

The Weakest of These
A Four-Part Bible Study on Weakness and Perfect Christian Living
By Deaconess Janet Nicol

Introduction

Of all the words that are used to describe weakness, which ones best describe those who are vulnerable in society? Some think of words such as infirm, invalid, disabled, injured, and damaged, just to name a few. These words can describe refugees and homeless people. These words could also describe someone who is deaf, blind, or handicapped in any way.

Some words like powerless, delicate, incapacitated, unsound, and susceptible could describe someone who cannot speak for themselves, such as someone in a coma, in a state of dementia, intellectually challenged, or an unborn child.

A list of words that describe weakness in feelings could include some of these words: weary, broken down, drained, hurt, and tired. These words can describe any of us at any time.

When discussing weaknesses, one really must make a distinction between these types of weaknesses. Someone with poor vision, hearing loss, or a missing limb may or may not think of themselves as weak in the same sense that someone who has full hearing or vision capacity may. People who cannot speak for themselves cannot communicate how they perceive themselves. Often a person who struggles with feelings of weakness will not physically show the signs of their distress, or it may manifest itself in a host of other ways, physically or emotionally. They cannot communicate their vulnerability, or they do not want to communicate it.

Even though this study is presenting three aspects of weakness such as weakness in the body, weakness in the mind, and weakness in the spirit, it is important to realize that we are mind, body, and spirit all at once. They are separated here for the purpose of discussion. Any one of us can and often does experience our weaknesses in all three areas at once.

When we discuss weakness, it is helpful to also discuss perfection and what Scripture teaches about it, as well as what our culture teaches. This study will reflect on living the Christian life toward perfection in our weaknesses, even as we look to neighbors' needs in their weaknesses. Scripture always gives us the truth. This study will endeavor to tackle weakness and perfection from all angles and to discuss how we should define and respond to the scriptural view of them.

PART 1: WEAK IN THE BODY

READ THE FOLLOWING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES AND DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS

Matthew 25:31-40 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'"

Exodus 23:9 "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."

Leviticus 19:10 "And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God."

1. According to this, who can be considered the weakest among us?
2. What does the Scripture say about the poor and the sojourner?
3. What is God saying about our status as a sojourner?
4. How can being poor and a sojourner reflect weakness?
5. What is our responsibility toward the sojourners we meet in life?

James 2:15-17 "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

Philippians 2:3-4 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Romans 15:1-4 "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

6. What is our responsibility toward our fellow believers? Toward our neighbors?
7. How does building up our fellow believers and neighbors give us joy and hope?

Prayer: *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46)*. Lord, be our strength and give us the courage to support and help others who need our care. Make us ever mindful that we are sojourners in this world so that we can see and understand the sojourners in our lives and provide for them as You would have us do. In Jesus' name we pray, AMEN.

PART TWO: WEAKNESS OF THE MIND

Some words like powerless, delicate, incapacitated, unsound, and susceptible could describe someone who cannot speak for themselves, such as someone in a coma, in a state of dementia, intellectually challenged, or an unborn child. Our culture often looks upon people described this way as being weak in the mind. They cannot think or make decisions for themselves. This makes them vulnerable which brings to mind weak. Look at what Scripture tells us about the weak and vulnerable in this way.

READ THE FOLLOWING SCRIPTURES AND DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

1. Whom does the world or culture consider to be weak-minded?
2. What are some examples in history, especially in the Bible, of God using what is foolish to shame the wise?

Matthew 18:1-6 "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.'"

Luke 18:15-16 "Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.'"

3. Who do the apostles think are the weakest or least among the people?
4. What is Jesus' reaction to that opinion?
5. What is shocking about His reaction?
6. What is humbling about Jesus' words in these two passages?
7. How do Jesus' words about the least among us give hope?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let us see the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us who had their faith in You be the only source of their hope and joy. Allow us in our Baptism to have the faith of little children and the courage to accept that the hidden weakness of Your death brought forth the glory of Your resurrection. Amen.

PART 3: WEAK IN SPIRIT

A list of words that describes weakness in feelings could include some of these words: weary, broken down, drained, hurt, despairing, and tired. These words can describe any of us at any time. Often our weaknesses in other areas cause us to also be weak in the spirit. What does that mean exactly and how do we seek the Lord and respond to others with weak spirits? Here we will look at how God's Word gives us a better understanding of what being weary and brokenhearted can do.

READ THE SCRIPTURES AND DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS

Psalm 34:18 "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

2 Corinthians 12:21-26 "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

1. What parts of the Body of Christ (the Church) might be considered weaker than others?
2. Who might be considered unpresentable?
3. How might the Church have joy when we suffer along with those who are weaker?

Matthew 5:1-5 "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'"

4. How do Jesus' words in Matthew 5:1-5 give you hope?

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger

of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

5. How had the Triune God used weakness to make the Apostle Paul understand grace?
6. Why boast of weakness? Should we be thankful for our weakness?
7. What is Jesus implying about faith and weakness?
8. How has God used weakness in you?
9. How have your weaknesses given you joy and hope?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in our weakness, be our strength. Help us to remain humble and to always be open to the idea that we are here in this life with all the struggles and concerns we have so that we can learn to become dependent on You alone. Amen.

PART 4: PERFECTION AND WEAKNESS

When we discuss weakness, it is helpful to also discuss perfection and what Scripture teaches about it as well as what our culture teaches. In Greek the word “telios” means complete, perfect, or whole. It is related to the word for finishing or completing. In these passages from Scripture, the word “telios” is often translated as perfect. Ponder the value in knowing what perfection is according to Scripture.

READ THE SCRIPTURES AND DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS

Matthew 5:48 “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

1 John 4:18 “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.”

James 1:4 “And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

1. What do you think Jesus meant when He said to “be perfect” as part of His sermon on the mount?
2. How do the letters by John and James help us to understand what Jesus meant?
3. How does this understanding of perfection compare to the culture’s understanding of it?
4. How does it compare to your own understanding of perfection?

Hebrews 5:9 “And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”

John 19:28-30 “After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

Philippians 2:5-11 “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

5. How did Jesus demonstrate His perfection?

Philippians 3:12-16 “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”

1 John 2:2-6 “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

2 Timothy 1:13-14 “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

6. As mature Christians, how do we obtain perfection?

7. How does knowing that our weaknesses relate to our perfection give us hope and joy?

Prayer:

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart. The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands (Parts of Psalm 138).

Help us to surrender our self-reliance and independence to You. Help us to understand that in our deepest vulnerabilities, You bring us comfort, hope, and joy. You are the source of restoration and completeness. Use us in our weaknesses to Your glory, AMEN.