

## WOUNDED SOLDIERS

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

It has seemed to many who have tried to follow Christ, down through the ages, that this passage – and this particular phrase within this passage – contains one of the most important principles of the entire Christian Life. Having said that, it sounds terribly obvious. To build and further God’s Kingdom among us, didn’t Jesus Himself keep choosing ways the world thinks of as “weakness”? We never hear of His ordering people around; twisting any arms; forcing or trying to coerce people into following Him, or into doing something they were unwilling to do even after they had chosen to follow Him. This would not be remarkable if Jesus were in fact a weak character – if He had no purpose, or passion, or goals of His own. If Jesus were not trying to accomplish anything – content merely to survive here, or to live off of other people – then we might better understand His strange way of going at things – His apparent “weakness.” Ultimately, of course, though we try and try to escape it, Jesus went to the Cross rather than take up arms or bully, force, or try to coerce anybody. Only years later did we begin to notice that it was not, in fact, a powerless Way. He ran on a different kind of power – an unearthly kind of power. And as His people spread across the Empire – not forced but drawn, not threatened but grateful and elated – the strange “weakness” of Christ turned out to be the strongest force on earth. For reasons hard for us to fathom, winning hearts and changing lives have greater impact in the long run than controlling people’s behavior. So in fact, Christianity is never about being powerless. It is about choosing a different power. Only, we cannot choose a different power without abandoning the old power. So we often talk about powerlessness, surrender, a narrow gate, and endless other similar images. But we are not as selfless as we sometimes make it sound. The “weakness” is genuine, from a certain perspective. But the power that draws us is far, far greater than anything we are leaving behind.

Because Jesus’ story and His message have so often been diluted, abandoned, or betrayed, even by sincere followers, His truth is not very clear to many people in our time. Who among us does not wonder, from time to time, if we ourselves have it very clear? But always there are

pockets of people on earth who still choose Jesus and His WAY – not perfectly, but in earnest. They continue to discover the mysterious “weakness” afresh, but usually not until they have spent considerable time in the new life – time letting the Holy Spirit, rather than their own egos, desires, or fears, govern and direct their lives.

Paul, despite some strangely perverted press in our time, spent the years after his conversion tuning his life more and more toward the Spirit and presence of Jesus. He trusted his own prowess less and less, as he trusted Christ’s power more and more ... until he came to the distilled awareness in today’s Scripture reading. Our society studies Christianity so little that many people today think that if a person is humble, it means they are easily controlled. Not at all. If a person is humble, it means they trust God instead of themselves. Though they lack confidence in their own wisdom and prowess, their confidence in God’s wisdom and prowess has grown exponentially. So Luther, a truly humble man, can stand against Pope and Emperor in a time when neither possibility seemed conceivable. They are increasingly furious that Luther will not recant – and not on the grounds of faith or reason, but on the grounds of their authority and right to coerce and control him. Luther stands because his humility is before God, not before them. His confidence is not in himself; in fact, he is terrified on a human level. But neither is his confidence any longer in Pope or Emperor once he realizes that they do not, in fact, revere God. It is, then, his very humility that makes him steel and flint before Pope and Emperor. “Here I stand, I can do no other. Gott helffen mir!”

This is not an aberration of Christendom; it is a theme that runs wide and strong throughout the Christian story – throughout all Christian history. If we are the followers of Christ, we are at times and in many ways at odds with – at war with – the world around us and its ways. If we are followers of Jesus, then like Jesus, we are in warfare against sin, darkness, despair, Satan – against a world that has no genuine allegiance to its Creator. All around us are people saying, and living it out: I can do what I want, when I want to, because I live in the land of the free and the home of the spoiled and self-indulgent; I do not owe allegiance to anything beyond my own best ideas of what’s right, and I reserve the right to seek my own success in whatever ways seem to me most likely to win it.

But the truth for us is that we belong to Christ. Our lives are put at His disposal. Our disciplines are chosen and kept because we want more and more to be responsive to His will and WAY. If we want one thing and it becomes clear to us that He wants another, we trust His wisdom beyond our own, and we willingly subvert our desires to His guidance.

I am only leading up to what has long been obvious to most of you: As long as we are alive in this world, we are in a great battle. Some of the battle is with our own human nature. Some of the battle is with forces and precepts around us that do not match what we understand as the truth of Christ. As Paul says, *“We even fight to capture every thought, until it acknowledges the authority of Christ.”* (II Corinthians 10:5) In any case, we are in a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, between self-will and God’s will, between love and hatred, between Satan and the Holy Spirit. It is often lumped together in the phrase, “spiritual warfare.” If you do not see or notice the spiritual warfare going on all around you, you are indeed spiritually asleep. It follows that you probably have little awareness of how much you need the presence of Jesus with you all the time. Many of us do not awaken – and join Christ’s army – until we are wounded by the warfare we did not fully notice.

In any case, since New Testament times, these realities have often been expressed in military concepts and phrases. The analogy is troublesome to many and annoying to some, and it simply does not feel right to many of my friends. Mariana is always put off by the old hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” I sang it too much as a kid to dislike it now, but she doesn’t like its attitude, or its tune. No doubt about it: The analogy of warfare has been sadly and badly abused, mostly by people who forget that it is an analogy and switch from spiritual warfare to physical warfare and march off to kill the infidels in the name of Christ. “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” How easily we switch from His purposes to ours – and change all the methods and approaches along with the change in purpose – often without hardly even noticing we’ve done it. But a tiny flaw does not keep me from loving “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” either.

So the language of warfare – and thinking of ourselves as soldiers of Christ – is indeed dangerous to the unwary. On the other hand, it is very clarifying and helpful, if we do not get careless. *“Put on the whole armor of God ....”* (Ephesians 6:11-18) *“Let us then cast off the*

*works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” (Romans 13:12) “Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.” (II Timothy 2:3) “To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.” (Philemon 1:2) “The weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” (II Corinthians 10:4) “This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience ....” (I Timothy 1:18-19)*

Am I boring you? The language of the New Testament is replete with images of war and warfare. And I have not even mentioned the Book of Revelation. So we do need to be careful not to confuse spiritual warfare with physical warfare. On the other hand, if we try to avoid the rightful warfare of the Christian Life – whether it is inside or outside the church, or whether it is inside or outside our own selves – then we cannot follow Christ beyond the point where we or a friend, relative, or fellow church member dislike it or are troubled by it. What’s more, we cannot follow Christ beyond the point where Satan dislikes it. If we are not better soldiers of Christ than that, then we might as well hang it up and go home. (Where, we might add, Satan can beat our heads in at his leisure.)

I want to switch back now, if I can, to one of the deepest principles of our warfare. The one Paul is making really clear in our Scripture passage today. And most specifically, to the key phrase: *“My power is made perfect in weakness.”* Paul is quoting the reply he received when, in sincere prayer, he asked Jesus to please remove his “thorn in the flesh.” Doubtless Paul mentioned that it would be easier for him to carry on his work if Jesus would take away this problem. But the reply is: *“My grace is sufficient for you.”* People like to claim that when they pray, God sometimes says no. But God does not say no to Paul. The reply is full of some of the most important affirmations of the Christian Life. *“My power is made perfect in weakness.”* Let us be very clear, then: It is Christ’s power that is made perfect in Paul’s weakness. I know that is obvious and clear to many of you. I also know that it is still fuzzy and vague to some of you. If we are to be part of Christ’s army – good soldiers of Jesus Christ – we dare not let it remain vague or fuzzy. Jesus cannot use our strength ... until it is broken. You will like it better if I say, “until

it is redeemed.” That’s fine too. If you think it can be redeemed without getting broken, dream on.

One of my favorite phrases – and I apologize for being unable to reference its source – nevertheless, one of my favorite phrases, because for me it epitomizes and summarizes the very principle we are looking at, is: In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight. That phrase sends chills up my spine. I have come to believe it completely. But I have not always loved or believed this principle. When I was younger, I wanted very much to be a famous pastor and preacher. I wanted to be one of Christ’s top Lieutenants; Captain or General would be even better. I wanted to be a hero of the faith, a great warrior in Christ’s cause. You cannot have images like that without trying to lead from your strength – without trying to become stronger and more proficient and more effective in your own right. You cannot have images like that without trying to hide your weaknesses – without trying to get over them in secret before anybody notices. The burden of being good and perfect gets heavier and heavier; after all, one slip – one error – will ruin it all. When we cannot in fact live up to the hero image, after a while there is nothing for it but to pretend.

It seems for a while that perhaps some good is coming from all our immense effort. In *my* case it was immense effort, whether you can imagine that or not. If we look hard enough, we can always find evidence that things are happening, that we are making it – at least that we are on the way. The world around us is able, sometimes, to see our gifts, and to honor and reward them. We can achieve a certain amount of human success. But I wanted to be a commander in Christ’s army – make Him proud of me; win His admiration and approval; do great deeds for Him. Forty-six years later, I am very honored and very pleased if He doesn’t kick me out of the army entirely. I no longer have a desire to be a commander, or a hero. Yet I love Him, and His army, far more than I ever did when I was younger. None of those dreams came true, yet what I really wanted – and really cared about – has come into my life far beyond anything I ever formerly imagined.

What has changed? Just this: I know now that in Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight. *“The well have no need of a physician.”* (Matthew 9:12-13) His power is made perfect in our weakness. How does that happen? Let’s review it.

Some of you have heard me say it many times: Our greatest strengths – our best abilities and gifts – are also our greatest potential detriments. Show me a person who is loyal, who will stand by you through thick and thin, who is enduring and will not be swayed from convictions or promises – and I will show you a person who is stubborn, unreasonable, bull-headed, and infuriating. Now, this person may evolve, of course, and learn to turn these character traits over to the service of Christ. Nevertheless, this gift – this type of personality – comes on a spectrum that runs from great asset to serious detriment. They all do!

Show me a person with enormous empathy, compassion, sensitivity, and awareness of the feelings and inner struggles of others. I will show you a person who can enable others to their destruction; who can weep until they are totally ineffective; who can sympathize their way into people-pleasing that no longer even remembers that we are supposed to be pleasing God. An enormously beautiful gift, but it comes on a spectrum that runs from great asset to serious detriment. They all do!

None of our gifts, strengths, or abilities work correctly if we use them for our own purposes. They came from God, and they do not function very well until we dedicate them back to God, and to God's purposes. What in the world could ever persuade us or induce us to turn our very best abilities over to God? Everything in our culture tries to persuade us to use our abilities to succeed *here*, to make a place for ourselves *here*, to get recognition and appreciation for ourselves *here*.

For most of us, there is only one thing that can interrupt us in our progress toward earthly fame and success, however we define that. Along the way, we hit a snag – a major setback, a failure, a surprise or result we were not expecting – a defeat. In short, we get wounded.

We could stop and benefit from talking about wounds, but there is no time today. Suffice it to say that some wounds are self-inflicted, some wounds come from relatives or friends, and some wounds come from the world around us. Many of us think that we are more wounded than most of the others of our kind, but usually that's because we do not know them very well. Some of us hide our wounds if we can, while others exaggerate them and tell everybody who will listen all about them, in great detail. Nevertheless, everybody who comes to this planet gets wounded. So being wounded, in and of itself, does not qualify us for Christ's army. Wounds sometimes just fill us with self-pity, or make us want to quit on life, or turn us into cynical, resentful agnostics.

But sometimes ... sometimes ... wounds turn us back to our Creator. We wonder what happened and why. Sometimes wounds break our pride – our self-sufficiency. We stumble into humility, ask for help, open ourselves to a power not our own. That kind of wound qualifies us for a very different life, in a very different kind of warfare. And we find ourselves invited into a very different kind of army.

As an aside, and you can go looking for exceptions if you wish, but most often our worst wounds are wounds to our best gifts and strengths. Of course! Those are what we lead with. Those are what we trust. Those are out in front, so to speak. So they are the most likely to get hurt. Why did Edison invent a lightbulb? Why is a person driven to study psychology? Why does a person study theology or go into the ministry? Why does a person who has made a huge fortune establish a foundation to benefit others? Most of the great contributions of humankind are driven by wounds. The gifts are there, but the wounds activate them in a new and different way.

And in Christendom, that cannot be left semiconscious. To be as clear as possible: Where we are wounded, the pride often goes away. Some of you are still confused about pride, humility, and confidence. The loss of pride does not mean you lose confidence; it means you shift from self-confidence to God-confidence – that is, to confidence in God instead of in yourself. Humility does not mean that you have no confidence; it means that your confidence is in God, not in yourself. Pride (*hubris*) means we are self-sufficient: we think we do not need God; we are not thankful, or appreciative; we do not worship. In humility, we know that all things come from God. We owe God our entire allegiance, and all our gifts and abilities come from God and must be devoted to God – turned over to God’s will and guidance and direction.

When we are wounded, sometimes it breaks our pride. If our wounds bring us to true humility, then also it causes us to devote, dedicate, and turn our lives, our gifts, and our abilities over to the purposes of Christ. As long as we live in pride and self-sufficiency – or in the belief that we have a right to live our lives our own way, or for our own purposes – there is no way we can serve Jesus or His Kingdom. Therefore: In Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.

But that is not the end of the sermon. It only sets up the possibility of some genuine conversations we might want to have this summer – with ourselves, with each other, and hopefully with our Lord.

## WOUNDED SOLDIERS

---

First of all, it reminds us that whenever – and in any way – we come here in pride, it is totally useless to the Kingdom. Jesus cannot use our pride, or any of our strengths or abilities that still run in pride. In fact, they can only do damage and harm to His church, and to His Kingdom.

Far more to the point, and far more fascinating for most of us: We need to think about our wounds. Especially we need to think about the places and ways in which we have been wounded that truly have turned us from pride to humility – that truly have made us dependent on Jesus. And we might go looking to see if those wounds are also now hiding what we used to think of as our best gifts, our best abilities, our best strengths. That is not going to come clear to us in two or three minutes of casual consideration, at least not in most cases. That is going to come clear to us in the process of deep and serious prayer. A spiritual quest, perhaps, to occupy a summer ...

In any case, your wounds are where you can be most useful to Jesus. Your wounds are where you can truly help other people to find their healing, and their way into the love and grace of Jesus. Your wounds are where you are most likely to be able to invite others into the true church – the fellowship and pilgrimage of Christ and His people – without any trace of superiority, self-interest, or coercion. Your wounds – if in them and because of them you have found the presence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – your wounds are where you are most likely to find that you have healing gifts for others.

In Christ's army, only the wounded soldiers can fight.