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## Foreword

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# Before You Begin ...

If ever a book title described me, it's this one.

Years ago, when I took that fateful dive into shallow water and broke my neck, never did I think that God was honing me for leadership. All I could do was retch at the thought of sitting down for the rest of my life without use of my hands or legs. But slowly over time, God began opening doors and expanding my sphere of influence. I became a leader by default. And no one was more amazed than I.

Yet that's also the way things happen in the Bible. A Christian's suffering is always filled with surprise packages. God delights in handpicking people for leadership who are either stumbling bumbler*s* or simply weak and ill equipped. It's what he did with Gideon. Right after God told Gideon that he was to go up against the

Midianites, God whittled his army down to a mere three hundred. Anyone will tell you, that's no way to win a war. Yet when Gideon crushed the Midianites, everyone knew that God had done it.

Sorry to disappoint you, world. It's just the way God enjoys getting things done. Consider how the Lord designed his gospel to go forth. When Jesus was ministering on earth, the twelve disciples—just common folk with ho-hum jobs—sort of half-believed in their Savior. The whole kingdom agenda looked like it was going nowhere.

Now, if I were God, I would do it differently. I'd pick the smartest men and women to be on my strategy team. I'd draft the world's sharpest millionaires to finance the operation. My public relations people would be the most effective communicators anywhere. Weak people need not apply. Those with physical defects? Forget it. People who might slow down my progress? Never.

Thank the Lord that I am not running the world. *He's* in charge. And he opens his arms to the weak and ungifted, the unlovely and unlikely. He opens his arms to sinners. It's because of his great love. It's also because this is the way God does things to bring maximum glory to himself.

My friend Scott Sauls has written an extraordinary book for people like me. *From Weakness to Strength* will force you to forget everything you've ever been taught about personal power leading to effective leadership. As a psychologist-friend once told me, confidence, charisma, and chutzpah count for little over the long haul. The leaders God chooses are often more broken than strong ... more damaged than whole ... more troubled than secure. God's greatest leaders do not rise up from a bed of roses; they rise from beds of nails.

It's why I thank God for my wheelchair—it is the bruising-of-a-blessing that has made me appreciate my failures and weaknesses. Never would I have dreamed I would serve God as an international disability advocate or an influential author. Never did I dream God would use me to influence the church or special-needs ministries. But it's the dream I am living. All because I have come to realize that God's most effective leaders don't rise to power *in spite of* their weakness; they lead with power *because of* their weakness.

I encourage you to read slowly and carefully the book you hold in your hands. It's filled with rich insights and sage wisdom. For Scott understands weakness. He resonates with people who have stumbled and fallen. And his friendship is one of my special joys of being in Christ's kingdom.

So, grab a cup of coffee and begin turning the pages of *From Weakness to Strength*—by the last chapter, you'll be shaking your head and thanking God for *your* bruised blessings, whether they be failures, botched surgeries, slowness of speech, long-standing losses, or maybe even a fateful dive into shallow water.

And may I say, from a fellow journeyman down the blood-stained road to Calvary, thank you for boasting in your weakness, delighting in the insults, and glorying in your suffering. It's the cast iron that makes you a ... *leader*.

Joni Eareckson Tada  
Joni and Friends International Disability Center  
Agoura Hills, California

# Reflection

Scott Sauls's new book means more to me than it could possibly mean to most of you. That's not a boast, just an expression of affection for a dear brother with whom I've shared many seasons of leader-life over the course of our twenty-year friendship.

I am proud of Scott, but more so, I love him. I really want you to read this book, take it to heart, and buy copies for other leaders. And I want you to understand why it's not just another book on leadership.

Until leaders have suffered, and have learned to steward their pain, they don't really have much to offer. They may build a big platform and develop a cool "brand," but little else of lasting value.

I trust Scott to write this book, because for two decades I've had the honor of watching him increasingly boast in Christ, and in his own weaknesses. The longer I've known Scott, the more vulnerable he's become and, paradoxically, the more effective as

a leader. And he's allowed me the privilege of walking with him during some of his most challenging seasons as a leader.

But I've also experienced Scott's willingness to enter the brokenness and vulnerability of other leaders as well—namely, me.

Scott first reached out to me when he was a young church planter in Kansas. I was a “seasoned” and, seemingly, successful church planter in Franklin, Tennessee. It didn't take me long to be drawn to Scott. When he first called, he didn't ask me for anything. He was simply intrigued with reports of what God was doing in our church family and wanted to encourage me.

Soon after our friendship began to grow, our Father took me into a painful season of breaking and healing—a season every leader will go through if they take the gospel seriously. God isn't nearly as concerned about what we're doing for Christ as he is committed to forming Christ inside us. God appointed a big fish to slow down and humble Jonah. He appointed a burnout for the same purpose in my life.

As a leader, I needed to discover the disparity between my outer success and my inner mess. I needed to own the disconnect between my head and my heart. I needed to grieve how much more alive and present I was in my pulpit than I was in my home. I needed healing for heart wounds I'd been carrying for forty years—wounds I denied and medicated poorly. Theoretical grace works well on theoretical brokenness, theoretical sins, and theoretical idols. My issues weren't theoretical.

Whatever illusions Scott may have had about me as a leader of a big, thriving church were short lived. But the truth is, Scott

has never needed me to be impressive, smart, or sharp. He has always been just as comfortable with my struggles, weaknesses, and wounds as he has been affirming of my gifts. In fact, I don't remember Scott ever engaging me about pragmatic "shop talk" or ministry chops—as important as those matters are. Rather, he usually wants to talk about heart issues, relational matters, and the implications of the gospel.

Thank you, dear brother, friend, and partner in the gospel. May God increase your tribe.

Scotty Smith  
Pastor, author, and teacher  
The Gospel Coalition

*“To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

**2 Corinthians 12:7–10**

# Introduction

If Jesus were with us in the flesh today, I wonder if we would accuse him of being un-American.

For as long as I can remember, I have loved being American. Yet I have often been caught in characteristically American trappings such as the pursuit of power, money, recognition, prestige, selfish ambition, making a name for myself, and advancing my interests, my agenda, my goals, my comfort, my privilege, and my view of the world.

As a young man, I took a trip to Jamaica with a few friends. Part of our visit included a brief stop in a Jamaican art gallery. As an American follower of Jesus, I was alarmed when I encountered a Jamaican painting of Jesus and his twelve disciples. To my surprise, all thirteen men in the painting (including Jesus) had brown skin, brown eyes, and black hair—betraying my long-held image of the white-skinned, blue-eyed, light-brown-haired,

English-speaking, American Jesus who could have easily passed as the fourth member of the Bee Gees. As I imagined him, Jesus was decidedly *American*. For this reason, my gut told me that something was off—perhaps even *wrong*—about the Jamaican portrayal.

Or, perhaps, the fault was not with the Jamaican artist. Perhaps the fault was with me.

Now, more than twenty years since that Jamaica visit, I have come to see that my home country is not and has never been at the center of the Christian story. Rather, we in America are members of the “ends of the earth” about whom Jesus spoke in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16–20.

It turns out that the Jamaican image of Jesus was much truer to form than my culturally biased American one. The Jesus of Scripture is in all likelihood a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, black-haired, first-century Middle Eastern Jewish rabbi who never married, was materially poor, experienced homelessness, was more homely than handsome, never spoke a word of English, and never stepped foot on American soil.

Realizing these things does not take me to a place of shame. Rather, it takes me to a place of deep awe, gratitude, and worship. Through the corridors of time, from the other side of the world, and across language and ethnic and cultural and religious and economic barriers, this same Jesus purposed to include people like me—*Americans* like me—in his great story of redemption. Though Jesus is in many ways *un-American*, he is by no means

*anti-American*. He is for people like me just as he was for his own contemporaries. Through sheer grace and based on nothing that I have contributed, he has grafted me into his everlasting family, which, although it is *first* for the Jew and *then* for the Gentile (Romans 1:16), is no less for me than it was for first-century Middle Eastern Jews like Joseph, Mary, Peter, and Paul.

Jesus also offers a radically different understanding of what it means to be a *leader*. His vision for leadership often parts ways with the typical American view of such things. For example:

In America, credentials qualify a person to lead. In Jesus, the chief qualification is character.

In America, what matters most are the results we produce. In Jesus, what matters most is the kind of people we are becoming.

In America, success is measured by material accumulation, power, and the positions that we hold. In Jesus, success is measured by material generosity, humility, and the people whom we serve.

In America, it is shameful to come in last and laudable to come in first. In Jesus, the first will be last and the last will be first.

In America, leaders make a name for themselves to become famous and sometimes treat Jesus as a means to that end. In Jesus, leaders make *his* name famous and treat their own positions, abilities, and influence as a means to *that* end.

In America, leaders crave recognition and credit. In Jesus, leaders think less of themselves and give credit to others.

In America, leaders compare and compete so they will flourish. In Jesus, leaders sacrifice and serve so others will flourish.

In America, leadership often means “*My* glory and happiness at *your* expense.” In Jesus, leadership always means “*Your* growth and wholeness at *my* expense.”

In America, the strong and powerful rise to the top. In Jesus, the meek inherit the earth.

The apostle Paul enjoyed great professional success and all the position, power, and recognition that a first-century rabbi could have dreamed of, yet he declared:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:7–8)

And also:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling ... not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what

is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:25–29)

The record of Scripture confirms Paul's words to be true. Time after time, the greatest and most influential leaders were imperfect, uncredentialed men and women who would never be candidates for our "Who's Who" and VIP lists.

Joseph, who was disowned by his brothers and thrown into an Egyptian prison, later became the prime minister of Egypt. Noah, a man who got drunk and passed out naked, rescued all the species on earth from extinction. Abraham, at times a cowardly husband and dysfunctional father, became the spiritual forerunner of all who have faith. Isaiah, a preacher who was rejected by his contemporaries and sawed in half at his execution, became one of the most influential voices in the history of the world. David, the youngest of seven brothers and son of an obscure shepherd, became the king of Israel and writer of over half the Psalms.

Peter, a hotheaded fisherman and erratic disciple who denied Jesus three times, later became a bold truth teller who courageously gave up everything for Jesus and was crucified upside down. Mary, the unwed teenage girl from a small town, became the mother of God's Son. Ruth the foreigner, Rahab the prostitute, and Bathsheba the adulteress were honorably included in the family tree of Jesus. Paul, once a blasphemer and persecutor and bully and

racist toward Gentiles, became apostle to the Gentiles and writer of one-third of the New Testament.

And then there was Jesus, who came to his own—but whose own did not receive him—who had nothing in his appearance that we should desire him, who died on a trash heap as a condemned criminal. Through this excruciating loss, Jesus *won* salvation for billions of souls and prepared the way for all things to be made new. Now and forevermore, the government of the whole universe rests squarely on the shoulders of the One who was despised and rejected by men.

Indeed, the most impactful, life-giving, and lasting leadership rests firmly on the shoulders of weakness. *God chose the weak things ...*

... including me. How often I have pleaded, as the apostle Paul did, for the Lord to remove my thorns, my struggles, and the obstacles that beset me! Yet it has been in these very weaknesses and challenges, even heartbreaks, that God has revealed his power, strength, and sufficiency. Although the thorns are painful, they are a gift of grace to grow me into the kind of leader that I could never become without them.

In the pages that follow, we will look at eight common thorns through a biblical lens: unfulfilled ambition, isolation, criticism, envy, insecurity, anticlimax, opposition, and suffering. Depending on how we respond to them, these challenges will either make us or break us as leaders.

Whether your leadership takes the form of pastoring, parenting, mentoring, shepherding, writing, steering an organization, or championing a movement, I pray that the insights from this book will help you live and lead from weakness to strength.

Grace and peace,  
Scott Sauls  
Nashville, Tennessee