

Ed/t rial



In the course of your employment, typically as part of business planning, many of you will have had occasion to take part in a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats). The idea is to step back and consider your branch/agency/Department in the context of the prevailing and anticipated circumstances, to identify what aspects of your ‘business’ could be built upon for future success, and which ones make you vulnerable and therefore need remedial action. Much of this can of course seem rather academic: e.g. a ‘threat’ may be little more than the theoretical possibility of a budget cut next year. But sometimes the weaknesses and threats are all too real...

In March, the Report of the Independent Public Inquiry into the Non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme was published. The final point of its Summary contains the following stark statement: “There is no guarantee that the weaknesses shown in governance, staffing and leadership revealed by the Inquiry’s investigation of the NI RHI scheme could not combine again to undermine some future initiative”. Nor is weakness confined to organisations. In the past few months, we have no doubt all felt how weak we each are personally in respect of Covid-19. As someone who now receives the flu injection annually, I initially thought that I was at higher risk; subsequent clarification of the guidance means this is not the case – a limited comfort.

Weakness (in various respects) is something that we read of in the Bible, and we are going to consider some of these in this article. The Holy Scriptures are always very realistic in what they describe. They humble us before God. And they always have an important message from Him. Bearing this in mind, let us first consider:-

Overwhelming weakness – Salvation provided by God

We like to think of ourselves as in control, strong, capable of attaining our own ideals and even of satisfying God. However, this is an utterly unscriptural view, and one which an objective examination of the evidence, or even listening to our own conscience, must soon dispel. Take the Law of God (the Ten Commandments). The Law of God is good. But Romans 8:3 tells us that “it was **weak** through the flesh”. The problem lies in our inability in our natural state (‘the flesh’) to consistently keep God’s Law. The previous clause of verse 3 reads, “what the law could not do”, a reference to escape from God’s condemnation (v.1). How marvellous that God Himself has provided a remedy, “sending his own Son ... as an offering for sin” (v.3, RV)! It is only through the sin-atonement death of the Lord Jesus Christ that we can escape condemnation (v.1) and fulfil God’s righteous requirements (v.4). The passage makes clear that these blessings only apply to those who are “in Christ Jesus”.

In the earlier chapters, the apostle has stressed that one is brought into this standing before God solely through faith in Jesus Christ.

Ongoing weakness – Succour granted by Christ

Being a believer in the Lord Jesus and indwelt by the Holy Spirit doesn't mean that one ceases to have weaknesses, or to feel weak. Indeed, it should make us more conscious of how little we are in ourselves, and how much we need the Lord, for every aspect of our lives. Even the great apostle Paul found himself to have "a thorn in the flesh" – probably a physical affliction (2 Cor. 12:7). He prayed that this would be removed, but it wasn't (despite being "the messenger of Satan"). Why not? One reason was to stop Paul from feeling proud (v. 7). Another, and the one we are thinking of, is in v. 9: that Paul would learn, through personal experience, that Christ's grace was sufficient for him, i.e. it enabled him to endure the affliction. More than that, Christ's strength is best experienced when we are at our weakest. In fact, Paul reached a point where he delighted in difficulties for this very reason: "when I am **weak**, then am I strong" (v.10). The credit for Paul's success would rightly go to Christ Himself.

Opposition-induced weakness – Strength requested from God

Quite apart from what we have already considered, as Christians we can feel weak because of external circumstances, and particularly opposition. We are not the only generation to have experienced this. In Ezra 4:4, when the Jewish exiles who had returned to Jerusalem were in the process of building the temple, we read that "the people of the land **weakened** the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building". Nehemiah, involved in rebuilding the city walls, similarly experienced hostility: "For they all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be **weakened** from the work, that it be not done" (Nehemiah 6:9). Nehemiah has the right response – he prays. His prayer is short, simple, and to-the-point: "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands". Amen.

Others' weakness – Support exhorted from Christians

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, we read: "support the **weak**". From the context, this is weak fellow-Christians. Their weakness could be in respect of lack of understanding (e.g. they might have scruples that have no biblical basis, see Romans 14), or limitations in their practical trust in the Lord to meet their every need. The exhorted support could be by prayer, or example, or encouragement, or avoidance of behaviour which, though legitimate, would offend the 'weak' brother or sister.

I trust that something in these reflections will help each of us to draw the needed strength from the Lord (Psalm 18:1).