

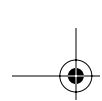
## INTRODUCTION

My wife, Annette, and I recently celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary. But that was not the only milestone we passed. We also celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the ministry we founded: Desert Stream. Through Desert Stream we and the other members of our team equip people to find healing in Christ for their sexual and relational brokenness.

To mark our marriage and ministry anniversaries, Annette and I spent nine days on vacation in New York City, enjoying the city's cultural treasures. I was particularly moved by some of the depictions of Christ on the cross that we encountered at art museums. These medieval and Renaissance works powerfully portrayed the way of deliverance that God has made for broken ones. Over and over these words of Bonaventure rang in my mind: "There is no other path but through the burning love of the Crucified."<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, while we were in New York, Annette and I had time to reflect on how God had healed our own brokenness. I had been set free from homosexuality and my wife had recovered from the effects of childhood sexual abuse. It had not been easy for either of us, of course, but then good things rarely are. Now we felt secure in the love of God and the love we shared between us, which had resulted in the





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wonderful blessing of our four children. My sense of security, though, was about to be shaken.

Neither of us had spent much time in Manhattan prior to our vacation, and now we were taken aback by the pervasiveness of homosexuality in the culture. As we walked the streets, it seemed that at every turn we met gay men who were intent on engaging with us and were wondering whether Annette and I were a couple. It all had a troubling effect on me.

The assertiveness of the homosexuals we encountered caused me to work harder to assert who I was and what I stood for, and that was good. But at the same time—I have to admit it—these overtures were appealing to me. Against the sophisticated backdrop of Manhattan, the homosexual lifestyle appeared highly seductive.

Thankfully I soon came to my senses. It happened as Annette and I were walking in Greenwich Village, just across the street from the site of the Stonewall riots—the official starting point for the gay rights movement in America. Nearby was a park featuring sculptures of two same-sex couples. We couldn't take it any more. We prayed together, asserting our true identities in Christ and calling on him to reclaim lives in the Village.

As if in confirmation of our intent to honor Christ, he honored us with a chance to minister to someone who was needy.

While wending our way through the Village, we met a woman with whom we felt compelled to share about Jesus Christ and his love. A lapsed Catholic, she hungrily received our words and exclaimed in tears how we were an answer to her prayers. Just two hours earlier she had asked God for guidance. Apparently we were her counselors that day, directing her to Christ.

**STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS: DO YOU SEE IT?**

I have discovered that God does not free me from all of my weaknesses. Rather, he frees me to cry out to him as I struggle to do what is right. Then he is faithful to release his power again and again and again.





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When submitted to God, our weaknesses have holy purposes. They challenge the limitations of our self-reliance. And they remind us—more often than we would like—of our need for the greater strength God can provide.

### **WEAKNESS IN SERVICE TO CHRIST**

The apostle Paul proclaimed God's strength in his weakness. It happened when the Corinthians accused him of being unimpressive (2 Cor 10:1—11:15). How did Paul defend himself? By boasting of his accomplishments? No. He defended his apostolic call with a single remarkable theme: strength in weakness. "If I must boast," he wrote, "I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30).

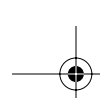
Paul resorted to the cross as his basis for understanding strength in weakness. He had grasped the truth that crucifixion precedes resurrection, first for Christ and then for us as Christ's followers. As he wrote in 2 Corinthians 13:4, "[Jesus] was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you."

Weakness in service to Christ? Any Christian worker knows that the pressure of ministry can cause certain weaknesses to surface, even those weaknesses we may have thought we had mastered. I experienced one such weakness—and the power of God at work through it—during a conference on sexual wholeness held several years ago.

I returned to my hotel room one evening and discovered that for some reason my television was receiving the "adult" channel even though I had not paid for it. I was shocked. And I was curious. Several years had passed since I had been exposed to pornography. What would it be like to watch such images now?

The images drew me and damned me at the same time. I watched for a few moments, then tried to fight back by calling the hotel desk as well as Annette and my prayer partners. But the hotel clerk said he was not able to turn off the channel, and no one else was home





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when I called. Thwarted on all fronts, I decided to watch the sexual images some more. Though little time had elapsed, my brain was now ignited.

Blessedly, just then the phone rang—it was a return call from a friend. I confessed my sin and we prayed for God to forgive me. But more than that, we prayed for God to strengthen me in my weakness.

After the phone call, I knew I could not go near the television set, so I lay down to sleep in the bathroom. For a long time, though, sleep would not come. A voice in my mind accused me, *How can you lead others to freedom when you are so weak?* I looked at myself, the mighty healer, huddled next to the toilet. It was pathetic. So I resolved to tell my host (a pastor) that I could not speak at his church the next morning due to my sin and weakness.

I thought then that I would have peace and be able to fall asleep. But God challenged me on my resolution. I believed I could hear him telling me, “Andy, your struggle is what qualifies you to serve.” It seemed he wanted me to go ahead and speak the next day even though, or even *because*, I am weak before temptation just like everybody else.

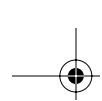
The next morning I told the whole story to the pastor. He affirmed my qualification to speak. And let me tell you, that morning the Lord moved with unprecedented power to release many from shame and impurity. His mercy poured from this weak and weary vessel!

**LAYERS AROUND WEAKNESS**

Before proceeding to look at the nature of Paul’s weakness, it may be helpful for us to look at the various layers that can surround weakness. In so doing I will use my struggle to break free from pornography as an example. Looking at the layers that obscure our weakness—whatever it may be—can free us to face the real problem more effectively.

First, we face *shame* in the struggle. That means we tend to feel bad about the problem, even to the extent that we want to hide it. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we cover ourselves with fig leaves.





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We pretend we are fine even though we know we are not.

That night in the hotel, with pornography filling my TV screen, I could have chosen not to call anyone. And the next day I could have hypocritically powered through the sermon I had prepared. That's what shame does. It silences us. It causes us to lie and to rely on ourselves.

Second, underneath the shame, God mercifully exposes the next layer—our *sin*. No matter how out of control we feel in our compulsion, the truth is that we are making choices. We thus contribute to our estrangement from God and others; we make decisions that damage our key relationships.

This is not weakness but wickedness. God wants to forgive, but he can do that only if we acknowledge the sin that stems from our weakness. Having received forgiveness, we are then free to receive holy power where we need it the most.

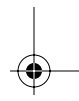
It's true I was surprised by the pornographic images coming from my television set. And yet I could have turned off the television when I saw what it was—but *I didn't*. I watched for a while, and then when my first attempts to change the situation failed, I watched some more. I *chose* to watch. That was my sin.

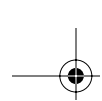
Another layer is our *wounding*. Such wounding may be physical abuse or inadequate love and affirmation or any number of other harmful effects. These wounds contribute to our misdirected grasping after love, fueling our sin.

For me, rejection early in my life set me on the road toward sexual confusion and an unwise search for love. In that way my wounding made me susceptible to the pull of pornography.

At the core, once the layers of shame, sin and wounding have been peeled away, lies our *weakness*. This weakness includes the tendency toward habitual sin. This tendency is not in itself sin, nor need it be shrouded by shame or empowered by unhealed wounds, but it does lead to many problems.

One of my weaknesses is a compulsion to look at illicit images.





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Now, God has given me much grace and power to free me from this compulsion, and I thank God for that. But the weakness remains.

Of course, I am not always mindful of it. As a matter of fact, the temptation has decreased to the extent that at times I feel completely free of it—that is, until I am faced once more by the emergence of that tendency. Then I have a choice: to submit to the world of false pleasure or to submit to God and trustworthy others. Therein lies his ability to strengthen me.

Our weaknesses, then, can be distinguished from our shame, our sin and our wounds. We will be exploring all three in the chapters to come. Our goal? To surrender our weaknesses to God and others so that, like Paul, we might discover God’s strength as we seek to serve him in our weaknesses.

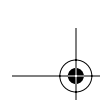
**NAMING THE THORN**

What was Paul’s weakness? Described by Paul as a “thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor 12:7), this weakness was something in him that was flawed or fragile, not whole. The weakness did not conform to Paul’s idea of how he should be. The enemy even had access to “torment” him through that weakness. God did not remove that weakness even though Paul pleaded with him to do so (v. 8). God had other plans for the thorn—he desired to use it to anchor the apostle in divine grace and power.

We are not sure of the nature of Paul’s weakness; many alternatives have been suggested. Regardless, we can identify our weakness with his. And we can receive the very words that the Lord spoke to Paul in response to the apostle’s prayer for deliverance from his weakness: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

Let’s break down that response. Rather than freeing Paul from his weakness, God offered the apostle his grace. And God claimed that his power would become most apparent in Paul through the weakened area of his humanity. The word translated “perfect” connotes a full ma-





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turity. God's strength would come to fruition in the fertile ground of Paul's weakness.

The apostle grasped clearly throughout his ministry how well suited his weakness was to receive and bear divine power. One commentator declared, "The startling contrast between the two [only served] . . . to magnify the superabundance of [God's] sufficiency."<sup>2</sup> Paul's weakness revealed God's power more clearly than did his gifts and strengths.

Just as the lower end of a dry valley drinks in the rain most deeply, so the cavities of Paul's soul received the outpouring of God's Spirit. He followed Jesus, who endured the weakness of the cross for the glorious power of the resurrection. Standing in Christ's example, Paul allowed his weaknesses to reveal God's strength through him.

**BEFRIENDING OUR WEAKNESS**

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is a valentine to human weakness. Through that letter the apostle implores us to befriend our frailties, for then we can act in God's power.

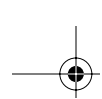
The cross guided Paul into that realization. Christ, weak in his dying, was empowered in his rising. We, in turn, are weak, yet we are made strong in our yielding to Christ. He raises us up to love well, not in spite of our weaknesses but in and through them.

From the outset of our relationship, Annette would accompany me to our healing meetings in West Hollywood. At first she resented the depth of brokenness we saw in some of the people to whom we ministered. She felt that more normal and resilient ones, like herself, might be more deserving of grace, at least the grace she had to give.

At one of the meetings, though, God challenged her. During a group prayer time, he called her to lay down her judgments—to surrender how she saw and felt about the group members.

As the prayer was closing, Annette looked around the room and saw the members with new eyes. God inspired Annette with fresh vision and compassion for the group. Following Christ's example, she "died,"





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and in her dying the Father released a fountain of his mercy in her. Out of her weakness he empowered Annette with holy love, which flows from her to this day.

God supplies his strength for our weakness in many ways. In this book I want to look at how God takes the weaknesses we experience in our relationships and in our sexuality and uses them to establish his powerful love in us. In those areas where we fail to love well, God meets us and invites us into a deeper communion with himself.

God also invites us to join with others so that our empowering can become established in context with real people. While God pervades the process of gaining strength in weakness, he is not content for it to be a string of lonely mystical experiences. He wants to use other people to empower us to love well. I pray that this book will help you toward that end.

