

## FROM THE AUTHOR

I don't want to admit that I am weak. And I don't want you to think that my weakness makes me admirable.

Those two reasons are why I am quite nervous about this book. The second one is more dangerous than the first.

Let's get the first one out of the way. I am a weak man. I read an article about the *Beano* comic a couple of years ago in which a member of its publishing staff claimed that readers were generally not like Dennis the Menace, the character whose villainous exploits have been at the heart of the comic for years. Rather, they were generally more like Walter the Softie, Dennis's nemesis. As a boy, I read the *Beano* and, unsurprisingly according to the article, regularly felt sorry for Walter as Dennis terrorised him and his chums yet again.

As a teenager, I read books about Hornblower<sup>1</sup> and fantasy

1 Horatio Hornblower is a fictional British naval officer serving during the Napoleonic Wars. C. S. Forester wrote a series of novels and short stories detailing his career.

heroes like Druss the Legend.<sup>2</sup> Men of action, courage, and strong compassion. Alongside that, I was deeply envious of schoolmates who were anything like them, which I was not. I played Warhammer rather than football, and stayed in on a Friday night. I hoped that one day I would grow up to find that overnight I had become a hero, a man of action, a rugged and dependable husband, father, and friend. One day.

As I have written this book, Jesus has shown me my weakness in its true colours. It runs even more deeply and sadly than I had realised, and I do not like it. I have tried to weave some of this into what follows, and I have to admit that it makes me squirm a bit! I am not the only weak one, though. The backdrop to writing this book was something that none of us could have imagined: a global humbling.

Remember the coronavirus pandemic, when the strength of the world was humbled by a virus? Entire nations, businesses, schools, and churches were brought to a standstill in confusion and fear. We were brought low, and we are still reaping the whirlwind of anxiety, fear, depression, and loss that we sowed with arrogant confidence in our technology, wisdom, and power.

At the same time, the strength of some more conservative parts of the church, where I am perhaps most at home, was also humbled by the public fall of certain well-respected leaders and preachers. All parts of the church have, sadly, been affected in similar ways. Sexual scandals, the use of ministry for personal

2 See, for example, David Gemmell, *Legend* (London: Century, 1984). Here we first meet Druss as a veteran warrior who comes out of retirement to help lead the heroic defence of his nation against a fearsome and vast enemy horde.

enrichment, the abuse of power—all with consequent casualties—and the confusion over what is fair and not fair unfolded at a bewildering pace. Friends were involved in some of these public matters, so it all landed very close to home. Alongside all of this, I was also directly involved in several lesser-known situations involving friends, sometimes in dispute with one another. (I feel sick as I bring these matters to mind now.) Some issues were resolved, others not, and a lot of people are left deeply wounded. We have been confused, broken, unsure, questioning the Lord. In a word, weak.

Tired from helping to lead a church during a pandemic, and sad and confused by the hurt in other churches, I experienced weakness even closer up, too, as I wrote. My wife Flick (short for Felicity) and I had become foster carers, a role which continues to show us both the weakness of families where abuse and neglect are endemic and the weakness of a system struggling to cope with the scale of harm being done to children. Fostering has also shown up our own weakness as a couple as we have tried to love Christ, one another, our birth children, our foster children, and our church family. We are often far beyond ourselves, and so slow to depend on the loving help around us from our God and our brothers and sisters.

Over the past several months, I have been frustrated, angry, despairing, and downcast more often, and more deeply, maybe, than I have ever been before. Yet I still long to be strong. I do not want to be Hornblower anymore, but now I envy husbands who know just how to show love to their wives in timely and wise ways. I envy fathers who are unflappably patient and full of

grace towards their children. I envy pastors who seem to have all the answers their churches need, and who lead people to Christ both effortlessly and often. I feel like an inadequate imposter in my life; I feel weak, and I do not like it.

I wonder, though, if Jesus has let me experience this weakness and see it more closely so that I can write this book? He has certainly drawn me close to himself and soothed my heart chapter by chapter. So this is a raw work, written in weakness. And frankly, I think that is a good thing.

My second concern is the one that bothers me a lot more than the above—namely, whether I have written too much about myself, and in a misleading way. I am worried that I have made too much of myself, and even displayed myself in a flattering light. My weakness is not noble. Indeed, much of it is sin, which is ugly, and some of the rest is from being a fallen man in a fallen world, which is miserable. The problem is that writing about weakness, and using my own weakness as an example, can make it seem as though I am admirably self-aware, wisely searching the Scriptures for the help I need, and faithfully bringing my every need to our heavenly Father. If only!

It is a dangerous thing to write about myself because I might lead your gaze to me, John, rather than to Jesus. If I do that, it will do you no good, make me a sinner, and snatch glory from the kindest and most glorious Lord. Thankfully, God has given me a wife, fellow elders, friends, and an editor to lead me out of that swamp. But a beautiful self-portrait might peek through at times. If it does, please know that my sin is not noble; it is nasty, and my weakness is not brave; it is brutal.

But Jesus is noble. He is brave, kind, generous, and full of grace. He is our hope, strength, and song. Jesus is also the One who makes sense of our weakness, as we will see, in ways that surprise us. He is Lord and Saviour. Jesus is all.

And one day our weakness will be over and forgotten—forever.

John Hindley

*Frettenham, Norfolk, September 2022*

# 1

## We Are Weak

I came into Norwich early this morning to spend the day writing. As I ordered breakfast in a local pub, the manager asked me what I was doing. So I told him that I was writing a book about weakness, and how Jesus knows that we are weak and does not expect us to sort ourselves out before we come to him. He said that he reckoned it was a good subject, because everyone who comes into his pub is “fine.” They all tell him they are doing well. And then sometimes they tell him the truth. My guess is that a publican hears a fair bit of the truth after a couple of beers.

The truth is that we are barely holding it together, at best. We are weak, and our weakness is painful. Some of that weakness is obvious. We cannot hide the weakness of ill health, whether it be the grinding weakness of chronic illness or the terrible weakness that cancer brings, both in the disease and its consequent treatments. When it is family who are suffering, the weakness and confusion can feel even worse than when we are suffering

ourselves. When those we love have died, the pain and grief often come with a sense of confusion and powerlessness. Our family and friends rally round us, as they know something of this suffering too. Or maybe they don't, and our grief is made worse by loneliness and isolation. When we lose our job, or the bank takes our house, those around us cannot fail to notice how weak we are and how hard life is for us.

Much of our weakness is hidden, though. I have been careful in how I have talked about the panic attack that I had. And I hardly know how to begin talking about the anxiety that lurks just beneath the surface. I am not sure exactly what I am anxious about, although my worry may fix on a random item on my to-do list or an entry in my diary. Sometimes I feel so downcast and dejected that I struggle to get out of bed or do anything much when I have got up. Yet for me, these things are neither constant nor total. So my weakness is part of my experience but not the whole, and that somehow makes it hard to discuss with friends whilst keeping some sense of perspective.

Then there is the weakness that lingers on the borders between suffering and sin. On busy days, when I have worked hard and still ended up moving three tasks onto tomorrow's long list, I finish by feeling overwhelmed, inadequate, frustrated with myself and anyone else I can think of—even with the Lord. I fight a rising anger that threatens to come out in cruel and unfair words to my children, or coldness and distance towards my wife.

I sometimes feel as though Christ has loaded too much onto my plate. Sometimes I even tell him so and ask him for his help. Too frequently, though, I simply wish that I were better, that I

were stronger, that I were more gifted, more disciplined, with a higher capacity to work and less need for sleep. I want to be more like other Christians I know who have everything sorted out and time for all the Lord has called them to do. They're calm and collected in the face of pressure and able to get far more done than I am, before enjoying stimulating and creative rest. Instead of just slumping on the sofa.

The strange thing is that I suspect that if you met me, you would think I was just that sort of Christian too! Which makes me wonder whether the people I look up to, and sinfully envy, are maybe more like me than they first appear. I wonder if the pub manager is right that we all pretend to enjoy a greater strength than we have. Maybe we are like the man I read about who had got so fed up with the effort of trying to develop a rippling six-pack through his workouts at the gym that he simply had one tattooed on instead. I smiled as I recognised something of myself in him.

I am weak, and you are too. You are probably reading this book because you feel the exhaustion and frustration of being a weak person in a world that loves strength. You are confused. You struggle to find a place when you see so many Christians and churches radiating calm, control, strength, peace, and joy. Alongside them, or as part of such a church, you feel that you do not fit in. You feel so empty, broken, messed up, and downright sinful. You are wondering why, if God is mighty, powerful, and on your side, things are proving so hard. Maybe you simply cannot keep the bills down; you are unable to imagine an end to the depression; your child has cancer, and you do not know how



it will end. Perhaps you suspect the world sees you as strong, coping, competent, and together, and you cannot work out how to mention your daily addiction, mental illness, inner emptiness, or shallow faith to anyone. You feel trapped in an image you have created, as the gulf between the truth of who you are and the impression you give to others widens every week.

So it helps you to know that I too am weak, just as it helps me to know that you are. This book is not written by the strong to help the strong get stronger. Nor is it written by the strong to help the weak. A friend suggested the book could be called *A Weakling's Guide to Weakness*, and he was right! I am weak, and being weak, I understand something of weakness. The hope, though, is not that I might understand something of *your* weakness. Rather, the sure and certain hope is that your Father in heaven understands your weakness; he understands it perfectly:

As a father shows compassion to his children,  
 so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.  
 For he knows our frame;  
 he remembers that we are dust. (Ps. 103:13–14)

The Lord remembers that we are but dust. He has no false expectations of us, no demands that we cannot meet, and no standards that we must achieve. He is more compassionate than the best of earthly fathers is with his children. Our God knows that we are weak; he knows the struggles we face and the burdens we bear. He knows how we simply cannot keep going, and that we need to relax our grip and lower our mask of successful

strength. That is why Jesus came to call us, with words like these:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)

Jesus is not a God who expects us to grow stronger backs and broader shoulders for him to lay more burdens on. He is a God who offers to take our burdens from us and carry them for us. He knows what we cannot bear, and he came so that we would no longer have to bear it. Jesus knows us and comes alongside us. He offers us a seat, pours us a drink, and sits down himself. His very eyes tell us that he understands, and his outstretched hands let us know that he has come to help. The scars from the nails remind us just how far his love goes. Here is One in whom we will find rest for our souls.

We can come with our weakness to Jesus. We can come to learn from him, for he is not strong in the ways in which we long to be strong; rather, he is gentle and lowly in heart. He is weak, but he is strong also, and we will never understand his strength unless we understand his weakness. For it was in the weakness of a child that God came to us, and in the ultimate weakness of a broken body and a death in the darkness that God saved us.

We see Christ most truly if we see him in the weakness of his cross. It is by seeing this cross that we can understand how our weakness is not something to be avoided, escaped from, or

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concealed. We will see that our weakness can be a route into the very heart of God, a way of freedom and an invitation to know rest in our souls.