

DISABILITY, WEAKNESS, AND PRAYER IN MISSION

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Why would God give missionaries weakness? Should disability be viewed as limiting involvement in missions? These questions arise in the fallen world that we inhabit. However, a biblical missiology recognizes the inherent value of weakness to the pursuit of missions according to the plan of God. Weakness humbles the proud and self-dependent missionaries, forcing them to rely upon God alone. It is a means of success, not failure; for when Christians are weak, then they are strong. This article examines the role of disability and weakness in the God-exalting work of missions.

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Introduction¹

Weakness does not neatly equate with disability, but they do often coexist. Furthermore, disability often, although not always, results in an experience of weakness. Weakness is central to the redemptive plan of our all-powerful God. It is the means of *success*, not failure; for when Christians are weak, then they are strong. Strength through weakness might seem paradoxical, but in fact it reveals the glory of God and crushes human pretension. God, who resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, confounds earthly powers and refutes worldly wisdom through the weakness of His chosen vessels. It was through weakness that the forces of evil were defeated and judged; and it is through weakness that the mission of God is advanced today.

As King over all creation, God is carrying out His mission plan for this world through His messengers. To make them successful agents, He commissions and empowers them, but often He must first reduce their strength to infuse them with His power. This is biblical weakness. Many of God's messengers experience weakness, sometimes because of disability, including Paul, Moses, Gideon, and David. To a

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group of beaten-down and weak captives, Isaiah the prophet said, “He gives power to the weary, and to him who lacks vigor He increases might. Though youths grow weary and tired, and choice young men stumble badly, yet those who hope in Yahweh will gain new power; they will mount up with wings like eagles; they will run and not get tired; they will walk and not become weary” (Isa 40:29–31). This common thread of weakness among God’s servants assures us that God will meet our inadequacy with His strength, in whatever task He calls us to accomplish. Moses, Isaiah, and Paul were all called by God to deliver His words and perform His works, but Paul perhaps gives us the fullest picture of weakness in the life of God’s servants.

The common pattern of God working in weakness is epitomized in Jesus, who was sent to earth in weakness and died on the cross in weakness. He humbled himself, taking on the form of a servant to complete the greatest mission of all time: to bring salvation to a lost and dying world. God uses weak messengers. It is therefore not surprising that weakness is a common experience in God’s mission. Biblical history leaves us a record of responses to disability, both good and disappointing.

Disability and Weakness in Biblical Times

Misunderstandings about weakness has often led to people with disabilities being stigmatized. In Israel’s early days, religious leaders misunderstood God’s law, believing that the same law that required God’s people to provide for and protect persons with disabilities also prohibited priests with disabling conditions from serving. This error was rooted in the misunderstanding that priests with disabilities who were restricted from offering sacrifices should not serve as priests at all.² In short, it assumed that people with disabilities should not undertake leadership roles. This prejudicial mindset often isolated and alienated them by stigmatizing them. This was carried to an even greater extreme later in Israel’s history when people with disabling conditions sometimes were not allowed to be present in the synagogue when the Torah was read,³ or to enter the Qumran community of ancient Israel near the Dead Sea.⁴ However, these were isolated incidents, for historically Judaism has set the bar on caring for people who are vulnerable.⁵ The church has its own patterns of neglect which exacerbates the weakness of the vulnerable.

Acts of exclusion of the seemingly weak find no place in Jesus’ teaching and practice. Jesus’ care for people with disabilities shocked the religious establishment and continued to do so into the period of the early church. Instead of being kept out, some with disabling conditions directly approached Jesus or were brought to Him on stretchers. In one case, a man was lowered through a hole cut in a roof (Mark 2:1–12). These acts mark the dawning of a new day for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the church. Jesus breaks down barriers of isolation and invites people with disabilities to come to Him. He provides them with dignity and sees their true value as treasures created in the image of God for His purposes and glory (cf. John 9:3). So why now do

² James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 39–40.

³ Lynn Holden, *Forms of Deformity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 214.

⁴ See the discussion of 1QS^a 2.5–6 in Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 39–40.

⁵ See Gregg E. Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 180–92.

some churches and mission boards reject “weak” people with disabling conditions from serving as pastors, missionaries, and in other forms of leadership?

Biblical Weakness

Weakness is a loss of strength or ability that affects everyone, and it changes through our lives. Disability terminology changes over time, but with each new term one characteristic remains: namely, that some ability is lacking. This negative framing of disability is a reason why the church struggles to understand it and appreciate it. Seeing weakness and strength through a biblical lens brings a different perspective.

The Bible teaches that to be human is to be weak (Gen 1; Ps 19; Rom 1) for we are frail, transitory, and mortal beings (Rom 5:6; 6:19; 8:26). From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture recognizes the weakness of humankind or the “flesh.”⁶ As David Alan Black writes in *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, “Weakness is not simply the occasional experience of sickness or powerlessness, but a fundamental mark of the individual’s worldly existence.”⁷ As Solomon explains in Ecclesiastes, while we may experience temporary strength, to pursue strength is ultimately a chasing after the wind (e.g., Eccl 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17). We all eventually become weak. The apostle Paul taught, in a nutshell, that our “whole being is dependent upon God and that men and women as creatures of God (like Adam and Eve) are susceptible to the limitations of all creation.”⁸

Owning our weakness can lead to biblical strength, which is rooted in dependence. Because God created the universe, He depends on nothing, but God designed humanity, indeed all creation, to depend on Him (Col 1:16–17). In the Fall, mankind sought independence and power, and, sadly, became weaker as sin weakened the creation (Gen 3:19). Ironically people’s unquenchable thirst for independence and power resulted in weakness that would ultimately crush them. In contrast, as is evident from the Bible, when we depend on God, we allow Him to enable us with His strength (2 Cor 12:9–11). True biblical strength is a consequence of a right and dependent relationship with God. God’s plan of redemption is to bring human beings back into perfect dependence upon, and union with, Him. Therefore, paradoxically, it is in our weakness (human) that we are strongest (most dependent on God). Similarly, when we are disabled, we are perhaps more likely to be dependent on God; to be God-abled.

Ultimately, God in His grace overcame our human weakness, caused by separation from Him, by sending His Son in weakness as a babe, to die as an adult in weakness on a cross, at the hands of human power (Phil 2:5–11). In Christ, the paradigms of power and weakness were turned upside down. Through this weakness of the cross, God restores our relationship with Himself, allowing us to depend on

⁶ Regarding the Old Testament term “flesh” (*basar*), see Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 30–31. For a treatment of the Greek term “flesh” (*sarx*) see David Alan Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 146.

⁷ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 154.

⁸ Black, 151.

Christ dwelling in us, and giving us true biblical strength. The cross nullifies the root cause of weakness by restoring us to relationship with God in astounding ways.

Weakness as God's Theatre

Our weakness shows us our need for God—the Creator and Sustainer of the universe—to enable us. One of Moses's weaknesses seems to have related to His slow speech and heavy tongue, likely representing a speech difficulty or possibly a speech disability (Exod 4:10–12). Yet He was God's weak vessel to display God's might. In our small-minded ways, we might question why it is important to God to use weakness. Our weakness is God's theatre for displaying His strength before a watching world. Even the angels are watching God's theatre of weakness. This explains why God chooses to work through weakness. But why do we need weakness?

First, God uses disability and any resultant weakness as part of our growth. To comprehend this, we must look at weakness from two points of view: our own weakness, and weakness in others. We will understand weakness in others by first understanding it in our own experience. From our self-study, we will learn to share empathy with those who are weak. Then we will be ready to help them from our position of weakness (2 Cor 1:3–5).

Second, weakness in others is our opportunity to serve them and to help them grow. Crucially, the Apostle Paul says, “we must help the weak” (Acts 20:35) because Jesus meets the needs of the weak through faithful fellow-believers (Heb 4:14–16). Helping others in sincerity before a watching world is a critical part of God's plan for weakness. In this way the weakness of those with disability is in fact a part of their ministry to the world. Their weakness is an opportunity for others to serve God through serving them. This is how those people are bearing witness to Christ.

How does weakness help us and others grow? God uses weakness to create a healthy vulnerability, which then allows spiritual growth. Like the Apostle Paul, the prophet Jeremiah came to realize that he suffered at the hands of his enemies because he followed the Lord's leading. Today, we might say with hesitation that it was the Lord who caused Jeremiah's sufferings. But we would be only partially correct, because God does allow us to experience weakness for His sake and ours. God uses our suffering to grow us in our sanctification, all the while displaying His glory by empowering us through our weakness. Jeremiah similarly came to accept God's plan for his (Jeremiah's) weakness through those who devised schemes against him.⁹ In short, our weakness is a battle that God will win as His power and purpose are displayed through our vulnerability.

Paul Experiences God's Use of Weakness

Throughout Paul's ministry, God chose to work powerfully through Paul's weakness; this weakness was a celebration of God's triumph through disability and

⁹ See Jeremiah 15. For a helpful description of the context, see Susan Niditch, *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 64.

hardship.¹⁰ The triumph of weakness can be won against various forms of resistance, opposition, or inability. These are God's battlefields, where He claims the victory. For the apostle, weakness often came through people who challenged him. But he also experienced weakness in the form of personal suffering, a thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7–10). Opposition from without and fear from within weakened Paul. He was afflicted on every side with conflicts and other forms of opposition, and with fears and weakness within (e.g., 11:23–33).

Paul's weakness from the outside came from those who opposed him and his ministry. Some opponents had entered the Corinthian church while he was away, and they sought to undermine his ministry. Their chief criticism was that Paul was weak, particularly when he was present! He didn't look like an apostle or teach like one. Paul was just not impressive, using their measure of strength. Interestingly, before Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus he was known as Saul, a strong man who used his power to persecute those of "the Way" (Acts 9:2). But Paul was changed. These opponents were using popular ideas of what a leader should be from Corinthian culture, setting them up as biblical standards. In the face of this opposition, Paul articulated his views about weakness in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Pastors, missionaries, and other ministry leaders will relate to the apostle's challenge. Paul wrote to the Corinthians to defend himself against their criticism. The approach that he took in the letter is a beautiful picture of accepting criticism and then turning it on its head with biblical teaching. Rather than denying weakness, Paul argued that he was most certainly weak, and that weakness is ideal for an apostle, indeed for anyone in Christ's church. The weaker, the better!

Weakness from the inside was Paul's thorn in his flesh. The thorn was likely some sort of infirmity as suggested by the idea of an object causing pain, and of "flesh" in its most literal sense, that is, body.¹¹ This was the most common meaning of the term "weakness" in Paul's world. The imagery is probably more precisely a stake in Paul's flesh, large and very painful! That the stake was some form of physical obstruction to Paul's ministry seems clear. It may also have formed one of the points of accusation. The fact that he sought the Lord in prayer three times to remove the thorn, but was not cured, may remind us of our own suffering (2 Cor 12:8). Those of us who have a disability, or some other form of suffering, find comfort in the fact that even the Apostle Paul, who healed others in his ministry, could not heal himself. Nor would God heal him, although He could have.

Paul described his weakness as a messenger of Satan, but God sovereignly used the messenger for his own purposes, just as He did with Job. Paul did not state the relationship between the messenger and the thorn. In fact, the apostle carefully used the passive construction, "there was given to me," to avoid identifying a sender (2 Cor 12:7). But who gave it? We can surmise that Paul did not identify a sender

¹⁰ Moisés Silva, ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. 'asthenia' (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 4:316.

¹¹ For discussion of various views on the meaning of the "thorn," see John F. MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 400–401; David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 518–22; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 567–71; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 851–59.

because it is not easy to explain responsibility when it comes to describing God’s and Satan’s roles in physical infirmities. This was true with Job too.

Whether the thorn was from God or Satan, clearly God intended to use it. Paul saw God’s purposes in his weakness, particularly when he made statements like “for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses” (12:10). Weakness is God’s design, not bad luck or random chance. Paul gave three reasons for his thorn, all of which may apply to us as children of weakness in this world. It served: (1) to cut off his flow of pride for receiving the revelations; (2) to position him in need, so that he could receive Christ’s help; and (3) to help him see the power of Christ working in him that he might otherwise miss.

These three things were not in Satan’s best interest. Paul’s spiritual weakness, that is, his propensity toward pride in receiving the revelations that gave him apostolic standing, was tempered by his physical weakness. This leads us to conclude that our weakness causes us to depend upon God and not on ourselves. We cannot appreciate God’s strength and His glorious purposes unless we first experience our own weakness. What can we draw from this?

When the church lays hands on someone, commissioning them to perform its work, this special blessing affirms and celebrates a call and giftedness in that person. Sadly, people with disabling conditions have usually been last in line to experience such affirmation and celebration. Sometimes, they are excluded from being in line, either by local church leadership or by mission agencies. Imagine what it would mean for a young girl or boy in a wheelchair, or someone who is hearing or sight-impaired, to realize that they too can take part in the church’s mission if they are called and gifted.

What the casual reader might miss is that Paul described his conflict as all-out spiritual war.¹² The opposition to him had moved beyond persecution to a full-scale attack. He was “harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within” (2 Cor 7:5). What is crucial is that the apostle treated the internal and external opposition as one. Paul’s opponents—Satan being the chief—had power that they used against him and the mission that he was trying to conduct. But God’s matchless power overrode the opposition in both the attacks and Paul’s physical diminishment.

The Sphere of Christ

It is in the “seeming weakness of the world” that the foolishness of the world is confounded by God’s wisdom. People are not called because of their wisdom, their talents, or their status and stature. God calls out of His strength and provision (1 Cor 1:26). God explained His ways to Paul in these clear words, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). The imperfect strength of this world cannot compare with what God offered Paul. And beyond human comprehension, weakness perfects God’s strength.¹³ No wonder Paul could say with conviction, “for when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Yes, it is as

¹² Lisa M. Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 190–94. Bowens argues that Satan attacks Paul by sending a thorn and that the ongoing conflict with false apostles should be viewed collectively as a cosmic battle over which God triumphs.

¹³ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 161.

easy as that. Let us remind ourselves that Paul's transparent look at himself and his own weakness was done in the context of his mission to the Corinthian church, which was probably the church that brought him his greatest challenge. Weakness of all sorts is most prevalent where the battle for new converts and new local churches is fiercest. For those of us who love the Lord's mission, this comes as welcome encouragement.

It is beautiful to think of Paul's weakness operating in the sphere of Christ (2 Cor 10:13–15). To understand this, we must picture the distinction between heaven and earth. Having prepared the way for us through His death on the cross, Jesus waits for us in the heavenly places. In our earthly realm, characterized by worldliness, believers are subject to all forms of weakness. We feel pain, experience disability, suffer spiritual confusion and meet all the darkness of the world's chaos. But as believers in Christ, we already have access to the heavenly places, the sphere of Christ, and this world's darkness begins to lift. The stench dissipates. In Christ, Paul ascends to the heavenly places (Eph 1:3, 20). And the apostle invites those of us who are weak to join him. The sphere of Christ offers unlimited power, comfort, and peace.

What Characterizes Paul's Weakness?

Paul describes weakness more precisely and thoroughly in 2 Corinthians 10–13 than anywhere else in Scripture. Although he does not intend to present his Corinthian readers with a complete theology of weakness, he offers us enough detail to understand it, and what it accomplishes for him and his opponents.

- *What is weakness like in Paul?* Paul shows that although weakness is humble and gentle (2 Cor 10:1), it can be bold (10:1–5), confident (10:7), and can have authority (10:8). It manifests itself consistently whether he is physically present or writing from a distance. Weakness is unimpressive (10:10) but is not inferior (10:15).
- *What does weakness do for Paul?* Weakness does not allow Paul to compare himself with others (10:12); does not boast in accomplishments (10:13–15); elevates others (11:7–9); does not judge by appearance (10:7); brings glory to God (11:30); and gains strength from the cross of Christ (12:9).
- *What does weakness do to Paul's opposition?* Powerfully, it demolishes strongholds, arguments, and pretension (10:4), and shames the strong and the proud (1 Cor 1:25–27).

David Black summarizes:

If being weak means acting like a father instead of like a ruler, speaking with simple instead of proud words, preaching the gospel free of charge instead of demanding apostolic wages, humbling oneself instead of boasting in oneself, leading the churches by example instead of forcing one's will upon them, then Paul is happier to admit, "I am weak."¹⁴

¹⁴ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 90.

Weakness transforms Paul. No wonder he uses the analogy of the human body to teach the value of weakness in the church (1 Cor 12:22–23):

Even the least attractive and most inconspicuous members of the church are important and should be treated with respect. The weaker members not only have a proper place in the church, but are in fact “much rather necessary,” for all the members of the body are interdependent and interrelated. Therefore, because they are indispensable, Paul says they only “seem to be” (*dokounta ... hyparchein*) weaker and unnecessary.¹⁵

In short, “God not only places the necessary weaker members in the body but also gives more honor to them” (1 Cor 12:24).¹⁶

Paul’s Exposé of Weakness

People with disabilities can bring a dependency that the church lacks and desperately needs. Too often our churches condone, or even adopt, the dominant societal narrative, with independence or autonomy as our goal. Yet, our earthly journey is a classroom to learn dependency upon the Lord. Paul wrote this exposé to give us a clearer picture of how dependency worked out in his own life, and therefore, how it might work out in ours. His conclusion? Our weakness displays our vulnerable humanity and thus our need to rely upon God. This allows God to work in and through us to achieve His mission.¹⁷

Ultimately, then, weakness transforms lives. What does it mean for us to be weak? It means that we must become weary and wait for God’s strength. It means that we must suffer before He can heal us. It means that we must fail so that our Lord can succeed for us. It means that we must lose so that He can win. It means that we must die weak so that He can give us new and perfect life. How we need weakness!

Prayer-Dependency: God’s Remedy for Mission Weakness

The Spirit’s Prayer Solution

God allows no weakness except He provides appropriate power. What provision has He made for our weakness, in particular our inability to succeed in His mission? What must we do so that God uses us, not *despite* our weaknesses but *because* of them?

In Romans 8, the context in which Paul defines hope for the suffering and groaning creation,¹⁸ he transitions to the next section with the words, “in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness” (v. 26). Paul then probes the complexities of our weakness when we don’t know how to overcome it. Crucially, this passage, like 2 Corinthians 12, focuses on weakness in God’s mission. The two passages go hand

¹⁵ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 81.

¹⁶ John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 178.

¹⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 382.

¹⁸ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 310.

in glove. If weakness is the problem, prayer is the solution. But what should we pray for in weakness?

Our Weakness and God's Will

We must understand our weakness-dependency upon God. But what provision has God made to overcome our weakness and yet help us remain fully dependent upon Him? Paul boldly proclaims, "My power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). The apostle needed mission power to validate his apostolic authority, include others into apostolic ministry, connect his work with others as fellow workers, in short, all mission activity.¹⁹ But he also needed God's help to remain dependent on God in weakness. The key was following God's will. For Paul, "by means of this disability God's will was made manifest to his servant."²⁰ Praying in God's will was the challenge before Paul.

Paul says, "The Spirit also helps our weakness" (Rom 8:26). But how? God so desires our dependency that He gave us an antidote. Prayer engages us in God's will. Thomas Schreiner explains: "The weakness of believers in prayer, therefore, is that they do not have an adequate grasp of what God's will is when they pray. Because of our finiteness and fallibility, we cannot perceive fully what God would desire."²¹ The author adds, "Believers are weak in that they do not know what to pray for, since the totality of God's will is hidden from them."²² The Apostle Paul is concerned with the believer's inability to pray; not *how* to pray but *what* to pray.²³

God's Will and Our Prayer

Weakness is the crucible for prayer-dependency. God so desires our dependency rooted in our weakness that He gave us an antidote—prayer. Prayer is an essential part of His missional strategy, and the point of prayer is to reinforce Paul's presentation of the gospel.²⁴ How does it work? It starts with groaning along with the rest of creation (Rom 8:18–22). Groaning is a prelude to hope. It is less about asking for something and more about depending on the Lord.²⁵

Although believers cannot specify their requests to God clearly since they do not know His will, the Holy Spirit translates these groanings and conforms them to God's will.²⁶ The prayer of believers is not always answered affirmatively since they do not always know what God's will is.²⁷ But because the Spirit "fathoms the divine plans to the bottom"²⁸ and intercedes in accord with God's will, God always answers our

¹⁹ Thomas A. Vollmer, "The Spirit Helps Our Weakness": Rom 8:26a in Light of Paul's Missiological Purpose for Writing the Letter to the Romans (Biblical Tools and Studies 36; Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2018), 80.

²⁰ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 111.

²¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 443.

²² Schreiner, *Romans*, 443.

²³ Vollmer, "The Spirit Helps Our Weakness," 145.

²⁴ Vollmer, 132.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 477.

²⁶ Schreiner, *Romans*, 446.

²⁷ Schreiner, 446.

²⁸ F. Godet, *Romans* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 103.

prayers.²⁹ Every prayer is one hundred percent heard and answered. With the Spirit's fail-safe prayer connection, the believer on mission can know for certain that prayer is consistent with the will of God.³⁰ By fulfilling God's will, mission is accomplished.

If you listen carefully to Paul, the only impressive thing about him is his weakness.³¹ But Paul is confident in God's power to prevail over Paul's weakness. Schreiner says, "Believers should take tremendous encouragement that the will of God is being fulfilled in their lives despite their weakness and inability to know what to pray for. God's will is not being frustrated because of the weakness of believers. It is being fulfilled because the Spirit is interceding for us and invariably receiving affirmative answers to His pleas."³² This might seem too good to be true. Not with God.

The Spirit's Role in Our Prayer

Simply put, "Weakness becomes something that keeps the believer from doing what God desires. The Spirit is the necessary agent to help the believer get beyond the impasse of the weakness and to live in accord with God's design."³³ Thomas Vollmer explains: "Paul includes himself in those struggling and fulfilling the mission of God, and one draws the conclusion that Paul has established the Spirit as missiological agent, in order to help the Christ follower succeed in expanding God's mission to the world."³⁴

Not surprising, Paul's discussion of prayer-weakness appears in the context with the verse we go to in times of hardship and suffering: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Schreiner explains, "No wonder all things are working out for our good—the Spirit is effectively praying for us so that the will of God will be accomplished in our lives."³⁵ To illustrate Paul's statement, an *ordo salutis* follows. God resolves our weaknesses as sure as He accomplishes our salvation.

If Jesus conducted His mission in weakness, how much more should we?³⁶ Richard Bauckham responds, "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."³⁷ Black adds: "In the midst of his inadequacy and apparent disabilities is at work the grace of God that enables him to be a more than conqueror (Rom 8:37)."³⁸ He continues, "Only when Christians confess their prayer-*astheneia* can that weakness be overcome by the Holy Spirit and prayer become not merely a possibility but a reality. Thus in Pauline thought prayer takes on a special significance to the

²⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 446.

³⁰ P. T. O'Brien, "Prayer 8:26, 27: A Revolutionary Approach to Prayer?" *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (1987): 71-72.

³¹ Richard Bauckham, "Weakness—Paul's and Ours" *Themelios* 7, no. 3 (1982): 4.

³² Schreiner, *Romans*, 446-47.

³³ Vollmer, "The Spirit Helps Our Weakness," 261.

³⁴ Vollmer, 261.

³⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 447.

³⁶ The apostle's weak mission is in continuity with Jesus' mission. See Peter T. O'Brien, "Mission, Witness, and the Coming of the Spirit," *BBR* 9 (1999): 208-209.

³⁷ Bauckham, "Weakness," 4.

³⁸ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 111.

degree that it is affected by the Spirit, who intercedes with wordless groans for those unable to pray.”³⁹

Prayer and Power in God's Weakness Theatre

Returning to the conviction that weakness is God's theatre for mission power, “This activity of the Spirit on behalf of Christians in their prayer life suggests that for Paul prayer is the ultimate showplace of the power of God revealed in human weakness, since it takes place at the most fundamental level of the believer's relationship with God.”⁴⁰ Prayer is not only our personal lifeline to God but also our fundamental access to God's mission power. No prayer; no accomplished mission.

How does weakness-dependency impact our thinking about God's power in our lives accomplishing His will for mission? Black explains:

Paul teaches that God's way of exhibiting power is altogether different from our way. We try to overcome our weakness; God is satisfied to *use* weakness for his own special purposes. Too many become disheartened over their infirmities, thinking that only if they were stronger in themselves they could accomplish more for God. But this point of view, despite its popularity, is altogether a fallacy.⁴¹

This draws us to the inevitable conclusion regarding our weakness-dependency and God's sufficiency: “God's means of working, rightly understood, is not by making us stronger, but by making us weaker and weaker until the divine power alone is clearly manifested in our lives.”⁴² This astounding statement means that every person, regardless of how weak, may participate in God's global mission. No one is excluded.

Conclusion

By His will, God chose Moses, Isaiah, and Paul in weakness and disability, then sent them on their missions. Was this mission sabotage? By no means. God used their weakness to disable pride, dismantle opposition, and display his power to a watching world in God's theatre of weakness.

If the church's mission needs weakness, the church needs to allow people with disabilities to express their call and giftedness for the glory of Christ along with the rest of us in our weaknesses. We all will demonstrate the value of, as well as the need for, weakness. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that “there are many people in ministry too strong to be useful. There are no people in ministry too weak to be useful.”⁴³

³⁹ Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness*, 127.

⁴⁰ Black, 127.

⁴¹ Black, 161–62.

⁴² Black, 161–62.

⁴³ Spoken by Dr. John MacArthur at Together for the Gospel conference, Twitter post by Richard Gregory, April 12, 2018, <https://twitter.com/RichardPGregory/status/984504149978042369>.