

# LIVE OUT OF WEAKNESS AND VULNERABILITY

## 20240505

### INTRODUCTION

This morning we examine a very challenging aspect of **Emotionally Healthy Discipleship**. We deal with two key words, **Weakness** and **Vulnerability**.

The English word "**Weakness**" refers to:

- the state or **quality of being weak**; lack of strength, fragile or feebleness;
- an **inadequate or defective quality**, as in a person's character; slight fault, flaw or defect.

The English word "**Vulnerable**" is derived from Latin and means "to wound."

- Capable of being physically or emotionally wounded
- Open to criticism, attack or damage

Everyone alive in our fallen world has been wounded in life. In fact in Vineyard circles we refer to ourselves as "wounded healers".

**NOTE: Weakness and vulnerability have nothing to do with wilful sinning. We are not addressing the subject of sin today!**

**Western culture places a high value on power and influence.** We are dazzled by celebrities, famous artists, and those with thousands of social media followers. We attribute great power to the wealthy and successful and to those who are brilliant intellectually or gifted athletically. We value cutting-edge innovators and entrepreneurs who chart new paths for the future.

Unfortunately, the twenty-first-century church also places a high value on power and influence — especially when ministries attract large crowds, have high impact and visibility, and boast impressive buildings and staff. We are dazzled by our own versions of celebrities, famous artists, and those with highly visible gifts. Famous popular church leaders, singers, and so on are given honour and glory.

Because we are not aware or know that there is an alternative, we allowed ourselves and our ministry, to be seduced by the world's definition of power. We try to avoid any sign of weakness and vulnerability.

### MY PERSONAL BACKGROUND

I grew up in a dysfunctional home. My dad was an alcoholic and violent person. As kids we experienced regular and severe physical beatings. My mom struggled to keep the home a place of peace, but eventually she was emotionally and mentally affected by the constant drama in the house. She was the parent who exposed us to church and Jesus. My dad was an unbeliever.

The Lord called me to ministry when I was 13. My dad was totally opposed to this happening. Made sure I went to do an apprenticeship at ISCOR as a millwright.

I had emotional and developmental gaps that caused me to feel different and insecure around other kids. I carried terrible secrets from home and felt out of step with everyone else who spoke of home happiness.

Even after theological college and ordination I felt inadequate. Through all my years in ministry I have been aware of my weaknesses.

My understanding and expectation was that no obstacle could hinder what God wanted to do through me. He would not have called me to a particular work if I could not fulfil it with His help. So I reminded myself that, "greater is he who is in me than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). I was determined to remain strong and faithful. God had given me zeal, talents, and good ministry experience.

A major shift began in my life after almost seven years of leading out of strengths and successes when Charl and I had been married for seven years and we had come to a place where we were considering divorce. That would have brought my ministry to an end as divorced priests were a no no in the Anglican denomination. But God stepped in and we really went through a great struggle and journey of healing and restoration. It began with me, as God dealt with my inherited weakness, mistakes, vulnerabilities, and failures – God helped me to break the power of the past. (Remember David's and Andrews sermons of the last two weeks).

Did I become perfect? No! Did this disqualify me from remaining in ministry? No! We all have flaws in our character. When we're in Christ, we're weak, but strong in His power.

## EXAMPLE OF PAUL

The best passage to teach us this truth is:

### **2 Corinthians 12:5-10 (NLT2)**

*<sup>5</sup> That experience is worth boasting about, but I'm not going to do it. I will boast only about my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it, because I don't want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message, <sup>7</sup> even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. **So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.** <sup>8</sup> Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. <sup>9</sup> **Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."** So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. <sup>10</sup> **That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.***

Paul considered his great weakness to be his badge of apostleship and authority from God — so much so that he boasted in it, arguing that this was how and why the power of Jesus flowed through him.

For most people, bragging about abilities, accomplishments and positive experiences, is a way to build themselves up in the eyes of others – to make much of themselves so others will make much of them. Paul found himself boasting, but he was boasting in a way we usually don't think of boasting. He was boasting of his weakness, of his difficulties, and of his troubles.

## **GOD'S COUNTERCULTURAL PATH TO POWER AND STRENGTH**

What we often miss is an understanding of what constitutes power and strength from a biblical perspective — and how radically different that is from the cultural understanding. We need a revelation of who God is and the way he works. But the qualities of weakness and vulnerability are rarely encountered in our world, or even more sadly, in our churches.

## **A THEOLOGY OF WEAKNESS**

Scripture consistently shows God choosing to work through weak, flawed, and imperfect people. We see this, for example, in the lives of many Old and New Testament characters.

As I have shared a couple of times already, at the leadership handover service my words to Andrew were:

"You pick up a church that I have led for 40 years, but I must tell you that it is not yet the church that I would like it to be. **It is far from being perfect.**

I have realised that **my gifting was to bring the church to this stage**; your gifting is going to take the church into the next phase of what God has ordained for Centurion Vineyard."

I certainly would not have said those words if I did not realise my **weaknesses and vulnerability**. If I was **proud and defensive** I could have said something like:

"Andrew you lucky man, you are getting 40 years of successful church growth and an almost perfect church. It is going to be very hard for you to follow my act, but here's hoping you can become a worthy senior pastor of CVCF."

## **THE 12 DISCIPLES**

The twelve disciples were not known for their scholarship or knowledge. They were not theologians, nor did they seem to have great intellectual abilities. They had attitude problems, showed lack of faith at times, made mistakes and failed miserably at times; They seemed to be slow learners, spiritually dense

at times, and had character flaws. Yet each of them were personally selected and called by Jesus Christ (Messiah).

Who were they? – Just normal people like you and me.

## **OUR GREATEST MODEL IS JESUS**

Think about it: God came to earth, not in a flashy show of signs and wonders, but as an infant born into poverty and obscurity. After living as a refugee in Egypt, he returned to grow up in Nazareth, a small village a long way from the big city. He waited thirty years to begin any public ministry, and even then, refused to do miracles on demand or overwhelm people with his brilliant intellect. His ministry was small and almost invisible by the world's standards.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus exercised his power carefully so as not to manipulate or force people into following him. **He revealed just enough of himself to make faith possible, but hid just enough of himself to make faith necessary.**

For his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he rode not on a magnificent war horse like Alexander the Great, but a humble donkey. And he allowed himself to be arrested and treated as if he were a common criminal.

We consider the passage from Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus' raw humanity is on powerful display. In the garden of Gethsemane we encounter a weak and vulnerable and broken Jesus:

### **Matthew 26:36–39, 42, 44**

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and **he began to be sorrowful and troubled**. Then he said to them, "**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death**. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "**My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.**" . . . He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." . . . So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.*

**NOTE: Jesus did not approach his suffering, the Cross and death as a superhero. He faced the agonising moments revealing his weakness and vulnerability as a normal human being.**

As he hung on the cross in the worst moment of his earthly life, his final prayer was a question he quoted from the Psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1).

## **EMBRACE THE GIFT OF YOUR LIMP**

Paul isn't the only one to whom God gave the gift of a "handicap," which is how The Message Bible translates "thorn in the flesh." Almost every believer has something that drives them to their knees on a daily basis.

What is it for you? A child with special needs? An addiction? Emotional fragility with a tendency to depression, anxiety, or loneliness? Scars on your soul from an abusive past? Childhood patterns of relating to other people that cause you to feel desperate for change? A physical disability? Cancer? Or chronic temptations to anger, hate, resentment, unforgiveness or Judgmentalism?

Early in my Christian life and ministry, I believed that God wanted to heal my weaknesses and frailties completely. It would never have occurred to me that they might be part of God's design and will for me, as it had been for Paul.

## **VULNERABILITY IS SOMETHING WE ALL SHARE AS HUMAN BEINGS.**

According to theologian Jürgen Moltmann,

**“There is no differentiation between the healthy and those with disabilities. For every human life has its limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. We are born needy, and we die helpless.”**

And we inevitably become more so as we age, living with increasing degrees of limitations and impairments.

God built brokenness and weakness into the fabric of all life when he set in motion the consequences of the fall (Genesis 3:16–19). From that point forward, God declares that all relationships would be marked by pain and misunderstanding, even in the best communities, and all work would be marked by frustration and a sense of incompleteness. He did this so that our weakness would drive us to seek him and recognize our need for him as a Saviour. There will be nothing perfect this side of heaven.

While the world treats weakness and failure as a liability, God sees our weakness and vulnerability as a gift. Weakness and failure cuts across all ages, cultures, races, and social classes.

**Vulnerability is risky.** It can be scary to lower your defences and open up your life to others. When you reveal your failures, feelings, frustrations, and fears, you risk rejection. But the benefits are worth the risk. Being vulnerable means being relieved of the stress that comes with trying to put on a front; it's a great step toward freedom.

Is it any wonder that Scripture tells us that “the weakness of God is stronger than human strength,” and that God chooses “the weak things of the world to shame the strong”.

### **1 Corinthians 1:25-27 (NLT2)**

*<sup>25</sup> This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength. <sup>26</sup> Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. <sup>27</sup> Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those*

*who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.*

Consider the people whom you are trying to serve or minister to. What if all they see are your strengths? Where does that leave them? It leaves them feeling discouraged and unable to measure up. If all someone sees in a servant is strength, then there is no encouragement to aspire or to try to be the same. But, we can be much encouraged by seeing others and their struggles, as well as their strengths.

You don't build credibility by trying to put on a front of perfection. If you are always 'right' or 'perfect' then you will repel people. No one can stand to be around someone who is always right! You build credibility by being honest and vulnerable, not by trying to present a front of perfection.

God has always used cracked pots to "show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us".

### **2 Corinthians 4:7 (NLT2)**

*<sup>7</sup> We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*

So ministry is not dependant on my or your strength, but on God's strength. Look at how great God is, He can use you and me to build His kingdom.

## **CONCLUSION**

As I conclude, I'd like you to think of the interesting example of Jacob. He, at one time, wrestled all night with God. He told God that he wouldn't let him go unless He blessed him. God was prepared to bless him, but before doing it, he grabbed his hip and dislocated Jacob's hip, so Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his life. Normally, the thigh muscle is one of the strongest in the body. God took that and turned it into a weakness so that Jacob could never run away from God. He had to lean on God whether he liked it or not.

Are you willing to go forward with a limp in your life? If you want God's blessings and for him to use you greatly, you must be willing to live with a limp, because God loves and uses weak people!

**The world will never comprehend the strange wisdom of Jesus's countercultural kingdom in which the last are first, the weak are blessed, the humble are exalted, the empty are filled, the poor are rich, and where impossibility becomes the occasion for miracles.**

Real ministry begins with vulnerability. The more you let down your guard, take off your mask, and share your struggles, the more God will be able to use you in serving others. Got It?

**John Wimber:** Never follow a leader who does not walk with a limp.

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## EXTRA NOTES:

**Peter Scazzero**, in his book, “**Emotionally Healthy Discipleship**” has identified four core characteristics of an emotionally healthy discipleship that embodies weakness and vulnerability:

1. Develop a theology of weakness.
2. Embrace the gift of your limp.
3. Transition to become a church based on weakness.
4. Practice vulnerability daily.

## ANALYSING WHERE WE ARE

**Peter Scazzero**, in his book, “**Emotionally Healthy Discipleship**” developed a simple chart contrasting the weak and vulnerable leadership modelled by Jesus in Gethsemane, and the proud and defensive way we often lead today.

As you read through the characteristics, consider which column you relate to most.

<b>Weak and Vulnerable</b>	<b>Proud and Defensive</b>
I allow myself to be sorrowful and troubled in front of others	I cover over my feelings of sorrow and confusion in front of my team.
I admit to my team when I am feeling overwhelmed.	I refuse to fall apart, always modeling strong faith and vision, especially in front of my team.
I easily ask for the help and prayers of others.	I rarely appear needy in front of others. While I will be there for others, I don't look for others to be there for me.
I pray in utter dependence to surrender my will to God's will.	I pray how to strategically turn a bad situation around and expand the ministry.
I have no problem falling face down on the ground in front of others when I struggle to submit myself to the unfathomable will of the Father.	I try to stand tall, being decisive and unwavering in crisis, so others can lean on me for faith and strength.

The column to the right, of course, is the exact opposite of the example we have in Jesus, and it stands in stark contrast to who we are called to be and the kind of churches we are called to build.

## PAUL'S GROWTH IN WEAKNESS AND VUNERABILITY

Paul's growth in Christ was matched by an ever-increasing sense of his own weaknesses and sinfulness.

- In his letter written to the church at Galatia, he comments on other apostles this way: “As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever

they were makes no difference to me" (Galatians 2:6). Traces of competitiveness with the Twelve appear in this statement. The letter is believed to have been written in **49 AD**, when Paul would have been a Christian for about fourteen years.

- Six years later, in **55 AD**, he writes the Corinthians in a more humble manner: "I am the least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9).
- Five years after that (about **AD 60**), and twenty-five years after becoming a Christian, he proclaims, "I am less than the least of all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 3:8).
- Two years before his death, and after walking with Christ for perhaps thirty years, he states clearly, "I am the worst [of all sinners]" (1 Timothy 1:15).<sup>11</sup>

What happened? Over time, Paul grew in his understanding of the love of God, and he became stronger in Christ by embracing rather than shunning his weaknesses.

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## David

The phrase most often used to describe David is that he was "a man after God's own heart." We observe that heart, of course, in the many psalms he wrote as well as the many victories he achieved. But one of the most vivid pictures we have of David's heart is revealed not in a triumph but in a colossal moral failure — when he commits adultery with Bathsheba and then murders her husband, Uriah.

When he is confronted by the prophet Nathan, David does not deny what he's done, cover it up, or try to erase all memory of it from Israel's history. Instead, he repents. And he makes sure his failure is recorded in vivid detail as a lesson for future generations (2 Samuel 12). He even writes a song about it to be sung in worship services and published in Israel's worship manual (Psalm 51)!

How many of us today would do something like that after such a colossal failure?

David understood something significant about who God is and how he works. He wrote:

*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:16–17)*

David knew that acknowledging imperfections was critical, not only for his own spiritual health, but also for the health of those he led.

His life embodied God's message that Israel's existence as a people was based on the love and mercy of God alone and not their own performance. And if God can use a person like David, forgiving him of such a massive breach of integrity, God can use anyone — even you and me!

## OTHER BIBLE CHARACTERS

This has always been the way God works. Consider the flaws and imperfections of the heroes of Scripture:

- Peter was a loudmouth with a short fuse.
- John Mark deserted Paul.
- Timothy had ulcers and struggled with fear.
- Moses was a stutterer.
- Rahab was a prostitute.
- Amos's only training was farming.
- Jacob was a liar.
- The Samaritan woman had a whole string of divorces.
- Samson was a womanizer.
- Naomi was a poor widow.
- Jonah ran from God's will.
- Gideon and Thomas doubted.
- Jeremiah was depressed and suicidal.
- Elijah was burned out.
- John the Baptist was loud and abrasive.
- Martha was a blamer.
- Noah got drunk.

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## PAUL

We don't know what the thorn in the flesh was. Many scholars think it was some sort of physical ailment, and the phrase "the flesh" seems to bear that out. Others think it may have been persecution, or some sort of spiritual resistance.

But whatever it was, that's not the point. Whatever it was, it was unpleasant, likely very painful – probably physically, or maybe emotionally, or both. It might have also been embarrassing.

I think one reason we're not told exactly what it was is because we can all relate to this better without specifics. We all have thorns in our lives that won't go away. We may ask the Lord to take it from us, and He doesn't. So it doesn't really matter, for the purposes of what we need to learn from this passage, what Paul's thorn was. It doesn't really matter what our thorn is. That's not the point. We're getting to that.

Sometimes, we don't sense any answers when we pray. Other times, God's clear with us, and gives us a revelation as to why He's saying no. But in Paul's case here, God said no. But God didn't stop with just saying no. He didn't just say to Paul – "No, I'm not going to take away this thorn." He said two things:

1. my grace is sufficient for you
2. my power is perfected in weakness

The point is God's answer to Paul, the answer that came with the refusal to remove the thorn in the flesh, that Paul entreated, begged, pleaded with God to take away.

God said, "My grace is sufficient for you." And, God said, "My power is perfected in weakness." The message is clear – God was telling Paul that His power – God's power, was not just perfected in weakness in general, but in Paul's weakness... and by extension, your weakness, my weakness.

With this, Paul learned that his thorn had a purpose. With this, Paul learned that even though God would not take away this thorn, God would be with him.

After God spoke the comforting words to him that His grace was sufficient for Paul, Paul began to recognize something important. These are important things we all must recognize. Paul had begun to make the argument that the only thing he could boast in was his weakness.

But here, in verse 9, that takes on new meaning. After God had told him that not only is His grace sufficient – that God's grace would sustain Paul, enable Paul, to stand firm, in anything that Paul would experience, including the pain and suffering and embarrassment of the thorn - but also that God's power was perfected – made perfect, in Paul's weakness.

**This phrase, made perfect, means: To complete, mature. To complete, make perfect by reaching the intended goal.** Particularly with the meaning to bring to a full end, completion, reaching the intended goal, to finish a work or duty

Paul's recognizing that without being weak in himself, he cannot be strong in Christ. He can trust in Christ's strength, or his own, but not both. His personal strength is puny and useless by comparison, and in the economy of God.

The Lord can use more of our weakness than our strength. Our strength often competes with God's strength, which is a joke if you think about it, because what can truly compete with God? But in us, our strength is the rival of God's strength. Our weaknesses are much more often His servant.

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## **GOD SPECIALIZE IN USING "AS IS" PEOPLE WITH WEAKNESSES.**

We are not nearly as strong as we'd like to think, sometimes. We try to hide our neediness. We try to hide our inabilities. We try to hide- and to hide from- the fact that we're not 'all that' by ourselves, and that we do need others. We are weak and needy. God loves to use weak people! Do you know that? Or do you think he is looking only for spiritual giants in the doing of his great work? We might think that God only wants to use our strengths, but he also wants to use our weaknesses for his glory.

When you and I think of ourselves, we like to think of our strengths, and we like to even manufacture strengths that might not really be there, as we want to look good to ourselves, first of all. However, we don't have to go there. Maybe you have some physical limitations, or a chronic illness, low energy, an emotional limitation of some sort, or a talent or intellectual limitation. God knows, and, frankly, so do you and I. Let's not hide from ourselves- that's the worst deceit we can be in- to hide from the truth of ourselves! God has chosen you and He delights in using you.

We always have a way to justify glorifying ourselves, even if that's not how it starts out – even when it's not our original intention.

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**Another Illustration:**

**Hudson Taylor**, founder of the **China Inland Mission**, which in the 1960's became what is today the missions agency **Overseas Missionary Fellowship** International, knew the secret of strength through weakness. Complimented once by a friend on the impact of the mission, Hudson answered, "It seemed to me that God looked over the whole world to find a man who was weak enough to do His work, and when He at last found me, He said, 'He is weak enough — he'll do.' All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them."