

STRENGTH MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

Preached on Lord's Day Afternoon, August 29th, 1841, at Allington, near Devizes

"And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." 2 Cor. 12:9

I have sometimes thought of the craft and subtlety of Satan in confusing the minds of men upon this point—that the apostles who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, and wrote these blessed epistles for our instruction, had not to learn their religion in the same way that you and I have to learn ours. There is a kind of persuasion in the minds of men—borrowed, I believe, chiefly from the Popish church, and handed down by tradition from the fathers—that the apostles did not learn the things they preached through exercises and burdens; but that they (I am speaking of them here as private Christians) learned to believe, hope, and love without these graces of the Spirit coming into their hearts through the channel of trials, and without their being exercised as we are with temptations and corruptions. They are called *Saint Paul*, and *Saint Peter*, and *Saint John*, as though they were not sinners saved by grace, and sinners to the end of their days; but as if they occupied some intermediate position between angels and men, and were certain holy beings who lived without sin.

Now with respect to the Epistles as being a part of the inspired Scriptures, no doubt the blessed Spirit was pleased to suggest to the writers special thoughts, and to dictate to them special words; as the Apostle says, "Which things we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual," or, as it might be translated, "composing

spiritual things for spiritual men" (1 Cor. 2:13). But so far as they had a personal religion, so far as they were individual Christians, so far as they knew the things of God in their own consciences, they had to learn their religion just in the same way—line upon line, here a little and there a little, a drop here and a drop there, a trial in this point and a deliverance in that—just in the same way that you and I have to learn ours.

I think we have this very strikingly manifested in the description which Paul gives of his experience in the twelfth chapter of his second epistle to the Corinthians. He tells us that he knew a man in Christ fourteen years before the time that he was writing, and that this man in Christ (beyond all controversy himself) was favoured at that time with certain revelations and manifestations such as it was not lawful nor possible for a man to utter. And I would just drop one hint on this subject. It does not appear that the apostle, for the space of fourteen years, had ever once mentioned what his soul had enjoyed, and it was only now drawn out of him through peculiar circumstances. The Corinthians, to whom he had been made so signally useful, and who had been called to the knowledge of the truth by his ministry, were led by the representations of false apostles transformed into the apostles of Christ (2 Cor. 11:13: 1 Cor. 9:1-3) to doubt even Paul's call to the apostleship, and to set aside him who had been made so useful to their souls. Such is the subtilty of Satan, and such is the power whereby he carries on his operations in the carnal mind, that these very Corinthians, who had received every blessing through the channel of Paul's preaching, had actually been persuaded to believe that he was not called to be an apostle at all. They disowned their own father, even at the risk of acknowledging themselves to be but bastards. If therefore the Corinthians, and the Galatians, and others to whom Paul was made so eminently

useful, could doubt his call to the apostleship, how are we to expect any other treatment? Therefore when I hear a man or a woman speaking much of being blessed under the ministry of some individual, the favourite of the day, whom they extol beyond all bounds, I expect by and by to see a change take place, and to find manifested in them the same spirit which Paul saw manifested in the Corinthian and Galatian churches. I have had some experience of this, like most other ministers, and it has taught me to be little elated by the praise, and as little depressed by the censure of these fickle hearers.

It was this opposition, this doubt and suspicion cast on his ministry, which drew out of the breast of Paul, where it had lain concealed for fourteen years, the manifestation which God had given him when he was caught up into the third heaven. Now does not this conduct of the apostle make it rather suspicious, when people are so fond of running about the country with their experiences? Did Paul act in this way? Was he in the habit of carrying about his experience as a hawker carries about his jewellery, and going to every door, opening his box and offering its contents for inspection? No; this was locked up fourteen years in his bosom, and most probably would have been locked up there for ever if the conduct of these Corinthians had not drawn it from the secret treasure of his conscience. And I believe that this is the effect of grace in the soul—that a man will keep both his troubles and joys to himself, except they be drawn from him by circumstances. Nothing can be more sweet and refreshing than mention of the Lord's dealings with the soul; but this deep water in the heart of a man needs to be drawn out of the well by a man of understanding, and does not run on babbling like a brook for every ear. A man fed by divine instruction will eat his morsel alone, and prefer to keep back even that which God has done for his soul rather than be

throwing it down indiscriminately in all places and in all company.

This blessed apostle, then, fourteen years before the time of his writing this Epistle, had had a revelation of Jesus Christ. He had been caught up, he could not tell whether in the body or out of the body, into paradise, into the third heaven, into the company of just men made perfect, into a view of Christ, and into the hearing of things so sweet, so blessed, so ravishing, that it was not possible, nor was it lawful, for him ever to tell a thousandth part of what his soul had experienced.

Now, doubtless, the apostle, after he had been thus favoured, thus caught up into paradise, thought that he should retain the same frame of mind that he was in when he came down from this heavenly place; that the savour, the sweetness, the power, the unction, the dew, the heavenly feeling would continue in his soul; and no doubt he thought he should walk all through his life with a measure of the sweet enjoyments that he then experienced. But this was not God's way of teaching him religion. God had another way which Paul knew nothing of, and that was—if I may use the expression—to bring him from the third heaven, where his soul had been blessed with unspeakable ravishment, down to the very gates of hell. O what a way of learning religion! for he says, "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the *messenger of Satan* to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."

Now this was given to him to serve a particular purpose, to produce a certain effect, to bring him into a certain spot, and to teach him a certain lesson; and unless he was brought there, he could not learn that lesson which it was God's

purpose to teach him. We will, with God's blessing, look a little into the words that he makes use of to describe this change.

1. And *first*, it is said that "there was given to him a thorn in the flesh." What is meant by this? Where there is a thorn in the flesh naturally, it is painful, it hampers every movement, it renders the hand or the finger in which the thorn is lodged useless all the time that it continues there; and the part in which it is fixed festers, rankles, and suffers the greatest pain until the thorn is extracted.

Now I think if we carry with us into spiritual things the leading ideas that I have just dropped, we shall see what a thorn in the flesh is spiritually. It is something that gives acute pain, that causes restlessness, that renders the part where it is lodged useless; that rankles, festers, and breeds corruption. Any powerful temptation coming from Satan into our mind produces these effects. *First*, they are painful and distressing to the quickened soul. But what makes Satan's fiery darts so painful? They are not painful to the carnal mind, nor to a seared conscience; they are not painful to a man dead in sin, they have no effect upon him; but they are painful where there is a spiritual principle, a new nature, a heavenly image, a tender conscience, a holy principle breathed into the soul from the mouth of God. It was so with the Lord of life and glory. What made Jesus feel so acutely the temptations brought before His eyes by the prince of darkness? He had no nature like ours to fall in with the temptations; but these temptations were most acutely painful to Him because He had a holy nature that abhorred them, that shrunk from them, that recoiled from them with detestation. And thus, when Satan would infuse his own daring blasphemies against God into the mind of a living child, what makes him recoil from these temptations? What

makes him cry to God to be delivered from their dreadful presence? What makes him feel them a heavy burden on his conscience? Why, it is because he has life in his soul, tender feelings towards God, a new, holy, and spiritual nature, which is galled and fretted by them. *Again*, a thorn in the flesh makes the limb useless till it is extracted. If a labourer has a thorn in his hand, he cannot grasp the flail, he cannot hold the sickle, he cannot master the scythe; because when he presses the handle of the instrument, it drives the thorn into his flesh, so that he is unable to use it until the thorn is extracted. So it is with the temptations which come from Satan; they render a man's hand useless. He cannot lift them up in prayer, he cannot take hold of any branch of truth contained in the Scriptures, he cannot embrace one promise, he cannot grasp one evidence. There is a thorn in the hand of faith, and when this hand would stretch itself forth (for I have usually found these temptations most powerful in secret prayer and other solemn moments), the thorn so pierces it, that it cannot grasp anything of a divine and heavenly nature, and sooner than be thus wounded, the hand of faith drops uselessly down.

But *thirdly*, if the thorn is not extracted, it will fester and rankle; there will be the gory matter at the bottom of the wound which the thorn has made. So it is wherever there is this thorn in the flesh, these temptations from Satan, these blasphemies, these obscenities, these imaginations, this enmity against God and godliness. It will produce corruption in the carnal mind; the wound will fester and rankle; and it is this very corruption that oozes up out of the wound, it is this very gory matter which issues from the bottom of the ulcer, that pollutes the conscience, defiles the mind, and distresses the soul of one born of God.

2. But the apostle has used another word: he calls this thorn

in the flesh, "*the messenger of Satan* to buffet him." I will, in explaining this, proceed as before by showing what it is naturally, as a clue to what it is spiritually. Now what is a messenger? You who are servants, or persons who are employed occasionally to take a message, know this very well—that if you do not take the very message which your master tells you, you are an unfaithful messenger. The messenger has nothing of his own to say: all he has to do is to deliver the message. He has no more to do with the meaning of the message than the postman with the contents of the letter he brings. All that the messenger has to do is to deliver the message given to him; not to add a word, not to omit a word that shall alter the meaning of the message, but simply to be the mouthpiece of the sender; his speaking-trumpet, as it were, through which he conveys his mind to a distance. To be such a mere passive instrument of conveyance is to be "a faithful messenger to him that sends him," and by such passive faithfulness "he refresheth the soul of his master" (Prov. 25:13).

Apply this idea, which every one must admit to be founded on truth, to the expression which Paul uses, "a messenger of Satan." This messenger from Satan must bring with him the mind of Satan, or he is no messenger. When I say to a servant, "Do you go to such a person, and tell him such and such a message," I am conveying my mind to that person; I am telling him my thoughts, my intentions; I am speaking to him through the messenger, just as I have seen a person on the ground floor of a shop speak through a tube some message to a person in the top story—the tube running from the top to the bottom of the house on purpose. I speak through the messenger, and all he has to do is to convey my mind, my intention, what is passing in my heart. A messenger then comes charged with the message which the sender has given him; and when he has delivered his

message faithfully, he has fulfilled his office. So this messenger of Satan comes charged with Satan's wrath, Satan's malice, Satan's blasphemy; and as a messenger from Satan, he breathes the very mind and spirit of Satan, and delivers his message into the carnal mind—the place of his destination, and the quarter to which he is sent.

Then if you and I know anything about the messages of Satan, we shall find that this messenger will bring into our carnal minds that which works in Satan's mind. The same pride, the same presumption, the same arrogance, the same hypocrisy, the same rebellion, the same blasphemy, the same obscenity, the same brutality, the same filthiness that are in Satan's hateful breast, the same things, in a measure, will the messenger bring into ours. Not indeed fully: because a messenger can convey but a part of what passes in the mind of the person who sends him. For instance, when I send a messenger, I do not send by him all that is passing in my mind; I only give him a part, and not the whole of my mind to carry to the person to whom I send him. So when the messenger of Satan comes into the carnal mind, he brings—not all that Satan is (that never can be), but he conveys a part: he brings—as I was speaking this morning,—a "puff" out of Satan's mind. As it is said in James, "The tongue is set on fire of hell" (James 3:6). If a man takes a coal out of a fire, he does not bring all the fire, but a part out of the fire; and so the tongue "is set on fire of hell," when a spark out of Satan is communicated to the inflammable materials which we carry about with us.

3. But this messenger of Satan was sent to do a certain work; and that is expressed in the word "buffet." There is very much contained in this word. The meaning of it is, literally and strictly, to strike a man blows with the fist, either with the flat hand or with the closed hand. And the

idea is this—that this messenger of Satan struck the blessed apostle with what Isaiah calls (58:4) "the fist of wickedness;" that is, he struck him such stunning blows as to perplex his judgment, confuse his intellect, confound his understanding, and, if I may use the expression, beat his religion all into a mummy. The idea is that of a strong man beating a weak one, and the strong man directing such violent blows against the head and face of his adversary, that he is so stunned by the power and weight of the blows as to be lost, and not to know where he is or what he is about, but to stagger like a drunken man, and be at his wit's end.

Now I want you to see the contrast we have here. The blessed apostle caught up into the third heavens, filled with light, life, and glory, enjoying the presence of Christ, and bathing his soul in the river of divine consolation. Now for a reverse: down he comes to the earth, and lower than the earth, for he sinks to the gates of hell. A messenger of Satan is let loose upon him, who buffets him, bruises into a confused mass all his past experience, and beats it into a shapeless mummy. Just as when a strong man beats a weak one, he bruises his features into a shapeless mass; so this messenger of Satan buffeting and pounding, so to speak, this blessed apostle, beat all his religion into a shapeless mummy—no eyes, no nose, no mouth, no features, but one indistinguishable mass of black and blue.

Now this is the effect of Satan's temptations coming with violence into the mind. They so beat and stun a man that he knows not where he is, what he is, or who he is. All his religion seems beaten to pieces, all his experience marred, and all that he thought himself to have known, felt, and tasted seems to be beaten into a shapeless mass, where there are no features of a living child remaining.

"What!" say you, "did Paul know this? What! that blessed saint, that man of God, who was the chiefest among the apostles?" Yes; does he not tell us that there was given to him "the messenger of Satan to buffet him?" And does not the word convey all this? Yes, every syllable of it. All that I have done is merely to open up and explain the force and meaning of his own expressions. This blessed apostle, then, so favoured with manifestations, had to learn a religion that had two sides to it—one side learned in heaven, and another side learned at the gates of hell. Such is the mysterious way in which a man learns religion; there are two sides to it; and that is the way you and I have to learn ours, each in our measure—some greater, some less.

Now what was all this for? Does it not appear very cruel—does it not seem very unkind that, after the Lord had taken Paul up into the third heaven, He should let the devil buffet him? Does it not strike our natural reason to be as strange and as unheard of a thing as if a mother who had been fondling her babe in her arms, suddenly were to put it down, and let a great savage dog worry it, and look on, without interfering, while he was tearing the child which she had been a few minutes before dandling in her lap and clasping to her bosom? Viewed, indeed, in reason's dim light, it does seem an inexplicable contradiction; but what if it were the only way whereby pride, arrogance, and presumption could be laid low in Paul's soul? He himself tells us that this was the reason of these mysterious and apparently inconsistent dealings. "Lest I should be exalted," he says, "above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given unto me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."

Here we have this difficult enigma solved, this mysterious knot untied, and we find that the object and end of all these

severe dealings was to hide pride from Paul's eyes.

This, however, the apostle did not at that time understand. To what then had he recourse? He went to the Lord with it, and besought Him thrice with earnest supplication "that it might depart from him." That is, he did not merely three times pray about it, but he had three seasons of solemn supplication, three distinct times of spiritual communion and nearness of access, when he could plead with the Lord as a man pleadeth with his friend, and at these three several seasons he besought his loving and sympathising Redeemer that the temptation might be taken away, for it was too grievous to be borne. The Lord heard his prayer and answered it, but not in the way that Paul expected. His answer was, "My grace is sufficient for thee." As though He should say, "Paul, beloved Paul, I am not going to take away thy temptation; it came from Me—it was given by Me; but My grace shall be sufficient for thee, for My strength shall be made perfect in thy weakness. There is a lesson to be learnt, a path to be walked in, an experience to be passed through, wisdom to be obtained in this path, and therefore thou must travel in it. Be content then with this promise from My own lips, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.'" The apostle was satisfied with this; he wanted no more; and therefore he burst forth, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

We have taken some time to arrive at the text; but it seemed necessary to enter thus fully into the context that a clearer light might be thrown upon the words of the text itself. It consists of two clauses, which, the Lord enabling us, we will consider separately.

1. "My grace is sufficient for thee." Now are you not

sometimes brought into this state, as though Christ's grace was not sufficient for you? Perhaps some of you in this chapel may have such doubts and fears working in your mind, and such distressing convictions on account of sin, as to think it impossible for you to be delivered from the nethermost hell. Now the Lord says to every one of His quickened children, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Has not this grace saved thousands, tens of thousands—I might say, millions? Were their hearts less hard than yours? Was their nature less dark, less sinful, less unbelieving? Were their lives, as far as any natural power of theirs was concerned, more spiritual, more upright, more holy, more turned away from sin, more turned to God than yours? Had they not their doubting seasons, their fearing seasons, their desponding seasons, their agonizing seasons, their wrestling seasons with God? Yea, doubtless, all God's people have passed through these things: and those blessed saints who have got safe to glory, who are beyond gunshot of the devil, who are bathing their souls in the ocean of endless bliss, had to walk in the same trying paths that some of you are called to walk in now.

But say some, "It is not only my doubts and fears that distress me, but that I have been such a sinner. O, if I dared tell what I have formerly done, the vile sins I have committed, the abominable iniquities I have been guilty of! O, I dare not breathe them into any one's ears: if I did, they would spurn me from them." The Lord says to every one whose heart He has touched with His finger, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Base wretch though you have been, and full of sin as your life has been—if the Lord has smitten you with convictions, and brought you to repentance and confession of sin before Him, He says to you, "My grace is sufficient for thee." His free, and glorious, and matchless grace is sufficient to deliver your soul from eternal perdition.

But, says a third, "I have been so presumptuous a wretch. There has been so much hypocrisy in my religion; I have so deceived the people of God; I have made them think so much better of me than I deserved to be thought of. There has been so much crookedness in my profession, so much insincerity about it. O how I blush and am confounded! I do think," says he, "that of all my sins my presumption cuts most deeply into my conscience. O what shall I do, such a presumptuous wretch!" The Lord still says to every one of His children whom He has cut deep in their consciences on account of their presumption, "My grace is sufficient for thee;" aye, sufficient for those who think it not sufficient; sufficient for those who think that mercy never can reach their souls, or enter with power into their hearts.

But says another, "Since I have been called by grace I have fallen into such backslidings. If it were merely sins which I committed before I made a profession, I could have some hope that mercy would reach me. But oh! to sin against light, conscience, warnings, reproofs, convictions—that seems to stamp sin in such aggravated colours, to make it appear so black and so dreadful!" Still the same merciful and compassionate Lord speaks, "My grace is sufficient for thee." "Return, O backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." He healed backsliding Peter, and backsliding Solomon, and backsliding Hezekiah, and backsliding David, and backsliding Ephraim; He healed them all—His grace was sufficient for them all.

But says a fifth, "I have such temptations—temptations almost too bad to be named; temptations to disbelieve the Scriptures, temptations to commit horrible sins, temptations to doubt the very being of a God, temptations never to pray, temptations to throw aside all my religion, temptations to

blaspheme that holy name which I desire to love and adore." The answer is still the same, "My grace is sufficient for thee." Did not Paul know these things? Did not the messenger of Satan buffet him with these very temptations? Was not infernal enmity breathed into his carnal mind from this messenger of the prince of darkness? Did not Satan make use of his messenger, by which seems meant one or more spirits like unto himself, to convey his own accursed wrath and rebellion into Paul's mind? Christ's grace is as much sufficient for thee as for Paul, able to support thee, able to uphold thee, able to keep thee from committing that sin to which thou art tempted, able to save thy soul from the condemnation of it, to purge thy conscience from the guilt of it, and to deliver thy heart from the power of it.

But says another, "I am so carnal, so dark, so stupid, so hard, so barren, so unfeeling. O, it seems at times, as though I had not a spark of true religion in me, as though I had not one single grain of feeling in my soul—no, not one atom of spiritual life, nor anything that bears the stamp of God upon it." The Lord still says to those of His children who are mourning over their barrenness and darkness, "My grace is sufficient for thee"—sufficient to move this load, to water this wilderness, to communicate fruitfulness to this desert—sufficient to bring life, light, and feeling into the soul that He has once touched with His finger.

But complains another, "I have been a professor so many years; I have sighed and cried to the Lord time after time, and I have asked Him to look on me and bless me; and yet things, instead of getting brighter, seem to get darker. Such gloom, such despondency, such melancholy, such a sinking sense in my soul, as though God had cast me off; as if I were only a barren tree in His vineyard; a wretch whom He spares with much longsuffering from day to day, but whom He will

at last cut down and cast into the fire." Still the promise holds good, "My grace is sufficient for thee"—sufficient for all who seek His face, and call upon His name; sufficient for every quickened soul that knows the plague and sore of his own heart; sufficient for every living child that is brought by the Holy Ghost to seek and mourn after God.

But says another, "In times past I did enjoy the light of God's countenance; I could walk in sweet communion with Him; I could tell Him out all my heart, and sincerely say that I loved Him; I could appeal to Him that I loved His people, His ways, His cause, His Word, and that His name was to me as the ointment poured forth. But O, what a change have I seen since then, and what a wretch am I now! I have lost my first love, lost my tenderness of conscience, lost my godly sorrow, lost my contrition and brokenness of heart, my love to the family of God, my love to the Word of God, my love to everything which in times past I was able to love. Was there ever such a wretch?" Must not the same word of promise still suffice? Is your case beyond the reach of the words, "My grace is sufficient for thee?" The free, the matchless, distinguishing grace of God is sufficient for all His people, in whatever state, or stage, or trouble, or difficulty they may be.

Let us examine the words, and see if we can penetrate a little into the meaning; let us press this honeycomb, if haply we may taste a little sweetness out of it. "My grace." What grace is this which He calls "My"? It is His own grace—grace peculiar to and flowing out of Himself. It is the grace which brought the Son of God down from heaven to earth; the grace which moved Him to take part of the flesh and blood of the children; the grace which carried Him through this world, and enabled Him to bear the contradiction of sinners against Himself; the grace which made Him give Himself up into the

hands of wicked men, that He might bear the sins of the elect in His own body on the tree, and there enduring the wrath of God in His soul, and shedding the precious blood of His body, He might make full atonement and propitiation for sin. O the sufficiency of this grace! How little, through unbelief, do we know its sufficiency! How little do we venture upon it! How little do we experience the abundance, the fulness, the freeness, and the blessed efficacy of it! But still it runs, "*My grace is sufficient for thee.*" Not *thy* strength, *thy* wisdom, *thy* prayers, *thy* experience; but "*My grace*"—My free, My matchless grace, independent of all works and efforts, independent of everything in the creature; flowing wholly and solely, fully and freely, out of the bosom of Jesus to the needy, the guilty, the destitute, the undone.

You that are tried in worldly circumstances, that have to endure the hard lot of poverty—"My grace is sufficient for thee." You who are tempted, day by day, to say or do that which conscience testifies against—"My grace is sufficient for thee." You who are harassed with family troubles and afflictions, and are often drawn aside into peevishness and fretfulness—"My grace is sufficient for thee." In whatever state, or stage, or trial, or circumstance of soul the child of God is, the promise still runs, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

II. But now we come to the second clause of the verse, which explains the former, and throws light on our experience when passing through the former; He says, "for My strength is made perfect in weakness." "Ah," say you, "I can believe what God says in His Word; I can see His grace sufficient for others, but not for myself; I can believe that so and so has the life of God in his soul, and shall never perish; I can see him encompassed by all the mercy of God, blessed with all the love of God, and supported by the power of God; I can

see him, or her, on the way to heaven, but as to myself, wretch that I am! I fear that I shall be cast out."

Now the Lord meets this case. He says, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." But that is a lesson which flesh and blood never can receive; it is a lesson contradictory to all the powers of reason. If it had read thus, "My strength is made perfect in strength," we could understand it, because it falls in with our reason. Our reason says, "I must try to be strong; I must resist my sins; I must do my best; I must endeavour with all the strength of my body and soul to get the favour of God; and *then, then*, I can easily understand how He will make His strength perfect in my strength." "No," says the Lord, "that is not the way; 'My strength is made perfect in *weakness*.'" "Well," say you, "if ever there was a poor weak creature, I think I am the man; if ever there was a wretch in the world who was unable to stand against temptation, unable to resist the powers of darkness, unable to do one thing spiritually good; if ever there was a poor creature in this world more unable than another to pray, to repent, to believe, to hope, to love, to lay hold of the promises, to receive Christ, to taste the sweetness of the gospel; if ever there was one poor wretch more feeble, more helpless, more crippled, more impotent than another to lift himself out of sin with all its miseries into Christ and all His mercies, I am the man. And," say you, "as to speaking of any great or deep experience, I leave that to others; but I feel this—that if all the people of God were placed in a row, and I were told that the weakest, the most helpless, the most ignorant, the most vile, the most sinful was to go to the bottom, I know where I should go—I should pass by them one by one, and put myself at the very bottom, as the very last and least of the whole row. But," say you, "this is not what I want to experience; I want to feel the contrary. I want power to believe, to love, to hope, to pray, to conquer my sins, to

know the Lord of life and glory, to enjoy sweet communion with Him, and to receive into my very soul that kingdom of God which is not in word but in power."

But have you not mistaken the way whereby this power is to be communicated? You must know your weakness first; and then have divine power, spiritual power, supernatural power, made perfect in that weakness. Like a man who is going to build a house, or even to put down a gatepost, there must be a hole dug for the foundation. The house or the post would not stand if put on the ground; there must be a hole dug for it. But when the foundation is being dug for the house, or the hole is being made for the post to be fixed in, an ignorant bystander might say, "Why I don't see a house being built; you are digging a hole instead of building a house." "But," you would answer, "the house cannot stand on the ground; there must be a foundation; if there is sand, we must go right through the sand till we come to the rock; and when the soil is very loose and bad, we have often to go very, very deep, till we get to some solid bottom; but all this is building the house." We admit the force of this reasoning naturally, but when we come to the very same thing spiritually (and we know that this is one of the Lord's own figures) we are baffled and confounded. When a child of God has to be taught this lesson experimentally, and is compelled to learn his weakness, to feel his impotency, to groan and sigh beneath his helplessness, he says, "Can this be religion? Can this be experience? Can this be the teaching of the Holy Ghost? Why," says he, "we read in the Scriptures: 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice; My peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you;' 'The kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' But," he says, "as for me, it is all up-turning work, and I can feel none of those blessed enjoyments which I see in God's Word." But does the Word of God say that this peace, and

joy, and love, and liberty are to be given to an unexercised heart? or that the Lord gives His blessed manifestations to a soul that never passes through trials and temptations? "It is through much tribulation that we enter the kingdom of God" manifested to the soul. So that the lesson to be learned by the child of God is, his weakness, his helplessness, his impotency to do any one spiritual action, for this very purpose—that he may experience the reality of joy, as being tasted in sorrow; of peace, as felt in bitterness; and of liberty, as communicated in bondage. Therefore, in order to teach him the secret of divine strength, when temptation comes he cannot resist it; when the blast of infidelity blows, he cannot overmaster it; when Satan breathes his dreadful suggestions into his mind, he has no power to shut them out. But why all this? In order that he may sink down in weakness, a poor helpless, ignorant creature that cannot do one thing that he would; that he may fall down before God in the depths of creature nothingness, and come to that spot where Paul came to when he said, "Though I be nothing." What! nothing!—you who have been in the third heavens, and heard unspeakable words; who have seen the blessed angels and the Lord of life and glory with your own eyes; you, this great apostle who have converted thousands of souls, and have left epistles which have been such rich breasts of consolation to the family of God; the highest and most favoured saint on earth!—you to be nothing! "Yes," says the apostle, "I am nothing—nothing at all; a nonentity after all in self."

This shows us how a real child of God sinks down into creature nothingness; everything in Christ, but nothing in self. Paul did not mean to say that he had no religion, but none in himself. What! could not Paul stand against temptation? Not more than you or I, unassisted by the grace of God. Could not Paul pray more than I can? No, not at all,

except so far as the Spirit of grace and supplications was given to him. Could not Paul love more than I do? Not a bit more, nor think a spiritual thought more, as far as self was concerned. But let us not mistake the matter. I do not mean to say that Paul did not pray, believe, and love more than any of us do; but he did not perform these actions in himself one whit more than we can. He says expressly, "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing;" and therefore not the good thing of faith, or love, or divine communion. The Lord indeed gave Paul more faith, more hope, more prayer, more love, more spirituality of mind, a deeper insight into the kingdom of God; but mark this—if he had his greater heights, he had his greater depths; if he had his greater consolations, he had his greater afflictions; if he rose higher in Christ, he sunk deeper in self; if he knew more of the fulness of Jesus, he knew more of the nothingness of the creature; and therefore we find him confessing, "Though I be nothing." And what made him nothing? The grace of God stripping and emptying him of everything in self.

Then, when we are passing through this divine teaching, in order to learn our weakness, our miserable helplessness, our inability to perform any one spiritual action—this is the most trying, baffling, perplexing, confounding lesson which a child of God can be taught. But the grace and mercy of Christ run parallel, move side by side, with this weakness; for "His strength is made perfect;" that is, is manifested as complete, gloriously shines, triumphantly reigns, and is powerfully developed "in weakness." It is perfect in itself, for it is the strength of God, but it is manifested as perfect in the helplessness of the creature. But what you want is *your* strength, some little strength of your own—strength to pray, strength to believe, strength to love; but no, says the Lord—"My strength, it must be all My own;" and that strength is made perfect in weakness.

Now when the Lord has brought a soul down to be nothing, He then makes His strength perfect in that nothingness; He communicates strength to pray, strength to believe, strength to hope, to love, to receive the gospel. Just like the poor man with the withered hand, to whom Jesus said, "Stretch forth thine hand." It was withered; he could not do it of himself. But Christ's strength was made perfect in weakness: when He spake the word, the withered hand was stretched forth, and became whole as the other. So with the dead Lazarus—he was asleep in death; but when the voice of love and power penetrated into the tomb, "Lazarus, come forth," life was made perfect in the dead corpse. So with the Old Testament worthies, who "out of weakness were made strong" (Heb. 11:34). And so, each in our measure, it is with us; our weakness, helplessness, and inability are the very things which draw forth the power, the strength, and the grace of Jesus.

When indeed a man is passing through these things he cannot see it, but he will see it afterwards. It was so with Peter. "What I do," said the Lord to him, "thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter." And depend upon it, if the strength of Christ is to be made perfect in our weakness, we can never know what that strength of Christ is till we know our weakness. Thus we never pray spiritually but when we cease to pray naturally; we never preach spiritually but when we cease to preach naturally; nor can we believe, or hope, or love, or resist Satan spiritually, till we cease to do these things naturally: and when we cease to do them naturally through utter debility and prostration of strength, the Lord does them supernaturally; when the flesh, so to speak, is dead as Abraham's body, then the life of God begins to work. When man with all his powers sinks down before God as a helpless wretch, then the Lord puts forth His

hand as He did when Peter was sinking in the deep waters. What then is the object intended by exercises, temptations and distresses to you who are passing through them? Not to destroy you, but to bring you down, and lay you low to break up creature strength, and to reduce it to perfect weakness; and, when you are brought down, to find the strength of Christ made perfect in you, His grace sufficient for you, His blood sprinkling your conscience, His righteousness justifying your person, His love comforting your heart, and His glory filling your soul. And then you will say, "Lord, I am willing to be nothing; I take pleasure in infirmities, in necessities, in reproaches, in distresses; for—mysterious, mysterious thing!—when I am weak, then am I strong."