



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Power Made Perfect in Weakness
(*Suffering*, pp. 11-19)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

Power Made Perfect in Weakness

How do we express courage in the face of suffering, pain, or even death? While our culture idolizes strength in adversity and tough self-reliance, courage has another side that is revealed when our vulnerability is greatest and our strength is exhausted.

Prayer¹

Nothing can trouble.
Nothing can frighten.
Those who seek God shall never go wanting.
God alone fills us.

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

Reflection

Though he asked three times to be relieved of a personal pain or difficulty — the mysterious “thorn in the flesh” that he endured — the Apostle Paul received from the Lord this startling response: “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). In the Hellenistic world, being sufficient (the word used here is *arkeō*) meant overcoming hardships and shortcomings by one’s own power. Yet Paul discovered “that courage is not finally about trusting our *own* strength,” writes DeYoung. “When our own strength is exhausted by suffering, we see most clearly that true strength is rooted in God’s power, and true courage inspired by his love.”

This radically different understanding of strength and power, exemplified in the person and life of Christ, gives us a new perspective on the virtue of courage. We discover that courage:

- ▶ *endures suffering*. We need not avoid pain at all times and places. For all its horror, suffering is not the greatest evil. It is worse to *do* evil than to *suffer* it. Indeed “we need not fear weakness,” DeYoung notes, for “suffering can be a crucible of self-transformation, an opportunity for new vision. Like Job, it is precisely when we are bent low from desperate weariness and pain that we are most likely to learn to say, ‘My ears had heard of you, but *now my eyes have seen you*’ (Job 42:5, NIV, emphasis added).”²
- ▶ *is an enabling virtue* that “doesn’t realize the good itself, but rather serves as an indispensable aid when the good is threatened.” Suffering isn’t good itself, which means that courageously enduring it has no value unless there is something worth suffering *for*. “The suffering the Christian is called to bear is most often the result of trying to love others in a world full of sin and wretchedness. Great love almost always involves suffering, whether it is in small doses of self-denial or great dramatic losses,” says DeYoung. “When we endure suffering, we say by our endurance that we are waiting for something better, and we believe it is still coming.”
- ▶ *is a spiritual strength*, not a physical power. Unlike the typical American action hero who conquers the bad guys on his own, a courageous person may be weak and vulnerable to harm. But courage doesn’t allow fear and suffering to stop us from doing the good. “Especially in his moment of greatest vulnerability, Christ showed us the source of true strength — the love of God.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2005 The Center for Christian Ethics

The power of God's love far exceeds the limits of any human power, yet it can become our own."

- ▶ *is a virtue for all of us.* The ancient Greek ideal of battlefield courage "disqualified women and children, the sick and disabled, the foreigner and the socially disenfranchised" from the virtue. But "if courage can be expressed in the endurance of suffering, then it is no longer open only to those who excel in human strength and physical power. It is a virtue for all of us, even those who may never count as powerful; in fact, it may be especially available to the weak and the wounded."

We hold fast "to God's promise to help us stand firm against fear, and to stand with us when we are powerless to avoid suffering, so that love—not fear—has the last word in our lives."

Study Questions

1. What are some examples of courage in the life of Christ?
2. Comment on DeYoung's observation that "If someone is suffering injury or pain because he doesn't love or respect himself, because he has been beaten into submission and self-hatred, then suffering can deaden the soul, not enliven it. The martyrs died out of great love, not out of despair."
3. Enduring suffering is a scary idea. Do you agree with the three reasons DeYoung discusses in the section entitled "Why is endurance so difficult?" Are there more reasons?
4. If "true strength is rooted in God's power," then how do we get in touch with God's power when we are suffering?

Departing Hymn: "How Firm a Foundation" (verses 1, 2, 6, and 7)

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord,
is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
to you, who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

In every condition, in sickness, in health;
in poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;
at home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,
as your days may demand, shall your strength ever be.

Even down to old age all My people shall prove
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
and when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,
like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.

John Rippon's A SELECTION OF HYMNS (1787)
Suggested Tune: FOUNDATION

¹ Translated from the poem "Nada de Turbe" by St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).

² Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.

Power Made Perfect in Weakness

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To take Christ as our exemplar and to define the virtue of courage in relation to his person and life.
2. To consider why enduring suffering is so difficult for us.
3. To explore how God's power provides strength when we must endure pain and suffering.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "How Firm a Foundation," locate the tune FOUNDATION in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Story

"Several years ago, a young couple was featured in the newspaper, holding a picture of their 21-month-old daughter Macy, whom they had buried the day before. She died of a rare genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy. These parents went through a lot caring for Macy in her short life, but they knew exactly what they were up against. The same disorder had also claimed the lives of Macy's older twin brother and sister just two and a half years earlier. The twins were diagnosed when they were six months old. They too died before their second birthday.

"You might expect parents in a situation like this to be bitter, angry, and hardened by their experience. Macy's mother and father freely admit how difficult life has been for them, how many questions they have for which they can't find answers. As her father put it, 'When they first told us this was a fatal disease, we didn't know the half of what we were getting into.' Even the blurry newsprint on the front page of the paper conveys faces marked by wounds that are fresh and deep. It is plain from the article, however, that their love for their children is greater than their pain. "We see Macy as a dancing angel," said her mother. "She is in heaven, able to breathe freely, playing with her sister and brother." The couple is not sure whether they will try to have another baby or adopt. But they do know they want to be parents again'" (*Suffering*, pp. 11-12).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for someone close to them who endures physical, mental, or spiritual weakness. Then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study begins with the Apostle Paul's startling idea that our "sufficiency" is a gift of God's power in our lives, rather than our own accomplishment. He suggests this in 2 Corinthians 9:8 ("And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having *enough* of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work") and says it explicitly in 2 Corinthians 12:9. By employing in each verse the word for self-sufficiency, *arkeō*, which the NRSV translates "enough" and "sufficient," Paul challenges the Hellenistic ideal of the self-sufficient hero.

Paul's radical idea, DeYoung suggests, begins to make sense if we take Jesus, rather than a battlefield hero like Achilles, as our exemplar of courage. On this model, courage (1) *endures* suffering, (2) is an *enabling* virtue, (3) is exhibited in *spiritual* strength, and (4) is available to all persons. The first two points stand in some tension: though we may often be called to *endure* rather than battle suffering, we must not begin to seek out pain or to think suffering is good in itself.

The third study question invites members to explore the cultural assumptions that make it so difficult for us to endure suffering.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention events in Jesus' public career — e.g., *confronting* angry townspeople in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30; cf. Matthew 13:54-58) or moneychangers in the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13 and parallels), *touching* people who were ritually unclean like people with leprosy (Matthew 8:1-4 and parallels) or the woman with a flow of blood or the child who was dead (Mark 5:21-43), *enduring* snide public attacks on his character (Matthew 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-35) or misunderstanding by his own disciples (Matthew 20:20-28, etc., and parallels). His enduring betrayal, rejection, and death on the cross are defining acts of courage. Why did Jesus do these things? Encourage members to discuss the love of God that led him to persist despite fear and suffering.
2. DeYoung is distinguishing those who endure suffering out of courage from others who suffer self-inflicted pain or endure out of despair. St. Augustine defines courage as "love readily bearing all things for the sake of the object beloved." The motive is crucial.

Members may know people who suffer out of despair or who seem to enjoy self-pity. How is their suffering qualitatively different from that of people who endure hardship, difficulty, and pain out of love for the good and true?

3. DeYoung mentions three reasons: (1) We must suffer and endure pain when *we are in a position of weakness* and cannot strike back or control the situation. "The pain is bad enough, to be sure; what makes it unbearable is the feeling of powerlessness that goes with it. We must endure pain because we cannot prevent or alleviate it." (2) *Our emotions are debilitating*. We feel anger, but it "is powerless to help us... when we can't fight the pain and make it go away." We also experience "the extra burden of sorrow, the emotion we feel when evil is already here with us." Courage must stand firm against these inner emotions as well as outward threats. (3) "Endurance *implies suffering for a long stretch of time*." In our culture, we expect to fix things quickly, but we do not have much control over how long we must suffer.
4. Encourage members to share their experiences of God's power to endure suffering. They may mention baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, prayer, singing hymns, reading scripture, mutual accountability to other Christians, Christ-like service, and witness as practices that transform our lives and mediate God's strength to us. They may have experienced God's care and strength mediated through family members, friends, congregation members, health care professionals, ministers, and even strangers.

Paul announces, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). This gospel (good news) includes the power of Jesus' resurrection, which when appropriated in our lives through baptism, frees us from sin and condemnation and begins to reshape our lives into conformity with his character (6:1-14; 8:1-4, 21-25).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.