

Sermon: Strong Enough to Be Weakness

Series: Lion & the Lamb (1)

Bible Passage: Revelation 5:1-10; Isaiah 53:1-6

Revelation 5:1-10

5 Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. **2** And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” **3** And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, **4** and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. **5** And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. **7** And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. **8** And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. **9** And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

Isaiah 53:1-6

53 Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we turn our hearts and attention to your Word, we ask that your Holy Spirit would teach us and remind us of your truth and promises and that we would seek and listen only to your voice, through your holy scriptures. Make our hearts ready and receptive. In this new year, make us eager to hear what you have to say. Lord, whether we've been to church many, many times and we delight in the law of our Lord or we haven't been around in awhile and maybe this is our first time and this "Bible-thing" is new, we pray Father, if you are real, which I believe you are, that your spirit would speak to us now. We ask, in Jesus name. Amen.

When I was small, in elementary school, I had a pretty bad habit. Whenever the teacher asked the question that everyone knew, I just didn't raise my hand. What's the point? Why bother? There were those times when the teacher would preface the question by saying "I don't know if any of you know this" or "this might be too hard for people your age". When that question happened, my ears perked up and I got attentive. I would listen attentively to the question and, if I knew the answer to this question, raise my hand as high as I could because I was desperate to demonstrate my vast knowledge.

It's pretty normal. Kids want that attention and it's fine, but it's pretty insidious. That blatant desire, actually, that emerging desire to have attention, to be affirmed by people, to stand out, has plagued me and probably many of you in our lives thus far. There is this desire to be seen as impressive. There is this desire to be seen as desirable and attractive. There is this desire to be seen as, in one word, strong. Whether you're on the basketball court and you don't want to play because the other players look too good or whether you're watching a band onstage and you're thinking, "Oh man, I can't hang with them. They're too good." There are so many examples of this. Maybe you're good with words and funny and you like to say things so people will think that you're fun and the life of the party.

In each of those cases, perhaps we've gone to far. In attempt to appear funny, we've actually hurt someone's feelings. In attempt to look impressive, we've actually repulsed people. In attempt to look smart, we actually end up looking foolish. I think all of that has to do with how we view weakness in life. As Christians, this concept of weakness is so vital to any level of discipleship. As we begin this new sermon series, God willing, we're going to begin with a topic I've titled "Strong Enough to be Weakness".

All of these sermons come from the basic idea of Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb. I need to preface this, which is why I put in the passage from Revelation 5. The Lion and the Lamb is a very well-known concept. There's a band named after it. It's a beautiful alliteration in English. We think it's just normal. However, most people don't realize that it's one person (Jesus) and aren't two separate characters from the Chronicles of Narnia or something.

In this incredibly image-ridden vision in Revelation 5, I want you to filter past a lot of this stuff. I'm not going to exposit that text this morning. I want you to see the inherent paradox, the tension in how the Bible portrays Jesus in His final days as he returns to the Earth. On the one hand, there is this representation of the end of human history, represented by unrolling the scroll, the scroll of God's plan for all of human history. There are these seals (don't worry about what they looked like or anything). The idea is that someone had to be worthy to open these scrolls of human history. The writer of the book of John wanted these scrolls to be opened and read aloud but he wept because no one was worthy to open them. The elders come and say, "Fear not because the Lion who conquered is worthy of opening the scroll and worthy of ushering the end of human history." It's impressive and see this here in Revelation 5, verse 5:

⁵ And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain..."

Granted a lot of us don't make it to reading Revelation because it's at the end of our Bible reading plan and as we're trying to push through it at the end of the year, we just skip over these imagery parts. It is so vital. If you want to understand Christianity, if you want to reject it properly or follow the Savior properly, we need to understand this diversity in the character of God, and particularly the character of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the conquering lion that is able to usher the end of human history. When John says “show me the lion that I am weeping to see that can conquer all”, he seems a wee little lamb, as if it had been slain. Most of us, if not all of us, probably have a deficiency in how we see Jesus. If you have any problem in your discipleship, in following Jesus, or even receiving Jesus, perhaps it’s because we want to live our own lives our way, perhaps we want to follow his moral teaching, or perhaps we don’t think we need God. Perhaps the biggest reason is that we don’t understand who Jesus really is.

Jesus is the lion who conquers and the lamb who is slain. This morning we’re going to talk about this tension in Isaiah because in this tension is Jesus’ strength used by the holy Father in a way to bring salvation in the form of weakness. The Lord has led us to this passage about strong enough to be weak, strong enough to be weakness.

This morning, through this sermon, I’d like to share with you three main points:

1. We need to recognize that it is hard to grasp the weakness of Jesus.
2. What does Jesus’ weakness look like?
3. What does this mean for us today? How can we apply this?

1. It is hard to grasp the weakness of Jesus.

Let’s take a look at Isaiah 53. If you’re like me, the only time we really read this is around Easter. It’s a classic Easter passage, particularly because of verses 4-6. The first two lines, starting in verse 1, speaks something that I’ve gone over far too much and perhaps you have too. In fact, we know the famous parts like “he was pierced for our transgressions”, but let’s begin with verse 1:

53 Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

The writer is posing a question and this question prefaces what is going to happen later, namely the weakness of Jesus, the suffering servant. In the ancient days, it was inconceivable that the servant of God would be a suffering servant. We see this to this day. Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, love Jesus but don’t really see a suffering Jesus because to them, suffering is an illusion. Muslims find it deplorable that God would wrap himself in humanity. That’s

unthinkable. Jesus is a great prophet but there's no way that he's going to come down and be a human. To this day, we cannot handle this.

If you've been a Christian for a long time or have grown up in the church, we need to come back. This is weird stuff. This is hard stuff. This is deplorable. The fact that people do not grasp or believe the weakness of God shows how hard it is.

In the second part it says, "And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" What is that? The arm of the Lord is the poetic way of referencing the strength of God. The strength of the Lord, the glory of the Lord, is shown in the suffering servant we are about to read. This idea of a weak, suffering, servant is really hard to muster.

In the Christian, we have idols, not in a worship idols kind of way, but rather like role models. One idol is Mother Theresa. People lifted her up as a idol or role model of being obscure and being someone who would serve the weak and the poor. The problem with Mother Theresa being a model for us, in terms of weakness and obscurity, is that she is famous. The very idea that she would be our model defeats it. Not because she's not a great role model, but because it implies that you need to be like Mother Theresa, someone who gave her life to serve the orphans and the widows in the slums and be famous like her too!

A more modern example is Jeremy Lin. Before Jeremy Lin, my mother did not watch any basketball and after Jeremy Lin, my mother knows more about the NBA than me and all of my children combined. We've lifted up, as a church, Jeremy Lin partly because of some of the obstacles and the prejudices he face as an Asian American in a sport that is dominated by other races and partially because he's smart and went to Harvard and lastly because he's Christian. I've heard this point raised from many people: how useful is it if Jeremy Lin is our example because he's famous.

We have picked famous models of obscurity. We have picked well known people who have given their lives to be humble. We've picked big names who sought to be small for the sake of Jesus. It is really hard. We just can't wrap our minds around it. We have this assumption that is so against our tendency to grasp that Jesus is weak. We worship a weak savior. We have a weak God. We have a heavenly father that embraces a weak son. I'm not saying that he's only weak. Of course he is mighty, divine, and the eternal son. At the risk of neglecting one of those eternal qualities, we have to realize in the attributes of God and in the perfect, inscrutable wisdom of God, we worship a weak savior. For those of us who are Christian, Christ is a stumbling block. In

fact, the first passage that I wanted to go to on this theme of Jesus' strength that would give us weakness I decided not to use because we've already used it (1 Corinthians 1). The weakness of Christ is the foolishness to the philosophers, weakness to the mighty, and poverty to the rich.

As we think about it, it's very hard to grasp. Why is it hard to grasp? It's hard to grasp because of what it means.

2. What does the Jesus' weakness look like?

What does the weakness of Jesus look like, at least in this passage? What do we learn about the weakness of the savior? What do we learn about the lamb-like qualities of the lion that conquered? I believe this passage teaches us three things in this poetic passage of Isaiah 53:

1. Jesus was unimpressive.

You wouldn't even look at him because your eyes would pass right over him. He's just unimpressive, unnoticeable, and insignificant. Let's take a look at verse 2:

“² For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.”

We need to understand Hebrew poetry. Hebrew poems rhyme, but not in sound, but in idea. When it says, “For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground”, the second line of Hebrew parallelism expands on the first line. Little young plants are tender and brittle. They're weak, small, frail, and need necessities like light. The poet elaborates on this plant, saying “like a root out of dry ground”. We're talking about a small, weak plant here. Someone might step on it and end its life. Unimpressive beginnings.

2. Jesus was not only unimpressive, he was unattractive.

If you looked at him, you wouldn't want to put a picture of him on your desktop or Instagram him. Let's take a look at Isaiah 53, the second part of verse 2:

“he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.”

He was unattractive. Just to understand this idea, if you say Jesus, he would just be this nobody from somewhere and if you looked at him, you wouldn't even think anything of him. This comes back from Old Testament when they anointed kings, particularly when they anointed young David and they said "Don't be fooled. You look at the outside but God has chosen David because God looks at the inside." If this was one of those cases where people just saw Jesus but they just didn't see the inside, then that would be fine. That is not what the poem is saying. The poem is more radical. He's saying: if you saw the inside, it's still unimpressive and unattractive.

3. Not only is Jesus unimpressive and unattractive, because he's unimpressive and he's unattractive, he is undesirable.

² For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
³ He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This is the Jesus that the world sees. This is the Jesus the Father sent down to Earth. Let's not be put off by pictures of Jesus in children's story books. We're talking about a guy who was unimpressive from the beginnings. He was a carpenter. He was undesirable. He wasn't impressive. He didn't have any gifts or skills, no schooling, no pedigree, no background. You looked at him and you didn't want to hang out with him. Let's be honest.

In church world, there are still the in-people and the out-people. Same with church service, fellowship, small groups, Project Destiny, adult large groups, etc. There are still the people who are attractive and desirable, like Jeremy Lin, you should be humble. Jesus was unattractive, unimpressive, and flat out undesirable. People shunned Jesus. We worship a savior who was shunned and considered a mockery. We need to get that.

Now, thanks Pastor Enoch for really lowering my view of Jesus, but what's the point? How does that relate to us?

3. What does this mean for us?

I think we've approached Jesus perhaps wrongly at times. There's a helpful book titled When People are Big and God is Small by Edward Welch. The idea that we fear man more than we fear God is a powerful idea. We talk about Jesus meeting our needs, but a weak savior doesn't meet our needs. This is a quote from Edward Welch's book When People are Big and God is Small about Jesus meeting our needs:

"It is possible that our present day discussion about needs might be framed more by secular, psychological theories than by scripture. If this is so, we should be careful about saying

"Jesus meets our needs". At first, this has a plausible, Biblical ring to it. Christ is our friend. Christ is a loving Father. Christians do experience a sense of meaningfulness and confidence in knowing God's love. It makes Christ an answer to our problems. Yet, if our use of the term "needs" is ambiguous, then its range of meaning extends all the way to selfish desires, then there will be some situations in which we should say that Jesus does not intend to meet our needs, but he intends to change our needs."

As we understand that Jesus was strong enough to be weak, we understand that we have to be willing to figure out what it means to embrace weakness in order to live and experience him fully. We have to know that the corollary to that is that we will look weaker to humanity, weaker to our families, weaker to our parents, unimpressive, unattractive, and undesirable. Other people's parents won't tell their kids to marry you. Other people's parents won't tell them to be like you. Other companies, if they're trying to do recruiting for a job, won't look at you; your bosses won't look at you.

If we embrace this, it's going to be a really radical. This is why, again in the quote, when we need people more than we need God, Edward Welch says this,

"The most radical for the fear of man is the fear of God. God must be bigger to you than people are. This antidote takes years to grasp. In fact, it will take all our lives."

And so, what does this mean for us? It means that we are about to suggest, or actually teach an application, that will make us undesirable to people. If you're sitting here and are an unbeliever, get ready because this is what it means to count the cost and follow Jesus.

We need to recognize this: one of the major stumbling blocks for you and I, right now, to follow Jesus, is that we are unwilling to appear weak. God has something for you to do for Him, in His name, in His plan. You might even know it and maybe you don't. Maybe I have something that God wants me to do but I can't figure it out. A major obstacle in the way of me figuring it out is

the unwillingness to become weakness. There are people that you could probably marry, but because they look too weak by human standards, you're missing that person. There's a career path that you and I being called to take right now, but rather than following that career path because it looks as if it's too weak. There are ways we could be serving in the church, in the kingdom, in the world and know we can be helpful, but we're not because it looks too weak. There's this idea that we need to reach our full human potential. There's no point in doing that because I should leverage my gifts and talents and reach my full human potential.

It is not in the Bible to reach your full human potential. Sure it's fine, but it's not biblical. You know what's biblical? Do whatever Jesus says by the power of the Holy Spirit. Biblical is do whatever Jesus tells us to do, for His name, to make disciples even if looks like we're throwing away an education, even if it looks like we're not going to marry the person we want, even if it looks like we're going to live at a standard of living we don't want to. We need to be willing to embrace weakness.

What is God calling for you, but we can't do it, aren't willing to do it, or can't even see it because we've taken all those options off of the table because it requires embracing weakness.

One of the missionaries who came to share at the Chinese Missions Conference last week in Baltimore talked about how she was trained as a pediatrician. Bright woman. She was trained as a doctor, but she was called to serve in a Muslim nation. I asked her off to the side as we prepared to get on stage, "So, you're a pediatrician... what do you parents think?" She responded, "They didn't like me going on missions." I asked her, "Are they Christians?" She said, "Yeah, but I'm a doctor and I threw away all my medical training." I said, "Maybe you minister to thousands of Muslim women right now. You speak to Muslim women and tell them about Jesus, right?" She responded, "Maybe less than 10...only a handful of women on a day to day basis." She went to a prestigious medical school, got trained as a pediatrician, felt called by the Lord to serve Muslims and help them hear about Jesus Christ, and they don't even know she's a doctor.

One of the other messages we heard at CMC was challenged by Michael Oh, who is a leader for the Lausanne movement. I took away his title and his main point: are you willing to be a nobody for Jesus? Everyone wants to be a somebody. Jesus says follow me. "Okay, what wall do you want me to scale? What hill do you want me to conquer?" Jesus asks, are you ready? "I'm ready

Jesus. I'm ready to swim across oceans and jump off cliffs for you!" Okay, then go be a faithful son or daughter to your Asian parents. That's what I want you to do. "I'm ready to go anywhere!" I know, go home. "I'm ready to do anything! I'll work hard!"

Jesus has the job that people think "somebody's gotta do it". That's why it says in the latter part of those verses. Let's read the last part, the famous part, of Isaiah 53, as we understand deeper what all this is suggesting to us:

4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

This is how Jesus uses weakness. This is why the conquering lion was the lamb that was slain. This is why from the mouth of babes, the scriptures tell us, Jesus will just mock the nations. This is why in weakness, Jesus will conquer. Meekness and weakness. We worship a weak savior and he's a savior only, precisely because he was weak. He became weakness. He was strong enough to be weakness.

Here's this deal. If we want to follow Jesus, if we want to know Jesus more fully, we need to add to our understanding of Jesus; He is more than a powerful conqueror, which He is, more than the divine son of God, which He is, but we need to recognize, in the wisdom of God, His weakness. You and I will never fully embrace God's plan for our lives until we appreciate His weakness and say, "God, I will follow you into weakness. God, I will follow you into obscurity. I will take my pedigree, my resume, and if you want me to give it all up and burn it, that's fine. No turning back."

That line, "I have decided to follow Jesus", that is the line that the martyrs said on their way of being burned alive because they're willing to embrace the weakness. I could pound it home and ask you directly, "what are you going to do to for Jesus?" and that's appropriate. However, first

of all, I think scripture says this: does your view of Jesus weak enough? Does your view of your savior, so humble, so willing to suffer? If you and I are not willing to face persecution, ridicule, or obscurity, then it's not because your Jesus isn't big enough, it might be because your Jesus isn't weak enough.

Jesus said, "Follow me to the cross. Take up your cross daily." Now, for some of us, we live in weakness. Some of you might say, "You want to talk about oppressiveness, look at me" or "You want to talk about unattractiveness, look at me" or "Talk about nobody has ever liked me and I've always been on the outside, that's me." Even in this church, even right now this morning, some of us are thinking, "I'm more like Jesus than I thought. I'm unattractive, unimpressive, and undesirable." If you've felt that way, then I envy you because in those moments, as hard as it was for that feeling to be there, you're closer to the heart of our savior. You're more like that child that Jesus references when he says, "Let the little children come to me. You have to be like this child to know me." If you've felt you are the epitome of human weakness, then embrace the weakness that is yours in Christ Jesus that you may have strength to be weak, to do whatever He wants you to do.

You say, "I'll do anything for Jesus!" Okay, well Jesus says to be weak. You say, "I'll go anywhere for Jesus!" Okay, then go someplace no one has ever heard of. You say, "I'll be anything for Jesus!" Okay, then be a nobody for Jesus. What would you and I do differently, maybe even today, if we could embrace both the strength and utter weakness of our savior and follow Him?

Let's pray.

Holy Father, we long for a mighty savior who swoops down to save the day, rescues the damsel in distress, and becomes the hero every little boy wants to be. Lord, we may have imported that in our notion of Christ. He is, in some ways, more than all those things, but He is also that because He is not only the lion, but the lamb that was slain.

Father, help us have a full view of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Help us to worship him in all the fullness of who He is and what He has done. Help us to know Him and follow Him both in strength and weakness and with the strength to be weakness.

Lord, there are things we must do and maybe we even wanted to, but we have feared humans more than we feared You. We have put humans above You. We have put their opinions higher than Yours. We put them in awe. We desire the favor of humans, man more than Yours. Remind us, Lord, in Christ. Jesus was unimpressive, unattractive, and undesirable. Lord, if

that is who You want us to be, give us the strength to do that, just like our Savior who had the strength to become weakness on the cross, pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Thank you that our savior was strong enough to be weak and may we know Him, worship Him, and follow Him into greater weakness for His sake.