LIVE OUT OF WEAKNESS AND VULNERABILITY PART 2

RECAP:

Last week Allan encouraged us to live from weakness and vulnerability. "Weakness means *the 'state of being weak; or a defective quality, as in a person's character."* Vulnerability means being *capable (or open) to being physically or emotionally wounded and open to criticism, attack or damage*." This reminds me that only people who do nothing are never criticised, wounded, or attacked. So, if you have never been… 😊

We looked at how, throughout the Bible, God chose to work through ordinary people who are weak, flawed and therefore imperfect. This is true throughout the Old Testament and the New. Paul boasted of his weakness rather than his achievements.

We discovered the gift of a limp because every human life has limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. John Wimber said – never follow a leader who does not walk with a limp. The Bible reminds us that *'this foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans*.' (*1 Corinthians 1:25 NLT*)

> *Allan's teaching last week reminded me of what I believed and how I behaved many, many years ago… I thought that the only way to achieve success, recognition and wealth was all up to me. So, I worked for too many hours and then spent a lot of my free time cycling, and what was left (not much!) was for Shirley and our two small children.*
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> *I was doing so well, achieving all the goals in my life, enjoying life, pushing ahead with what I believed was important, and doing it all alone. I believed that it was all up to me and so I isolated myself from Shirley, my friends and even God.*
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> *Then God intervened in my life, firstly I met an old friend who asked me how I was progressing in meeting God's goals for my life! (I wasn't!) Then we discovered that Shirley had a kidney disease, and there was nothing I could do to fix it! I moved from being strong on my own, to facing the reality that my strength was not enough.*
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> *I had to admit my weakness to God, and then be vulnerable to Shirley and my pastor before I started on my journey to living out of weakness and vulnerability. This was my starting point, but my journey continues, I'm still learning to be fully God-reliant and not self-reliant.*

Today we look at a few more pointers about why and how to live from weakness and vulnerability. To begin with, I want to share a deeply theological truth:

NO SUPER-HEROES HERE, JUST ORDINARY PEOPLE

There are no superheroes in this church family, another way of saying we don't have 1st and 2nd class Christians here, just ordinary people learning to love God and each other.

> ***Galatians 3:28 (MSG)***
> *In Christ's family, there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.*

I'm not certain if you've noticed, but we're people who make mistakes, and therefore we do not expect perfection from each other, and we exercise grace towards each other. Consequently, we practise forgiveness so that our hurts are processed with others correctly, and we don't decide to ignore people when they hurt us, nor do we run away and hide. Instead, we choose patience, love and forgiveness as our standard. We call this an adult-to-adult relationship.

We're a family where everyone is encouraged to share their life story, even stories of failure and weaknesses, and they are still accepted, supported, and not seen as inferior or lacking. This is not a once-off, 'this is who I am' event, it's an ongoing, lifelong story – our life and what's happening in it.

This a place where we can live without having to be strong all the time, and it's a safe place to share our fears and mess-ups. But it takes a long time for any of us to get to this level of trust in each other, and this is where our Discovery groups are crucial. So, to begin to live out of weakness and vulnerability begins by attending one of our Discovery groups. We must be intentional and committed to these groups.

I regularly meet with a small group of people, where we can share how people hurt us, how we've messed up, the wrong choices we've made…and yet we still love each other, care for each other, and encourage each other. We are just imperfect people still learning to love God and serve Him together. So, we cry and laugh with each other, a lot, in our choice to be authentic and vulnerable together.

GOD ALLOWS WEAKNESS AND VULNERABILITY SO WE WOULD TURN TO HIM

Last week Allan said that '*almost every believer has something that drives them to their knees daily*.' These challenges encourage us to turn to God, rather than trying to solve these issues ourselves.

Jesus lived with a group of 12 ordinary men who struggled with insecurity, pride, power, and position (or status). This was despite Jesus living the perfect life of humility, weakness and vulnerability whilst He was with them. Yet we know that Jesus was strong; He had to be to clear the Temple and chose to endure His trial and crucifixion. At His betrayal and arrest, He said He could call down thousands of angels for protection, but He chose not to.

> ***Matthew 26:53 (NLT2)***
> *Don't you realise that I could ask my Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and he would send them instantly?*

When we say, "I am strong," we mean that we do not need anyone's help, we stand alone and can complete everything on our own, even when we feel overwhelmed by everything happening to us and around us.

The world teaches us that '*going for it on our own*' is the only way to achieve success and recognition, and we admire those individuals who get this right. Think of South Africans Patrice Motsepe and Mark Shuttleworth or the UK's Richard Branson, and the USA's Bill Gates, and many others. All started with nothing and have built hugely powerful business empires and fortunes. We admire them for

Weakness is choosing to be neither powerful nor strong. Why? I believe that since the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden, each of us **have a choice between being self-reliant or being God-reliant.**

But God's plan for what happened in the Garden of Eden was to turn us back to Him.

> ***Genesis 3:16-19 (NLT2)***
> *16 Then he said to the woman, "I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you." 17 And to the man he said, "Since you listened to your wife and ate from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat, the ground is cursed because of you. All your life you will struggle to scratch a living from it. 18 It will grow thorns and thistles for you, though you will eat of its grains. 19 By the sweat of your brow will you have food to eat until you return to the ground from which you were made. For you were made from dust, and to dust you will return."*

At first, this appears to say to us '*Be strong to survive..'* but when we try this on our own we become overwhelmed by the constant struggle and pain. Only when we choose to follow God's plan to depend on Him by accepting His strength and wisdom, not ours, do we begin to live in weakness. For this reason**, the spiritual practice of surrendering to Him daily is foundational to living in vulnerability and weakness**.

> ***Matthew 11:28 (NLT2)***
> *Then Jesus said, "**Come to me**, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

A life of weakness and vulnerability is not comfortable, and we prefer the easy trouble-free path that leads into the trap of hardening our hearts. This is why we refuse to be vulnerable. When we give other people the impression that we're always perfectly strong and perfectly capable, we create a standard that anyone who is struggling believes they cannot achieve. Then they feel they're inferior and start to withdraw.

Being honestly vulnerable or sharing our fears, failures, and struggles, needs some care. We don't share all the intimate details of our life with everyone, I call it '*hanging out our washing but not our underwear*.' We only share these intimate details with people we have known for a long time and trust unreservedly.

As Allan said last week, sharing our life struggles, failures and victories with others helps them fully identify with and trust us. And that is the beginning of a true discipling relationship. If this isn't enough to encourage us to begin living like this:

GOD INVITES US INTO WEAKNESS AND VULNERABILITY.

Let's turn to Luke 15:11-32. Many of us will know this as the parable of the Prodigal (or lost) Son. Some translations call this parable the love of the Father.

> *Luke 15:11-32 (NLT2)*
> *"A man had two sons. 12 The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.*
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> *13 "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. 14 About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. 15 He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. 16 The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.*

17 "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home, even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, 19 and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."' 20 "So he returned home to his father.

And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' 22 "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. 23 And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, 26 and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 27 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

28 "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, 29 but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. 30 Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!' 31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. 32 We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

There is a painting by Rembrandt van Rijn, currently a part of a collection of his works in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Painted in about 1667, it shows the younger son, the elder son, and the father. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Return_of_the_Prodigal_Son_(Rembrandt)



Let's look at this beautiful visual aid that reveals brokenness, weakness, humility, and vulnerability.

THE YOUNGER SON: A PICTURE OF BROKENNESS

Remember that the younger son wanted his inheritance early, he may as well have said to his father 'I see you as dead and want my share now!' In the brashness of youth, he thought he could leave home, spend money and do everything. So, he spent time partying, but when his money ran out, so did his friends!

He reached the 'end of his rope' whilst feeding pigs. For the Jews listening to Jesus, this was the worst of insults. Then he started on his journey home.

In the painting we see him in beggar's clothes, bald (another insult), having lost a shoe (also an insult in that culture), but kneeling before his father, begging for forgiveness. He had realised he could not change his circumstances alone and, broken, sought only mercy. Notice how his father holds him to his chest, giving him love and acceptance.

The younger son's brokenness is a picture of our Christian life. We acknowledge our need for God when we first acknowledge our sinfulness before Him. From then on, we try to live our lives constantly aware of our own brokenness and vulnerability before God as we intentionally "*lean into God*" (quoting Peter Scazzero. We "*lean into God*," when we put our trust in Him, no matter the circumstances we are facing. Faith (*i.e. trusting God with our life*) is the evidence of things we cannot see, for example, the future.

> ***Hebrews 11:1 (NLT2)***
> *Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.*

In faith, we know that we are God's children, His beloved and His favour rests on us. But we can choose to leave this place of grace, especially when we listen to the world's expectations that try to persuade us that we are neither accepted, nor good enough and we only become good by 'earning goodness' through what we do.

Many of us can identify with this, *we've been taught that perfection is our only standard, and so we live constantly with the fear that we'll be fired if we do not live up to this standard.'* Then we try hard to please people, to achieve success, and to be recognised, believing this is the way to peace and success. In the process, we disobey **God's gift of limits**, leaving the place of the Father's love and ending up lost.

But when we remain surrendered to God, receiving His love, resting in His embrace, and being intentional about remaining fully aware of how fragile we are, we see a small glimpse of "*how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is*").

> ***Ephesians 3:17-19 (NLT2)***
> *17 Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. 18 And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep His love is. 19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.*

THE OLDER SON: A PICTURE OF LOSTNESS

Also in the painting, we see the older son, standing apart from the celebrating father and his brother. He appears to be judging, annoyed, and disapproving of his father's lavish reception of his younger brother.

Although the older son has done nothing wrong, his heart is far from right. He is, in fact, more lost than his younger brother because he cannot see how lost he truly is. His devotion to respectability, self-righteousness, and duty has blinded him to his condition. Despite living in his father's home, he has also left home emotionally, drifting far from his father's love.

To me, this is a warning that we can obey God's commands, serve in God's house, and still be lost. I can appear to be near God and yet actually be very far from him. *When we are not intentional and purposeful about embracing our weakness and vulnerability before God every day, we become the older son.*

I know I am falling into the '*elder son behaviour pattern*,' when I hold on to my anger rather than process it, complain and critical about everything, and have difficulty

letting go of personal hurts. In other words, I'm not behaving in an adult-to-adult relationship.

ENCOURAGED TO BE WEAK AND VULNERABLE EACH DAY

Every church family has both younger sons running away and older sons who are angry and grumpy. **I know, some days I get to be both**. This is why it is crucial for us to base our spiritual life on the discipline of exercising vulnerability every day.

Last week we heard about a theology of weakness and embracing the gift of a limp. Today, we learnt about intentionally surrendering to God, acknowledging our weakness and vulnerability each day, and then we live out of weakness and vulnerability.

This is our journey, it will not be short, but we know that God will complete his work in us.

> ***Philippians 1:6, NLT***
> *And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*

Amen.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Let's face it, creating a healthy discipleship culture flows out of who we are as leaders, which means the stakes are especially high in those moments when our weaknesses and flaws are exposed. And these moments come to all of us.

I Know I Am Being Proud and Defensive When . . .

_____ I am guarded and protective about my imperfections and mistakes.
_____ Those close to me would describe me as defensive and easily offended.
_____ I easily notice the flaws, mistakes, and imperfections of others.
_____ I give my opinion a lot, even when I am not asked.
_____ I am quick to advise or fix things before they fall apart.
_____ I struggle with holding grudges and with asking forgiveness.
_____ I rarely ask others for feedback on how I can improve or change.
_____ I find it hard to ask others for help.
_____ I find it difficult to say, "I don't know" in front of others.

It's simply an expectation to be teachable, vulnerable, and willing to do ongoing work on your own issues.

IT FILTERED INTO THE WIDER CULTURE

Once our leaders were making progress, we began to be intentional about developing a wider church culture based on weakness. As you might imagine, it was not a transition that happened quickly.

We began by using every opportunity to invite people to testify about **how God meets them in their failures and frailties**. We wanted people to acknowledge the cracks in their soul—whether they came as a result of their own sins or of sins committed against them. We used worship services, marriage and singles retreats, equipping classes, baptisms, small groups, and other events to encourage people to tell their stories of weakness. Initially, this was frightening for many people. But we found that our coaching and one-on-one conversations created a safe environment for people to step out by faith and share honestly.

It transformed, and continues to transform, the culture of our community.

Today, it's not uncommon in our services to hear from a recovering heroin addict who leads worship *and* from a respectable, middle-class father of three who struggles with pornography. Weakness and vulnerability runs through every person's story. And so we look for any opportunity to create safe spaces where our people can connect from a place of mutual vulnerability.

PRACTICE VULNERABILITY DAILY

able to be easily physically or mentally hurt, influenced, or attacked:

Vulnerability as a lifestyle is difficult—I know this only too well. A few of the pressure points where I am tempted to not be vulnerable today include:

- Not learning from young leaders who are breaking new ground with dreams and insights from God. It's easier to say, "Been there and done that!"

- Not creating environments in which people feel free to give me constructive criticism and different points of view. It's easier to say, "It sure seemed great to me!"
- **Not integrating limits on a larger scale as I grow older**. It's easier to act as if I am not slowing with age physically or emotionally.
- Not treating my four adult daughters as adults, learning from their wisdom and journeys. It's easier to give them answers to questions they are not asking.
- **Not dedicating time to continue growing in my marriage** with Geri. It's easier to say, "We've done a lot of work and are doing fine. I don't want to change any more."

STAY THE COURSE

You can be sure that when you take steps to live in vulnerability and weakness in leadership, you will have to deal with multiple fears and questions. If you are like me, your mind may be gravitating to worst-case scenarios. When that happens, let me encourage you to stay the course.

In this chapter, we have explored **four core characteristics** of churches that embody weakness and vulnerability:

1. they develop **a theology of weakness**,
2. embrace **the gift of a handicap**,
3. transition to becoming **a church based on weakness**,
4. and **practice vulnerability daily**.

As you consider the complexity of such a transition, let me assure you that there really is a resurrection awaiting you and your ministry on the other side of this journey. In fact, you can rest and relax in the truth that this is anchored in the heart of Christianity—life comes out of death, the humble are exalted, the last are the first, and the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Let me invite you to adjust your expectations in prayer. God has used the following prayer to encourage me to stay on this journey of weakness and vulnerability. I pray it grants you strength as well:

> *I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*
>
> *I asked for health that I might do greater things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*
>
> *I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise.*
>
> *I asked for power that I might have the praise of others; I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*
>
> *I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*
>
> *I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all people, most richly????*