THROWING STICKS AND SINKING SHIPS

A huge crowd was watching the famous tightrope walker, Blondin, cross Niagara Falls one day in 1860. He crossed it numerous times – a 1,000-foot-trip 160 feet above the raging waters. He not only walked across it; he also pushed a wheelbarrow across it. One little boy just stared in amazement. So after completing a crossing the fellow looked at that little boy and he said, “Do you believe I could take a person across in the wheelbarrow without falling?” “Yes, sir. I really do.” Blondin said, “Well then, get in, son.”1

Trust in God is like that; we may be all fired up and ready to do God’s will for us, but when the time comes, our enthusiasm wanes and we remember that we’re in a wheelbarrow over Niagara Falls. For the past two weeks we’ve heard about weakness being a place where God can work in our lives, and that’s true, but there are times when it’s our perceived strength that becomes a stumbling block.

Someone once wrote, “The thing we have to watch most of all is our strength, our strong point. We all tend to fail ultimately at our strong point.” Sometimes the greatest obstacle to the power of God in our lives is us! We may assume that because we want to see God’s power at work in our lives we would welcome it with open arms. But asking for God’s power also involves abandoning confidence in our own, admitting failure, surrendering or releasing things we’ve held on to tightly.

If we are going to take the power God desires to make available to us, we have to look at the places in our lives where that power might be launched, and that means our weakness. We need to examine those areas where we sense a clear and obvious weakness, and those areas we’ve always seen as our strength. In these two contradictory areas we will find the same thing; places where God would demonstrate His power if we would only allow Him to.2

It might have worked for King Saul, but unfortunately he was too far gone to give himself over to God. David’s victory over Goliath caused Saul to admire him, Jonathan to love him, and the Israelites to revere him. However, there was a power struggle going on between David and Saul. David had already been anointed as the king to replace Saul, but it would be years before he would take the throne.

Saul did not know about the anointing, but he did know that God was with David at the same time He was leaving Saul. Saul’s jealousy and suspicion is obvious in this passage. He was afraid of David because he knew God had left him. He came under the influence of an evil spirit and in his frenzied state he tried to kill David by throwing a spear at him, even though David was now a part of Saul’s household and was trying to soothe him by playing music for him.

In putting David into battle as a commander Saul actually added to his success. Saul became even more afraid of him. Surely he knew he was fighting a losing battle. The end of this chapter says that Saul became David’s enemy for the rest of his life. If we take our eyes off of

1 Swindoll, Charles R., The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart, pg. 586
2 Schaeffer, Dan, The Power of Weakness: Embracing the True Source of Strength, pg. 95-97
God and keep them on someone else we will find ourselves wrestling with emotions and running from our feelings and totally incapacitated to be of much use.

Saul’s story is tragic, but then David wasn’t going to be without his problems either. He would take his eyes off of God at some point and would follow his own desires into a bad situation. It’s true of all of us that faith can lapse, even those who had a relationship with Christ in the flesh. A panicky boat full of disciples and a sleeping Jesus made for just such a situation.

The water was over the sides of the boat, causing great fear in the disciples. This begs the question; why were the fishermen frightened? There they were on their own turf, or surf, in this case. They were in boats, on the Sea of Galilee, known for its sudden and violent storms. Yet on this occasion they were in fear for their lives. No doubt those disciples could turn right around and ask us why we are afraid of what we experience as part of our everyday lives.

There were three good reasons why none of those men should have been afraid that night. For starters, they were traveling across the lake because that’s what Jesus wanted to do. Do you really think Jesus would be in danger of not getting where He was going? Secondly, they had the Lord of the Universe there with them in the boat. They had witnessed His power over disease and death. Lastly, Jesus was asleep during the whole thing. Try to think of the last time you slept through a crisis.3

We know that Jesus was exhausted. The human part of Him was as human as any of us. He got tired, He got hungry, He got frustrated, and yes, even fearful as He approached His death. The human part of Him was asleep at that point because the divine part of Him already had matters under control. The disciples, however, had no notion that He was in control. They cried out to Him, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are about to die?” Of course He cared. God always cares, so what we really should be asking is why they went to Him for help if they really didn’t know exactly who He was.

By “we” I can imagine they included Jesus in the threat of death. He awoke, spoke to the waves and wind, told them to be quiet, but He used the word peace. Do you think that was really meant for the wind or for the disciples? There was complete calm after that. Just the wind and sea, or the disciples too? He questioned their faith and their fear and they questioned who this man was who could control the weather.

Think about this now; why would we call out to God for help and then accuse Him of not caring? If our question to God is “Don’t you care?” then His response to us is “Where is your faith? Where is your confidence that I am God and I know what’s going on?” The greatest danger in that boat was not the wind or the waves, but the unbelief in the hearts of the disciples. It was their unbelief that caused their fear, and their fear made them question whether He really cared.

What would He say to you at your less than finest hour? Do you panic first, thinking only of what you are capable of, or do you remain calm and trust? If it’s the latter, then I would say either you have a great tolerance for crisis or you have the faith of a saint. I once met a woman

as a patient in the clinic where I worked. When taking her medical history and asking if stress was a problem in her life, she told me she didn't think she'd ever experienced stress. I didn't believe her.

As “Don’t you care that we’re dying out here?” is suffering humanity’s challenge to God, “Why are you afraid?” is God’s challenge to humanity. This story functions not merely as a report of a once-upon-a-time amazing event at sea, but as a narrative of the divine-human encounter.

Faith empowers us to use what happens toward the good. It drives us to take hold of the circumstances of our personal lives or of general disaster and to turn them to profit. It believes that God can bring good out of evil, even the worst of evil, and that since this is God’s mind and purpose, we should seek ways to cooperate in that enterprise. Because we have faith, we do not stand on the sidelines waiting for God to impress us into divine service; we volunteer for the conflict.4

The ability to give to God our control and power often hinges on our willingness to allow God to be God. And this hinges on our belief or disbelief that God is precisely who and what He says He is. We can embrace our weakness and trust God to reveal his power in the most difficult of our situations only, and most fully, when we have made peace with His goodness.

Sometimes that involves willingness to finally revisit and reassess some of those experiences in our past where we have believe God did not truly act in our best interest, when we experienced pain, loss, discouragement, and allowed our heart to cast doubt on His goodness. Ironically, sometimes to move forward in our relationship with Christ we must go backward to those places we feel He failed us.

Did the disciples eventually get over the night on the lake when they thought Jesus didn’t care? Did David look back at the numerous attempts on his life, some from his own son? Did he express regret or relief? There is a word from the book of James that might help us put things into perspective. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

James says that the end result of the trials that come our way will, if we allow them, make us perfect and complete. Now, who do you know who is perfect and complete? Wait...that would be Jesus! God’s purpose in our lives is not to make us miserable; it is to make us into the image of Jesus, who alone is perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. There is wisdom to be gained through the difficulties God brings our way, wisdom that comes no other way.5

This is a great verse for the persecuted Christians of the early church, but we might prefer something a bit less demanding. We may not face what those Christians faced, but time has not erased the faltering human spirit in the service of God. We can talk ourselves in or out of just about anything, so why can’t we let God’s voice talk us into being of use to Him?

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4 Kalas, J. Ellsworth, The Will of God in an Unwilling World, pg. 75
5 Schaeffer, Dan, The Power of Weakness: Embracing the True Source of Strength, pg. 132-133
To alleviate the fear of being judged, or being criticized, of failing or even of being afraid, we only need to ask God to prepare us. He will not ask anything of us that He will not also provide us the necessary knowledge to accomplish. It does not have to be anything grand or complicated. Sometimes just offering a smile to someone who seems to be having a bad day is enough.

A businessman, nervous and upset, was ordered by his doctor to go to Grand Central Terminal in New York and look for someone who needed help. He felt like a fool obeying, but found a woman seated on her suitcase weeping. Someone had failed to meet her. He found out where she wanted to go, got a taxi, went with her, bought her some flowers on the way, and delivered her to her daughter’s home. He went to the telephone, called his doctor, and said, “Doc, it works. I feel better already.” He was well – when he thought of someone else!

There is something both freeing and thrilling to be a part of making someone’s day or lifting their spirits or giving them what they cannot obtain for themselves. The power is not ours, but it is given as needed. Our weakness may be just the place where we can change someone’s life. Our strength may be something precluding us from trying. The sticks we fear being thrown at us or the sinking ships we hesitate to board have no power to match that of the Holy Spirit who fills and fulfills us.

There is power in weakness. There is joy in surrender. There is life in dying to self. All these are yours for the taking, if you give fear to God and open your hands to receive His strength.