

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: DRAWING NEAR**

(Growing in prayer)

### **Purpose in God's Pattern**

(Abraham, Exodus, Gideon, etc...)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: Out of weakness, strength...**

On July 30, 1967, an athletic and energetic seventeen year old who enjoyed horseback riding, hiking, and tennis, dove into the Chesapeake Bay for a swim.

On that day, she misjudged the depth of the water and hit a rock just under the water's surface. She suffered a spinal fracture and became a permanent quadriplegic.

Joni Eareckson Tada has spent the better part of the last forty five years in a wheelchair.

There is no question about it. Joni suffered a tragic accident. Her shallow water dive instantly crushed all of the dreams she had ever had. It cut off every single one of the possibilities she thought life held for her.

Yet, over the last forty five years, Joni has sold innumerable works of art she has painted with a brush in her teeth, written forty eight books, recorded six music albums, and been involved with starring in, writing, or creating seven separate film projects.

Joni has also received honorary doctorates from six universities,<sup>1</sup> received tons of awards for her work in Christian ministry on behalf of the disabled, and founded an organization that is "*dedicated to extending the love and message of Jesus Christ to people who are effected by disability around the world*" (Joni and Friends<sup>2</sup>)

Who would have thought that God could use someone who is so weak in such powerful ways? What an amazing thing!

Actually, the amazing thing is that this - God doing His best work through crushed and broken and weak people - is his standard mode of operation.

Today, for the fifth week, we are seeking to grow in the life of prayer. But, today's message comes with a twist.

What we'll see from Scripture this morning is that God typically, characteristically, normally accomplishes His work through desperate people who understand their weakness and turn to Him in prayer for His strength. This morning, we'll see that we're all Joni.

We see the pattern of God's purpose to use our weakness to showcase His strength over and over again in the Bible.

So, over the next few minutes, I'm going to point to a select few stories that make it clear that His passion is that we would depend on Him for all we're worth

#### **Father Abraham and Mother Sarah (Genesis 12-21)**

##### **Abraham Chosen and Given a Great Promise**

We'll begin with the well-known story of Abraham and the birth of his son, Isaac, by his wife, Sarah.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon College, Columbia International University, Westminster Theological Seminary, Lancaster Bible College, Indiana Wesleyan University, and Biola University.

<sup>2</sup> Now "The Joni and Friends International Disability Centre" (located in Agoura, California).

God chose Abraham to be the father of a nation. God told him that from this nation would come a great king - the Jewish Messiah - who would redeem a world lost in sin.

Of course, in order to fulfill that promise one thing had to happen. Abraham had to have a son. At the time was given, Abraham and Sarah didn't have any children. So, the promise of a son was first given to Abraham when he was 75 years old. Sarah was 65. (Genesis 12:4)

We would have thought that having read of the promise in Genesis 12, we would be reading of the birth of a son in the same chapter. Not exactly...

### **Waiting, waiting, waiting...**

Follow the story of the life and times of Abraham and Sarah and you'll find God promising that son again and again. He re-makes the promise in Genesis 13, 15, 17, and 18.

Through the years, Abraham got impatient and tried to arrange for a son on his own. First, he suggested that his servant, Eliezar of Damascus, could be his heir. God would have nothing of it.

Then Abraham really took matters into his own hands and had sex with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, and produced a son, Ishmael. God was not impressed. He reiterated to Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah, would have a son.

When the promise of a son was given for the final time Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. We don't know what Abraham said in response, but Sarah, eavesdropping, rolled her eyes and laughed. She knew enough biology to know that she was well past the point where having a son was even possible.

But sure enough, the end of the story has Abraham at 101 and Sarah at 91 welcoming a bouncing baby boy into their long-empty nursery with the birth of Isaac. (Genesis 21)

Now, you may know that story really, really well. The details of the birth of Isaac may be written indelibly on your heart and mind.

OK. Have you ever stopped to wonder why God took a quarter of a century to fulfill His word to give Abraham a son?

### **The Genius of God's Delay**

Here's my working hypothesis: While development of Abraham's character was a real need - and twenty five years of disappointment will shape a character! - the most obvious reason God waited until both parents were as old as they were was to prove that Isaac's birth was not a function of what people could do, but of what He could do.

God purposefully delayed Isaac's birth so that everyone hearing of Isaac's birth would say, "*Look at what the Lord has done!*" and so that God's people would depend on Him to do what only He could do.

Fast forward about five hundred years and we come to another well-known Bible story. Our view of it today may bring it into focus in a way you've not seen it before.

### **Caught Between the Sword and the Sea (Exodus 11-14)**

#### **Abraham's Family Goes in Egypt**

The family of Jacob (Abraham's grandson) had moved to Egypt due to a drought in the land of Canaan. There in Egypt, the family grew into a great nation.

However, over the long years in Egypt, the Jews became an oppressed, enslaved people, whose lives were miserable. At about the four hundred year mark, God raised up Moses to negotiate Israel's departure for home: Canaan.

#### **God's Deliverer: MOSES**

When the Egyptian Pharaoh resisted and would not let Israel go, God responded by sending plague after wasting plague on Egypt to convince him to release the Jews. But Pharaoh was stubborn and kept on refusing to let Moses take the people out of Egypt.

Then came the final plague. The tenth and last plague was the death of the first born in every Egyptian household - including his own.

After this plague, Pharaoh knew that he was defeated and allowed the Jews to leave, which they did.

### **Israel Freed from Egypt; Pursued by Egypt!**

However, shortly after the Jewish slaves left, Pharaoh had a change of heart about letting them go. He had received word that Israel had traveled to a place that made them easy pickings to bring back to Egypt again as his slaves.

They had traveled directly into the path of a large body of water, often referred to as the Red Sea, more properly an inlet off of the Red Sea we know today as the Gulf of Aqaba.

Pharaoh knew that with the Israelites hemmed in by the water, he could easily capture them, enslave them again, and take them back to Egypt.

There, stuck at the water's edge, the people with Moses saw and heard Pharaoh and his chariots coming. Panic set in. There was no place to run and no place to hide.

That's when God went to work on behalf of His people.

He placed before the Egyptians a pillar of fire to keep them at bay while He parted the Sea, allowing the Jews to walk through the dry sea bed to the other side.

Then, with Israel safely on the other shore in the land of Midian, God removed the pillar of fire, the Egyptians went barreling into the dry sea bed, and God brought the sea back together, protecting His people by destroying Pharaoh and his army.

This - the story of the Exodus - is THE story of deliverance in the Old Testament. It was celebrated every Passover. It was the one story God wanted His people to remember over and over and over again.

Maybe you know the story well.

### **The Genius of God's Route-Choosing**

But have you ever considered that the story could have ended quite differently? Have you ever considered that it was, in fact, God who led His people directly into a slot canyon that led to the water's edge?

There were other routes He could have chosen for the people to take that would have led them straight up to Canaan. He intentionally, on purpose, chose to lead them by way of an impassable body of water.

Why would He do that?

It would only make sense for God to do such a thing if He wanted His people to be in an impossible situation so that, in the end, when they were safe and sound and delivered from their enemies there would never be any argument about who saved them. God saved them.

Now, after the people were delivered by God, they eventually entered the Promised Land and started the process of establishing Canaan as their re-newed home.

There were many fierce peoples who had taken up residence in Palestine since the days of Abraham, four hundred years earlier.

These warlike tribes were taken on, one by one, by Israel as they were led by judges put in place by God. One of those judges was a man named Gideon.

### **Gideon's Incredible Shrinking Army (Judges 7)**

#### **God Chose Gideon to Judge Israel**

Gideon's family was the smallest family in the tribe of Manasseh. Gideon himself was the youngest member of his father's household. That, in and of itself, gives Gideon a rather inauspicious status as a mighty deliverer.

But God called Gideon to be a judge, so, a judge he was!

At the time that Gideon was a judge Israel was being oppressed by the people of Midian, a mighty desert nation to the south of Palestine. God tasked Gideon with the daunting assignment of defeating Midian in battle.

### God Told Gideon to Defeat the Mighty Midianites

The story is found in the book of Judges, chapters 6 and 7. Gideon called the warriors from the Jewish tribes of Manasseh and Asher and Zebulun and Naphtali to gather to him for a battle against the Midianites.

God told Gideon (Judges 6:16) that He would give him victory over Midian. And we get some insight into Gideon's personality when we are told that he sought a sign that God would really deliver Israel from the Midianite oppressors.<sup>3</sup>

Before going to battle, he told God, *[Judges 6:36]... "If You will deliver Israel through me, as you have spoken, [37] behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken."*

Well, sure enough, the Lord gave Gideon the sign he was looking for and the next morning the fleece was soaked with a bowl's full of water from the dew.

Gideon, though, still wasn't satisfied. So, he again spoke to God, *[39] "Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground."*

Once again, God gave the sign and the ground was wet all around the fleece, but the fleece itself was bone dry. What happened next is fascinating.

### The Genius of God to "cull" Gideon's Army

Gideon and his army of 32,000 fighting men prepared for battle and went to one side of a broad valley to meet Midian.

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<sup>3</sup> Clearly, Gideon should have believed the Lord's promise. The request for a sign of a wet or dry fleece was not a faithful request at all, but a fearful request.

God was not impressed with the size of the army. And it wasn't that He was faulting Gideon for not being a good recruiter. In God's eyes, Gideon had been too effective in recruiting. God wanted a smaller army.

So, He told Gideon to make an announcement that if any man was afraid to go to war against Midian, that man should go home.

The Bible tells us that 22,000 soldiers went home that day, leaving only 10,000 men to fight the fierce Midianites.

God was still not satisfied. He wanted Gideon to cull the army further. Another round of BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) was in order.

Gideon was to keep in his army only those who drank water in a certain way.

Every soldier who stopped to get a drink of water by putting his hand to his mouth, what is called "lapping", remained with Gideon to fight the Midianites. All the rest, who kneeled to drink water, were sent home.

Now I've read explanations about why the kneelers were dismissed and the lappers were kept. Some say, *"It was better to lap because you could still keep your eyes on the enemy."* Or, *"It was unsoldierly to kneel to drink."*

And I, with no military experience whatsoever (but with a good bit of experience drinking water from streams), respectfully say, *"Nonsense."*

The test was, at best, arbitrary. It was much like saying, *"We'll allow the quarterback to start in the Super Bowl who puts his right shoe on before his left shoe."*

Or, perhaps more likely, it was that the kneelers were *more* soldierly and the lappers were *less* soldierly that prompted God to tell Gideon to choose the three hundred lappers and send the 9,700 kneelers home!

After all, the reason for culling the army in the first place was to weaken it.

Listen to what God said to Gideon when the 32,000 soldiers showed up for battle.

*[Judges 7:2]... “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’”*

And after the 22,000 went home, He told Gideon, *[4]... “The people are still too many.”*

Too many for what?

There were too many for there to be NO DOUBT that when Israel won the battle it was God who was responsible.

So, if you cut the size of the army down from 32,000 to 300 and leave only the ones who lapped water with their hands and THEN Israel wins, well, who is going to argue that anyone but God was responsible? Who but God will get all the credit?

If the St. Mary’s basketball team wins with Justin Alexander playing center, everybody’s happy and nobody’s surprised. But if there is a late change in the game plan and the coach exercises his right to draft any player he wants for one night and starts Dave Smith at center and THEN St. Mary’s wins, well, everyone will know that it was the power of God.

Why in the world shrink an army if not to highlight that the victory of the Jews over Midian was God’s doing?

Clearly, a pattern is emerging.

God purposefully orchestrates events so that the strength of His people can’t possibly explain a victory. The result is that His people learn *dependence* on a powerful God and a watching world is impressed - not with His people’s strength! - but with the strength of God Himself and are also drawn to depend on Him.

We see this pattern over and over again in the Old Testament and we see it in the New, as well.

A couple of lessons given to a couple of apostles drives home the point.

### Apostolic Eye-Openings

#### Peter’s Strength Reconsidered (John 21)

*Simon Peter, the leader among the apostles*

Read through the early chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John and you’ll come away with a deep respect and admiration for Simon Peter.

He was among the first to follow Jesus. He left his nets to fish with Jesus for the souls of people who were far from God. Peter asked good questions. He was bold.

He was the one who said to Jesus, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”*** He walked on water. He was in the inner circle of disciples who heard and saw things that the others didn’t. Most of us would tag Peter as the chief among the apostles.

*Simon Peter, depending on Simon Peter*

Near the end, right before Jesus was to be put to death, Jesus predicted that all of the disciples would fall away. None of them would stand with Him when the going got tough.

Peter was frankly offended by that warning and told Jesus - with all of the other disciples listening - *[Matthew 26:33]... “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.”*

To which Jesus replied, *[34]... “Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”*

And sure enough, before the rooster crowed, Simon Peter had denied even knowing Jesus three times. So...

*The genius of allowing Peter to fail*

- Did Jesus make Peter fall away? Absolutely not!

- Did Jesus know that while Peter's faith in Him was real, Peter still had way too much faith in Peter? Absolutely!
- Did Jesus intentionally allow Peter to be placed in a situation that would reveal the depths of his ugly self-confidence and drive him to greater dependence on God? Absolutely.

The marvelous thing is that Peter became what Jesus intended him to become. A courageous, humble servant-leader. But that only happened when he saw the dead-end street that trusting in his own natural strength really was.

And another apostle learned the hard way the strength of his weakness.

### **Paul's Weakness a Strength (2 Corinthians 12).**

*The Apostle Paul - tireless, brilliant, courageous witness for Christ*

The Apostle Paul was a dynamo for Jesus. As zealous as he was *against* Christ prior to his conversion, he was more zealous *for* Christ after.

He traveled tirelessly, endured all sorts of hardships, planted churches, trained up and coming younger leaders, and was even given visions of heaven.

*The Apostle Paul - a thorn in his flesh*

But he had a pain in his life that really bothered him. It seemed to Paul that it would be a really good thing if he could be free of this pain. If he could just get rid of this pain he would be so much more effective in serving Jesus.

He called this pain his **"thorn in the flesh"** - and we don't know if it was a pain in his foot, hand, back, eyes, heart, or soul. All we know is that it hurt.

Paul tells us that he prayed repeatedly to God about this pain. He asked three times (which may be like our saying *"over and over and over"*) that God would take the thorn away.

Well, here's what God finally said in answer to Paul's request.

*The genius of leaving a thorn in place*

**[2 Corinthians 12:9]... "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."**

There is it, again. God could have taken this pain from Paul's life. He didn't. He could have alleviated the suffering of this faithful servant. He didn't. He chose to say, "No" to Paul's request for healing so that Paul would more fully rely on God and not on his own brilliance and skills and talents and energy.

Now, let's listen to Paul's response to God's word to him. It is easy to see that he really "got" what God wanted him to learn.

**[9b] Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. [10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."**

There is no question that Paul was a powerful witness for Jesus. Now we know why. He knew his own weakness and depended on God's strength.

That's five stories that all say essentially say the same thing: God orchestrates or allows weakness to drive His people to trust. God uses crushed and broken people to draw attention to His power, prompting others to trust Him, too.

And we could add story on top of story to that list of five.

- Negatively, notice that it was when the Israelites believed the report of the ten faithless spies rather than trusting that God could deliver them against overwhelming odds that He turned them back to the wilderness. (Numbers 13-14)
- None of the older, stronger sons of Jesse were chosen to be king of Israel. David, the runt of the litter, was chosen, to highlight that God sees not as man sees. God sees the heart. (1 Samuel 16)

- Elijah called down fire from heaven on the sacrifices in the showdown with the prophets of Baal only after dousing the sacrifices with water. (1 Kings 18)
- God gave victory to Israel during the days of Jehoshaphat when they were threatened by Ammonites and Moabites. The victory came when they started singing. (How weak!) (2 Chronicles 20)
- The Assyrian armies died overnight by the hand of God after Hezekiah expressed his desperation to God for deliverance. (2 Kings 19)
- Daniel's three friends were miraculously delivered out of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. (Daniel 3) Then, against all expectations, Daniel was delivered from hungry lions as he depended on God. (Daniel 6)
- Nehemiah turned to God in desperation and prayed about the bad situation Jerusalem was in, leading to God's favor in getting the walls rebuilt.
- The church began to spread the Gospel to areas outside of Jerusalem ONLY when persecution forced them to go to Judea, Samaria, and to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8; 8:1ff...)

It is just as the prophet Zechariah wrote, [4:6] ***“This is the word of the Lord..., ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit’ says the Lord of Hosts.”***

### **Conclusion:**

A couple of weeks ago, I read something that really excited me. There is a new Christian film coming out called “Alone Yet Not Alone.”

It looks like it might be a good movie, but what I found most exciting was that Joni Eareckson Tada sang the title song AND that the song had been nominated for an Academy Award for “Best Original Song.”

There was a buzz in some places that Joni might be singing that song on stage at the Academy Awards ceremony. That would have been fun.

I say, “*would have been*” because as of this past week, for a variety of reasons, the nomination of that song has been rescinded. Joni won't win the Academy Award.

However, when it was still a possibility that the song was in the running, she was asked to give her thoughts about the whole thing.

In light of what we've seen from God's Word today, I thought that her remarks were well worth repeating.

First, she said this, *“When I heard the news I thought they were kidding,”*

Then, speaking about the song, she added, *“I really resonated with the words – after all, I sit down in a stand-up world and often feel ‘alone;’ but of course with my faith in God, I’m never really alone! The Bible is filled with stories of God picking ill-equipped, unskilled people for places of great influence – that’s how I feel, me, a quadriplegic, singing an Academy Award nominated song.”*

She concluded, *“Can you imagine how this might encourage other people with disabilities? It’s all about God’s power in our weakness, and I love the chance to advance that message!”* she says.

Today we remember that we are least in control of the things that matter to us most. Today we remember and exult in our weakness. We embrace Jesus' words, ***“Apart from Me you can do nothing”*** (John 15:5) and ***“With God, all things are possible.”*** (Mark 10:27)

Today, we affirm our dependence on God - and pray!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> On the YouTube recording of the song, “Alone Yet Not Alone” Joni prays: *“We are the ones that run to you when we are weak. And, uh, you know this body, you formed this body. This is a quadriplegic body. That is broken. My lungs are limited. But there’s this fine balance with presenting to you all of my weakness and thinking that it can’t be done. I don’t want to think that it can’t be done. So Father, I pray that you will mitigate any crackiness in my voice . . . and so, give me your strength.”*