we have asked ourselves again and again; we have feared that we could not keep up the supply, and we have felt our own weakness to a terrible degree; but this, also, is the way to strength. So prepare yourselves, my younger brethren, to become weaker and weaker; prepare yourselves for sinking lower and lower in self-esteem; prepare yourselves for self-annihilation, and pray God to expedite the process.

Certain brethren know nothing of this experience, they are not weak at all; but despise such confessions. Have you never met with preachers who can keep on and on, though they never did say anything, and never will? Yet they never know what it is to be weak; they are just as able today as ever they were. I have heard of an old Scotch preacher, whose divisions were very numerous, and whose subdivisions were almost innumerable; so one day the people, one by one, went away, until at last the boy took the keys up, and said to him, "You can lock the church up when you have done." Some are so very long in saying nothing, and are so surely emptying their places, that it would be wise to hand them the keys so that they might retire when they are quite through.

As for some of us, we are consciously feeble; and when we prose, we know it. We come out of the pulpit, at times, feeling that we are less fit than ever for the holy work. Our last sermon we judge to be our worst, and frequently for that reason it is our best; we grow, and among other growths we grow downwards. We shall go on feeling less fit, and still less fit, and all the while we shall be becoming more ready to be used of the Lord. I know one who said, the other night, when she was reading, that it seemed as if her eyes had dropped out. The truth was, her spectacles had fallen off. Go on losing your spectacles, and be sure that you get rid of all those holy tones and whines, and grotesque methods, and stiff-nesses and mannerisms, which are not your eyes, but only shockingly bad spectacles.

II. I conclude by speaking upon THE BLESSED EXPERIENCE: "When I am weak, then am I strong." How is it, and how can it be?

Well, first, it is when I am weak that *I am sure to flee to God for succor and help*. The little conies mentioned in Scripture were poor, puny creatures, yet they baffled the sportsman. Learn a lesson from them: "The conies are but a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks." Brethren, because I cannot think, I hide behind a doctrine which God has thought out for me; and because I cannot invent a hypothesis, I rest my soul on a self-evident fact; and because I cannot even be consistent with myself, I get behind the plain teaching of the text, and there I abide. It is wonderful how strong a man feels in such a hiding-place. When

you cannot lay a stone, and cannot lift a trowel by yourself, then you may begin to build for God, for He will make you a worker together with Him, your feebleness will be linked to the eternal strength, and then the wall will rise with speed.

Next, we are strong when we are weak *because we gain our strength by prayer, and our weakness is our best argument in supplication*. Jacob never conquered until he limped, nay, until he fell. When the sinew shrank, the suppliant triumphed. When you are engaged in prayer, plead your strength, and you will get nothing; then plead your weakness, and you will prevail. There is no better plea with Divine love than weakness and pain; nothing can so prevail with the great heart of God as for your heart to faint and swoon. The man who rises in prayer to tears and agony, and feels all the while as if he could not pray, and yet must pray,—he is the man who will see the desire of his soul. Do not mothers always care most for the tiniest child, or for that one which is most sick? Do we not spend the greatest care upon that one of our children which has the least use of its limbs; and is it not true that our weakness holds God's strength, and leads Him to bow His omnipotence to our rescue?

There is another strength in weakness which it is well for us to have. I believe that, *when we preach in conscious weakness, it adds a wonderful force to the words we utter*. When Mr. Knill went out to distribute tracts among the soldiers, he tells us that there was one wicked man who said to his comrades, "I will cure him of coming to us with his tracts;" so, when a ring was made around the minister and the blasphemer, he cursed Mr. Knill with awful oaths. Hearing those profane words, Mr. Knill burst into tears, and said how he longed for the man's salvation. Years after, he met that soldier again, when the man said to him, "I never took notice of your tracts, or of anything that you said; but when I saw you cry like a child, I could not stand it, but gave my heart to God." When we tell our people how we are hampered, but how much we long for their souls' salvation; when we ask them to excuse our broken language, for it is the utterance of our hearts, they believe in our sincerity, for they see how our hearts are breaking and they are moved by what we say. The man who grinds out theology at so much a yard has no power over men; the people need men who can feel,—men of heart, weak and feeble men, who can sympathize with the timid and sorrowful. It is a blessed thing if a minister can weep his way into men's souls, or even stammer a path into their hearts. So, brethren, do not be afraid of being weak, but rejoice to be able to say, with the apostle, "When I am weak, then am I strong."

Besides this, another form of strength comes of weakness, for by it *our sympathy is educated*. When you and I become weak, and are depressed in spirit, and our soul passes through the valley of the shadow of death, it is often on account of others. One Sabbath morning, I preached from the text, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" and though I did not say so, yet I preached my own experience. I heard my own chains clank while I tried to preach to my fellow-prisoners in the dark; but I could not tell why I was brought into such an awful horror of darkness, for which I condemned myself. On the following Monday evening, a man came to see me who bore all the marks of despair upon his countenance. His hair seemed to stand upright, and his eyes were ready to start from their sockets. He said to me, after a little parleying, "I never before, in my life, heard any man speak who seemed to know my heart. Mine is a terrible case; but on Sunday morning you painted me to the life, and preached as if you had been inside my soul." By God's grace, I saved that man from suicide, and led him into gospel light and liberty; but I know I could not have done it if I had not myself been confined in the dungeon in which he lay. I tell the story, brethren, because you sometimes may not understand your own experience, and the perfect people may condemn you for having it; but what know they of God's servants? You and I have to suffer much for the sake of the people of our charge. God's sheep ramble very far, and we have to go after them; and sometimes the shepherds go where they themselves would never roam if they were not in pursuit of lost sheep. You may be in Egyptian darkness, and you may wonder why such a horror chills your marrow; but you may be altogether in the pursuit of your calling, and be led of the Spirit to a position of sympathy with desponding minds. Expect to grow weaker, brethren, that you may comfort the weak, and so may become masters in Israel in the judgment of others; while, in your own opinion, you are less than the least of all saints.

More than this, I believe that my text is true when a man becomes weak *through love to the particular place in which he is called to labor*. Suppose a brother placed in the midst of a dense, poor population, and he feels the responsibility of his work, and the misery of souls around him, until it gets such a hold upon him that he cannot escape from it He tries to think of more cheerful subjects, but he cannot shake off the

nightmare of the people's poverty and sin. It is with him by day, and it is with him by night; he hears the crying of the children, and the wailing of the women; he hears the sighing of the men, and the groans of the sick and dying, and he comes to be almost a monomaniac in his desperate zeal for his own part of the great field of service. Yes, that man may kill himself with anxiety; but, meanwhile, it is evident that he is the man whom God has sent to bless the people. He will go on thinking, and praying, and planning, until, at last, he will hit on a method which outsiders may judge to be as odd as the man; but he will carry it out, and the whole district will be the better for it.

Oh, it is a blessing when God casts a godly man into the middle of a mass of misery, and keeps him there! It may not be a pleasant thing for him, but it will bring a sevenfold reward in the end. I am glad that Howard felt that he must go through all the prisons in Europe. He had a comfortable home of his own, and yet he must roam through France, and Germany, and Russia, poking his nose into every pestilential dog hole where prisoners were to be found. He makes himself familiar with the unimaginable horrors of dungeon life, and suffers fevers born of the jail filth. He has a choice nose for the worst atmosphere; the fouler it is, the more needful that he should breathe it, for he has a passion for the discovery and destruction of prison cruelty. He comes home, and writes a book upon his pet subject: and then, after a little while, he is off again, and at last he dies a martyr to the cause he has espoused; yet it was worth while to be a Howard who could live and could die to rescue his fellow-men. Mr. Howard, it is because you are so very weak, and suffer so much from *prison-on-the-brain*, that you are strong; you will accomplish reforms while others are talking of them. I daresay there were some who said, "These things must be gradually ameliorated by the progress of better principles, and we must try new notions by degrees." Yes, this gradual reform is a prudent idea; but then Mr. Howard is such a weak-minded man that he goes raking up horrible stories, and insisting upon it that murder by imprisonment must cease at once. Brethren, may you become weak in like fashion,—almost out of your minds with restless resolve to save souls! If you break loose in an absurd way, and set the chill proprieties a-trembling, and the imbecilities ridiculing, it will cause me great joy. Little do I care if you become fools for Christ's sake. When our weakness verges upon fanaticism, it may have all the more power about it. Mr. Plimsoll did nobly when he stood up and pleaded against coffin-ships; but he was never so strong as when he lost himself, and broke the rules of the House of Commons in the ardor of his passion. It was very weak of him, but in that weakness lay his strength. Give us more of the speech which comes of a burning heart, as lava comes of a volcanic overflow. When the truth conquers us, we shall conquer by the truth.

Once more, weakness is strength because, often, *a man's sense of weakness arouses the whole of him*; whatever there is in the man then comes out, it makes him intense in every part. Certain small animals are much more to be dreaded in fight than larger beasts, because they are so active and furious that they bite so fast. A man might almost as well face a hyena as a rat or a weasel, because these lesser creatures are all alive, and so intent on the attack, that they fight with their whole bodies; claws and teeth are all at work, and thus they become strong through that sense of weakness which causes them to use every atom of force which they possess. Have you never seen a great man, perhaps a Doctor of Divinity, concerning whom you have felt how mighty he is? We all acknowledge his strength; but what does he accomplish? A far smaller man, full of grace and ardor, and all alive in working for the Lord, achieves much more. The conscious littleness of the man makes him live intensely unto God.

"When I am weak, then am I strong." Because I cannot do much, therefore I will do all I can. Because I have little power, therefore I will use all the power I have. Do not the tradesmen say that "a nimble nine-pence is better than a lazy half-crown"? I am sure it is so. A sense of weakness may bestir us to a bravery which else we had not known. Look at our own country, ages ago, when Spain tried to destroy her. See the Invincible Armada! Huge ships burden the sea, and Papal warriors are speeding to seize the prey. England must do her best. On the one side is Spain, mistress of empires, and on the other is a poor little island, with a brave queen, it is true, but with an army and navy slender to the last degree. The monster ships are off Plymouth; here they come, like a half-moon, or like jaws opening to swallow us up. What is happening in Britain? Why, everybody is preparing for the battle, and every man and every woman on the island will fight to the death. All the seafaring folk are on the alert. Our sailors in their diminutive vessels are hovering round the huge galleons, waiting for an opportunity to strike a blow, and the opportunity comes:

"Look how the Lion of the sea lifts up his ancient crown,
And underneath his deadly paw treads the gay lilies down."

God watches over England. He blows with His wind, and the sea covers the: Armada, and Spain is smitten, and England is saved. It was a sense of weakness that aroused the valor of our forefathers, and stirred the saints to cry to God for help. Go to, ye mighty ones, ye are not strong. Come ye up, ye weak ones, to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty, for ye are "strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might."

And this, last of all, is the reason why we are strong when we are weak, namely, *because the sacrifice is being consummated*. When was Christ strongest but when He was weakest? When did He shake the kingdom of darkness but when He was nailed to the tree? When did He put away sin for His people but when His heart was pierced? When did He trample upon death and the old dragon but when He was Himself about to die? His victory was in the extremity of His weakness, namely, in His death; and it must be the same with His trembling Church. She has no might; she must suffer, she must be slandered, and derided, and so the Lord will triumph through her. The conquering sign is still the cross. Wherefore, brethren, let us be perfectly content to decrease even unto the end, that our right royal Lord and King may gloriously increase from day to day. Amen.