



RENEW: Strength

Large Group Talk 3

Objective: We live in a world that values strength and power above anything else. But Christ-followers are called to be different. God works through the humble and willing, and often uses weaknesses and hardships to remind us of our desperate need for him. As we humbly offer him all of our efforts (both strong and weak), he promises to replace them with his mighty power and strength. This has two major implications for students: First, those who consider themselves successful and strong must be wary of pride so that their efforts will not take away their love for God. Second, those who feel weak and battered can take courage that God wants to display his power through them.

Speaker's Note: This talk focuses more on how we can offer our weakness to God and how his strength is made known in that. The small group session on RENEW Your Strength focuses more on how we can offer our talents and gifts to God.

Recap of RENEW Your Mind

Say Something Like: *We've been talking about the work God does in us when we become his disciples. When we follow him, he begins the process of renewing us so we can love him with all of who we are. At our last meeting, we talked about how we can love God with all our minds. Now, we're going to look at another area God transforms: our strength—all of our efforts and our actions. It's our service, our dedication, and our tenacity. Usually our efforts fall into two categories: what we're good at and what we're bad at. In this session we're going to take a look at how we can love God not only when we're good at something or when it's easy, but also when it's hard and seems beyond our ability.*

Introduction

Ask: *How do you know if someone is strong? What different kinds of strength are there? How are strong people different from weak people?*

Say Something Like: *We love to dream about being incredibly strong. Think about our love of superhero movies. We spend millions of dollars going to movie theaters so we can watch imaginary people do incredible things. Who are some of your favorite superheroes? Who is the toughest superhero? If all the superheroes had a fight, who would win? (Have some fun with this!)*

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Illustration Option 1: There are many great superhero fight scenes on YouTube or elsewhere. Find one that your group especially likes. Here's a good one from Captain America: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXP0I6EjbWg).

Illustration Option 2: Here's a video clip of the world record for deadlift—one of the world's strongest men: (<https://youtu.be/wWUNjTHHlxY>).

Say Something Like:

Have you ever noticed that there's one thing most superheroes can't do? Spider-Man can swing through the streets on his webs. Superman can fly. Iron Man can lift cars and buses. But none of them can raise the dead. That's the "holy grail" of super powers. Every superhero movie has the one scene where the hero is trying to defeat the villain and rescue their best friend. We wait, breathlessly, as the friend hangs inches from death, knowing that if the hero fails, it's all over—the friend will be gone forever and death will win. Even superheroes have weakness.

Some of us feel like superheroes sometimes. We feel like we have life figured out. Maybe you're popular at school, or good at sports, or academics come easily to you and you think you'll get a high-paying job someday. You feel strong, even invincible.

But, if we're honest, we know we have limits. No matter how smart we are, there's always someone smarter. No matter how strong or fast we are, there's always someone stronger or faster. And no matter how famous we become, in 100 years, no one will care. We'll just be empty names on the pages of dusty history books.

Some of us don't need to be told we're weak. We feel it every day. Maybe you feel like you can't impress your friends, or you're a failure in sports or music, or your family is falling apart. You know that you're weak. And like so many others, you wish that, for even just one day, you could be totally strong. You wish you could exchange your weakness for superhero strength.

I have good news. You can.

Read 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.

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Say Something Like: *Sometimes God's kingdom is called the "upside-down kingdom," because the rules of his kingdom are so different from what we expect. When you read the Gospels, you notice that Jesus is always saying things we don't expect.*

Object lesson: Show students three objects: a bowling ball, a brick, and an egg. Ask the students which of these objects is the weakest (unless they're joking, they'll choose the egg). Explain that what they think is weak is actually stronger than they know. Follow this up by either showing this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn5s6aScfw) or by recreating the demonstration yourself. If you want to do it in front of the students, you'll need a hard, flat surface that will support the egg and the weight, something to keep the egg upright, an egg (obviously), J-cloth or rags to help evenly distribute the force, and several weights to add one at a time (in the video, the egg holds up to 35 lbs. of weight). After the egg finally breaks, explain to the students that what we think is weak can actually be surprisingly strong. As always, be sure to test this demonstration before you actually do it in front of the students so you know what to expect.

Say Something Like: *If you read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 carefully, you end up saying, "Huh? Let me get this right. I'm supposed to be happy about my weaknesses. I'm supposed to be excited when super hard things happen. Because, somehow, when I'm weak and beat up, then I'm actually strong?" And Paul says, "Yep. That's about right." Let's unpack that a bit further.*

Teaching: Strength

1. We All Have Weaknesses

Say Something Like: *We all feel weak at times. Most people you meet who seem confident probably aren't, and people who don't fear anything are probably delusional.*

Discuss: *What are some of the most common fears you know about? (Possible answers: heights, small spaces, germs, cancer, car accidents, evil people.)*

Say Something Like: *Some people fear things that may not be that dangerous, but the fact is, there are things we should fear all around us. Nothing makes you feel weak quite like being surrounded by things you should be afraid of. But there are other things that make people feel weak, too. Have you ever worked hard at something, really given it your best effort, and ended up accomplishing nothing? Maybe you were writing a paper, and your computer crashed. Or maybe you were elected to student government and thought you could make major changes, only to discover that you don't have any real power to change things.*

Illustration: Watch this throwback clip from the movie Superman: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkSaAhbceBk). For superheroes, a weakness is something to be exploited. The villain figures out the weakness and suddenly the superhero—and everyone he protects—is in danger.

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Discuss: *How is weakness treated in our world? How do people treat weak people at school—those who are small or slow or socially-awkward or different?*

When we discover our weaknesses, what is our first response? (Possible answers: fix them, hide them.)

Say Something Like: *But like we saw earlier, God's kingdom doesn't work the way we expect. God doesn't say we should fix our weaknesses. He doesn't tell us to hide them so no one will know about our frailties. He invites us to do something totally different with our weaknesses. First, he invites us to boast about them. You heard me right—boast about our weaknesses! That's crazy, right? Everyone knows that you're supposed to keep others from seeing your weaknesses. The minute others find out, they can take advantage of you, just like Lex Luthor used Superman's weakness to hurt him. At most, we expect God to ask us to tolerate our weaknesses, to say, "I know you don't feel strong in some ways, so just ignore those areas and concentrate on your strengths." But he tells us to boast in our weaknesses. Why would God ever tell us to brag about the places we feel weak?*

Let's look at the person God is using to tell us this: Paul. The apostle Paul had every reason to brag about his strengths. He was a respected Jewish man who had high standing in his own community and also among the ruling Romans. And after he started following Christ, he did some truly amazing things: he started the first churches in many different cities (most of us have a hard time sharing Jesus with our closest friends); he survived persecution, jail, and a shipwreck; and he performed amazing miracles and healings. This was a guy with a lot of accomplishments and strengths to boast about. But instead he brags about weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. And this is the guy we're supposed to imitate?

2. True Power Comes from Christ

Say Something Like: *Did you notice from this lesson's passage where true power comes from? Christ! Before we can understand the rest of this passage, we need to figure something out. What sort of power does Christ have? Let's look at Ephesians 1:18-20. As we read it, try to spot Christ's power:*

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.

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Did you see Christ's power? It's something none of our favorite superheroes can do. Christ's power is mighty enough to raise people from the dead, even himself. How incredible is that?

Illustration: What has to happen for a dead person to become alive again?

- Blood has to de-coagulate.
- Cells that are dead and decaying have to be replaced by live and active cells.
- Those cells have to start reproducing again.
- The body has to warm up.
- Nutrients have to start feeding the cells, muscles, and other parts of the body.
- The heart has to start pumping again.
- Lungs have to start breathing again.
- Brain cells have to start firing again.

Basically, things that ceased to exist have to be recreated. And no one can recreate something except the one who created everything in the first place. This is the ultimate superpower.

Say Something Like: *Can you imagine how it would change movies if the hero had the ability to bring people back from the dead, to create life from death? The other characters wouldn't have anything to fear. The super villain would be rendered completely powerless. The hero would just be too powerful. If God's power can do that, then it can do anything. Christ offers to renew us with that same strength.*

3. God's Strength Shines through Our Weaknesses

Read 2 Corinthians 12:10 again.

Say Something Like: *Think for a second about the list of things Paul is so eager to boast about. We've already talked about weakness, but these other things are just as bad. Every one of us has probably been insulted. People tear us down and say hurtful things. Hardships, persecutions, and difficulties are all different ways of saying the same thing—life sucks. Things don't go the way we want them to. Our friends turn against us. Money is tight. Loneliness is so real we can taste it. Our parents are fighting. People are spreading lies about us at school. We fell flat on our face on the way to class. Whatever the cause, life sucks and we're hurting.*

Why would God want us to experience such difficult things? Does he get some sort of sick pleasure out of our pain? Is he callously telling us, "Life sucks, get a helmet?" Of course not! God created this world to be good. He delights in watching us use our gifts and abilities. He is grieved when we experience the effects of sin. So why does God invite us to celebrate our weakness?

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Illustration: You've probably seen an infomercial like this. Play this video: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkIRuSF4718). Why would you load a car full of nasty food wrappers and sweaty hockey gear? (Why would you carry sweaty hockey gear anywhere?) You would only do this to show the power of the product that you are trying to promote! Febreze needed to show a car in dire circumstances so you could see the strength of their product.

Say Something Like: *There are two big reasons God tells us to boast in our weaknesses. First, he wants other people to see him. Think about the commercial we just watched. It would have been different if the windows were open and they parked the van in the shade. Then, it would have shown that they could have controlled the smell without totally relying on Febreze. But by making the circumstances so extreme, the viewers will see that this air freshener is the only thing powerful enough to do the job, and hopefully, they'll buy the product for themselves. That's what Paul is doing in this passage. If he only bragged about his strengths, people would think he was fine on his own, and they would never know that they needed God's strength. But since he proudly displays his weaknesses, people can see that there's no way he could have accomplished the things he did without the amazing strength of God.*

Second, God is thinking about what's best for us. God isn't against our gifts, strengths, or abilities. He's the one who gave them to us in the first place! But God knows that those same things can cause us to become proud and focused on ourselves. As soon as that happens, we stop loving God with our strength, and we begin loving ourselves instead. God loves us too much to let our lives be wasted by pride and self-love. So he allows weakness and hard times to remind us of our need for his strength.

Putting It All Together

Say Something Like: *Most of us envy those who are smart, strong, or rich. But Jeremiah 9:23-24 says this:*

This is what the Lord says: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord.

Jesus is more than the ultimate superhero—he's God. And he wants to reveal his power through us, the same power that raised him from the dead. Nothing else can match it! But there's a catch: we won't be able to rely on that power or share it with others if we're only worried about showing off our own strength (which isn't all that strong, anyways). God loves us enough to use weaknesses and hard times to remind us of our need for him and his strength. In our times of greatest weakness and pain, God's strength can be displayed if we rely on him and invite him to show himself through us. God renews our strength by showing

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us that there is no strength apart from him, and his strength is great enough to accomplish anything!

[Speaker Note: The following questions will be discussed in the following Small Group Lesson.]

Question 1: Why do you think the apostle Paul welcomes and delights in hard times?

Question 2: When is it hardest for us to show weakness? Think of a time when you tried to rely on your own strength to do something. How did that work out for you?

Looking forward: Let students know that they will be finishing up RENEW in the next lesson by looking at how God transforms their souls. Make sure to give them any instructions they might need to go from here.

**LeaderTreks recommends watching all video clips and visiting all websites in this lesson before sharing them with students. These links are optional and not required in order to lead an effective large group talk. Websites often change, and links may not always have the same result. LeaderTreks will do its best to keep them updated and fresh; however, in the event that they do not function properly, we cannot retain responsibility.*

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