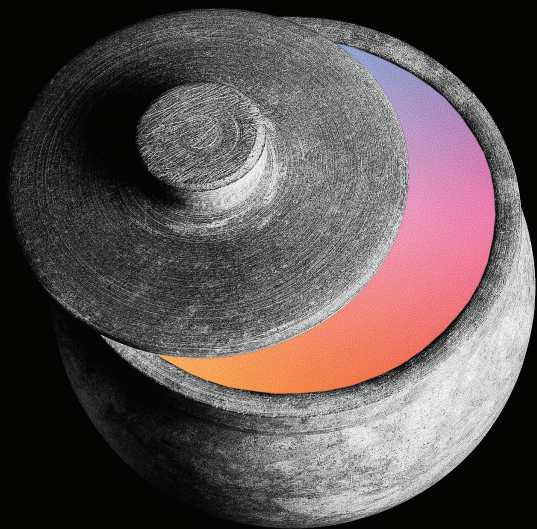


THE CLAY POT CONSPIRACY



God's Plan to Use
Weakness in Leaders

DAVE HARVEY

FOREWORD BY DANE ORTLUND

“Dave Harvey speaks from decades of experience to encourage church leaders to embrace God’s purposes in their weakness. He also reminds us that great joy comes along with the suffering as we care for the Lord’s sheep. I counsel many discouraged pastors, and I am excited to be able to give them this resource, which will encourage them to continue to be vulnerable for Christ’s sake and to endure.”

Jim Newheiser, Professor of Christian Counseling and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte; executive director, The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship (IBCD)

“This book is balm and strength for leaders who love Christ’s church and are feeling swamped by the suffering which their vocation as pastors entails. Dave Harvey opens his heart, sharing his long experience, and shows how leaders united to Christ will embody the gospel of Jesus’s own dying and being made alive. A courageous book to bring strength in weakness.”

Clive Bowsher, Provost, Union School of Theology, United Kingdom

“This book is for leaders, but if I’m being honest, it’s a must-read for every believer today. Dave conducts a masterclass in his latest work, showing us that weakness is one of the most counterintuitive but essential aspects of

our faith. With sincere honesty and humble vulnerability, Dave shows us that weakness is the way—the way to true flourishing in Christ.”

Jonathan D. Holmes, Executive Director, Fieldstone Counseling; board member, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF)

“With deep biblical insight and personal vulnerability, Dave Harvey presents an essential resource for leaders. In a day when many pastors and leaders are resigning, the call for biblical resilience is paramount. This book provides the often-overlooked secret to ministry resilience—discovering God’s power through our weakness. I enthusiastically recommend this book, and I pray its core message will be received with joy and applied with faith.”

Robbie Symons, Lead Pastor of Preaching and Vision, Hope Bible Church Oakville, Ontario

“Dave Harvey’s wisdom, forged through suffering, makes this an essential read for every pastor and ministry leader. Don’t hesitate—pick it up! You won’t regret it. You’ll be as blessed as if you were sitting with him, hearing him open his heart and urge you to stand firm no matter what you’re facing.”

Felix Cabrera, Founder, Endos Network

“This is a book filled with heartbreak and hope, chronicling the life of a man who has not only walked with the

Lord during seasons of brokenness and heartache, but has been carried by him through the darkest valleys. Dave reminds us through story and Scripture that our weakness is the means by which God produces wholeness in us. A phenomenal piece of work that will help and encourage many.”

Ronnie Martin, Director of Leader Care and Renewal, Harbor Network; pastor-in-residence, Redeemer Church, Bloomington, Indiana

“It has been one of the most difficult lessons I have ever had to learn, that God delights to use weak people. God does not use weak people by first making them strong, but by keeping them weak. Why? Because their weakness provides the greatest opportunity for God to display his power. This is the clay pot conspiracy that Dave Harvey unveils in this powerful, necessary book. I highly recommend you read it.”

Tim Challies, Author of *Seasons of Sorrow*

“Dave Harvey helps us all with the timely reminder that when we acknowledge our dependence upon God, we find that weakness is an advantage!”

Alistair Begg, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church; Bible teacher, Truth For Life

“I’m grateful for Dave Harvey’s *The Clay Pot Conspiracy* because of how he points leaders to the true gospel where,

like Jesus, we minister out of suffering. I pray you'll read this book and join the conspiracy of Christlike leadership it lovingly outlines."

Jared C. Wilson, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry, Midwestern Seminary; pastor for preaching, Liberty Baptist Church; author of *Lest We Drift*

"Dave has suffered family and ministerial heartbreak—trials that can wreck a person's faith. Yet, all Dave can talk about is Jesus. With the loveliness of Jesus set before us, Dave counsels us with wisdom, grace, clear talk, honest weakness, and the kind of humor that mends a soul. Dear leader, Jesus has met Dave in the broken places. Dave testifies that Jesus can meet us there too."

Zack Eswine, Lead Pastor, Riverside Church; author of *The Imperfect Pastor*

"With biblical insight and raw personal stories, Dave Harvey reminds us that the steep road of sorrow isn't an aberration but a promised part of the journey toward glory. Drawing especially from the apostle Paul, he shows how our frailties are not barriers to ministry but the very means by which God displays his goodness and love. A powerful book forged through sorrow and joy."

Trevin Wax, Vice President of Resources and Marketing, North American Mission Board; author of *The Thrill of Orthodoxy*, *Rethink Your Self*, and *Gospel Centered Teaching*

THE CLAY POT CONSPIRACY

GOD'S PLAN TO USE
WEAKNESS IN LEADERS

By Dave Harvey



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FOR PETE

*My clay pot mate who has spent
decades of friendship embodying the conspiracy
and calling me to do the same.*



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FOREWORD

Deep heartache is not an unfortunate accident some ministry leaders stumble into while the rest of us look on sympathetically. Deep heartache is the path that all true ministry leadership takes.

We all know this, at one level. We see it everywhere in Scripture—in Moses's leadership, in David's psalms of lament, in Christ's teaching, in the weakness celebrated in 2 Corinthians, in the pastoral charges of 1 and 2 Timothy.

But it is another thing to be plunged into this truth personally, abruptly, surprisingly, painfully. The unique ministry of this book by my friend Dave Harvey is that it takes us into the heartaches of New Testament ministry under the guidance of someone who knows what he is talking about from the inside. Dave does not write

about the anguish of pastoral work in a clinical, detached way. With redemptive transparency, Dave shares some of his own weaknesses and sufferings. As we less experienced ministry leaders read, we find ourselves thinking: *This man gets me. He's been down the road I'm walking. I thought my ministry travails were unusual. They're not. And not only are they normal, they're needed.*

This pain is not an optional ingredient to gospel ministry—it is a key ingredient. And it is a privilege to share just a bit in the sufferings of Christ. And we in ministry deeply accept the path that the Lord has laid for us, knowing that in his own way and in his own time, God will flip each little experience of death into a mighty permanent resurrection. That's what God is like. It's the path his own Son walked, and we are united to him.

In the meantime, we embrace our deep and unique weaknesses. They are not a problem; they are a strategy. They are the strange ingredient to God's own divine power quietly emerging in our ministry and leadership.

Dave Harvey writes to us as a friend, a brother, a counselor. This book is biblical, and therefore can be trusted. But this book can be trusted for another reason: Dave reflects on ministry with both scars and laughter. I trust a man who is standing tall with both after forty years of pastoring. The cynical pastor has scars, but no laughter. The frothy pastor has laughter, but no scars.

Dave has both acute pain in his life and a joyful gleam in his eye. But joy is the major chord. How could it be otherwise? Dave follows in the footsteps of an apostle who was “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10); the apostle who tells us to rejoice always (Philippians 4:4) just a few sentences after letting us know he is crying while writing (Philippians 3:18).

So I thank Dave for offering this book and its vital truths to the rest of us. For the message of this book is key to lasting in Christian leadership—and not just lasting, but rejoicing to the very end.

Dane Ortlund

INTRODUCTION

This morning, according to the calendar, is a new year. I hope so. Last year was a hard year. The caboose to a long, hard decade. I listened for our grandson, who sleeps like he's training for the Olympics. Our little slumber-lord. Four years ago on this very day, I discovered our youngest adult daughter was pregnant. She was never able to raise her son. Several years ago, at the age of sixty, my wife and I were given custody and became caregivers.

I took a deep breath. *Man, I thought, I really need a new year! Something with more wins. A factory-delivered, field-tested string of months that arrive with a little sparkle. Maybe even a warranty.* A cloud of gloom rose casting a shadow across my soul. My emotions missed the brake and went spiraling toward the pit. I knew this pit well. *"Hello darkness, my old friend . . ."* Paul Simon had been there too.

The tears came slowly. Shoot, I knew it. When I sleep less, I weep more. Or maybe I weep more because I sleep less. Who knows? After four decades in ministry, the whole sleep thing still eludes me. The pit does not.

WEEPING ALONE

I weep a lot these days. It's strange, but my tear ducts only work when I'm alone. Maybe it's a guy thing. Maybe it's because I want to control people's perception of me. Or maybe it's because I come from a long line of non-criers. Who knows? But when no one is around, I let the tears flow. It happens a lot, but it no longer scares me. Not anymore. The Bible has helped me to anticipate it. God has shown me his power through it. That's really important. We will come back to that thought many times in this book.

Last year was a hard year. I've had worse, but last year made the short list of "the worst of times." The loss of my mom, leadership loneliness, relational conflict, ministry betrayal, unrelenting fatigue, shame from the past, double-pneumonia for a couple of months, the feeling that ministry is filled with feckless effort. *Wow, some days I can't even remember the names of my grand-kids, but that list rolled right off the tongue.*

What a depressing start to the new year.

Do you ever feel this way? You know, where the past is like a magnet growing stronger with age. When I was a younger leader, even into my early fifties, I was very forward looking. But the older I get, the greater the magnetic pull toward the past.

Reflecting back, the tears flowed more freely. I wept over pain and loss. I wept for the disconnect I often feel between how life should be and how it is. I wept over my weakness. The impact of my weakness and the ground war it wins each year. At my age, it feels like limitations lurk behind every corner waiting to mug me; a thief swiping some asset I used to possess. Memory, stamina, resilience are all stolen away by time and trouble.

A strong breeze blew; that's when I heard it.

OF CHIMES AND WONDERS

A set of wind chimes hangs on a tree in our yard. Five chimes dangle, like flutes suspended in space. Down the center runs a wooden ball attached to a fishing line. It hangs between the chimes. When the wind blows, the ball swings, and the chimes sing. A solid breeze creates a symphony of bells banging together, tolling for my attention.

I stopped ruminating to listen. The sound is distinct. Inviting. Beautiful and timely. Surprisingly *haunting*.

As the wind grew, the chimes soared with sound. Glancing over, a sunrise crested the hill and shafts of light beamed upon the musical mobile. Chimes swung back and forth like the pendulum on a clock, catching the sunbeams as they rocked eastward before they swayed back into the shadows. Morning broke as the chimes rocked from darkness to light, swinging between shadow and sun, clanging as it moved between blackness and beauty.

I closed my eyes and listened. That's when I noticed it. The chimes pitched wildly back and forth, yet the music remained unchanged. Strong. Resonant. Consistent. I felt summoned to listen.

I can't remember the last time I felt like an experience formed a metaphor for my life as a leader. But in that moment—as the winds of the new year were blowing—I sensed the chimes were an invitation from God. A reminder that my story was not unique; my pain, not uncommon; my tears, not unexpected. I remembered something it took me years to learn. My weakness was part of God's plot. His fruit-bearing plan. The hard, yet wonderful vehicle through which his power would flow.

Wiping my eyes, I thought about the new year. The winds will blow strong through ministry this year, I can already see that. Feel it. And the chimes of my aging body may swing wildly between shadow and sunlight.

But sitting there, I realized that absent the wind and the turbulence of swinging, the chimes hang silent. There is no music. What a wonder that is!

GOD WANTS US TO CHIME FOR HIS GLORY

Be it good or bad times, weakness or strength, prosperity or adversity, God wants my life to chime for his glory. It's why he calls us to lead. But God has an unusual way of producing the music. A secret way. A mysterious and wondrously covert plan he uses for extracting his glory from the life of leaders.

*Leadership was never about exalting our strengths.
God's plan was always to deliver his strength
through our weaknesses.*

It's a kind of incongruity that uncovers a conspiracy.
I call it the *clay pot conspiracy*.

It's a simple equation:

Our Weakness + God's Power = Resilient
Ministry

We'll unpack this equation by looking at seven surprising wonders, but for now let me say that the leader can neither manipulate nor escape God's counterintuitive plan. Nor would you ever want too.

You see, gospel ministry carries a clause. Suffering and sadness? Trauma? Fatigue and feebleness? You bet! It's all embedded in the call and part of the plan. You can't avoid it. It finds you. Then it transforms you and positions you for power. It's all part of the conspiracy.

God is not content to make us merely conversant about the gospel. Biblical leadership is a call to embody it. And the leader's capacity to persevere is connected to their understanding of that glorious, empowering reality.

No leader knows the baseline of suffering drawn for him by the hand of Providence. He can only know it is designed to uncover the conspiracy. Your story will be different from mine. But the goal will be the same. To draw back the curtain on God's plan to help you embody the gospel. If you enlisted in service of the gospel, you too will be caught up in this glorious wonder.

WILL YOU JOIN ME?

Seeing the chimes swing away from the sun, I was reminded of God's plan. It inspired me. Faith infused my

soul as I remembered passages packed tight with promises. My tears evaporated. Learning how God works, sometimes surreptitiously, to ensure leaders understand and embody the gospel will change your life. It changes how you think about ministry and gives you a new arsenal of faith for endurance. Connecting the dots to how God's conspiracy helps us to last in ministry is going to transform how you move toward the future.

Our call is to make gospel music. Even as we swing between valleys and mountains, and shadows and sunlight. That's still our call. We are part of the clay pot conspiracy. And the more you see the brilliance and beauty of this plan, the more your journey in ministry makes sense. Your ministry is the instrument. The wind and the swings make the music. Gospel music.

Are you curious? Let's try this: Let's start an adventure together; let's explore the details and delights of God's clay pot conspiracy. You probably need it now more than ever. I know I do. Take the next step by looking deeper into the details behind the conspiracy. See you in chapter 1!

Wonder #1

STORE TREASURE IN CLAY

In 1947, a young Bedouin shepherd was herding his flock on a hill near the Dead Sea. Since sheep are prone to wander, one little lamb ambled away. The shepherd set out on a search that led him to a dark cave tucked away on the hillside of the northwestern ridge.

The young shepherd crept toward the cave mouth and peered inside. The genetic coding of every teenage boy determined what happened next. Yep, the shepherd boy found a rock and chucked it into the darkness. What he heard next astonished him. Something shattered. Crawling through the entrance, the intrepid shepherd came face-to-face with an archaeological wonder.

The boy found a row of enormous clay pots, larger than him—each one sealed shut. Popping one lid, he

uncovered ancient scrolls inside—some wrapped in linen, others blackened to the point of being unreadable. Little did the shepherd know that he would be immortalized as the guy who discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls.

A treasure of incomprehensible value. Stored in clay pots.

CORINTHIAN CRITICISM

Make no mistake, leadership is hard. Maybe you're reading this and thinking, "I left Planet *Hard* a while back. I'm rocketing toward the moons of *Brutal!*" Yes, ministry can be brutal. But the depth of difficulty is often connected to the way it violates our expectations. *This is NOT what I expected!* We signed on for a cruise only to discover we have boarded a battleship. We came aboard assuming God recruited us to display our strengths. But the good ship *Ministry* sails in a different direction. A truly unexpected, covert bearing.

Weakness, that's our heading.

The journey toward ministry maturity and fruitfulness fixes us on a course toward weakness. In a fallen world, the most fruitful and durable ministry is always packaged up with—and revealed in—weak and broken vessels. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes it:

We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7–12)

Why is Paul portraying gospel ministry in such a confounding way? In Corinth there was a party opposed to Paul. Their mission was to tear people away from Paul's leadership, and to win the Corinthian believers over to their version of leadership success. Their strategy for achieving this was to attack and discredit Paul. "There can be no doubt," says Murray Harris, "that the primary aim of Paul's adversaries was to undermine and so destroy Paul's apostolic authority. What they taught was calculated to bring about Paul's downfall, at least in Corinth, and to establish their own credentials as authentic servants of Christ."¹

It's an old-but-effective playbook. Strike the shepherd, the sheep scatter, and then wolves replace the shepherd and roast the sheep.

WHAT MAKES A LEADER ATTRACTIVE?

Paul's opponents despised weakness. They believed leadership meant putting on a show for others. They boasted in "face," not in heart, and they were trying to fool the Corinthians into believing that it was their outward appearance that mattered most (2 Corinthians 5:12). "Appearance counted for everything, as it often does today," says commentator Mark Seifrid. "One wonders how Paul would have fit into today's social media culture. At this point, there were few in Corinth who "liked" his message, and fewer still who were willing to "friend" him.²

Have you ever felt like there are things about you that make you less appealing as a leader? Gifts and graces you see in others and wish you possessed? Maybe it's the way you speak—you lack wit, charisma, too often your brain can't locate your tongue and you stumble to find words. Perhaps it's the way you look—a scar, a defect, your size, any other noticeable physical condition. Paul can relate. His appearance was . . . well, let's just say it gave the opposition party a lot to work with.

Tradition has it that Paul was unattractive. Many have observed that he suffered from an eye condition. That's why, when writing about the Galatian church's love for him, Paul says, "I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me" (Galatians 4:15 NIV). Paul wasn't only weak in appearance; he sometimes came across as unskilled in his speech (2 Corinthians 10:10). He also carried no letters of commendation (2 Corinthians 3:1; 10:13–14)—the primary way back then of displaying street cred. From his antagonists' point of view, Paul was too plain. Too contemptible. Too *weak*.

We get it. It's how the world works. Nobody celebrates flunked tests or failed start-ups. You never find sports teams named after weakness. Imagine—"The Los Angeles Lambs are still 0–6 on the season." We can't imagine it because it would never happen.

At best, weakness is pitied. At worst, it's despised. Maybe you're living under that cloud right now, feeling friendless and feckless. Perhaps you're looking for a way to move forward. Check out what Paul does.

WEAKNESS—THE CORE LEADERSHIP CREDENTIAL

Paul counters with a decidedly unconventional defense. To the charge that he's insufficient, Paul says, "Guilty."

To the charge that he's an unrefined orator, Paul repeats, "Guilty." To the charge that he's weak, Paul asserts, "Guilty!" Paul flips the script on his detractors by saying, "You think my weakness disqualifies me. *But it's actually my core credential.*"

You see, Paul discovered a secret: His weakness was an opportunity for God's power. He learned that when weakness meets God's grace, strength abounds. It's what I like to call the *clay pot conspiracy*.

Although the word *conspiracy* has dark overtones and is frequently politicized, I think it accurately conveys the essence behind God's hidden agenda. After all, the conspiracy is not aimed at us. God coordinated a covert plan to sabotage an enemy who manipulates human power and strength. It's a magnificent plot where God recalibrates our metrics of success from human potency to Godward dependence. It's a secret design to humble the proud, abolish boasting, and establish the ground for our longevity.

Here is the simple formula for the clay pot conspiracy.

Our Weakness + God's Power = Resilient
Ministry³

Slow down and roll this over in your mind for a moment. The vulnerability and frailty you are feeling right

now are not a punishment; they are not a consequence of your narrow gifts or poor performance. That's what we often think, isn't it? I know I do. Each month I beat back some form of condemnation around poor performances or low-fruit places in ministry.

But then something happens. Through the incomparable power of God's living and active Word, I remember God's clay pot conspiracy. As I have studied 2 Corinthians along with other Bible passages, I've discovered seven different "wonders." These wonders point to the remarkable and mysterious ways God reanimates weakness for our good and his glory. Together they form God's blueprint for leadership longevity. I use the word "longevity" intentionally, because one of the clear aims behind this whole passage is to help leaders not "lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1, 16). God loves longevity. He wants leaders who last.

The wonders we are going to uncover are surprising because God's clandestine plan does not fit neatly within our categories for successful ministry metrics. There is little appeal to what we would naturally want or expect from leadership in this conspiracy. It takes time to see it and to hear it.

The wonders do not make us softer saints or less courageous leaders. This book is all about how God instills strength, boldness, power, and resilience in those he has

called to be leaders. But let's be honest, this is counter-intuitive. We don't expect to grow stronger by becoming broken, to experience power by becoming weak, or for God's plan for our leadership longevity to be so packed with paradox.

I was like that. But that was before God uncovered the first wonder within his conspiracy.

THE WONDER: STORE TREASURE IN CLAY

Here's how Paul describes this wonder: "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

What is the treasure Paul is talking about here? What does the pronoun "this" in "*this* treasure" refer to? To answer that question, we need to go back and look at the first six verses of the chapter. You can trace the antecedent of "this" back to verse 1 where Paul talks about the ministry he's been given through God's mercy. You see it again in verse 6 where he says that his ministry is to share the light of the knowledge of the glory of God to all peoples.

Paul's treasure is his gospel ministry. Paul is speaking first about the amazing worth of the incomparable Christ, the priceless message about the Savior who left the glory of heaven and died to save sinners. But the

treasure for Paul is both the glorious news of Christ's completed work and *the ministry* of the gospel of the glory of God. Think of it like this:

Message + Ministry = Treasure

Gospel ministry is a privilege all Christian leaders share with Paul. It is a privilege entrusted to us when we enter ministry as leaders in the local church, Christian ministry, or the mission field. Regardless of the size of the ministry or the leadership role we occupy, we share the glorious honor of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, seeing the light of God's glory go forward through the finished work of Jesus. This is God's treasure.

But at the heart of this passage rests a stunning contrast. This incomprehensible treasure is stored in fragile jars of clay.

Clay jars had a range of uses. In 2 Timothy 2:20, Paul writes, "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for special purposes and some for common use" (NIV). The 2 Corinthians 4 reference was not, however, the classy, upscale container. No, actually, think: jars you could find in a dollar store. These were the common-use pots in everyone's home. They were the containers where you

stored things, and they were sometimes, well, let's just come out with it—the chamber pots!

The clay referred to here, is little more than baked dirt. Clay pots were for common use. Think about that. If you put it in today's language, clay pots are like those disposable rubber gloves in the hospital, or the foam coffee cups littered on the lawn after a church picnic. Paul uses the metaphor of the clay pot to convey something common, fragile, powerless, even breakable.

Paul is saying that he *is* a clay pot—an ordinary, brittle container. That's me too. And actually, you're a clay pot in this kitchen as well!

Just to be crystal clear, Paul isn't downgrading our worth, value, or dignity in this passage. As fragile as we may feel, the Bible tells us that we are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and he loves us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). One of the loudest statements God can make about our value is that he has authorized us to carry his treasure.

Leader, God is talking to you. You have something of infinite value stored in your ministry, your body, your life, your clay pot. You are the receptacle; you are the earthen vessel in which the treasure of the gospel rests. Being like a clay pot can mean we are either fragile or disposal (or both), but each idea points to one common

ingredient: the clay pot is a metaphor for weakness—our weakness.

THE WEALTH OF WEAKNESS

When I was seven years old, my brother—such a nut-case, my brother—called me over to the gravel parking lot across from our house. “Dave,” he said. “Come here. I want to show you something.” In his hand was a gold nugget—at least what looked like a gold nugget; I didn’t yet see the gold spray-paint cans littered on the ground around his feet.

“Whoa! Where did you get that?” I said.

“Right here, man!” he said, as his arms spread wide. “And they’re sprinkled all over the parking lot. It’s filled with gold!”

I stood astounded. But my brother was just getting started. “And guess what? *I bought the whole lot!*”

Then he stepped forward. “And since I’m your brother, here’s the first piece of gold from my new lot.” He reached over and set the spray-painted piece of gravel in my sweaty hand. When I close my eyes, I can still remember the sensation of awe as I palmed this priceless mineral that had transformed me into a wildly wealthy kid.

Feeling now the burden of spontaneous wealth, I knew my gold needed to be secured. So I ran home, rushed upstairs, and grabbed a shoe box. I put my gold nugget in the middle of the shoe box, and I stuffed newspaper all around it. Then I wrapped it in duct tape (because we all know that duct tape is impregnable to burglars). The box then went into the bottom drawer of my dresser (because no criminal would *ever* think of going into the bottom drawer!). Even at seven, I knew that my treasure should be in the safest place I could find.

But God's strategy is different. God stores his treasure in something common and breakable. We think our battle with anxiety makes us less effective to lead. We assume our physical illness or prodigal child means the end of usefulness for God. We look in the mirror and walk away with a catalog of defects. To us, our weaknesses mean that we are less-than—less than worthy, less than useful, less than acceptable.

But beneath our pain there is a plan—it's the first wonder in the clay pot conspiracy. God is working to make your life shine in ways you never imagined. How? God stores his treasure in clay *to show that the surpassing power belongs to him and not to us* (2 Corinthians 4:7).

We are not always strong. We are human and frail. And the only way to experience God's surpassing power is to own our weakness and behold how God reanimates it for our good and his glory.

God stores his treasure in jars of clay. Can you own it?

THE WAY OF WEAKNESS

Owning starts with knowing. So let's begin to know the way of weakness by unwinding the meaning wrapped around the metaphor. What does weakness truly mean?

Weakness can be a general way to talk about the comprehensive human condition. We are imperfect, perishable, and fragile. It spills out every day. The use of "weakness" here is singular—a sweeping reference to the frailty and fallenness corrupting the occupants of a broken world. Yet the clay pot metaphor supplies more clarity, nuance, and detail to the idea of weakness.

To begin, weakness reveals our inadequacy. "For what is weakness?" asks J. I. Packer. "The idea from first to last is of *inadequacy*" (emphasis mine).⁴ The first inkling that we are inadequate typically happens around conversion. Think back to those days, long before you were a leader. Do you remember how you

became convinced that you were inadequate to save yourself? Effort and energy never moved the needle. You were trapped within the boundaries of your inability. But your substitutionary Savior came and swapped out your inadequacy for his adequacy. Christ's sufficiency resolved your insufficiency. That's where this whole journey started—with your complete and utter inadequacy.

But leadership arrived and something happened.

Inadequacy receded into the background. Gifts were identified. We assumed roles that played to our talents. Our strengths were affirmed and celebrated. Our service and performance generated respect and credibility. It wasn't easy, but we became adequate and able—a vessel that sparkled with significance. This seemed good and felt good. We wanted to look strong. We *needed* to look strong.

But it didn't last. Suffering made a surprise visit. Unexpected betrayal occurred. Deep disappointments landed. We are still sinners. We discover detractors. Detractors discover us. Demonic discouragement visits. Church leadership is nothing like what we expected. The balloon of our own strength, once so energizing and elevating, gets punctured. We stare into a mirror that reflects more and more weakness.

INADEQUACY: THE STAGE FOR POWER

Cheer up! Looking polished was never the point. “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Inadequacy sets the stage to display something far more glorious than our strength. It’s about God’s power, not ours. It’s about God’s grace, not our grit. Whether you know it or not, a life where weakness reveals dependence upon God has always been the point of your call to leadership. D. A. Carson explains it like this: “God’s strength is made perfect in weakness: it reaches its fullest measure and most powerful forms when issued in response to weakness. The greater the Christian’s weakness, the greater the grace poured out.”⁵

Let’s do a check-up: Do people walk away from your leadership thinking more about you than God? Who is most magnified in your leadership? If I’m being honest, the answer to that question is, too often, me. I want people to see me through my strengths. I want the surpassing power ascribed to me—a clay-less composite of Dave.

Last year I got to thinking: *What might it look like for me to highlight the clay pot that is behind my ministry?* So I tried it. I was asked to supply a bio for a board where I served. This is what I wrote:

I'm not particularly imaginative or some kind of big change-agent. I have a remarkable wife, but we've experienced some challenges as parents. I've lost about 200 lbs. over the last twenty years, primarily by gaining and losing the same ten pounds. I like praise too much and wish I used my time better because I want to read much more than I do. Ministry over the decades has delivered incredible and undeserved joys, not to mention unimaginable sorrow. Whatever bitter taste there may be has made Christ sweet!

One small step for clay-kind.

We leaders are a funny lot. Each day our clay goes on full display. We skip appointments, manage disappointments, miss exit ramps, oversleep, misplace car keys, forget our phones, drop glasses, get irritated, become impatient, say things we shouldn't. Just a few sleepless nights can shatter us. We arrive into the world needy and, if we grow old, we plumb deeper into weakness before departure. Yet we often live in clay-denial, posing as the Creator even while we desperately prop up (or push down) our creatureliness.

On some level within us, the truth of our inadequacy is inescapable. To admit we are clay helps us to see through the scaffolding of strength we have erected

to disguise our clay pot. But it's a relief when our inability comes into sharper focus. Acknowledging it puts us on the path toward power. God knows we're messy and weak. Do we know it? Can we own it?

WEAKNESS MEANS VULNERABILITY

What else do we need to know about weakness? It's important to know that weakness means *vulnerability*. Vulnerability is the risk imposed by our inadequacy. It's the powerlessness and exposure we accept when leading as a clay pot in a fallen world.

George Whitefield was undoubtedly a flawed vessel in God's service.⁶ Yet he possessed a vision of ministry that embraced the risk of his inadequacy. Whitefield had a large network of churches in England when he felt called to preach for an extended period in the United States. To maintain his ministry, Whitefield arranged for a younger leader to manage the churches while he was gone. But the leader subverted Whitefield, shifting doctrines, co-opting affections, and winning people over to himself.

Whitefield returned to a ministry maelstrom of sabotage and betrayal. He became convinced it would be too divisive to fight for the church movement he started. He walked away and just started over. He took the hit. Maybe a more discerning eye would have detected the

vulnerability or sniffed out this leader's corrupted ambitions before leaving. But Whitefield made a choice. By deciding to travel to the States, he opened himself up to significant loss. Much of his ministry was hijacked.

But Whitefield knew that risk and loss came with the call. His unusual gifts did not exempt him from exposure. Whitefield did not play the victim, demonize the leader, or contend for his place. He sought the strength that comes from weakness. Whitefield's loss became a way to display a surpassing power that belongs to God alone; to know Christ in the fellowship of suffering (Philippians 3:10). He later said, "It is good for me that I have been supplanted, despised, censured, maligned, judged by and separated from my nearest dearest friends. By this I have found the faithfulness of Him who is the friend of friends . . . and to be content that He to whom all hearts are open . . . now sees . . . the uprightness of my intentions to all mankind."⁷

Risk is the cost of making decisions without the luxury of omniscience. Whitefield could not see, nor could he fully calculate, the impact of his decision to travel. His inadequacy made him vulnerable to betrayal. God used this vulnerability for great good. The latter fruit of his ministry was greater than the former. But that did not exempt Whitefield from the emotional pain of

leading as a clay pot. When the clay pot risked vulnerability, glory shone through.

To lead means we must bear risks. Each risk we take makes us vulnerable to others who don't understand or appreciate our actions. They may have their own agenda. We may have additional (and more accurate) information we are unable to share. In a climate where full access to all information by all people is seen as a constitutional right, being more principled will make you more vulnerable. True leadership means we carry some burdens so that others don't have to.

Leaders bear burdens so others can walk without the weight. But it strains the clay pot. Leaders become weaker. We learn to say with David, "As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me" (Psalm 40:17a).

Sometimes risk means self-disclosure—but not the faux vulnerability that sheds tears and manipulates emotions but exposes us to no risk. That's simply a calculated self-disclosure under the guise of vulnerability. True confession involves risks. It's not designed as a transaction where we purchase reconciliation or the sympathy of followers. Vulnerability is an invitation to walk in integrity before God, regardless of the response from others.

Leading from inadequacy makes us vulnerable. *When inadequacy and vulnerability marry, weakness is conceived.*

THE WONDER OF WEAKNESS

The Corinthian troublers could brook no weakness. They were too accustomed to looking at a leader's appearance and gifts. They assumed that treasure was always stored within strength. They led from a different worldview and toward an opposing conspiracy. Let's call it the *Corinthian* conspiracy.

Here was their false formula: My Strength + God's Power = Resilience.

But this is just another earthly scheme that magnifies human might. Rather than acknowledging our clay pot, we polish it. And even try to pass it off as a gold-plated chalice.

Why is it so easy to believe the Corinthian conspiracy? I naturally fall into it. Not long ago I was having blood pressure issues. It would jack up and then drop down low. At first, I didn't know what was triggering it. I just knew that it was really hard to get off the couch. When lifting the TV remote becomes the hardest work you do, weakness becomes your cellmate. Then it's a

good idea to ask for prayer. Or seek help. Unless you are proud. And foolish. Like me.

I found myself reluctant to share my condition with other people. I didn't want to talk about it, I didn't want to ask for prayer, I just wanted to tough it out. I work with a lot of young pastors—much younger. Who wants to be *that* old guy telegraphing his age?

Eventually, by God's grace, I saw my folly. It was nothing more than my pride, nothing more than my desire to appear strong, to look good, to keep my clay pot polished in the eyes of others. I wanted my ministry to be shining, to appear unbreakable. I didn't want other people to see my vulnerabilities—to see the cracks. *Yep, take a look, folks—a ministry crackpot, in the flesh!* No way.

So I instinctively tried to control perception by verbally polishing the pot. Can you relate? But as I get older, I see more. I notice that the leaders committed to polishing don't seem to finish well. When we want to be a big deal, it pretty much commits us to a life of polished performances. It makes us less relatable, less accessible, probably less accountable too. Because nobody really knows us, nobody around us is qualified to supply care and nobody around us is capable of understanding our unique cracks. Nobody is capable of really speaking

wisdom to us. We embrace the Corinthian conspiracy: support my vision, ignore my cracks, and don't smear the polish.

If you're a leader and you feel uncomfortable reading these words, maybe it's because you're missing the wonder that leads you to the place of God's power. Don't despair. God's grace is greater than our sin or our foolishness. God's grace is more magnificent than our weakness. Whatever haunts you about your past performance or dogs you about your present impact, whenever you think your life is too messy or your leadership too lame, remember this one thing:

The perfection of Christ is greater than the cracks in your pot.

Jesus is not intimidated by your limitations or surprised by your struggles. The King has a deeper work, and his plans are unstoppable. Christ's grace is greater than your guilt; his steadfast love is greater than your shame. The finished work of Jesus frees him to rush to your side, to pour out his grace, to grant you the hope and perspective you need to see the wonder of his conspiracy—the remarkable plan illustrated by the shepherd who stumbled across the Dead Sea Scrolls: the surprising plot to store treasure in clay pots.

Christ loves us so much that we can stand secure in his embrace. God's power is greater than our weakness.

But if we truly want to connect our clay pot to power, we must renounce our polishing and move toward another plan. The second wonder is the one that reveals how God releases the treasure placed within the pot. This wonder helps us to comprehend how leaders bear pain as a means to flourish and how that part of the clay pot conspiracy makes us more like Jesus.

Are you ready? Then take a deep breath. A startling plunge awaits us.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Make a list of some of the worldly credentials you most rely upon to feel good about your ministry.
2. How would your ministry change if you viewed weakness as your core credential?
3. In what ways might your present view of weakness stoke fatigue more than resilience?