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Sermon Notes

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Christmas: The Weakness of God

1 Corinthians 1:25

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than man’s strength.”

I. The “Weakness of God”? How Can It Be?

A. The Omnipotence of God

1. Absolute power: can do anything He wills to do

a. creation

He merely speaks the words and the universe springs into being. He merely speaks the words, and angels, powers, and invisible principalities takes their ordained positions. He merely speaks the words, and whole galaxies are flung out, stars burning brightly, never ceasing until He says so. He merely speaks the words and oceans are gathered into one place, dry land appears. He speaks and the raging waters obey... they rule in absolute power, but they cannot cross the thin bars of sand that are their limit. God merely speaks and whole species of animals, birds, reptiles, creatures of the sea spring to life... blood coursing through their veins, instincts for survival and reproduction already in place. God merely speaks and human beings appear, with bodies fearfully and wonderfully made, with brains so immensely complex we will never fathom them completely.

This is the limitless power of God the creator!! And the Bible says God the Father did it all through God the Son.

b. providence

God the Ruler is also demonstrated to be omnipotent! He rules all nations with an iron scepter. He speaks and kings rise, He gives the opposite command and mighty emperors fall. A sparrow doesn't fall to the ground apart from the will of God, neither does Rome fall to the barbarians except at His command. God the providential ruler opens His hand and satisfies the desires of every living thing... he feeds everything that eats every day... billions and billions of insects, tropical fish, predator eagles, and cities of people. God rules over ever weather pattern, every natural occurrence, every blizzard, every drop of rain that falls or doesn't fall, every breeze that blows. God the providential ruler oversees every roll of the dice, every happenstance meeting, every news story that makes it only to page 36 of major metropolitan newspapers.

This is the limitless power of God the Ruler!! And the Bible makes it plain that it is Christ Himself who rules as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, sitting at the right hand of His heavenly Father.

c. miracles

God the Miracle worker is also demonstrated to be omnipotent! He interferes with the natural laws He originally set down, showing Himself to be sovereign over each law of physics, chemistry and biology. He made those rules and He can break them any time He chooses. And when He chooses to break a law of nature for His own glory, when He astounds the watching worlds of angels and men, He proves that He is the might wonder-working God. Staffs can turn into live serpents and then back again. Human flesh can suddenly turn leprous, then be healed again in an instant. The Nile River can suddenly turn to blood, and even water pitchers that a moment ago were pure and clean can suddenly be fouled, red blood. Plagues can strike Egypt at the word of a man, and oceans can open wide to allow people to cross. Just as suddenly oceans can swallow up a huge pursuing army. All of this done by the word of God, the mighty, omnipotent, ruler... who makes natural laws and then breaks them as He sees fit. At the word of God, a mighty wall can crumble as though it were made of sand... the sun can stand still in the sky... fire can fall from the sky and consume cities, altars, or people... iron axe heads can float.

This is the awesome power of the God of Heaven, the omnipotent ruler of the universe. And all of this power He displayed through His Son.

2. Absolute authority: no one can overrule His choices
 - a. He is King
 - b. no one can say "What are you doing"
 - c. His hand is stretched out, and no one can turn it back
 - d. He needs no advice from human counselors
 - e. He is never confused in what to do
3. Absolute position: no one can even approach Him
 - a. high and lofty
 - b. unapproachable light
 - c. heaven cannot contain Him
4. Absolute character: no one can bend His will or make Him yield
 - a. "strong" metal means unyielding
 - b. strong will means cannot be broken
 - c. God's will is unyielding... no external force can change it
 - d. God's character is unchangeable

B. The Ultimate Question of Christmas: How Can Such a Being Be "Weak"?

1. It seems unfathomable to speak of it
2. Can absolute power and authority become perfectly weak?
3. If so, why? Why would God become weak?

C. Christ: the “Weakness of God”

1 Corinthians 1:23-25 we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

1. Paul introduces the possibility of the weakness of God
2. CROSS: Christ crucified = “the weakness of God”
3. Christ was God in the flesh... yet there He hangs dead on a cross
4. YET Paul says even the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength

Man’s wisdom crafts great systems of philosophy... the systems of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Kant

Man’s wisdom generates great schools of science... the systems of Newton, Darwin, Mendeleev, Mendel, Freud

Man’s wisdom invents incredible devices... the inventions of Edison, Bell, Ford, Marconi, the Wright Brothers

Yet all of man’s wisdom is as nothing compared to the so-called foolishness of the Gospel

Man’s strength establishes great empires like that of Babylon, Greece, and Rome; builds immense structures like the Great Wall of China and the Pyramid of Cheops; man’s strength harnesses the greatest power of the natural realm... the power of wind, of stream, of chemicals, of hydraulics, even of the atom itself

Yet all of man’s strength is as nothing compare to the weakness of God

The tiny baby in the manger of Bethlehem, the man John baptized, the tempted man in the desert, the tired man sitting by the well, the bloody man hanging from the cross... Christ, the weakness of God accomplished more of eternal value than all that the most powerful men in history ever dreamed of achieving.

The wisdom of man and the strength of man are but dust in the wind

The foolishness of God and the weakness of God are of eternity, and will last for eternity.

D. Corinthian Context

1. Problems in Corinthian church

- a. endowed with every spiritual gift
 - b. they were bloated with pride, carnal, immoral
 - c. they were divisive, admiring and following human leaders
 - d. they needed to learn the lessons of the cross
 - e. they needed to learn the power of weakness
 - f. they needed to come to Bethlehem and see the helpless baby, and worship Him
 - g. they needed to come to Calvary and see the helpless, bloody sacrifice, dead under the crushing wrath of God, and worship Him
 - h. they needed to see again that the weakness of God accomplishes eternal life
2. Paul's experience preaching
- a. Paul had planted this church through his preaching and teaching
 - b. he had come here from Athens where the philosophers had ridiculed his message
 - c. he came to Corinth low, meek, humble, and trembling... here the Lord appeared to him and exhorted him not to give up
 - d. some people were won to Christ and he taught them every day for a long time
3. Paul's reputation and authority in question
- a. after Paul left, some other men came calling themselves the "super-apostles"
 - b. they scoffed at Paul, minimized his message, threw their weight around, acted like big shots
 - c. Paul wrote both the Corinthian letters to counteract these men
4. Corinthian mentality
- a. love for worldly wisdom
 - b. in awe of worldly power
 - c. yearning for worldly "success"
 - d. upwardly mobile... looking for ever-better, ever-higher
 - e. Paul had to remind them of the way of Christ... the way of weakness, of humility, of birth into a manger, fleeing for your life, of constant daily opposition, of being slandered, of being conspired against, of being arrested, of being beaten, of dying

5. Paul's message: the CROSS of Jesus Christ

- 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 God's foolishness = a crucified Messiah
- 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 God's foolishness = the Corinthian church

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

- 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 God's foolishness = Paul's preaching

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.

Central concept: God delights in humbling human arrogance and pride... Christ's lowly birth, His humble life, His humiliating death all demonstrate the "weakness of God"... God delights to exalt weakness and slay human arrogance

Secondly, God has chosen weak people to make up His church, and this also brings Him glory by humbling human pride. Only the humblest sinners would ever be attracted to a Gospel of a lowly babe in the manger, and of a bloody man on a cross

Thirdly, God has chosen weak and despised messengers and a weak and despised methodology... human preachers standing and proclaiming the message of the cross in weakness, fear, and much trembling.

This is the true message of Christmas... Christ's weakness means salvation for those who believe

II. The Weakness of Christ

A. Christ's Lowly Incarnation

1. Weak when conceived

Luke 1:34-35 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

Psalms 139:13-16 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Hebrews 10:5 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me

God knit together a tiny body for His Son by the power of the Holy Spirit... at one point, Jesus' body was smaller than the size of a grain of rice. If Christ's body developed inside Mary the way your body developed inside your mother, the following things were true:

- At 21 days, Jesus' heart began to beat... it would not stop beating until He cried out "It is finished" on the cross
- At 42 days, Jesus' brain would have had recordable brain waves; he would be able to move his legs, to stretch, and to jump
- At eight weeks, Jesus would be able to turn his head, suck his thumb, and respond to pain... sheltered in Mary's womb, Jesus felt no pain then... but later, he would know the agony of the cross
- From 11 to 12 weeks, Jesus would have had His greatest growth spurt, almost doubling in size to 3 ½ inches in length

All of this points to the great weakness of the incarnation... Jesus was so fragile at that moment that a tiny needle could have torn Him apart. But the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowed Him and at His weakest physical moment He was yet absolutely invincible

This is a great mystery... Michael Card wrote:

When the Father longed to show
A love He wanted us to know,
He sent His only Son and so
Became a holy embryo.

No fiction as fantastic and wild
A mother made by her own child.
The hopeless babe who cried
Was God Incarnate and man deified.

That is the Mystery!
More than you can see.
Give up on your pondering
And fall down on your knees.

2. Weak as a conquered Jew

Luke 2:1-5 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to his own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth

in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Christ was carried inside his mother's womb to Bethlehem, going there at the whim of a Roman emperor over a thousand miles away. Christ would be born a Jew, and that meant being born

3. Weak when born a baby

Luke 2:6-7 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Is this not the very picture of weakness? Jesus was totally helpless, and had to be swaddled. His physical existence and protection lay in the hands of his parents. He could not decide, He could not will or choose anything but to lay in that manger and wait for Mary to nurse Him. He could barely disturb the hay in which He was lain. He had not the strength to get out of that poor first bed where He lay His sacred head.

Yet, the weakness of God was more powerful than the mightiest demon horde. Revelation 12 clearly depicts that Satan stood near Mary wanting to devour her child as soon as He was born... but that little helpless babe was defended by the decree of God!

4. Weak through poverty

When Mary wrapped her infant in swaddling clothes and put him in a feeding trough for animals, she testified clearly to a state most Christians throughout the world and throughout the ages can relate to... POVERTY. Joseph and Mary had very little to offer Jesus materially... this is also clearly demonstrated through the offerings they offered at the Temple:

Luke 2:22-24 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

This was the offering prescribed for poor people:

Leviticus 12:8 If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean."

This is the very weakness, the poverty that won our salvation... Christ's willingness to become nothing, so we might have everything:

2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

5. Weak before angels

Hebrews 1:6 And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

Luke 2:13-14 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

6. Weak as a hunted infant refugee

King Herod's jealousy... wicked vicious bloodthirsty soldiers

No angelic army dispatched... no pillar of fire between the babe and the soldiers

It was God's will for His Son to be weak... and that meant fleeing for His life.

7. Weak before the devil

Revelation 12:4-5 The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. 5 She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

It was not merely Herod who wanted Christ dead, but a power far greater than Herod could have imagined. The ancient dragon, the devil, stood ready the night Christ was born... to snatch him away and murder Him. Christ lay there in the manger, gurgling, breathing softly, sleeping... weak and helpless; unaware of the purest evil force around him ready to kill him.

All of this weakness was on display at the beginning of Christ's life. Yet He did not stop there. He lived a humble, lowly life... in one sense a life of weakness every moment of His incarnation.

B. Christ's Servant Lifestyle

1. Weak when born under the law

Galatians 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law

Christ submitted fully to every jot and tittle of the Old Covenant. He humbly did everything the Law required of Him. It was done for Him when Joseph and Mary had Him circumcised on the eighth day, and when Mary offered the two doves for Him and for herself. This was just the beginning of a whole life of humble submission to every word that came from the mouth of God.

2. Weak as submissive to His parents

Luke 2:51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.

3. Weak as patiently waiting God's timing

Christ did not begin His public ministry until He was about thirty years old. Many, many years of humbly waiting on God's perfect timing. This humility and submission to the perfect timing of God continued right to the cross.

4. Weak when baptized

5. Weak when tempted

Luke 4:1-2 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

Jesus meekly followed the leadership of the Spirit into the desert. Jesus yielded to the process of temptation by the devil, but not once did He yield to temptation. Jesus refrained from using supernatural power to escape His earthly suffering. This was the very nature of His weakness. He was HUMAN, and that meant suffering... suffering temptation, suffering hunger... spiritual pain and physical pain. This was the weakness of Christ.

6. Weak when persecuted

In the same way Christ meekly accepted daily abuse and opposition from the Jews, and scarcely once did He lift up His voice to defend Himself.

7. Weak when poverty-stricken

Matthew 8:20 Jesus replied "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Matthew 12:1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.

This was a regulation in Israel, providing for the poor and needy. Jesus' disciples were in effect welfare recipients:

8. Weak when humbly meeting needs

Luke 22:27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

9. Weak when refusing to be king

The world is constantly ambitious for positions and trappings of power. Jesus rejected any human effort to crown Him with kingly glory in a fleshly way:

John 6:15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

10. Weak when riding on a donkey

Matthew 21:5 "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle [or "humble"] and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

Jesus entered Jerusalem in a very meek and lowly way... humble and undignified on the back of a donkey. Because the donkey is so low to the ground and so slow afoot, it would have actually been a great hindrance in a battle. Jesus selection of a donkey shows Him to be coming in peace... weak, lowly, not looking for a battle.

C. Christ's Humiliating Crucifixion

1. Weak when praying in Gethsemane
2. Weak when arrested and bound

Again, Christ could have used supernatural power to destroy His enemies...

Matthew 26:53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?

But instead of a powerful display, we seek the picture of weakness:

Matthew 27:2 They bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

3. Weak when silent before His accusers

Isaiah 53:7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

4. Weak when condemned by the law

Christ did not open His mouth because as our substitute He WAS guilty before the Law... He did not open His mouth to a single charge. There was no display of power to free Him from condemnation... He was weak on His day in court.

5. Weak when flogged by Pilate

Through all the humiliation and degradation inflicted on Him by the Romans, Christ never defended Himself, never resisted... simply passively walked from one place of humiliation and torment to the next.

6. Weak when condemned to crucifixion

Christ did not strike Pilate dead at that instant, nor did He resist the beam of wood when laid on His shoulders.

7. Weak when bearing our sin on the cross

It was for this reason that Christ took on a human body to begin with! The tiny hands and feet so fearfully and wonderfully made in Mary's womb had now come to their proper and final destiny... torn apart by the spikes of the cross. Never was there such a picture of fearsome weakness than the moment the Romans crucified Jesus Christ!

1 Peter 2:23-24 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

8. Weak when under the wrath of God

Matthew 27:46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This was the crowning moment of Christ's weakness... drinking deeply every drop of the just wrath of God against the sins of all believers for all ages! Here all Christ's sheep are saved by the death of their shepherd. Here Christ's weakness comes to its perfect climax.

9. Weak when submitting to death

Luke 23:46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Philippians 2:7-8 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

Lest we ever forget what the weakness of Bethlehem was for, it is for the weakness of Calvary. The journey of the incarnate Son of God was a path not of visible omnipotence, but of stunning weakness: weak in birth, weak in life, weak in death.

Yet never was there so much power in weakness!!!

III. The Power of Christ Demonstrated in Weakness

The weakness of God is not ultimately weak... NOT AT ALL!!! Quite the contrary, for the apostle Paul told us already

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than man's strength."

How is Christ's weakness actually omnipotent strength?

A. Powerful Atonement Satisfies God's Law, Quenches God's Wrath

1. By humbly accepting a life of weak servitude under the Law, Christ could be our sin bearer

2. By humbly standing quietly before His accusers, Christ accepted the transfer of guilt on His shoulders
3. By humbly accepting our guilt and by dying under the wrath of God, Christ has freed from condemnation forever all who trust in Him!!!

Immeasurable power in the weakness of Christ!!

B. Powerful Death Destroys Death Forever

1. Christ's death as sinless substitute destroyed the grave forever
2. It opened the way for the greatest demonstration of God's power in history: the resurrection of Christ from the dead
3. Christ's weakness in death destroyed my fear of death forever... as it does for millions of believers around the world

C. Powerful Message Overthrows Human Pride

1. The Gospel message is a message of the weakness of God in Christ
2. It is utterly foolish to human wisdom and repugnant to human pride
3. BUT to those whom God is saving, the message of Christ's weakness is the very power of God for the salvation of all who believe!!
4. The Gospel alone has the power to slay the towering pride of man, and bring us to our knees
5. For this reason, the magi knelt before Jesus... mighty earthly men humbled before the meek babe

D. Powerful Messengers Advance through Weakness

1. In the same way the Gospel message itself advances through your life and throughout the world through weakness
2. In your life, only when you acknowledge your weakness before God can you grow as a Christian

We are so independent, so self-sufficient!! Grace operates only when we are weak and needy!

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the spiritual beggars for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."

John 15:5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

3. In the world, the Gospel advances when we lay down our lives and become weak as Christ was... willing to suffer shame and disgrace to bring a neighbor, co-worker, friend, family member to Christ

John 12:24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.