

FINDING
STRENGTH
IN WEAKNESS

COMPACT EXPOSITORY PULPIT COMMENTARY SERIES

FINDING
STRENGTH
IN WEAKNESS

Drawing Upon
the Existing Grace Within

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Shepherd's Fire exists to proclaim the unsearchable
riches of Christ through mass communications for the
teaching ministry of Bible expositor David Harrell,
with a special emphasis in encouraging and strength-
ening pastors and church leaders.

Table of Contents

Books in this Series	6
Field-Preachers of Uncommon Valor	7
Weaknesses Exposed	25
The Teacher	44
The Soldier	60
The Athlete	73
The Farmer	85
Endnotes	96

Books in this Series

Finding Grace in Sorrow: Enduring Trials with the Joy of the Holy Spirit

Finding Strength in Weakness: Drawing Upon the Existing Grace Within

Glorifying God in Your Body: Seeing Ourselves from God's Perspective

God, Evil, and Suffering: Understanding God's Role in Tragedies and Atrocities

God's Gracious Gift of Assurance: Rediscovering the Benefits of Justification by Faith

Our Sin and the Savior: Understanding the Need for Renewing and Sanctifying Grace

The Marvel of Being in Christ: Adoring God's Loving Provision of New Life in the Spirit

The Miracle of Spiritual Sight: Affirming the Transforming Doctrine of Regeneration

1

Field-Preachers of Uncommon Valor

“ . . . My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” . . . Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10

One of the most remarkable books I have ever read was written by a Scottish divine and biographer, William Garden Blaikie, D.D., LL.D. (1820–1899), Professor of Apologetical and of Pastoral Theology, New College, Edinburgh, Scotland. The title of his work is *The Preachers of Scotland from the Sixth to the Nineteenth Century*,¹ a detailed history of how God empowered fearless servants to bring the

gospel to the wild barbarians of Scotland, and how that gospel saved and radically changed them. As I was transported to another time and another place, I was deeply impacted by the great mystery of godliness at work in the early days of Scotland when

. . . missionaries, with tearful eye and trembling lip, told them of the manger of Bethlehem and the cross of Calvary. What else could have dispossessed the old gods from their hearts at a stroke, spite of all they had learned from their fathers? What else could have turned these shaggy men and women, hardly less wild-looking than the cattle of their mountains, into devout and earnest followers of a crucified Jew?²

With vivid language and biblical theology—combined with first-source historical accounts from eyewitness testimonies, journals, and some recorded sermons—Blaikie took me on an unforgettable journey to witness the power of God at work in a pagan land. From the earliest days when Roman soldiers in the invading army were “moved by the love of Christ,” and “followed it to cast the seed of the Gospel into the furrows of war,”³ through the great preachers of the Reformation and Covenant-

ing Period of Scotland, his recounting of history caused me to stand in reverential awe as I beheld the agencies of divine providence at work in accomplishing the sovereign purposes of God.

The annals of Scottish religious history repeatedly demonstrated how the power of sound doctrine (decidedly Calvinistic) would prevail over the church's tendency toward compromise, especially in those seasons when it embraced the "doctrines of Pelagianism and Arminianism," that "ultimately developed into deism and indifferentism."⁴ But his chronicles of the persecuted Field-Preachers that resulted from the edicts of King Charles II of England were especially moving to me, especially in light of the topic of this mini-book, *Finding Strength in Weakness: Drawing Upon the Existing Grace Within*.

Field-Preachers

During the dreadful years of persecution between 1663 and 1688, young clergymen who championed Presbyterian church polity and a robust Reformed soteriology were driven from their charges, and under the "threat of fine and imprisonment, of torture or of death"⁵ were restricted from preaching the only gospel that can save. With no way of earning a living, and with orders from the King to

inflict heavy fines, imprisonment, and even torture leading to death upon anyone who helped a them, "the preacher, with a great price on his head, had no certain dwelling-place, and where there was no friendly cottage to shelter him, had to wander about in wild lonely places, sleeping in woods and caves, often cold and wet and hungry; racked by rheumatism or prostrated by dysentery, glad if he could succeed in keeping his pocket-Bible dry."⁶

These great soldiers of the cross were affectionately called, "Field-Preachers" — men of uncommon valor. With gloomy colors Blaikie painted the tragedies and triumphs of those days on a dark canvas of satanic oppression. He writes,

If ever circumstances compelled the Lord's servants to preach "as dying men to dying men," it was then. Neither preacher nor hearer could ever be sure that the dragoons would not burst on them before the sermon was ended, or that before nightfall their life-blood would not be staining the ground. . . . Preachers seemed at times to feel the bloody rope round their neck, or the bullet in their brain; the word came from their hearts and went to the hearts of their hearers, and stuck there for their conversion, confirmation, and

comfort. Persecution, like the deathbed, has a wonderful sifting power. It tears away all disguises, shams, falsehoods, and formalities; it compels men to look the stern realities of life and death right in the face, it sweeps away the refuges of lies, and leaves only those truths to cling to which will sustain them in the agony of conflict.⁷

Despite the satanic onslaught of persecution designed to terrorize both the Field-Preachers and those who would hear them with the threat of imprisonment and death—often a slow and agonizing death—these men proclaimed the unsearchable riches of Christ with fervent boldness. Their sermons thundered across the moors and mountain recesses of the northern third of the island of Great Britain, often to massive crowds who were hungry for the great saving, liberating, and transforming truths of the gospel.

Richard Cameron

One such Field-Preacher was a young man named Richard Cameron (1648?–22 July 1680); a man who refused to submit to the Crown's High Church Anglican form of church governance (episcopacy) that

sought to control the Church of Scotland through their appointed (apostate) bishops and demanded that the King be considered the head of the church (rather than Christ). Refusing to submit to such an unbiblical ecclesiology with its concomitant heresies, Cameron became a leader of the militant Presbyterians known as the Covenanters.

A born preacher with no formal theological training apart from what he received from other field-preachers, he was a mighty and fearless preacher in the spirit of the apostles. In his book, *The Scottish Covenanters: 1638–88*, James Dodds (1813–1874) paints a beautiful picture of the Spirit-empowered revivals that marked those days; a season when thousands of saints and sinners met in the wilderness to worship God by hearing Cameron preach the gospel while other men stood guard in the distance. Here's a description of such a scene:

Picture to yourselves this noble and majestic youth, with blooming countenance and eagle eye, standing on some huge rock uplifted in the wilderness. Ten thousand people are grouped around him: the aged, with the women and children, seated near this pulpit of nature's handiwork; the men of middle age and the stalwart youths of the surround-

ing hamlets composing the outer circle, many of them with their hands on their swords, or their trusty guns slung by their side; and on each neighbouring height may be seen the solitary figure of the watchman, intently gazing in all directions for the approach of the troopers who are now kept garrisoned in every district, and who night and day are on the prowl to catch some poor outlawed Covenanter, or surprise some conventicle in the depths of the hills. It is a Sabbath in May. The great wild moor stretches out to a kind of infinity, blending at last with the serene blue sky. How sublime and peaceful the moment! Even in this age of violence and oppression—of the dungeon, the rack, and the scaffold, and murder in cold blood in the fields. Heaven smiles on the “remnant.” All is hushed and reverent in attention. The word is precious. . . . The psalm has been sung, and the echoes of the myriad voices have died on the moorland breeze. The prayer has been offered, the earnest wrestlings with Heaven of men who before sunset may themselves be an offering for their religion. The preacher rises. He eyes for a moment in silence that vast multitude, gathered from all parts of the West. Al-

ways serious, always inspired with elevated feeling, there is in his manner more than the usual solemnity. . . . Yes, he knows that his days are numbered; and but a few more suns the heather sod shall be his bed of death. A strange, almost unearthly sympathy is visible, stirring those assembled thousands to the very depths of their being. Rousing himself from the reverie which had passed over him, the preacher announces his text—“Ye will not come to me that ye might have life.”⁸

My purpose here is simple: I wish to give you a glimpse of a man—like many others—who knew what it was to *find strength in weakness*. Young Cameron knew how to tap into the resources that were his because of his union with Christ—a foreign concept to many Christians. He understood and applied Paul’s admonition to Timothy when he said, “You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. . . . Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1, 3). And suffer he did.

On 22 July, government dragoons killed Cameron at Airds Moss near Cumnock. There they mutilated his body by severing his hands and head from it. Then, in perhaps a more heinous act of barbar-

ic cruelty, they took his head and hands to Edinburgh to show to his father who was incarcerated there for the same crimes. It is hard to imagine a more macabre scene, or fathom a more satanic hatred capable of evoking such evil in the hearts of men. When the father was asked if he recognized the hands and head he responded, "I know them. I know them. They are my son's, my own dear son's. It is the Lord. Good is the will of the Lord, who cannot wrong me or mine, but has made goodness and mercy to follow us all our days."⁹ His head was then placed upon a pole and paraded through the streets of Edinburgh. His hands and his head were finally affixed to the Nether-Bow Gate for public display.¹⁰

Elusive Spiritual Strength

When considering the violent opposition to the truth that has marked not only the history of Scotland, but countless other countries, any reasonable person must admit that something supernatural is at work. Something so sinister, so evil, so powerful, that it can only be described as satanic. Truly we "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12); requir-

ing every Christian to “be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might” (v. 10), like Richard Cameron and thousands of others like him down through redemptive history.

Jesus warned us that the world would always hate those who belong to Him “because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you” (John 15:19). From the days of the Old Testament prophets through the New Testament era of Christ and the apostles, divinely appointed men who have proclaimed the truths of God’s revelation have been violently opposed, imprisoned, tortured, and killed—our sinless Savior being the supreme example. *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* provides numerous examples of men and women during the time of the Reformation that took a stand against the religious abuses that had taken over the church. Untold numbers of godly men and women who embraced the true gospel were so hated by the forces of evil that they were forced to pay for their faith with their very lives.

This has been, and will continue to be, the history of the church until Christ returns. The fact that throughout history New Testament Christianity has been hated (unlike the numerous counterfeits that have always existed) is not strange to those who belong to Christ. They understand their citizenship

is in heaven (Phil. 3:20) and they are therefore content in being “aliens and strangers” (1 Peter 2:11) in a world of which they have no part (John 15:19). But this doesn’t make it any easier when it comes to doing battle with sin—theirs and others’. Although we know “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18), we still “groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (v. 23) when, in our glorification, we finally and fully enter into the ineffable splendor of our inheritance. Even our Lord was “despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3) and was so overcome by the prospect of the cross that an angel was sent to strengthen him in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43).

Though the agonies of Christ were infinitely greater than anything we would ever even imagine much less endure, we are all prone to debilitating physical and spiritual weakness. But knowing how to find spiritual strength in those seasons of weakness—especially in the face of persecution—is elusive for most. Unfortunately, far too often men and women who have demonstrated remarkable strength of character and resolute faith in the midst of some great trial are considered to be the recip-

ients of supernatural resources unavailable to the average Christian and therefore unattainable to most. But such is not the case. Every believer united to Christ in saving faith possesses all that is His—what Paul described as “the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. . . . in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ” (Eph. 1:19–20).

Spirit Filling

To be sure, the debilitating problems of life can exhaust even the most devout Christian—even as it weakened the resolve of the apostle Paul himself (2 Cor. 2:12). We all need a supernatural dose of spiritual strength. Unfortunately, however, spiritual limitations and failures can be fertile soil for the seeds of charismatic error to be planted. Self-promoting charlatans tell naïve and gullible people seeking divine power that they need to be “filled with the Spirit,” which typically leads to the practice of being “slain in the Spirit.” They insist that this will produce a “Spirit-filled Christian” (in contrast to a non-Spirit-filled Christian which is no Christian at all [Rom. 8:9]). Evidence of such a phenomenon will, according to them, result in the gift of speaking in tongues, which in reality is nothing

more than a nonsensical counterfeit of the true gift of languages described in the New Testament (see Acts 2:6–11). Other bizarre behaviors that supposedly result from this supernatural empowerment include things like falling to the floor, laughing uncontrollably, barking like a dog, erratic shaking, and staggering around as if in a drunken stupor. In fact, no conduct—no matter how absurd or irrational—is considered unacceptable.

What they fail to understand—and what every believer should cherish—is that the very moment God’s Spirit imparts eternal life to the spiritually dead in regeneration (Eph. 2:1–3), multiple supernatural transactions involving the Holy Spirit occur simultaneously:

- Christ *baptizes* the believer with the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).
- The Father *seals* the believer with the Holy Spirit as a show of ownership and a guarantee of one’s salvation (Eph. 1:13).
- The Spirit *indwells* the believer (1 Cor. 3:16).
- The Spirit *fills/controls* the believer (Eph. 5:18).
- The Spirit *produces* spiritual fruit in the believer’s life (Gal. 5:22–23).
- The Spirit *gifts* the believer for service in the church (1 Cor. 12:4).¹¹

Furthermore, at the moment of salvation, we are forever united to Christ. For we have been *crucified* with him (Gal. 2:20), we have *died* with him (Rom. 6:8; Col. 2:20), we have been *buried* with him (Rom. 6:3), we have been *raised* up with him to walk in newness of life (Eph. 2:5–6; Rom. 6:4), and we have been *seated* with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6).

Christ is no longer *outside* us; He dwells *within* us, and *we* in Him, for indeed, we are a branch attached to the vine that is Christ. And solely because of His power we are able to bear spiritual fruit (John 15:5). Indeed, the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). We are “a temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16); “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), and we now “[strive] according to His power, which mightily works within [us]” (Col. 1:29). We are forever united to the One who “is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20).

Accessing Resources We Already Possess

But practically speaking, many Christians wonder how they can access the resources they already