

Being Strong

RETHINKING POWER



LARRY DEASON

Loving Relationships That Last Series

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Our Common Struggle

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*“...For Christ’s sake,
I delight in weakness...
For when I am weak,
then I am strong.”*

To the *wife of my youth* Helen,
Affectionately known to me as “Muffie,”
Who, through the years, has stood by my side
and has been
The wind beneath my wings.

Being Strong

Our Common Struggle

“Life is difficult,” wrote M. Scott Peck, M.D. in the opening line of his book, *The Road Less Traveled*. I didn’t have to read that to know that life has its difficulties. It’s a fact: an absolute reality. To believe that life on this earth is carefree and easy is to deny this fact. An even more subtle denial is to believe that “life *should* be easy.”

Experiencing “life” will eventually entail difficulties and problems; a two-year-old who stumbles and bumps his head knows this. H.A. Williams (*Tensions: Necessary Conflicts in Life and Love*) said, “Conflict is Life.” Who is prepared for it? How can I face it? Indeed, *can* I face it and deal with it?—*all* of it?

*My life is consumed by anguish and my years
by groaning; my strength fails because of my
affliction, and my bones grow weak.¹*

Life is difficult because life is full of conflict. Facing the conflicts of life is not easy. One must be strong in order to deal with frustrations and grief, sadness and loneliness, guilt and regrets, fear and anger, anxiety and anguish, despondency and despair.

*My strength is dried up...But you, O LORD,
be not far off; O my strength...²*

Most of our thinking and training is for success and advancement. When failure and defeat come, who is prepared for it? The usual reaction to life's conflicts is cursing, crying, moaning, or fretting. There is an alternative to the groan of defeat.

We can face and confront these problems and difficulties in God's paradoxical power: strength in weakness! Herein lies the secret to real strength. Here is the key to victory and triumph. We can turn disgrace to grace, ugly wounds into beautiful scars. A painful thorn can become a powerful tool! Jesus said:

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."³

Life causes everyone to experience *brokenness* in varying degrees, through many ways, and for different periods of time. Being broken hurts! There is no miracle pill to make the pain cease, but in Christ we can learn to find helpful meaning in the suffering. Out of life's brokenness can come *wholeness of life in Jesus!*

Jesus Christ experienced brokenness. He put on human flesh⁴ and lived through not only our

common human experiences, but a unique role as Suffering Servant and Lamb of God. He experienced the brokenness and pain that should have been ours for eternity. He can identify with us. He understands our afflictions and can give us strength in our weaknesses.⁵ By understanding the pain and suffering that Jesus experienced, we can gain insight and find wholeness through brokenness, strength in weakness.

Looking Beyond Weakness

Most of us view any kind of weakness as simply “weakness”: a completely negative evaluation. We never dream that there could be power or strength in *weakness*. Paul gives a persuasive example of this concept:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in

persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.⁶

Power made perfect in weakness? Delight in weakness? When I am weak, then I am strong? How can this be? First of all, we must desire to live a humble life. We cannot allow pride, especially spiritual pride, to threaten and destroy us.

Thorns keep us humble, preventing conceit. Unpleasant and painful experiences have a purpose in our spiritual maturity; they prevent us from being self-exalted. At first, Paul found his thorn not empowering, but *overpowering*. It was so difficult to bear that he cried out to the Lord for its removal. He felt dismay, not delight; he did not understand that a thorn of weakness could save him from a spiritual fall. He couldn't yet fathom how much could be gained in his relationship to Christ from this painful situation. It is difficult for all of us to see through our pain. A wall of tears is hard to see through! But once we come to understand and accept what God has in mind for us, our tragedies can become treasures, and our thorns triumphs.

The LORD is the stronghold of my life...⁷

Often, we think we can overcome our weakness with a few words of discipline. We sometimes think that only a brief period of suffering in our

lives will teach us the invaluable lessons that we need so much to learn. Not so. Our spiritual needs may be such that we need unrelenting adverse circumstances to motivate, revive, and strengthen us.

When a brief affliction or momentary constraint is removed, we often go back to our same old habits. Long-term change requires a process of conditioning. The crooked branch will not straighten if it is only held for a short while. It takes time and the constant support of something stronger than itself to become straight and strong. We can be humbled by affliction and temptations, but when these trials are too brief, we invariably return to our old way of thinking and living. As the sharpness of the thorn is removed, our consciences again become dulled.

Paul's thorn was not taken away, but the Lord did answer him with the enlightening words that gave him power to endure.

... “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”⁸

Although his source of torment and tribulation remained, by these words, Paul knew he had the constant love and support of God in Christ. *Through* Paul's weakness, Jesus would become his *sole* source of strength!

Finding Strength In God's Grace

Grace comes to perfection and fullness when weakness is submitted to it. We need the grace of God, not only for salvation, but also for deliverance from the tribulations of everyday life. We must depend on grace to resist temptations and stand firm in the faith.⁹ *God's grace is sufficient!*

Power comes to its ultimate strength in weakness. When one has reached the point of utter helplessness, having no control over his "thorns in the flesh," he can only depend on the Lord as his Source of strength. He realizes he has no power in himself.

*...the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*¹⁰

Paul allowed the strength of God's all-sustaining grace to penetrate his entire life by accepting his own helplessness. He humbly and completely depended on the strength of Christ. He understood by actual experience that God's grace really is sufficient: His power is made perfect in weakness. The grace of God comes alive in ways we never dreamed possible. Every day we find that He gives us *more* grace¹¹ to help in our every need and to draw us closer to Himself¹² in humility, good works, and labors of love.

Paul boldly proclaimed the effects of God's grace in his own life of faith and dependence:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them [apostles-L.D.]—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.¹³

The Holy Spirit, through the Word, encourages us to *stand* firm in the faith, *continue* in love, and *grow* in trust. By our humble submission to the power of His grace, God *can* accomplish these things in us.¹⁴ We will truly find the fullness of Christ; we will find wholeness through brokenness; we will experience “strength in weakness.”

Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.¹⁵

Delighting In Weakness

After the Lord answered Paul's pleading with His strengthening and life-giving answer, the apostle had a revolutionary change in attitude. He then exclaimed that he would boast very gladly of his weaknesses, so that Christ's power might rest on him. He

willingly submitted to his lowly circumstances for the sake of higher spiritual ends. He finds that the abundant and unceasing grace which Christ provides enabled him to have peace, contentment, and a loving, accepting attitude toward all his trials.

A proper attitude is needed so that God's grace can transform our responses to life's troubles. Then we can learn the joy of uttering these words:

...for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.¹⁶

We can *delight* in the truth that divine power and strength live within us when we endure or overcome our weaknesses—but it is *Christ's* strength, not ours!

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.¹⁷

God alone is praised, for it is only by His grace and might that we survive weaknesses and tribulation in a God-glorifying way. We become willing and eager to learn the righteous characteristics of Jesus from life's afflictions and trying temptations. Only then can we deeply receive these godly qualities

into our lives. Paul said that he *actually delighted* in the severe problems that he experienced. He didn't say that they wouldn't cause him to experience a great deal of emotional and physical pain. Persecution and other traumas hurt profoundly.

Most of us initially ask, "How in the world can we delight in something that hurts us?" The basic purpose of pain must be understood before we can begin to grasp this concept of "delighting in weakness."

In a fallen world, suffering must precede glory and wholeness. To share in the glory of Christ's resurrection, we must know conformity to the likeness of His death. Even Christ had to approach the crown of glory through the cross of submission and suffering. We need to accept these fundamental realities, and live in peace and contentment through it all. We must find higher reasons for suffering, so that we can actually delight in it.

Making Suffering Count

The pains, trials, tribulations, and temptations that we face are inflicted upon us by Satan and/or Self. When God, in His wisdom, allows these adversities in our lives, we should never believe the falsehood that the discipline of the Lord is a proof that God has rejected us; rather, it is evidence that we are

His sons and daughters—if, indeed, we are. It is entirely possible that the sufferings we endure are a direct result of our commitment to Christ:

Dear Friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ...¹⁸

In the world we are going to have disappointments, difficulties, problems, hurt, pain, anguish, disillusionments: all kinds of suffering. Those without Jesus constantly ask the question: Why? But followers of Christ have something worthwhile for which to suffer. We can suffer trials *for Christ's sake.*

Without applying the biblical perspective, the best we can do in response to the problem of pain is resign ourselves to a morbid endurance of suffering. This attitude does not lift us out of ourselves and can only lead to more tribulations. Depression can develop as troubles mount. Resorting to chemical painkillers leads to even deeper complications. Followers of Christ can rise above themselves to a higher end and make personal suffering count. We can endure it for Christ's sake. We can be *thankful* and rejoice!

*O my Strength, I watch for you; you, O God,
are my fortress, my loving God.¹⁹*

Suffering Means Glorification

We can find joy in the fact that we are counted worthy in this present life to glorify God in suffering for Christ's sake. We can also look forward to being glorified by God in the future to come.²⁰

...our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.²¹

“Glorification” is not a heavy theological concept. It simply means “to rise up, to honor, to extol.” Because we are all significant persons created in the image of God, we appreciate recognition. But self-centered recognition is prostituted recognition. It is purchased. The true and genuine person doesn’t want this kind of honor. We need honor that comes unsolicited.

Who, but God our Father, can best honor and glorify us? It is our glorious God who honors and glorifies us—can you imagine that? Anticipate this and rejoice in your sufferings; *delight in them!*

Finding Joy In The Testing Of Your Faith

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you

know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.²²

James doesn't say we'll experience joy when we *look* for troubles, but rather, "whenever you *face* trials." Too many times *we* bring misery to ourselves and others. If you live a life of love, sensitivity, and humility, you are going to suffer painful experiences that you don't search for; thorns will come! But count it all joy, knowing that it works faith, steadfastness, and the development of the character of Christ in your life.

We say we want to be like Jesus, but do we really desire it at *any* cost? We must go through the fiery furnace of trouble—that is what it will take. Jesus, the Son of God, willingly stepped down from His heavenly throne and walked into the fiery furnace of this earthly life. He, more than anyone else, with an inner peace and joy, endured the testing of His faith.

...he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect...²³

Another outstanding biblical figure who obediently submitted to the testing of his faith was Abraham. Over and over again he was tried. The ultimate test

of his faith, the one we so emotionally identify with, was God's requirement that he sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham had waited a lifetime for this son God had promised him. But one day God said to Abraham:

... “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burn offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”²⁴

Abraham obeyed the Lord. He glorified God by not holding back. In surviving this trial, his faith relationship with God was probably never stronger. Because of his obedience in love, the Father snatched him out of this excruciatingly painful experience. And Abraham rejoiced in the Lord's goodness and mercy.

How would we come through a test like this? Could we give up the most cherished person in our lives? If put to the test, would not the average Christian become very confused and hesitant and even fail the test?

Can God ask too much of us? Can there be too much pain and suffering allowed in the testing of our faith? Could God allow us to be so severely tried that we cannot endure the test? The Holy

Spirit in the Scriptures tell us the answer to these questions: an emphatic *no!*

*God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*²⁵

We are all at different levels of maturity. Abraham, through years of discipline, had been prepared through the many tests of his faith to undergo the painful trial concerning Isaac. And in his obedience he didn't lose sight of God's love and faithfulness. He learned discipline to greater and greater degrees as the years passed because of the continuous testing of his faith and constant reliance upon God. Abraham was blessed for his humble submission. The Lord gave him back his son. He delighted in the testing of his faith. Through weakness he became stronger!

We, also, are prepared as we grow in the testing of our faith. The Lord develops us by giving us the opportunity to *practice* what we've learned. Through practicing our faith we grow to greater levels of maturity. We can rejoice in this growth, for as we mature spiritually, the Lord can use us in greater service to His glory. With each new test, we learn that there is nothing greater we can depend on and no one we should trust in more than the great God

of all grace and strength. There is such a peace, such a deeply felt joy in *totally trusting Him*. As our faith grows toward maturity, as selfishness is being dethroned in our hearts, Christ and His power will be expressed in us.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²⁶

Living in this truth and reality will give us the strength we need to overcome or endure any weakness that might befall us. Rejoice—for the testing of our faith is the means to this glorious end.

Delight In Comforting Others

Because of the strength and spiritual growth we experience by submitting ourselves to the Lord's power, we can delight in still another gift from above. The weaknesses we have learned to endure and overcome in Christ enable us to help others in their trials and temptations.

As we are continually strengthened and encouraged by the truths of God's Word, we are also sustained through the Lord's providential care. He uses others to bring about the help that we need in times of crisis.

As we mature and grow in strength, we can glorify God by helping others find power in their weakness.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.²⁷

Just as we've come to know the sensitivity and tenderness of the "Father of all compassion and God of all comfort," we've also experienced the same special qualities in the love and concern of our brothers and sisters. When we become distraught and are suffering affliction, people we never even imagined would care may give us such comfort and compassion. What motivates us to reach out to others during their troublesome times? First and foremost, all of us want to follow in the steps of Jesus. His entire life was devoted to helping others in their trials and afflictions. We want to learn to do the same.

But there is something else that causes certain people's lives to "overflow" with comforting and

encouraging words and actions. They have suffered greatly in their own lives.

What a wonderful God we have—he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of every mercy and the one who so wonderfully comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does he do this? So that when others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we undergo sufferings for Christ, the more he will shower us with his comfort and encouragement.²⁸

When we have suffered trials similar to those of a person in need, we have a *heart-felt* sensitivity to his or her problems. “The most painfully tried, the most proved in suffering, the souls that are best acquainted with grief, provided their consolation has abounded through Christ, are specially called to the ministry of comforting others.”²⁹ Comforting others in their suffering is a very valuable gift of God’s grace.³⁰ Suffering is the ultimate service.

Someone wrote a three-minute drama about the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1ff) which illustrates my point. The main character of the play is a physician. The doctor, being ill from a wound he himself

cannot heal, goes to the pool in Bethesda. As he approaches the water the angel attending the pool forbids him to enter. The physician is puzzled by the angel's forbidding nature and questions him: "Why am I not allowed to enter the water? You have permitted thousands of others before me to do so; why not me?" But the messenger insists and then reveals the reason for not allowing the sick physician to submerge his body into the healing waters. "Sir," said the angel, "without your wound, where would your power be?" As the doctor listens attentively in humble resolve, the angel concludes his astonishing remarks: "My good man, it is only the wounded who can truly labor in Love's service." In our weaknesses we are made strong.

While there are those who have been developed by God through suffering great hardship throughout their lives, all of us can identify with suffering of some kind. In experiencing hardships we can find comfort in the mere fact that we are partaking of the sufferings of Christ.³¹ In addition, we can rejoice in sufferings, no matter how severe; for in them we find strength in weakness and victory in Christ.

Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in

*purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*³²

Paul, through Christ, rejoiced in the mercy and comfort of God that sustained him through his many sufferings. He is a remarkable and inspiring example of the joy that can be found in hurting for Christ's sake. By enduring trials and finding strength in our sufferings, we too can be an incentive to others to persevere under their trials. Their faith will grow as they also find victory in Christ.

With a sensitive depth of perception, we can accept that suffering is not only for our benefit,³³ but is also for the comfort and growth of others. With the right attitude toward tribulations, afflictions, temptations, and troubles of all kinds, we will always find "strength in weakness" through Christ. We will come to a greater love and appreciation for the "Father of compassion and the God of all comfort."

Unless the LORD had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your love, O LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.³⁴

As we grow in faith and strength in our weaknesses through the comfort and discipline of God, we will become assured of our place of safety in the love of Jesus Christ:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger of sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.³⁵

Misbeliefs That Keep Us From Being Strong

Many persons, including some of God’s people, are not willing to accept some fundamental principles of life. How can we grow in strength if we do not perceive life in this world as it often truly is?—

difficult. Those who live as though this were not true are not being honest with themselves. Life is difficult! Remember, “truth sets us free.”³⁶

If we believe that life is not difficult, our lives will be detrimentally affected. We will not be free. “Truth sets you free”; that is a great theological statement. We have heard others say it and have read it in books, but this is a fact of practical experience. If I suddenly received a call, reporting that my wife had been murdered, I would be devastated: bound and shackled by this belief. But if, five minutes later, I saw her walk in the door, I would be set free. I would be freed from the deception that was holding me in bondage. From despair and pain, I would come to feel utter joy.

If we do not accept the truth and acknowledge the reality that life is difficult, we are going to have serious problems living in a pain-filled world. To believe that life is easy or without problems is to be unrealistic.

Life *is* difficult. But life is *not* impossible to live. We can rise above troublesome situations and even find value in them.

To believe that life *should* be easy is a misconception that seems to plague us constantly if we have not come to understand the concept of strength through weakness. We learn from the time we’re

small children that life is not easy. Stubbed toes: life is difficult. Mashed fingers: life is not easy. A child snatches a toy away from another—what is the deprived child learning? Life is difficult. A mother, looking out for a child's well-being, exhorts, "No, son, don't do that; that's dangerous!" He is learning that life is not easy.

Many Christians believe that, because they have become children of God, life will not have any more difficulties. Everything will be rosy. They paint a constant smile on their faces, but deep down inside they are fearful, believing that this smile *should* not crack for any reason. The "shoulds" of this kind of living will eventually overwhelm them. This kind of thinking leads to the misbelief that if one is suffering afflictions or trials of any kind he has somehow been unfaithful to the Lord, and God is punishing him for his sin.

Job's three friends believed this falsehood. They tried to convince Job that his own sinfulness had brought many afflictions upon him. They did not know the truth. It was because of the Lord's strong belief in Job's faithfulness that He *allowed* Satan to attack him so unmercifully.

Job suffered greatly, but he remained true to God. He did not curse God, as his own wife urged him to do. Although there were times, in his humanness,

that his spirit became very low and he became confused and weak, he did not fall in rejecting God in spite of the severe afflictions with which Satan tested him. He kept the truth of God alive in himself and even confidently accused his friends in their misbelief:

“I have heard many things [untruths-L.D.] like these; miserable comforters are you all!...I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief.”³⁷

It is ironic that Job was accused by all those who came in contact with him during his afflictions. In the past, he was a great comforter and encourager. He was devoted to instructing many; he had strengthened feeble hands; his words supported those who stumbled; he strengthened faltering knees.³⁸

Throughout Job’s time of suffering he continued to cry out to the Lord in prayer. Finally, God answered him. Before restoring Job’s health, prosperity, and family, God first turned to the three critics. He expressed His anger at their not having spoken what was right, as Job had. They were so blinded to the truth that they were convinced they knew God’s ways. By insisting on the falsehood that all suffering

is punitive, they had limited God's wisdom. They could not see the spiritual value of suffering: to grow in the strength and faith that enables God's people to serve Him in greater ways.

Another principle that I have learned through years of study, counseling, and personal application is that the trying situation is usually less painful than one's reaction to it. Our reactions often cause us more distress than the circumstance itself. So, we become disillusioned and frustrated. This response brings about a string of problems which affect our thinking, our actions, and even, in turn, our physical health.

Most assuredly, we are reactionaries. Very few of us respond to an intense predicament with calm, objective evaluation and proper action. This is not to say that one's emotions should not be involved, but that they should be under control. This will enable us to make proper choices according to the conditions at hand.

Strength In Overcoming The Common Temptation Of Anger

An example of a practical life weakness that gets out of hand is the emotion of anger. When people selfishly demonstrate anger, they speak of having "lost it." Actually, the problem is that they have never really found it and controlled it.

Anger, as psychiatrists and social workers have come to believe, is a chosen expression. No one can “make you mad”; no one can cause you to “fly off the handle,” whether verbally or physically. No, it is something we *choose* to do which sets off a chain reaction. Lives become frustrated, fragmented, and broken. But we can find wholeness through this brokenness, strength in this weakness. Anger is an emotion that can be controlled and channeled correctly; anger can be expressed in a constructive way, a righteous way.

Destructive anger is an emotional inclination to attack. It is provoked by selfishness.³⁹ Selfish anger has many expressions, including resentment, bitterness,⁴⁰ and hatred. These emotions originate in the heart. Feelings are soon displayed by actions: quarreling,⁴¹ sarcasm, criticism, gossip, revenge,⁴² assault, and fits of rage. But don’t fool yourself: these heart emotions can also be displayed in a covert way. The “silent treatment,” the “arm’s length syndrome,” and the “If-I-don’t-see-you, you’re-not-really-there” game are also expressions of anger.

There are many causes or sources from which this destructive anger arises. One might lack a *feeling* of power over oneself, other people, and circumstances. There can also be a lack of *feeling* regarding personal self-significance and self-sufficiency.

Diminishing *feelings* of importance can cause the loss of a sense of self-worth. The frustration of desiring unachievable perfection can also be a contributing factor. Many people have learned from faulty environment conditioning that angry actions and words are the only ways to respond to the angry feelings within.⁴³ But how can we change these selfish feelings of anger? How do we find wholeness through the brokenness that evolves out of the feelings and actions of anger? How do we find strength in this weakness?

First, we must face the *truth* of anger's existence within our hearts, and the havoc it creates. We must also look within ourselves and find the *truth* concerning the deep-felt causes of these ruinous actions. Then, we must correct our understanding of anger and recognize that these *feelings* are there because of unrealistic expectations. The correct understanding, and consequently the right choices, will defeat this selfish, destructive anger. *There can be constructive choices* made in response to angry feelings.

We should then courageously admit all feelings of resentment, bitterness, strife, hatred, rage, and malice. We must also learn to make calm and correct observations, and to develop accurate interpretations of all situations. Where dissension has occurred, humbly seek immediate reconciliation.⁴⁴ And don't be a perfectionist; no one is perfect—not even you!

We must ultimately remember that our relationship with God and the precious people created in His image is more important than the things that are frustrating us, tempting us to express anger. We must learn to leave vengeance to God. If we apply these principles, we can turn the weakness of anger into strength.

In attempting to practice these suggestions to defeat anger in our lives, we must keep in mind that these can only be accomplished if we truly depend on Christ's strength, not our own. Completely relying on His power that works in us, we can be victorious over anger or any weakness.

Nonacceptance Of Unpleasant Realities Causes Conflict

Refusing to face the fact that life is filled with problems, afflictions, misfortunes, and other difficulties causes conflict within us. It is not easy to accept the strain of living in this imperfect world. But if we don't, the conflicts that this denial brings about will cause us to turn to our own destructive desires. We will continually find ourselves frustrated; we will experience guilt, fear, regret, anguish, and even despair. In order to deal with these reactions of nonacceptance, many turn to drugs, alcohol, withdrawal, isolation, pursuit of selfish endeavors, sexual promiscuity, and many other escape routes.

These may seem to deaden the pain of conflict for a short while, but soon they create *much more* pain, confusion, and hopelessness.

Sometimes, we can't even accept *small* conflicts in our lives. For instance, when a planned picnic or some other outing is ruined by inclement weather, what is the common reaction? We complain, fret, gripe, perhaps even swear and curse. If we can't calmly and graciously accept the trivial conflicts, how are we ever going to face the very difficult problems of life?

One of the most common fears with which we all must deal is caused by nonacceptance of the reality that we will all eventually die. Death may take us by surprise at any time. We just do not have control over it; God in His wisdom controls both life and death.

When severe illness strikes, most people don't want to accept the potential threat it poses to their lives. I once saw a documentary about a woman who was afflicted with a violent form of cancer. One whole side of her body was being eaten away before her very eyes. The disease had destroyed many of her vital organs, but her mind was not in any way affected. She was very intelligent and alert. Even when the doctors continually informed her that she would not live much longer, she would not accept

the reality that she was going to die. She confidently announced to her doctor and family that she was going to live another 20 or 30 years. But she died within a few weeks.

Often, the one who is stricken with an illness that is leading to his or her death can accept it, but members of the family will not. This nonacceptance of the fact that a loved one is going to die causes shock, sometimes leading to severe depression and even despair when the loved one does pass away. Sooner or later we all must face the reality of our own death and the passing away of those we love.

Fear of death causes many other phobias that control people's actions and lifestyles. Some people actually lock themselves away in a house for years on end, for fear that something will happen to them if they step outside. Others are afraid to go over bridges, frightened to ride in a car, and many would never set foot in an elevator. There are many fears that could inhibit one from living a full and anxiety-free life.

If we could only develop a strong faith and trust in the wisdom of God, we would rest in the fact that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."⁴⁵

We would be accepting of all difficulties and would not even fear death itself.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.⁴⁶

Strength In Weakness Through Prayer

One of the most powerful tools God has given us for developing strength in weakness, in tribulation, in trouble, and in trials is *prayer*. We can continually go to the Father, exchanging the cares and troubles of this world for the joy of the Lord. Close communion with Him lifts the burdens from our heavy hearts.

Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.⁴⁷

For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.⁴⁸

In order to reap the benefits of prayer we must have a great faith in its power, and entertain no doubts. Jesus assures us, “Whatever you ask for in prayer,

believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”⁴⁹ But we must also pray in humble submission, as Jesus did, wanting only the Lord’s will in everything.⁵⁰ It could be very detrimental to our well-being if we prayed in ignorance and vanity and received what we selfishly asked for. In prayer we must be convicted of the Father’s great love and concern for us in considering our possible shortsightedness. God provides us with the freedom of not having to worry about anything.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.⁵¹

There is a great peace and rest to be found in prayer. For we know that God withholds nothing that is good for us and that will assist us in growing in the character of Christ.

Many times, when we pray to the Lord in desperation and great pain, He does not remove our hurt immediately, or even eventually. But we rest in the truth of God’s Word: His grace is *enough* for each of us. We will always find comfort and strength in weakness through devout prayer, no matter what troubles the Lord may providentially hold out to us in life.

The Lord is my strength and my song...⁵²

Paul did not find relief from his torment through prayer, but his heart did become established in great joy and strength in the midst of any hardships he would have to bear the rest of his life. The apostle learned to endure suffering and to continue in strength of faith. He also delighted in it because Christ's power was made perfect in weakness. As devoted followers of Christ, we can do the same.

David was one who constantly beseeched the Lord in prayer for strength in his struggles and anguish. And he waited for His answers with *expectation*:

Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. Morning by morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; morning by morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.⁵³

David's prayers show his great faith and trust, that the faithful would be delivered through prayer. They will lack no good thing.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man

called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.⁵⁴

David constantly *praised* the Lord in *gratitude* along with his loud cries and petitions:

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.⁵⁵

Jesus Christ suffered terribly in the Garden of Gethsemene. He went there to pray for strength. "...he began to be deeply distressed and troubled."⁵⁶ He shared with Peter, James, and John: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."⁵⁷ Then He fell to the ground and humbly prayed, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."⁵⁸ Even though emotionally suffering to the point that he felt death at His door, He still had the *strength* to lift the Father's desires above His own pain. Taking the time to commune intimately with the Father in prayer gave Him the power to face with courage the trial that was before him: betrayal, scourging, and death on a cross.

The strength we gain through prayer should be a source of continual praise and thanksgiving to our

Father who lifts up the brokenhearted. He may not give us what we cry out for, but He does give us power to endure all suffering!

...but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.⁵⁹

Strength In Weakness Realized

Even though life *is* difficult, it need not be defeating. *Glory* in your weaknesses—failures are not final! *Accept* your weaknesses—frustrations are not final! You may have to *live on* with a broken body, a broken heart, a broken home, or shattered dreams—but not without *strength*!

Acknowledge your weaknesses, for in them power is made perfect! Jesus faced His helplessness when

...he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...⁶⁰

Delight in your weakness, for when you are weak, strength comes to its fullness. “*My grace* is sufficient for you, for *my power* is made perfect in weakness.”⁶¹ Christ’s power rests upon those who believe this great truth spoken by the God of “more grace.”

Are you weak? What is your thorn? Accept the truth and receive God’s power and grace so you can face life’s problems and difficulties, rise above them, and triumph over them by allowing God to turn your weakness into strength.

With God’s grace *everything* pays a profit. You will be able to get *something* out of *everything*—even defeat! Every trial will yield its victory. Every sickness will grow into wholeness. Every criticism will stimulate growth. Every disappointment will produce a delight. Severed relationships will provide a new beginning. Every broken dream and shattered hope will give birth to a new dream and an even greater hope. In every thorn there will be triumph. And every weakness can be an opportunity for Christ’s power to be made perfect in you.

“*But now be strong...Be strong...Be strong...For I am with you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”*⁶²

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.⁶³

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”⁶⁴

Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Gen. 22:2	15	1 Cor. 1:25	8
Exod. 15:2	34	10:13	16
2 Sam 22:32-33	32	15:10	9
1 Chron. 16:11	32	2 Cor. 1:3-5	18
Job 4:3-4.....	25	1:4-5	19
Job 16:2, 4-5	25	1:5	20
Ps. 5:1-3	34	4:7	10
22:15-19	4	6:4-10	21
23:4	32	12:7-10	6
27:1	6	12:9	7, 37
28:6-7	9	12:10	10
31:10	3	Gal. 2:20	17
34:1-3	35	Eph. 4:26-27.....	28
34:4-6	35	4:29	27
59:9-10	13	4:31-32	27
94:17-19	22	6:10	38
Prov. 15:1, 18	27	Phil. 2:6-8	4
22:24-45	28	4:6-7	33
Isa. 38:17.....	21	Heb. 4:15-16.....	5
40:31	36	5:7ff	36
Hab. 3:19	38	Heb. 5:8-9	14
Hag. 2:4	37	13:9, 20-21	9
Matt. 5:11-12.....	13	James 1:2-4	14
Mark 11:24	33	4:4-10	8
14:33	35	4:6	8
14:34	35	1 Peter 4:12-13	12
14:36	35	5:5-6	8
John 8:32	23	5:5-10	8
16:33	4	1 John 5:14-15.....	33
Rom. 1:29.....	27		
8:18	13		
8:28	31		
8:35, 37-39	22		
12:8	19		

Notes

¹Ps 31:10.

²Ps. 22:15, 19.

³John 16:33.

⁴See Phil 2:6-8.

⁵See Heb. 4:15-16.

⁶2 Cor. 12:7-10.

⁷Ps. 27:1.

⁸2 Cor. 12:9.

⁹Read carefully James 4:4-10; 1 Peter 5:5-10.

¹⁰1 Cor. 1:25.

¹¹See James 4:6.

¹²See 1 Peter 5:5-6.

¹³1 Cor. 15:10.

¹⁴Carefully consider Heb. 13:9, 20-21.

¹⁵Ps. 28:6-7.

¹⁶2 Cor. 12:10.

¹⁷2 Cor. 4:7.

¹⁸1 Peter 4:12-13.

¹⁹Ps. 59:9-10.

²⁰See Matt. 5:11-12.

²¹Rom. 8:18.

²²James 1:2-4.

²³Heb. 5:8-9.

²⁴Gen. 22:2.

²⁵1 Cor. 10:13.

²⁶Gal. 2:20.

²⁷2 Cor. 1:3-5.

²⁸2 Cor. 1:4-5 (Kenneth Taylor, *The Living Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1967]).

²⁹James Denney, “The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947), 5:727.

³⁰See Rom 12:8.

³¹See 2 Cor. 1:5.

³²2 Cor. 6:4-10.

³³See Isa. 38:17.

³⁴Ps. 94:17-19.

³⁵Rom. 8:35, 37-39.

³⁶See John 8:32.

³⁷Job 16:2, 4-5.

³⁸See Job 4:3-4.

³⁹See Prov. 15:1, 18.

⁴⁰See Eph. 4:31-32.

⁴¹See Eph. 4:29.

⁴²See Rom. 1:29ff.

⁴³Clearly consider Prov. 22:24-25.

⁴⁴See Eph. 4:26-27.

⁴⁵Rom. 8:28.

⁴⁶Ps. 23:4.

⁴⁷1 Chron. 16:11.

⁴⁸2 Sam. 22:32-33.

⁴⁹Mark 11:24.

⁵⁰Read carefully 1 John 5:14-15.

⁵¹Phil. 4:6-7.

⁵²Exod. 15:2.

⁵³Ps. 5:1-3.

⁵⁴Ps. 34:4-6.

⁵⁵Ps. 34:1-3.

⁵⁶Mark 14:33.

⁵⁷Mark 14:34.

⁵⁸Mark 14:36.

⁵⁹Isa. 40:31.

⁶⁰Heb. 5:7ff.

⁶¹2 Cor. 12:9.

⁶²Hag. 2:4.

⁶³Hab. 3:19.

⁶⁴Eph. 6:10.

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