

Weakness - Paul's and ours

Richard Bauckham

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Richard Bauckham is Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews.

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2 Corinthians has for a long time seemed to me among the most impressive documents of early Christianity. When I need to remind myself that the Christian message is convincing - still convincing today in spite of our great chronological and cultural distance from its first-century origins - I turn as readily to 2 Corinthians as I do to the gospels, and cannot remember failing to be impressed. The key to this impressiveness I find in the insight 2 Corinthians gives us into the way Paul integrated his message and his life. Remarkable as Paul's expositions of his message are, in Romans and Galatians, I find myself needing also to see, in 2 Corinthians, how Paul lived that message. A critical reader of Paul might wonder whether a message as exclusively concentrated on the death and resurrection of Jesus as Paul's gospel was could actually have the power to interpret and direct a man's actual living experience in a life-enhancing way. 2 Corinthians shows how in Paul's own instance it did.

To say that Paul's autobiographical reflection in 2 Corinthians is impressive may be a little paradoxical, because Paul's obsession in this letter is with how unimpressive he is, or at least with the fact that the only impressive thing about him is his weakness. In this rambling apologia for his life and work as an apostle, Paul's weakness is the recurring theme. In chapter 4, for example, Paul writes of the glory of God revealed in the gospel and of his own call to be a minister of that gospel, when the glory of God in Christ shone in his heart (4: 6). But the thought of the glory and the power of the gospel entrusted to him immediately, by contrast, suggests the thought of his own frailty: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels' (4: 7). The clay pot is both a very ordinary and a very fragile container for treasure. What makes this theme of the apostle's weakness so arresting and intriguing is that Paul is not in the least apologising for it or mentioning it only for the sake of honesty. In chapters 11-12 (with deliberate irony, of course) Paul boasts of it, as precisely the qualification which validates his claim to be an apostle of Christ. He catalogues his sufferings (11: 23-33), not as heroic ordeals, but as evidence of how his ministry was marked by the physical and psychological frailty of an ordinary human being, ending the catalogue with a vivid memory of the ignominious occasion when he had to flee for his life from Damascus by being lowered in a basket from the city wall (11: 32-33).

This weakness of Paul was the occasion for the power of God to be active and evident in his ministry: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us' (4: 7); 'I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me' (12: 9). The power of God evident in Paul's ministry, not least in the transforming effect of the Gospel he preached, could be seen to be no merely human

achievement of Paul's but divine power which found its opportunity in Paul's weakness. In his weakness Paul was obliged to trust in God and his converts to recognize God.

Some modern readers might begin to feel uneasy about this Pauline motif of the apostle's weakness and God's power. Someone may recall Bonhoeffer's famous passage about the religion which exploits human weakness:

Religious people speak of God when human knowledge... has come to an end, or when human resources fail - in fact it is always the *deus ex machina* that they bring on to the scene, either for the apparent solution of insoluble problems, or as strength in human failure - always, that is to say, exploiting human weakness or human boundaries.... I should like to speak of God not on the boundaries but at the centre, not in weaknesses but in strength.¹

That might, at first glance, seem like a direct rejection of Paul's idea. Is Paul's God to be found only at the end of human resources, when human strength runs out?

Or it might be thought that Paul falls victim to Dorothee Soelle's incisive critique of Christian masochism (as she calls it), that attitude which calls for willingness to suffer because suffering demonstrates human impotence by contrast with God's omnipotence. 'Suffering is there to break our pride, demonstrate our powerlessness, exploit our dependency. Affliction has the intention of

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bringing us back to a God who only becomes great when he makes us small.² Is Paul's God the God who can only be exalted at man's expense?

Such questions should be borne in mind and may help us to avoid misunderstanding Paul, but as criticisms of Paul they would miss his point. In the first place, when Paul reflects on his weakness, he is being soberly realistic. In his dedication to his missionary task, Paul constantly drove himself to the limits of his physical and psychological endurance. As he would have put it, the love of Christ controlling him (5: 14) drove him to those limits. His missionary labours were, quite literally, killing him (4: 10-12). Human resources do have their limits and Paul discovered them, not because he sought God only there or because he embraced suffering masochistically to demonstrate his powerlessness, but simply because the demands of his apostolic mission took him to those limits. From the hazards of ancient travel, the perils of persecution, the anxiety and depression incurred by his pastoral responsibilities, Paul learned that when God equipped him for his apostolic ministry he did not turn him into some kind of superman or angel, immune from danger, untouched by weariness or stress. On the contrary, precisely his apostolic ministry made his ordinary, limited human capacities plain for all to see. Yet Paul found that such weakness was not after all an impediment to his ministry: somehow (and it may well have seemed strange to him at first) the power of the gospel became all the more apparent and effective. There is nothing grovelling about Paul's recognition of this. He does not have to pretend to be a miserable worm in order to let God be God. He simply sees that he is human, not superhuman, and need not step outside his human weakness in order to be an apostle of Christ.

Paul's *theological* breakthrough in 2 Corinthians was to understand this weakness of the bearer of the gospel in relation to the content of the gospel. If God's definitive salvific act occurred through the weakness of the crucified Jesus, then it should be no surprise that the saving gospel of the crucified Jesus should reach the Gentiles through the weakness of his apostle. And just as the crucified Jesus proved, through his resurrection, to be the power of God for salvation, so the weakness of the apostle had, as its reverse side, the power of God effective for salvation through his ministry. Paul found the pattern of the cross and resurrection of Jesus - death and life, weakness and power - reflected in his own ministry and used it as the key to his own experience. If he experienced the dying of Jesus in his frailty and sufferings (1: 5; 4: 10-12), he also found in every escape from death, every encouragement after anxiety and depression, every convert made in the midst of persecution, a participation in the resurrection of Christ, God's ability to bring life out of death (*cf.* 1: 5, 9-10; 4: 10-12). Such experiences were not necessarily dramatic or miraculous deliverances, like the escape from death to which 1: 9-10 refers, but were often relatively ordinary events. One example Paul gives is the arrival of Titus, after a worrying delay, with unexpectedly good news about affairs in the church at Corinth (7: 5-7; note the echoes of the language of 1: 3-7). In 4: 8-9 Paul gives a rhetorical list of 'cross' and 'resurrection' aspects of his experience:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed.*

The second member of each pair here seems strikingly understated: just the negative point that Paul's weakness had not yet put an end to his ministry. The demands of his ministry had almost proved too much for him, but, by God's grace, not quite.

Thus Paul's experience might often seem outwardly unremarkable. But because he sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as the key to his life, as to everything else, he can find there a pattern which makes Christian sense of his experience. The shape which everyone needs to give to his experience in order to understand it Paul found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This pattern, however, was more than an interpretation of the experience: it also made the experience what it was for Paul. All the ups and downs of his ministry were for Paul experiences of God, events in which he experienced an identification with Jesus in his dying and rising: 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies' (4: 10).

To identify with Paul's experience we do not need to be shipwrecked or imprisoned or lowered in a basket from a city wall. Even without the physical dangers of Paul's career, anyone who throws himself into the work of Christian ministry of any kind with half the dedication of Paul will experience the weakness of which Paul speaks: the times when problems seem insoluble, the times of weariness from sheer overwork, the times of depression when there seem to be no results, the

depression when there seem to be no results, the emotional exhaustion which pastoral concern can bring on - in short, all the times when the Christian minister or worker knows he has stretched to the limits of his capacities for a task which is very nearly, but by God's grace not quite, too much for him. Anyone who knows only his strength, not his weakness, has never given himself to a task which demands all he can give. There is no avoiding this weakness, and we should learn to suspect those models of human life which try to avoid it. We should not be taken in by the ideal of the charismatic superman for whom the Holy Spirit is a constant source of superhuman strength. Nor should we fall for the ideal of the modern secular superman: the man who organizes his whole life with the object of maintaining his own physical and mental well-being, who keeps up the impression of strength because he keeps his life well within the limits of what he can easily cope with. Such a man is never weak because he is never affected, concerned, involved or committed beyond a cautiously safe limit. That was neither Jesus' ideal of life nor Paul's. To be controlled by the love of Christ means inevitably to reach the limits of one's abilities and experience weakness.

Of course, I am not suggesting that the Christian minister should not take sensible precautions against overwork or reasonable steps to maintain his physical and mental health. Nor am I suggesting he should not do his best to be efficient in his work. He owes it to his Lord to do so. But a Pauline perspective on Christian service takes us further than that. The Christian minister should be sensible, but above all he must be wholehearted. He should try to be efficient, but even when his efficiency runs out the effectiveness of his ministry need not do so. His efficiency may actually need sometimes to run out-by necessity, not neglect - if the power of Christ is to prove effective in his ministry.

That the Christian minister's life should match his message is a common enough thought. But the content which Paul gives to it is not so commonplace. For Paul the Christian minister's weakness is not the point where he is failing, but the point where the deepest integration of his life and his message is possible. If he can respond to God at that point in his experience as Paul did, then it will be for him an experience of Jesus Christ, and for his ministry an occasion for God's power to be most evidently and characteristically at work. The impressiveness of his ministry will not be his own impressiveness, but that of his message which matches up to the experience of human weakness and makes it the vehicle of God's power.

References

¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition (London: SCM Press, 1971), pp. 281-282.

² D. Soelle, *Suffering* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), p. 19.