

STORIES THAT TELL: Of Weakness and Strength

Study 8

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[The Lord] ... said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (2Corinthians 12:9) ~ Paul

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5) ~ Jesus

True weakness is undefeatable strength ~ Geoff Bingham

MY WEAKNESSES

The Apostle Paul was acutely aware of Jesus Christ's gracious, great, moral power, and of his own disturbing weakness, by contrast. Paul was so fully blessed by the kindness of God, through the atoning death and risen life of Jesus Christ, that he could say that he was content with *insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties*, for *Christ's sake* (2Cor. 12:10). He knew the principle of non-violent, gentle, constraining love that genuinely suffers, for the great eternal benefit of others.

Paul recognised that the great love God, our Father, was revealed in the life, death and sufferings of Jesus Christ upon the cross at Calvary, as well as in his resurrection and patient, triumphant ascended Lordship. This love upon the cross—so seemingly weak, and unattractive—was and is, in the words of D.T. Niles that love which '*binds the whole world, every barrier it breaks, the hills it lays low, and the mountains it shakes*'. '*That love like a stream, flowing clear to the sea, makes clean every heart, that from sin would be free*'.¹ Through the proclamation of the gospel and the by convicting witness of the Spirit of God (John 16:8) to the hearts of sinful human beings (1Corinthians 2:1-12), the knowledge and power of Jesus Christ's love is made known, unveiled and revealed to the world. The principle is:

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Word of the cross is the power of God. The weakness of human beings arises from both a good origin, namely, genuine creaturely faith-dependency, and from an evil origin, namely the outworking of sin in so detrimentally affecting the normal powers and capacities of the human race. Geoffrey Bingham's book, '*Where Conies Dwell*', has poems, essays and stories all with the common theme of 'the power of God and the weakness of human beings'.

WHERE CONIES DWELL

The book title is taken from the story, based upon the little rock rabbits, or rock badgers, that are mentioned in the Bible². In the *King James Version* and *New International Version*, they are called 'conies':

¹ Australian Hymn Book, No. 105

² Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Where Conies Dwell*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1994, p. 21-27

Psalm 104:18 The high hills *are* a refuge for the wild goats; *and* the rocks for the **conies**.
Proverbs 30:26 The **conies** *are but* a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks;

The following excerpt picks up the thrust of the story, and of the book:

“Often the old statement about the conies has come to me—‘the conies are a feeble people’. I have looked at history and seen that the Christians are a feeble people. Oh, yes! they have had their hours of greatness. They have built great edifices, splendid cathedrals, monasteries of artistic architecture, and have accumulated the massive treasures of fine art, literature—scrolls and ancient volumes—and music that haunts whilst it edifies and inspires, yet behind all of this outward achievement is a little people, a small, feeble people, which at times is the scorn of great cultures, and the object of their ridicule. Only when the church emulates the politicking and warring of its enemies does it achieve like success with them. Left to themselves they are a little people.

The feeble people have inherited a great portion from the community from which they derived—another congregation of conies, the *qahal* or congregation of Israel. What a puny people were they! In Goshen of Egypt they grew up as a separate race, being subjected to slavery, their muscles and minds being tightened by the terror of their captors. Shepherds by trade, they were forced to make bricks, and their forced labour built them bodily and put iron in their souls. Even so, matched with the magnificent Egyptian army they were nothing. Chariots with cutting blades set in their hubs, fine trained chargers of horses could roll over and crush them. They knew they had to work, even to make bricks without the straw they had once been permitted to use.

They scarcely knew it when Moses—‘a proper child’—was born and saved from the slaughter that came to all male children. Unthought of by them, he grew up, being trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, but his blood-ties with his people proved too much and he slew an unjust Egyptian slave-master. He escaped at the age of forty into the backside of the Sinai desert and there grew as tough as any elusive cony. At the age of eighty he was commissioned to bring his people out of Egypt—and he did! He did it by God’s power, but what a flock of conies they were who often wanted to scuttle back to their Egyptian habitation and take up the relief of just being slaves once more! This cony-like people needed forty years of fashioning to enter the land God had promised to their patriarch Abraham.

As they entered the land, the inhabitants felt their hearts melt with the fear. Yahweh—the Most High God—has a way of using conies rather than kings. Suddenly conies are strong and fearsome and those who would have destroyed them now flee from them. Only when the conies thought themselves to be something did the danger come again; only when they forgot the principle which Daniel was to record later, ‘the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action’. In the ultimate it is the meek who shall inherit the earth. Moses, they said, was the meekest man on all the earth. But then even he exploded from his meekness into excessive anger—against the very conies whom he loved and for whom he was prepared to die.

Down through the centuries the Israelites alternated between being warriors who decimated their enemies, and fools who grew weak in their idolatry. ‘Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked’, it was once written of Israel. The new rulers of Canaan needed no hideout, no rocks into which to scurry. They grew strong as they knew God, and so they did great exploits, but their idolatry sapped the holy morale God had given them. Immorality, greed, loss of justice, and a wild carelessness overtook them as it does all conquering nations who have pride in themselves.

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And, guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word—
Thy mercy on Thy People, Lord!

Will we learn from Israel’s history? Have they fully learned from their own? They are in God’s hand, and many have learned the way of being quietly feeble. God’s plan for them, and their great climax in history will show that the conies of history’s rocks have survived not only the holocaust of a dreadful world war, but the enmity which Christ slew for them at the Cross. In that day the conies will come out of their holes, and they shall be valiant and do great exploits.

This rambling essay has a purpose in it. It is to show that the use of the term 'worm' for Man who has sinned is not inappropriate. It is correct. Yet man is more than a worm in the earth. He is a glorious creature reflecting the splendour of God when he will, in the cony spirit of humility. It is in this spirit of meekness that he will inherit the earth.

How quickly the early Christians spread across the face of the earth. How wonderfully they succeeded when they were simple, when they did not shape weapons such as their ungodly neighbours used. They did not fight the sword but endured it, taking its very thrust in their martyrdom. They were meek upon the face of the earth."³

Towards the close of the essay, Geoff writes of the truth of being *contingent*:

'When I am truly a cony, a feeble person, then am I a lion. Then can I do exploits for God, so God keeps me in the place of weakness and humility.' This is how we ought to pray. 'Despise not the conies for they are strongest in the end', should be a sort of maxim for us. Yet, if we were to leave it there we might have a lopsided view of weakness. True weakness is undefeatable strength. The history of the church is that when it became wealthy, landed, played power-politics, and sought to sway nations to be loyal to it, and did not primarily lead them to God and His great holy love, then the power they knew became a torment to them. Islam arose at one point of history to decimate such churches. At other times the church has foundered because it has taken up the philosophies and idolatries of its day, has set its sails to the prevailing wind, has absorbed the mores of its changing culture, and has done horse-trading—so to speak—with a people which refuses to know the true God.

Despise Not The Conies For They Are Strongest In The End

Often the church has been dreadfully mistaken. It has turned its pruning hooks into spears and its ploughshares into swords. Yet its Master was 'crucified through weakness', and 'gave his back to the smiters'. Being reviled he reviled not again, but committed himself to Him who judges righteously. Only a Cross can transform the peoples of the world: God is so weak He needs to use that Cross! *What humans see as weakness is really the heart of God's power.* The camp of God faces the might of Gog and Magog, and is threatened with annihilation, but the fire of God comes from heaven and destroys the enemies. God is on the side of the conies. It is 'the Lamb-as-it-had-been-slain' who breaks the scrolls of the sealed book and displays its mysteries to the world, by which all evil is finally defeated.

'The meek shall inherit the earth', and they shall also inherit the heavens. In the ultimate the battle is not to the strong, but to the weak—God's weak. Be encouraged little conies: your history is one not only of survival, but of taking on the eternal glory and ruling the world as a Kingdom of priests unto God and all creation!⁴

THOUGH HE WERE RICH

In this poignant story, Geoff Bingham has taken a current news story from the global TV media, and has provided an extremely valuable commentary, which richly contributes towards the formation of a practical hopeful, theodicy of suffering. We are confronted by a need for it! I too, can recall seeing this incident reported on television.

The other night I was watching 'A Current Affair' on television. I think it was one of the most moving events I have seen in my lifetime. It was to do with mentally defective and retarded children in Romania. Under the former Communist regime the children had been institutionalised by the Government, and crowded together into buildings substantial enough but which had the appearances—some of them—of being prisons. Virtually that is what they were—and still are. In the films taken of the children they were mainly naked, many of them pitifully thin, not at all like children as we know them, children generally being beloved and at least having the appearance of being cared for.

It would take reams of paper to describe the sadness of the scenes. I imagine the sight of them, comparatively brief though it was, will haunt many of us to the end of our days.⁵

³ Bingham, *Where Conies Dwell*, p. 22-25

⁴ Bingham, p. 26-27

⁵ Bingham, 'Though He Were Rich' in *Where Conies Dwell*, p. 195-205 - various quotes.

The government of the land wanted to put away children who were a problem in society—defective, retarded, idiots and many of them insane. Where could they be put in a collective society? The answer must have been 'Out of sight. Out of mind. Behind heavy stone walls!'

There is scarcely much point at this time referring to the lavish palaces of the President of Romania. He has been put up against a wall and shot for his vast perfidy on so many scores, but his death does not undo the evil of his time. The new government—whatever its qualities, and whatever its good intentions—cannot in a day or two undo the works that have been happening in these child asylums. Not only are they understaffed but for the most part are staffed by non-professionals. Here and there is a doctor, even a psychiatrist or two, but they cannot cope with the horrible institutionalised mess. The children have grown to be like animals, snatching each other's food at mealtime. Some eat whilst urinating and defecating on their little potties. Meanwhile their feet paddle in a flood of urine.

The old ideas of Bedlam have come to be with us again. Noise, clamour, idiocy are all there, but something far worse. Many of these children are not defective, many of them not retarded. Perhaps some minor ailment—their being cross-eyed, or imperfect in physiognomy, or something—has brought them into a hasty but faulty classification. Even in the brief showing of the films one could see the normality of some children showing through, even—here and there in a smile, in a brief showing of intelligence. Everything rose up within one to cry out for their redemption.

The pediatrician who was investigating the state of the children was herself in a constant state of indignation. We could see immediately that certain children were not defective, that many children could have been healed of their minor complaints, that the conditions of the institutions had cruelly numbed the children emotionally, and that many were dying of malnutrition even though not diseased. In some ways it was the scenes all over again of starving children in Biafra, in the Sudan, in other parts of Africa. The same staring rounded eyes, the aching shrivelled bodies and distended bellies, and the attenuated limbs.

Looking at it all I wept inside. Having seen my own fellow-soldiers as thin and emaciated within a prison camp, yet this seemed—if it were possible—even a horror beyond that horror.

This is the stark, confronting and difficult view of humanity, we really need to obtain:

As I looked I saw the utter poverty of humanity—the poverty of spirit that put the children into these places, and the complete poverty of the little waifs themselves. Days afterwards when my memory remained haunted by these tragedies the thought came into my mind, 'Is all humanity this poverty-stricken, this defective, this weak and emaciated, this deeply into some moral and spiritual malnutrition?' The answer came back abruptly, 'Yes!'

It was as though I saw afresh what I had known in many years, but had gradually moved away from fully believing it, that is, 'Man is utterly poverty-stricken, utterly incapable of true human health, utterly devastated as a human creature. He is pitiful, weak, undernourished, and ready to die without any rich prospect beyond death.'

The confrontational aspect of our own human evil comes to light as we know God's true love and what true humanity is in Jesus. As ever, it is the capacity of grace to transcend every evil of the human race, which is so gripping. Geoff again:

As I looked at those wasted little lives I thought of the pitying words of Isaiah: 'A bruised reed shall he not break and the smoking flax shall he not quench.'

I thought then, 'There is hope for these pathetic little ones. The God of hope can yet fill them with all joy in believing. He can cause the broken reed to become strong again, and the smoking flax has the promise of true fire to come.' All this promise lies in the Man of grace.

For the grace of God has appeared, for the salvation of all men.

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared . . .

'You know,' said St Paul, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

I recall one of Geoff's public comments at that time, being something like: '*you wait and see, if there are not some remarkable human beings, emerge from that horror*'.

1. Friends, tell the story! And the stories—and even the stories about the stories!
2. As *God's conies*, may we own our weaknesses, embrace our Christ, and go in hope.
3. **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might (Eph 6:10)**

STORIES THAT TELL: Appendix

Some Further Notes

As we did not mention all of Geoffrey Bingham's Short Stories Book, in this series, I thought it maybe helpful to include them in this Appendix:

SHORT STORIES ...PLUS

1. To Command the Cats	1980
2. Angel Wings	1981
3. The Translation of Mr. Piffy	1982
4. Three Special Stories	1983
5. The Concentration Camp	1983
6. God and the Ghostown	1984
7. The Days & Dreams of Arcady	1985
8. At the End of His Tether	1985
9. The Raymond Connection	1986
10. I saw in the night visions	1986
11. This Building Fair	1988
12. The Boy the Girl and the Man	1988
13. The Vandal	1990
14. The Stranger in the Cemetery	1991
15. Laughing Gunner	1992
16. The Boy in the Valley	1992
17. Twice Conquering Love	1992
18. Mr. Piffy Comes Home	1993
19. The Lion on the Road	1994
20. Where Conies Dwell	1994
21. Mr. Hicken's Pears	1995
22. The Return of the Lorikeets	1995
23. No Life Without Dryads	2002
24. The Artist in the Garden	2005

OTHER STORIES:

24. Where I love I live	1977
25. Bright Bird and Shining Sails	1981
26. Tall Grow the Tallowoods	1991
27. The Heavenly Vision	1987
28. Love is the Spur	2004

TRILOGY

28. Strong as the Sun	1994
29. Beyond Mortal Love	1996
30. Love Unto Glory	2003

POETRY

31. Harps, Viols and Goodly Guitars	1981
32. The Spirit of All Things	1992
33. Songs of War and Peace	1995
34. All Things of the Spirit	1997

Three Special Mentions: 'Coo! Coo! Coo! Coo!' in *No Life without Dryads*
'I Saw in the Night Visions', in *I Saw in the Night Visions*
Mr Hicken's Pears - is a book designed for use in schools