

Episode-211

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Joining me today is a good friend and author, Eric Schumacher. He's the author of the new book, *The Good Gift of Weakness*. It's a very interesting topic to write on. Not a whole lot of Christian bestsellers are on the topic of weakness, but I think this is a topic and a conversation that's important. So Eric, welcome back to the show.

Eric Schumacher

Yeah, it's good to be here, Shea. I am a big fan of Got Questions and just always love being here.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you for that. Tell our audience just a little bit about yourself and what led you to write a book on weakness.

Eric Schumacher

Yeah. So I, well, I'm a native Iowan, grew up in the town of Glidden and attended school with your wife, MeLissa, preschool through our senior year. And MeLissa's great. And so I, you know, I grew up in her shadow feeling weak. And so I thought I'd need to explore this.

Eric Schumacher

No, I'm, I've been married to Jenny for 25 years. We have five children, live here in Iowa, was in pastoral ministry for 20 years. And now, last October, I started full time as the pastoral ministry director for the Baptist Convention of Iowa. So I sort of do pastoral care for pastors. And you know, a lot of it is what led me to write on weakness. I think, really, it's an obsession with strength that I had since a very young age and I think entered the pastorate with, you know, in a Midwestern context, you know, we're self-reliant and in an American context, we love our strength, explosions, guns, big things. And I very much thought that to be a successful pastor meant I had to be strong and that good ministry, successful ministry would happen through my own, my own strengths, especially strengths relative to other people who were weaker than me.

Eric Schumacher

And that, in many ways, brought me to the end of myself, a big humbling when things weren't going the way I dreamed of them going and realizing I was powerless to produce the kind of outcomes that I dreamed about and ended up really coming face to face. God graciously brought me face to face with His grace and His unmerited favor and what it means to depend entirely on Him for everything that we are. And that got me thinking a lot about the idea of weakness and what the Bible has to say about it. And it's sort of an upside-down kingdom, very opposite of what we look for in the world.

Shea Houdmann

So, yeah, as we were talking before the show, just going through some of the frequently asked questions about weakness, so some of the articles have, what does it mean to boast my weakness? 2 Corinthians 12.9. What is the weakness of God? 1 Corinthians 1.25. What does it mean that when I am weak, then I am strong? 2 Corinthians. I'm noticing a theme here. It's Corinthians.

How has God's strength made perfect in weakness? 2 Corinthians. So far. So, as you study scripture, as you read this book, what are some of the key points in scripture that you found particularly relating to weakness?

Eric Schumacher

Yeah. Well, that's a hard question to answer because, you know, you mentioned Christian books written on weakness and probably the two of the best are 1 and 2 Corinthians. Though really, you know, this book, as you know, is an overview of the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation and what all of scripture has to say about weakness. And I was surprised and encouraged that at every point in the storyline of redemptive history, God is working through human frailty and weakness as opposed to the kind of strength that we worship. And I think one of the key points that I like to point out is that we were created weak. You know, I define weakness as the inability to act or produce an effect.

Eric Schumacher

And some of the pre-readers, some of the feedback I keep getting is that they're like, I'm stunned just this idea that weakness existed before the fall. We often think that weakness is a result of the fall. But just reading the creation narrative brings us face to face with the fact that we didn't create ourselves and we don't sustain ourselves. You know, we don't have the power to, you

know, God gives us food and he gives us a place and he gives us other people to live with. You know, it's not good for man to be alone. There's a weakness. We cannot fulfill the creation mandate in isolation. So just at the very beginning of the Bible, before sin even enters the picture, we're designed to live by faith in a good God who graciously gives us everything we need. And that sort of sets the tenor for the rest of the Bible.

Shea Houdmann

Oh, it does, for sure. One of the things that stood out to me, this is like going through the book, like, you know, I know so many people and I'm not immune to this at all that really, really struggle with admitting weakness. It's in our culture. It's in our personalities. It's learned, it's trained, it's observed. What do you say to someone who has been taught their whole life, like never ask for help, never admit weakness? How do you point them to accepting it as weakness is not a sign of, I don't know, it's not a sin. It's not a sign of a weak relationship with God and it's the exact opposite.

Eric Schumacher

Well, I think I would begin by reminding them that that's how God created us to be. I mean, even that point that it's not good for man to be alone, I will make a helper for him. And I don't think that speaks solely to men who are called to be married. I think that speaks to humanity in general, that we're not meant to be isolated individuals. We're meant to live in community where we help each other. And we all have strengths relative to each other and weaknesses relative to each other.

Eric Schumacher

God designed that as an ongoing picture of our relationship with Him, that we're always needing help. And I think that when we refuse to admit areas that we're weak and we need help, whether it's from God or from other people, we miss out on opportunities to display God's glory as the giver. And when we try to live independent and be sort of self-reliant, independent people, we are in many ways rebelling against what God designed us to be. Because weakness is really the platform on which God displays His strength and His provision. And Paul says, when I'm weak, then I'm strong. You know, Paul says also, you know, again, Corinthians, that's a great place to go to study weakness. God chooses what is weak and despised in the world, things that are accounted as nothing. And he's talking about God's people to

put to shame those that are counted as something. And the reason is so that no one may boast in the presence of the Lord. And so often, I think when we refuse to admit that we're weak, it's really because I think we want to take credit for things.

Shea Houdmann

Definitely. So when I, you talk about it in the book quite a bit, but the first thing that comes to mind about the value of weakness is the question we get quite a bit, like, what was Paul's thorn in the flesh? And so many people want to focus on, what was it? Was it physical weakness? Was it an injury? Was it eye problems? Was it? And that's really not even the point of the passage. But the point is, like, Paul's asking again and again, Lord, please take this from me. The Lord says, no. And he responds in 2 Corinthians 12:9. They said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. And Paul responds, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. So how do we get to the point of rather than refusing to admit our weaknesses and fighting against our weaknesses to rejoicing in our weaknesses because they teach us and force us to rely on God?

Eric Schumacher

Yeah, I think that passage you mentioned with Paul's thorn in the flesh, it's so interesting and praise God that in his wisdom, he saw fit not to let us know what exactly Paul's thorn was, because then we might limit it to that kind of weakness. But as it is, it's applicable to whatever kind of weakness we find. And, you know, Paul, it's interesting there because it's obviously something very painful. There's satanic influence involved in it because it's a messenger of Satan that's been sent to afflict him. And so it's real suffering, and it's suffering because of the fallenness and brokenness of this world. And Paul is, I think the fact that he says he pleaded with the Lord three times to have this removed gets the fact that this wasn't just he repeated the same prayer three times.

Eric Schumacher

I think, you know, it probably comes with the idea that he's maybe three serious periods of like fasting and praying, pleading with God to take this away. It's something that is very heavy on Paul, and he desperately wants it to go away. And that's where the revelation comes that Jesus says, no, what

you're going to see here is that my power, my grace is sufficient for you, and my power is made perfect in weakness.

Eric Schumacher

And that idea of being made perfect is the idea of coming to its fullest end, coming to its completion. His power is more fully displayed the weaker that we are because there's less of our own strength to account for. And so part of maybe the way that we come to accept our weakness and rejoice, even boast about our weakness and rejoice in God's strength is through the painful process of suffering, enduring pain over a period of time to where we sort of come to the end of ourselves and grapple with the fact that we can't create whatever it is we want. Paul can't remove the thorn from his flesh. And now he has to learn what does it mean then to live with this thorn, whatever it means, relying day in and day out for God to supply this thorn seems to take away.

Shea Houdmann

And then the quote in the passage that my grace is sufficient for you. That's one that's always interested me is like, how exactly is grace the solution in weakness? What did you learn in your research and of course, your personal experience on the issue?

Eric Schumacher

Yeah, it's, I think there's a lot of facets there because if my weakness is, let's say I'm starving and I can't get food for myself, what does it mean that God's grace is sufficient? I can't eat it. And so, and that kind of question pops up I think in any circumstance we end up finding ourselves in is what I think you're hitting on a very good thing. What does it mean that God's grace is sufficient? And there's various facets there. So one might be, I look weak and foolish in the eyes of people and they reject me. And there's no way that based on my external appearance or whatever it is that they're going to listen to me and hear the message of Christ. God's grace tells me I'm fully and entirely accepted by God. I don't need the acceptance of others because of who I am in Christ. God's grace tells me that He will never leave me or forsake me. So I don't need to worry about being abandoned by other people and rejected because of my weaknesses. God's grace reminds me that everything that we, you know, Paul asks, what do you have that you haven't received?

You know, we've received everything. So even my faith is a gift from God. And so He is the one who will sustain me and keep me believing in circumstances where I am afraid that I will lose my faith.

Eric Schumacher

And He's the one who is in the end, the gospel is the power of God for salvation. So if I'm ministering to someone, it's Him that will produce the effect as I simply sow the seed. And He's the one who feeds the ravens, you know, and counts the sparrows. And He values my life more than I do. He loves these weak things in the world like flowers and sparrows, and He values me even more. So I can count on His grace to see me in my need and supply what I lack.

Eric Schumacher

I think answering that question of like, what does it mean that His grace is sufficient is sort of to dissect whatever situation we find ourselves in weakness and pull apart all the little facets of that weakness and then see how the grace of God in Christ applies to every one of those.

Shea Houdmann

Well said. Grace is not just for salvation, it's an ongoing, we need it for everything in our life. And as we said, God's grace is perfected in our weakness. And to me, even the gospel itself, it's the one area in the Christian life where we absolutely have to admit our weakness in the sense that we can't save ourselves. We are utterly, completely unable to contribute anything to our own salvation. God has to provide for the salvation.

Shea Houdmann

And we don't need to get into Calvinism versus Arminianism, but God has to do some sort of work in us to even enable us to believe. So we are so weak in that area. And it seems strange that many Christians, well, yeah, salvation is 100% God. I didn't contribute anything. I am utterly unable, completely weak in terms of fighting for my salvation. But then when it comes to their day-to-day Christian life, admitting weakness in that area, like, I can't do this. I can't overcome the sin of my own. I can't accomplish this. I can't do this thing you're calling me to, God. Admitting weakness in those areas is so much more difficult. Why do you think that's the case?

Eric Schumacher

I love what you said about the gospel is just the centerpiece of reminding us that we depend entirely on the finished work of Christ to save us. There's nothing that we contribute. We're the tax collector beating our chest saying, be merciful to me, a sinner. And we're recognizing that Christ's life is our entire righteousness. And His death on the cross is the full payment for my sin and the cancellation of my debt and the curse. And His resurrection from the dead is the guarantee of my future resurrection and life with Him. And His Spirit is given to me to empower me in all ways. And even Peter says, everything we need for life and godliness is given to us. We've received it in the knowledge of Him.

Eric Schumacher

And so, I think the reason that we forget or we're resistant to admitting weakness, the reason we resist admitting weakness in sanctification and the ongoing Christian life is that we forget the gospel. We forget that everything has been given to us in the finished work of Christ and all of its implications. And we can sometimes begin to think, well, my ongoing relationship with God, I need to sustain that by my works. And if I'm not good enough and I'm not perfect and I can't do these things, then maybe God's mad at me now. Maybe God's going to abandon me. He's going to forsake me. And we forget.

Eric Schumacher

No, it all rests on the one who said it's finished. And that actually gives us the freedom to try and to make an effort to go forward. Because if it depends on me being perfect and strong and all those things, then I'm never going to be that, this side of the resurrection. And so, you end up just giving up. Why even try? Because I'm failing as soon as I start. But if it's all finished, and I'm secure in God, I want to press on and keep going. And Paul says again, it's Corinthians, where he even says Christ became our sanctification. It's not just our justification, it's our justification, our sanctification, our glorification is all wrapped up and secured in Jesus. And when that is my controlling reality, I don't have anything. There's no risk in me going, God, I can't do it. In and of myself, I can't do this.

Eric Schumacher

And Scripture says Jesus isn't ashamed to be called our brother. That is amazing. And he's not going to look down on me and be like, oh, what a puny

wimp you are. Like, I am so ashamed that you're in my church. Father looking at us going, oh man, you know what? I kind of wish I hadn't adopted you as my son. No, he loves us. And like a good father or a good big brother, when we come and say, I can't do it. I need your help. He is happy to say, that's what I'm here for. That's what I'm here for, is to help you. And we actually miss out on knowing God as Father and Jesus as brother and Jesus as Savior when we're unwilling to admit weakness. The more we know our weakness, the more we know his strength.

Shea Houdmann

I know we're both big fans of Paul David Tripp. And that's one of the things I love about his writing is he applies the gospel, not just to salvation, but to everything in life. And to me, your book on weakness is such a great illustration of that in that we need to rely on God for everything in the Christian life. The gospel is not just, yay, we're saved. Now we have to do it on our own. No, no, we rely on God for sanctification. We rely on God for strength. We rely on God for wisdom, for discernment. All these things is such a powerful reminder.

Shea Houdmann

Now, before we close, there's one question I really wanted to get to. For you, this topic of weakness is not just theoretical. It's not just a theology. Something that you've personally struggled with and it involves different ministry callings in your life. So how did you learn or notice or recognize that you were relying on your own strength? And how did that then change even the direction of your ministry calling in the sense that I used to be doing this, now I'm doing more of this? Tell me a little bit more about that.

Eric Schumacher

That is a great question. And I want to echo what you just said. This is a very theological book, but for me, it was not a theological exercise so much as it was, I don't want to be overly dramatic, but a matter of life and death. There was a point at which in ministry where I had some dark nights of the soul where I despaired of life itself. I didn't want to live anymore at certain points because I think the altar at which I worshiped had become strength.

Eric Schumacher

Our hearts are mixed. I love God. I love Christ. I loved his glory. I genuinely wanted to see him glorified, but I also was very much in love with my own

strength and my own glory. And God exposed my worship of my own strength, doing ministry in my own flesh and thinking I'm going to be something great because I'm something great. And he showed me the emptiness of that.

Eric Schumacher

And if that was my God, a functional God, in some sense, when your God dies and isn't resurrected, you're without hope. You're without any hope of the future. And when my strength was shown to be the illusion that it was, there were so many things in life, and it's beyond just ministry. It's other issues in life that you realize, I can't change this. Even sometimes it's things that happened in the past. I can't go back and change this. And it feels like a thorn in my side for the rest of my life.

Eric Schumacher

And it made me so desperate for grace, just to know that I'm loved and I'm accepted and I'm forgiven and I've been made perfect in God's eyes. He's for me. He's not against me. And that's not dependent on who I am, but who Christ is. And so, what happened was I became much more – I don't know if comfortable is the right word. I don't know if you're ever comfortable sharing our weakness because it's so vulnerable, but it's made me more willing to be vulnerable about my own tendencies toward sin. It made me more vulnerable in my willingness to talk about maybe residual effects of the fall, like struggles with depression and anxiety. And to go – there were so many times to admit those things meant other people would look down on me and that risked my own reputation.

Eric Schumacher

But now I've just been more willing to say to follow Christ's example in Philippians two, that he humbled himself. It was voluntary humiliation to be able to stand before people and go, here's who I actually am. And I can admit all this because here's who Jesus is. And he's awesome. And what I found is that not only do I begin to just see God's power at work through me and in me, but I thought if I was this picture of strength and perfection, that would be attractive to make my ministry successful. But all of a sudden, you start talking about how weak you are and people start pulling you aside and they're like, hey, that's what I'm like. Can we talk about that? And they suddenly see

that you're a fallen, redeemed sinner, finite creature like them. Not something to be idolized, but you're like them. And maybe they can find hope too.

Shea Houdmann

Thank you for that personal touch. And for me, I've met people who study a doctrine or an issue and they've got all the theory, they've got the theology down pat, but never actually experienced what they're talking about. And so I know that was not the case for you. So I definitely wanted you to have an opportunity to share that at least briefly.

Shea Houdmann

In closing, this is a unique book. I think this book will challenge the way a lot of people think. But ultimately, who would you say the good gift of weakness is for? If you were to identify, I'm not going to allow you to say it's for everyone, but particularly, who do you think would be most encouraged or benefited by reading your book?

Eric Schumacher

Well, I guess if I say it's for the weak and the strong, that would be cheating because that would be saying everyone. I do think people who are strong will be challenged by it, who have relative strengths. But I really think it's for, who I really hope it serves, is people who are viewed as weak and undesirable and counted as nothing in the eyes of the world. People who sit in church pews, or we have pews anymore, and they sit in church. And sometimes we hear this idolization of strength. Oh, if the celebrity sports star becomes a Christian, that will really help the kingdom because they're so respected or whatever. And you begin to feel like, I'm really a nothing. And I want them to see, congratulations, that's who God chooses. That's the means through which God accomplishes His kingdom work most often.

Eric Schumacher

And so, I want them to see that and go, oh, wow, I can go try now to share the gospel or to serve people. Whereas I was previously waiting for the strong to come along and do it, I can just call on God and no matter what my ministry does or doesn't look like, I can trust Him to be at work in and through me.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, for sure. Book truly is excellent and eye-opening and thought-provoking. I love how it's kind of a biblical theology of weakness where let's go through the whole Bible and show how weakness is displayed in all of the

major biblical characters and how it is weird to say weakness isn't really a weakness. Weakness is God's design, which I love. Also, the personal touch you bring into it makes it way more practical.

Shea Houdmann

So, Eric, excellent job on this book. I hope it sells well. I truly think it will encourage and help a lot of people. So, if you would like to purchase Eric's book, we'll include links in the show notes and the description when this video goes live on YouTube and also at podcast.gotquestions.org. So, Eric, thanks for joining me again. I truly enjoyed our conversation today.

Eric Schumacher

Yeah, thanks for having me on, Shea.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast with Eric Shoemaker, the author of *The Good Gift of Weakness*. Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.