



**WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO BE WELL?
THE BIBLE AND THE
CHALLENGE OF
BEING WELL**

ROD THOMPSON

It is our conviction that the texts of Christian Scripture, in their testimony to the gospel of Christ, provide a radical alternative to other grounds from which humanness may be understood. In Jesus' prayer, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"¹, we find a dramatic confrontation to all other kingdoms, all other rulers, and all other visions for life. How are we to understand humanness in the light of Jesus and the testimony of Scripture? More particularly, how are we to understand human flourishing? What does it mean for humans to be well?

New Testament authors use a variety of words to describe those who are unwell, those who seek healing, and those who long to be well. Here are two short passages from Mark and Luke:

And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.²

Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."³

The word "sick" in Mark 6:56 and again in Luke 10:9 is the English translation of a frequently used Greek word "ἀσθενής" (asthenés), which is also often translated in the New Testament as "weak".⁴ This word in the Greek can mean sickness, or more generally, having no strength, being afflicted or weak. Jesus, and also his disciples, heal the sick. Many who are unwell are cured. Their weaknesses and afflictions are taken away. In these passages, "healing" or "cure" is pronounced because symptoms of sickness are no longer evident. So for example, in the ministry of Jesus, people who are paralysed or blind now walk or see. Those who are bed-ridden rise up and go about their lives again without the evidences of debilitating illness any longer present.⁵

These healings are signs that the kingdom of God has come near in the person of Jesus, and in keeping with the ancient prophecies of Scripture, Jesus

demonstrates his power to take away the symptoms of sickness, giving sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and freeing the captives – this is good news indeed! The words of Isaiah, "Here is your God", are evidenced by such signs. As the prophet writes: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy".⁶ In the ministry of Jesus it is evident that the kingdom of God will be a place where there is freedom from affliction, new life, strength, hope and peace. It will not be like the Roman Empire, or the previous great empires of Egypt, Assyria or Babylon, in which so many were weak and enslaved; in which injustice, slavery, cruelty, and the abuse of power flourished and human life did not.

But here's the strange thing: when Christ's disciples began to live by faith in the risen Messiah Jesus, by the power of God's Spirit, in fresh, young churches that sprang up throughout the world as

the good news of God's kingdom was proclaimed, and then wrote about their discipleship, they continued to use this word for "sickness" or "weakness"

as a defining characteristic of discipleship in the kingdom of God. So, for example, in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 we read climactic words from Paul concerning his experience of life in Christ. The apostle affirms that the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness".

One might have expected, in light of the ministry of Jesus culminating in his resurrection victory over death, ascension to glory and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that God would affirm that power is made perfect "instead" of weakness, rather than "in" weakness. Surely this would have been in keeping with the healing works of Jesus in which sickness and weakness were overcome through healing. However, the Lord says that power is made perfect – made complete or fully accomplished – "in" weakness. The apostle then makes his boast:

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

These words bring to its conclusion the portion of Paul's letter sometimes referred to by commentators as "The Fool's Speech" (2 Corinthians 11:1–12:13).

HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND HUMANNES IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS AND THE TESTIMONY OF SCRIPTURE?

¹ Matthew 6:10. All quotations from Scripture will be taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

² Mark 6:56

³ Luke 10:9

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, "ἀσθενέω" in *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁵ See the healing miracles that are described in, for example, Matthew 8:5–13, John 9:1–7 and John 5:1–9.

⁶ Isaiah 35:4–6

Paul Barnett frames the Fool's Speech Proper (11:21b–12:10) with an Introduction to the Speech (11:1–21a) and then an Epilogue (12:11–13).⁷ Throughout, Paul characterises himself as a fool (11:17, 18, 21; 12:6, 11), and even a madman (11:23), who will only boast with regard to one essential characteristic or defining quality of his life and ministry, that is, his weakness and those things that highlight how very weak he is. In 11:30, the apostle writes, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness". The apostle specifically speaks of weakness on nine occasions in the speech which reaches its climax in the words of 12:9–10 where Paul uses the terms "weak", "weakness", and "weaknesses" (twice).⁸

Moreover, in 12:9–10, Paul's affirmations regarding his weaknesses are quite remarkable. He writes that he boasts of them "all the more gladly". He has come to relish them! He recognises that Christ's power indwells him, or rests on him, when he is weak. And perhaps most dramatically, the apostle affirms that he has become "content" with those things that render him weak, or as translated in the TNIV, he takes "delight" in them. Paul says that he is well-pleased, well-content with his weaknesses. So it is that the apostle concludes with the words "for whenever I am weak, then I am strong", or as in the paraphrase of *The Message*, "the weaker I get, the stronger I become".

What is the immediate cause of this weakness? Paul had a thorn in the flesh. He informs his readers: "To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated."⁹ Commentators differ in their views as to what this thorn was that so tormented Paul. Some think he is referring to habitual temptation and struggles with sin; others that he suffers from a physical sickness: "epilepsy, a chronic eye disorder, a speech impediment, migraine headaches, malaria, and leprosy" have all been put forward as possibilities.¹⁰

Whichever is the case, this thorn in the flesh made Paul weak. Initially, he wanted nothing of it. He appealed to God, pleading with the Lord three times to take away this "messenger of Satan", this thorn that "was given" to him. The text here makes use of a divine passive ("was given"), recognising

⁷ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 497.

⁸ See 11:21, 11:29 (twice), 11:30, 12:5, 12:9 (twice) and 12:10 (twice) 2 Corinthians 12:7

¹⁰ William R. Baker, *2 Corinthians* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 431.

God as the ultimate giver of the tormenting thorn, and also therefore, as the one able to remove the affliction. But the Lord does not take it away and Paul's experience of the thorn, and the grace of God that rested on his life in weakness, took him from pleading for its removal to affirming that he was well-content that it had been given and remained with him.

In light of Old Testament prophecies and the healing signs of God's kingdom as present in the person of Jesus, surely Paul's experience and affirmation of contentment, indeed delight, are surprising. Is Paul "well" in his weakness, with this thorn in the flesh? Is he flourishing? Is he really delighted?

Moreover, is the apostle's understanding of God's grace as perfected in weakness echoed by Disciples of Christ in subsequent generations? Are we challenged by the lives and writings of others who have sort to serve the Lord and discovered that

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"strength-in-weakness" must become core to our understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be well?¹¹

One significant starting point for consideration are the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1933, as Nazi power was increasing across Germany, Bonhoeffer engaged on a life-changing journey to the village of Bethel in Biesenthal, a large community that had been established in the 1860's to care for people with epilepsy. By the 1930's it was led by a deeply respected Christian minister named Friedrich Von Bodelschwingh. At the time of Bonhoeffer's visit, Bethel "was a whole town with schools, churches, farms, factories, shops, and housing for nurses. At the center were numerous hospital and care facilities, including orphanages. Bonhoeffer had never seen anything like it. It was the antithesis of the Nietzschean worldview that exalted power and strength. It was the gospel made visible, a fairy-tale

¹¹ It is important to note that the language of "weakness" and "illness" is also used in Scripture, for example in 1 Corinthians 11:29–31, to speak of the consequences of sin in the lives of God's people and God's discipline in the lives of those who were disobedient. In that passage we read, "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world". There is always the need for discernment as to how sin is impacting a person's life. However, that is not what Paul is writing about in 2 Corinthians 12, nor what this article is focused on. Paul seeks to live out of faithful obedience to God. The thorn in the flesh is not the consequence of disobedience in his life.

landscape of grace, where the weak and helpless were cared for in a palpably Christian atmosphere.”¹²

This visit had a deep impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his emerging theology. In a letter to his grandmother, Julie Bonhoeffer, dated 20 August 1933, he wrote:

The time here in Bethel has made a deep impression on me. Here we have a part of the church that still knows what the church can be about and what it cannot be about. I have just come back from the worship service. It is an extraordinary sight, the whole church filled with crowds of epileptics and other ill persons, interspersed with the deaconesses and deacons who are there to help in case one of them falls; then there are elderly tramps who come in off the country roads, the theological students, the children from the lab school, doctors and pastors with their families. But the sick people dominate the picture, and they are keen listeners and participants. Their experience of life must be most extraordinary, not having control over their bodies, having to be resigned to the possibility of an attack at any moment. Today in church was the first time this really struck me, as I became aware of these moments. Their situation of being truly defenseless perhaps gives these people a much clearer insight into certain realities of human existence, the fact that we are indeed basically defenseless, than can be possible for healthy persons.¹³

During his visit to Bethel, Bonhoeffer became aware, in a new way, that so-called “sick” people have clearer insights than so-called “healthy” people, into central realities of human existence. Their experiences of being defenseless against the vagaries of their illness enable them to live in the world with perceptiveness into our shared human condition of dependency and vulnerability. Bonhoeffer was instructed by this encounter in ways that shaped him for the rest of his life.

In his letter, Bonhoeffer continues:

What utter madness when some people today think that the sick can or ought to be legally eliminated... What we see as “sick” is actually

healthier, in essential aspects of life and of insight, than health is. And that the two conditions depend on each other is surely an essential part of the plan and the laws of life, which can’t simply be changed to suit people’s impertinence and lack of understanding.¹⁴

Bernd Wannewetsch comments that “for Bonhoeffer, it is not the mentally handicapped who are insane, but those who assume they can distinguish their own ‘healthy’ existence from that of the handicapped in a way that actually severs the bond of all humanity, that eliminates those others who powerfully reveal the fundamental fragility of human life shared by everyone”.¹⁵

In Bonhoeffer’s thought and writings, there is a deep awareness that the stereotypical categories of “wellness” and “sickness”, or “strength” and “weakness” are at best, ambiguous, and at worst, quite destructive. An embrace of weakness and of God’s grace in weakness subsequently became

transformative for his life and ministry. He preached on the text of 2 Corinthians 12:9 in London in 1934. His sermon commenced:

All philosophy of life has to give an answer to the question which presents

itself everywhere in the world: what is the meaning of weakness in this world, what is the meaning of physical or mental or moral weakness? Have we ever thought about it at all? Have we ever realized that ultimately our whole attitude toward life, toward man and God depends on the answer to this problem?

Bonhoeffer preaches that our understanding of the meaning of weakness will be decisive for our attitude to all of life. It is fundamental to the human condition, and it is at the heart of Christian faith and discipleship. He continues:

Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power and with its apologia for the weak. I feel that Christianity is rather doing too little in showing these points than doing too much. Christianity has adjusted itself much too easily to the worship of power. It should give much more offence, more shock to the world, than it is doing...

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¹² Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 183.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*, vol. 12, trans., I. Best, D. Higgins, & D. W. Stott, eds., C. Nicolaisen, E. A. Scharffenorth & L. L. Rasmussen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 157–159.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bernd Wannewetsch, “My Strength is Made Perfect in Weakness”: Bonhoeffer and the War over Disabled Life” in *Disability in the Christian Tradition; A Reader*, eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, 2012), 356.

the weak is that the strong has to look *up* to the weak and never to look down. Weakness is holy, therefore we devote ourselves to the weak. Weakness in the eyes of Christ is not the imperfect one against the perfect, rather is strength the imperfect and weakness the perfect. Not the weak has to serve the strong, but the strong has to serve the weak, and this not by benevolence but by care and reverence. Not the powerful is right, but ultimately the weak is always right. So Christianity means a devaluation of all human values and the establishment of a new order of values in the sight of Christ.

These are radical words. They were counter-cultural at the time and continue to be so. For Bonhoeffer, weakness is “holy”; weakness, not strength, is “the perfect”; the weak, not the strong, “is always right”. His sermon concludes with the words:

“My strength is made perfect in weakness” says God. Wherever a man in physical or

social or moral or religious weakness is aware of his existence and likeness with God, there he is sharing God’s life, there he feels God being with him, there he is open for God’s strength, that is God’s grace, God’s love, God’s comfort, which passeth all understanding and all human values. God glorifies himself in the weak as He glorified himself in the cross. God is mighty where man is nothing.¹⁶

God glorifies himself in the weak. It is not only Bonhoeffer, but many of Christ’s disciples over generations who have affirmed this to be true. Roy McCloughry, for example, has reflected on the challenges of having epilepsy. In a biographical note, he writes:

...having epilepsy has taught me extraordinary things about life. It has given me a perspective on power, ambition, priorities and weakness that I would never have had otherwise. It has opened up close friendships with people I might never otherwise have befriended. It has taught me about the tremendous compassion and kindness of strangers in the street... It has led to uproarious family meals with friends, going through ‘fits I have known’ – a kind of *This is Your Life* approach to epilepsy – since some of the situations I have found myself in have been hysterically funny... Some of the

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London: 1933–1935*, vol. 13, trans. I. Best & D. W. Stott, eds. H. Goedeking, M. Heimbucher, H.-W. Schleicher, & K. Clements (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2007), 401–404.

strengths I have as a person are due to its influence on me. So it is a part of who I am, it is not something I ‘have’, though the word is difficult to avoid. It is integrated into ‘me’. I have to own it. Without that I cannot come to terms with who I am.¹⁷

Theologian J. I. Packer has affirmed that the embrace of weakness must become a way of life. In the face of alternative, all-pervasive messages “that everyone has a right to a life that is easy, comfortable, and relatively pain-free, a life that enables us to discover, display, and deploy all the strengths that are latent within us”, he affirms that “for all Christians, the likelihood is rather that as our discipleship continues, God will make us increasingly weakness-conscious and pain-aware, so that we may learn with Paul that when we are conscious of being weak, then – and only then – may we become truly strong in the Lord.¹⁸

What conclusions can we draw? What does it mean to be strong or weak? What does it mean to be well or unwell? May I suggest the following for consideration and further discussion.

1. To be human is to be weak. We are all weak. There is no “us” (those who are strong and well) and “them” (those who are weak and sick) in this regard. In accordance with the gospel of Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness, wellness is about the embrace of weakness and coming to know God’s power-in-my-particular-weakness and God’s power-in-our-shared-weakness. Wellness is not about weakness being eradicated. That is not even on offer. Ideals concerning complete health and strength are just that – ideals. Such visions and promises concerning humanness and wellness are not real.
2. We claim too much if we think we know for certain what it means to be well or be healed. Making judgements about being sick solely on the basis of challenges such as, for example, epilepsy, blindness, hearing impairments, or cerebral palsy, are bound to be simplistic. Equally, making judgements about being well solely on the basis of the absence of such challenges and the presence of abilities such as high energy levels or intellectual acumen are equally simplistic.

¹⁷ Roy McCloughry, *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability*. (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge: London, 2002), 62–63.

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way: Life with Christ our Strength*. (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2013), Kindle Edition: Chapter 2, Location 390.

3. God's grace and power make a transformative difference in the lives of all humans, whether they are apparently strong and well, or apparently weak and sick. All humans must embrace the sufficiency of God's grace and discover the completeness of God's power in their lives as they seek to be well. The journey to wellness, and the ongoing experience of wellness, will involve learning to live faithfully, even with contentment, in dependence on God's strength-in-weakness in our lives. This is a journey we must take together, in recognition of our shared weakness and our shared need to know God's grace in our lives day by day.

In Romans 8, the apostle uses the memorable phrase "more than conquerors" to speak of those who cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. However, this affirmation of overcoming, of triumph and victory, is very much in keeping with Paul's understanding of "power-in-weakness" in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul writes:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

"In all these things" we are more than conquerors, the apostle writes. Not "instead of" all these things and not "from" all these things. Hardships, distress, afflictions remain. Things that render us weak remain. However, as Paul had come to learn and to affirm, God's power is made perfect in weakness. To be more than a conqueror is to live by God's grace in weakness. The journey to wellness, shaped by the gospel of Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness, cannot be understood otherwise.

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