

Finding Strength in Christ

MICHAEL D. BARNES

I am honored to address all who are listening today. My thoughts are directed primarily to you, my student colleagues, who represent the future of the Church and the hope of families in the world. Today we will consider how the Atonement of Christ can help us become strong in response to our God-given weaknesses. We will discover that our weaknesses are assets because they help us be humble. And when we humbly seek our Heavenly Father and are endowed with grace, we become strong in Christ.

As a young Primary boy, I learned that Heber J. Grant was truly a great man. He served as president of the Church from 1918 to 1945 and was ordained an apostle at age 25. In general conference in April 2000, President James E. Faust used examples from President Grant's life in his talk "The Power of Self-Mastery":

Part of [President Grant's] strength was his great determination for self-mastery. His father died when he was only a year old, and his widowed mother struggled to raise him. He was conscientious in helping her and trying to take care of her.¹

President Faust quoted Roderick L. Cameron's description of Heber J. Grant's struggle to become proficient playing baseball:

When he was older and wanted to join a baseball team, he found the other fellows laughing at him and calling him a "sissy" because he could not throw the ball between the bases. His teammates teased him so much that one night he went home and made up his mind that he was going to play with the nine who would win the championship of the Territory of Utah. He purchased a baseball and practiced hour after hour, throwing at a neighbor's old barn. Often his arm would ache so much he could hardly go to sleep at night. He kept on practicing, and kept on improving and advancing from one team to another until he finally did succeed in playing with the [team] who won the championship!²

Another instance of his self-mastery was his determination to have readable handwriting:

His penmanship was so poor that when two of his [friends] were looking at it one said to the other, "That writing looks like hen tracks." "No," said the other, "it looks as if lightning had struck an ink bottle."³

Michael D. Barnes was a professor of health science when this devotional address was given at BYU on 1 July 2008.

Heber realized at that point that he could not be much good to an employer or society if he did not improve his penmanship. He practiced and worked at it persistently. Over the next few years he was offered lucrative jobs because of his superior penmanship, won first prize in a contest against professional penmen, and taught penmanship and bookkeeping at the University of Utah.

Another challenge for President Grant was singing:

When he was a small child . . . he could not carry a tune. When he was ten, a music instructor worked and worked with him, trying to teach him the simplest song and finally gave up in despair. At the age of twenty-six, when he was an apostle, he asked a Professor Sims if he could teach him how to sing. After listening to him, the professor replied, "Yes, you can learn to sing, but I would like to be forty miles away while you are doing it."⁴

This only made him try harder.

President Grant once said, "I have practiced [the hymn "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow"] between three and four hundred times, and there are only four lines, and I cannot sing it yet."⁵

Once, on a trip to Arizona with Elder Clawson and Elder Kimball, [President Grant] asked them if he could sing one hundred songs on the way. They thought he was joking and said, "Fine, go right ahead." After the first forty, they assured him if he sang the other sixty they would both have a nervous breakdown. He sang the other sixty.⁶

President Faust concluded that "by practicing all of his life he made some improvement in singing but perhaps not as much as in baseball and penmanship, which he mastered."⁷

I greatly admire President Grant's faith, courage, and determination to work on his weaknesses. And, like our living prophets on earth today, I appreciate the example of

President Grant in becoming strong in Christ. President Grant often used a quote attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: "That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased."⁸

Reflecting on that quote, I value President Grant's view that our weak nature may not change but that there is a power, even a heavenly power, to do important things in spite of that weakness. If you'll permit, I will speak of my own experience with weakness and of what I have learned from the Lord.

I have always known that I possess both strengths and weaknesses. Let me tell you about one of my weaknesses. I am often a perfectionist who becomes worried and sometimes obsessed with wanting to do well and look good. Maybe someone who has perfectionist tendencies sounds ideal, since perfectionists are known for conscientious, precise, detailed, and practical work. But while the attributes listed may appear praiseworthy, they can get in the way. Take it from someone who has been there and tried that. The problem with perfectionism is that no one is perfect now, and perfectionism creates unrealistic expectations for ourselves and others. I had to chuckle at a bumper sticker I saw the other day. It read, "I would be perfect—but I can't seem to get the walking on water thing down."

My weakness is based on the fear of looking bad or performing poorly. For example, as a young boy and teenager I was very tall, but my ball-handling abilities were definitely lacking. In fear of looking bad in front of my peers, I often avoided sports and physical activities unless I knew I could show a little talent—which didn't happen very often. Also, I used to hate making phone calls—not because I was shy, but because I didn't want to say something wrong, sound dumb, or take the chance of being seen in a bad light.

As a student in college, the attributes of the perfectionist are of benefit when revising

a manuscript, yet they have no place when writing a first draft. Fear of looking bad is a pretty common tendency for many of us. But I became obsessed, anxious, and preoccupied with making sure that I was good—really good. These reactions to fear held me back at times.

I did not need to feel this way. When my weakness flared, my primary attention was on me and my performance. This inward perspective often prompted me to be critical of my work and of the work of others. It also led to sins that included being selfish, critical of others, frustrated, unloving, and impatient. My self-absorbed fear of looking bad left little room in my heart for love, joy, or peace.

Can you understand how my weakness caused pressures, stress, and trials not only for myself but also for others? While hard work and personal dedication were helpful in dealing with my weakness, only the Atonement could fully compensate for my weakness. Once I understood this, things began to change.

Let me explain. With the inspired comment of a priesthood leader, I began to more fully understand this personal weakness—the fear of looking bad. Although it was not easy to acknowledge at the time, it gave me reason to go to the Lord. I asked for help to understand my weakness, and I received many answers through the scriptures. Once the Lord began to help me understand my weakness, I began to understand the help I would need from the Lord to deal with it.

At first I prayed for the weakness to be taken away—to be removed like sin as one repents. However, it did not go away. Rather, I began to feel peace in knowing the Lord would help me deal with it. I felt humbled and recognized my dependence on the mercy and grace of the Savior. I fully embraced the fact that perfection could not come on my own. Once the consequences of my weaknesses were being resolved and my fears were lessened, I could feel myself becoming more selfless,

sensitive, and easygoing. Through the Lord's grace, I do not take myself too seriously, I enjoy helping people feel comfortable and happy, and I feel comfortable being myself.

I have witnessed how my weakness has helped me to be strong in Christ. For example, while serving as a bishop, I had many opportunities to meet with individuals and counsel with them. Time and time again I felt the Spirit fill my heart and mind with what to say. In these moments, if I had been worried about saying things exactly the right way, with pre-planned precision, the flow of the Lord's Spirit would have been stopped. As I relied on the Lord in my weakness, he "loosed my tongue" and "opened my mouth" at the very moments I needed it.⁹ Fortunately, through the Lord's tender mercies, He blessed two people in those interviews: the person seeking inspired counsel and me, that my fears would be softened.

Now, let me just say that although my weakness has not been taken away, it has helped me become strong, because it enables me to turn to the Lord, rely on Him, and recognize the power of the Atonement in my life. For that reason, I have come to refer to my continuing weakness as my "sacred struggle." The power of the Atonement is designed not only to free us from sin but also to strengthen us in the presence of our weakness. I have learned to be grateful for my gifts of weakness and to acknowledge that the Lord has helped me become better, stronger, and happier because of them.

As I have studied the scriptures and learned about strengths and weaknesses, I have noticed a pattern that appears over and over again. Today, let's review a scriptural pattern from the words of Moroni in Ether 12:27 and ponder its application to each of our lives.

In Ether 12:27 we read:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they

humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

From this verse, I'd like to share the five A's of finding strength in Christ. As we review the verse, I invite you to consider how you can apply these A's to your own circumstances and to your own weaknesses. Here is the pattern for finding strength in Christ:

1. Accept Christ's invitation to come to Him.
2. Ascertain our God-given weaknesses.
3. Appreciate weaknesses as gifts to help us be humble.
4. Allow Christ's grace to strengthen and enable us.
5. Acknowledge that "when I am weak, then am I strong."¹⁰

Verse 23 is given in response to Moroni's fear that his words will be seen as weak and awkward or that they may be criticized by us when we read them in the latter days: "The Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing."¹¹

To this the Lord reassures the prophet, "My grace is sufficient for the meek, that they shall take no advantage of your weakness."¹²

Personally, I think that Moroni is "a literary genius"¹³ and among the great heroes of all time. Yet, at the time he lived, Moroni was concerned that his writings would not in some way measure up.

1. Accept Christ's Invitation to Come to Him

The first step in finding strength in Christ is to accept Christ's invitation to come to Him. In Ether 12:27 the Lord said that "if men come unto [Him]" He will bless them. The Lord always provides an invitation to us when He wants to bless us. He loves us unconditionally and wants us to choose to come to Him. Coming unto Jesus is the source of being happy and is the test of our existence. So, when

we choose to come to Him, He will give us what we need.

2. Ascertain Our God-Given Weaknesses

Once we accept Christ's invitation to come to Him, we are ready to ascertain our God-given weaknesses. Remember, in Ether 12:27 the Lord said, "I will show unto them their weakness." With the Lord's help, we must recognize and understand our weakness. Weakness is defined as "the condition of being mortal and lacking ability, strength, or skill."¹⁴ Weaknesses exist because we live in an imperfect state as "natural"—or mortal—men and women. Examples of weakness include being disorganized or short-tempered; having a tendency toward a personality challenge; having a defect or failing in athletics, music, public speaking, or writing; or having challenges with physical or financial circumstances. However, these weaknesses need not be seen as liabilities. In reality, these and other weaknesses can be assets because of what they may do for us.

Now, let me make a clarification here. There is a difference between weakness and sin. Sin is a conscious act that violates God's law, and sinners often desire to hide or mask their sins from others. Weaknesses are not choices but are hallowed gifts from God, and thus they are not sins. God-given weaknesses do not require repentance, since they are gifts to help us humbly rely on God and love and assist others. Fortunately, the Atonement is always available for you and me when we depend upon Him because of our sins and weaknesses. Thus our weaknesses become another important way for us to rely upon the Lord's Atonement throughout our lives.

I love the Prophet Joseph Smith. I honor him for his example and his dedication to the Lord and to the Restoration of the gospel. I find great comfort in knowing that even this incredible prophet struggled through his weaknesses. Three years following the young prophet's vision of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ,

Joseph was humbled by the persecutions he had been experiencing. In fact, he said, “I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections.”¹⁵ So, isn’t it wonderful that none of us are exempt from weaknesses? They truly are gifts from God.

3. Appreciate Weaknesses as Gifts to Help Us Be Humble

Once we accept Christ’s invitation to come to Him and ascertain our God-given weaknesses, the third step in finding strength in Christ is learning to appreciate our weaknesses as gifts to help us be humble. In verse 27 of Ether 12, the Lord said, “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble.” We are each blessed by Heavenly Father with gifts of strength and gifts of weakness. Each type of gift is a prized possession. Sometimes we may want only the kinds of gifts that are recognized as strengths. But a life of all strengths would actually be quite dull and would not allow us to grow in the ways the Lord desires.

It is clear from the scriptures that God gives men weaknesses. Christ knows our weaknesses, and He promises: “He that is weak among you hereafter shall be made strong.”¹⁶ However, some may mistakenly believe that if we follow the Lord then everything will become easier and less problematic. Living the gospel does not ensure that we will not experience any pain or challenges, but it does provide an assurance when challenges do come. We may wonder why a loving Heavenly Father wants us to see our weaknesses. Heavenly Father wants to bless us and help us grow. That is the point of mortality. As we see and recognize our weaknesses, we are humbled, and we turn to the Lord for help.

I am reminded of a humorous story told by Sheri L. Dew. She told of a mother of eight children who one afternoon was briefly frazzled with weakness as she worked with her young children. She called her husband for comfort at that difficult moment.

With humor in her voice she said to her husband, “Remind me, why *did* we have eight children?”

To this he replied, “Because the Lord knew we could have handled seven just fine.”¹⁷

This story may relate to our weaknesses—the Lord gives us weaknesses plus sometimes even a little bit more so that we can grow and stretch and become who He wants us to become.

We can grumble about our weaknesses and try to ignore them, or we can embrace the challenges to be stretched and to grow. Weaknesses are all about our humility, not about our liabilities. When we actively approach our weaknesses in humility and with grace, our mortal journey will be rewarding, with indescribable glimpses of eternal joy. The key is to be humble, to seek the Lord for help, and to glory in the grace of Jesus Christ!

4. Allow Christ’s Grace to Strengthen and Enable Us

Now, let’s once more read Moroni’s counsel in verse 27 in Ether 12:

If men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me.

If we are willing to humble ourselves, the Lord promises, “My grace is sufficient.” The key phrase is “my grace is sufficient.” In the Bible Dictionary, *grace* is defined as “an enabling power” and a “divine means of help or strength, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ The connection between humility and grace is critical, because when there is “‘sufficient humility’ in us, Christ pours down sufficient grace [to compensate for what we lack]. That grace purges, cleanses, heals, and strengthens.”¹⁹

When Elder David A. Bednar was newly sustained as an apostle, he declared that he

was among the weakest of the world. Yet he shared the significance of the Lord’s grace:

*The enabling and strengthening aspect of the Atonement helps us to see and to do and to become good in ways that we could never recognize or accomplish with our limited mortal capacity.*²⁰

5. Acknowledge That “When I Am Weak, Then Am I Strong”

The final and fifth step to finding strength in Christ is to acknowledge that “when I am weak, then am I strong.” The Lord reminded us in Ether 12, “For if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.” And, just a few verses later, the Lord promised Moroni, “Because thou hast seen thy weakness thou shalt be made strong, even unto the sitting down in the place which I have prepared in the mansions of my Father.”²¹

Wow! This is a hopeful and inspiring message! This refining and polishing process is among the most sacred experiences we can hope for. This process is not about being weak or infirm because of weakness. It is about being made strong through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Please remember that humility and grace qualify us for the Atonement. The Prophet Joseph Smith’s experience in Liberty Jail illustrates how profound humility leads to profound grace and eternal blessings. For four months the Prophet and several others unjustly experienced severe struggles in the miserable circumstances of the jail. But after Joseph’s heartfelt pleading, the Savior comforted him often and reassured him with these words: “Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.”²² Thus the Lord focused on blessing each prisoner in his heart and soul—not changing their physical circumstances until several weeks later.

The role of the Atonement is to transform *us*, not our weaknesses. We may feel imprisoned

at times by our weakness, trial, sin, or pain, but the way the Atonement helps us is by changing *us*—not necessarily by taking away weaknesses, trials, sin, or pain. The Lord’s goal is to strengthen, build, and develop our capacity through the Atonement—a process we may call perfection.

We learn and grow from our experiences, our weaknesses, and our trials. While we can overcome some weaknesses, most stay with us for many years or throughout mortality. Weaknesses that linger can provide defining moments for us in becoming the men and women God has sent us here to become. Additionally, the Atonement is available to pay for the effect of our weaknesses upon others. Weaknesses manifest between couples or families are probably the most important for us to deal with. That said, it is also important for each of us to be tolerant of others’ weaknesses. Thus, in Heavenly Father’s glorious plan, our weaknesses and challenges can keep us holding fast to the Lord, feeling supported by the Lord, and experiencing indescribable joy, peace, and love from the Lord.

So, as a review, the five A’s for finding strength in Christ are as follows:

1. Accept Christ’s invitation to come to Him.
2. Ascertain our God-given weaknesses.
3. Appreciate weaknesses as gifts to help us be humble.
4. Allow Christ’s grace to strengthen and enable us.
5. Acknowledge that “when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Now, let me share one of my favorite scriptures pertaining to weaknesses, found in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. In his letters to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul shared a personal way to see a weakness that was given to him by Heavenly Father.

In verse 7 he provided a descriptive representation of his weakness:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.

In his case, Paul knew that he had received this gift of weakness so that he could be humble. But, because of his metaphor of a thorn, it does not appear that he wanted this weakness to stick around.

In verse 8 we learn his response to his unwanted gift. As we review this verse, think of its similarity to what Moroni taught in Ether 12. Paul said:

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

I take great comfort in knowing that Paul's original feeling was to ask God to help him get rid of this weakness—even to the point of asking Heavenly Father three times to take it away. However, after three pleadings to Heavenly Father, Paul accepted the Lord's answer. In verse 9 we read:

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. [And now my favorite part:] Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Please notice the marvelous transformation that Paul experienced as he humbly approached Heavenly Father with his weakness. Because of the peace, love, comfort, and strength granted him through the Atonement of Christ, he learned to gladly welcome his weaknesses.

In verse 10, we then learn the following redeeming promise:

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities . . . : for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Paul's powerful example illustrates the wonder and majesty of the Lord in helping each of us become strong through our weaknesses.

In conclusion, I testify that once you and I come to know our God-given weaknesses, we will begin to see the marvelous plan of the Lord and increasingly view the Atonement in a new and wonderful way. The Atonement is the source of the strength we need. This divine power will become active as we rely on the Savior through humility and grace. Then we can testify, as the Apostle Paul declared, "I take pleasure in infirmities . . . : for when I am weak, then am I strong."

I encourage you to start today. Accept Christ's invitation to come to Him and begin your own journey and experience of seeing the Atonement's influence on your weaknesses. I encourage each of us to pay attention to the feelings and impressions we have received. If you have not already done so, may I encourage you to write down those spiritual impressions and make a determination to follow the promptings you have received. Paying attention to those impressions is more important than the words you have heard.

I testify that the Lord is ready now to be a growing part of our lives. He seeks to do this by helping us overcome sin. He seeks to provide comfort and assistance when we face trials, struggles, or challenges. And, as we have considered today, He also seeks to be part of our lives by helping us become strong through our weaknesses.

I am humbled and profoundly grateful for the grace and love that I have felt when I have turned to the Lord with these needs. With all my heart, I know He lives and has the capacity to lead us back to our Heavenly Father. We can become perfect in Christ and thus be filled with the Lord's blessings of joy, peace, and love. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. James E. Faust, “The Power of Self-Mastery,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 44–45.
2. Roderick L. Cameron, *Tenacity*, speech given for the Grant Oratorical Contest, in Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (1 December 1964), 3; quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45; see Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941), 342–43.
3. Bryant S. Hinckley, *Heber J. Grant: Highlights in the Life of a Great Leader* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 40; quoted in David C. Call, *Success—Spiritual and Temporal*, speech given for the Grant Oratorical Contest, in Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (30 November 1965), 5–6; also quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45.
4. Cameron, *Tenacity*, 2; quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45; see Grant, *Gospel Standards*, 351.
5. Heber J. Grant, in *CR*, April 1900, 61; quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45; see “Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 242.
6. Cameron, *Tenacity*, 2–3; quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45; see Grant, *Gospel Standards*, 354.
7. Faust, “Power,” 45.
8. See Grant, *Gospel Standards*, 355; quoted in Faust, “Power,” 45.
9. See 3 Nephi 26:14, 16.
10. 2 Corinthians 12:10.
11. Ether 12:23.
12. Ether 12:26.
13. Truman G. Madsen, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, February 1985, 49.
14. *Guide to the Scriptures*, s.v. “weakness,” online at lds.org under Scriptures.
15. JS—H 1:29.
16. D&C 50:16; see also Jacob 4:6–7 and D&C 62:1.
17. Sheri Dew, *God Wants a Powerful People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 89; emphasis in original.
18. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “grace,” 697.
19. Madsen, “Question,” 50.
20. David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 77.
21. Ether 12:37.
22. D&C 122:7.

Additional Reading

D&C 1:17, 19–24; D&C 50:26, 44; D&C 62:1; Jacob 4:7; Moroni 10:32–33.