



# The *H. Mann Willbrook* Collection

## Chapter XVIII

### Strength in Weakness.

*And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. — Hebrews xi. 32–34.*

The history of our world is a record of wonders — wonders unsuspected, or at least unseen — wonders discovered, wonders achieved, all linked in an advancing unity, and in their purpose and relation to each other showing the highest wonder of all — the presence and power of God. Our earliest knowledge is of the wonders of the earth's creation; and all its marvels are to culminate at last in the great wonders of Resurrection and Judgment. There will have been wonders all along the intervening time. Talk of miracles! Think of the wonders of life; of the wonders wrought by human thought, and labour, and endurance; of the wonders that have been and still are wrought by human skill. Wonders in the world of matter: the Pyramids, the steam-engine, the great ship, the electric light, writing, painting, printing, and a hundred other common things of daily life, equally marvellous. And there have been wonders also in the moral sphere no less remarkable. Wonders of courage — think of all that pluck has accomplished! Wonders of virtue — are they not the most enduring of all? Wonders of love - is it possible, for example, to measure what has been done in the world by the force of mothers' love alone? And there have been spiritual wonders more wonderful than all the rest — the wonders of Grace, and the wonders wrought by Faith.

The chapter in the Epistle to the Hebrews, from which the verses at the head of this paper are taken, is a category of some of the wonders wrought by faith; and among them there are two very important but common-place achievements which often seem to me to be deserving of more attention than they receive. I refer to the words wrought righteousness, and out of



# The H. Mann Willbrook Collection

weakness were made strong. I rejoice to find that 'wrought righteousness' is placed so high among the victories of faith; it comes second only to 'subdued kingdoms,' and goes immediately before 'obtained promises;' so that the glory of getting the victory over sin, and the honour of doing right - for this is the meaning of 'wrought righteousness' — is equal to the highest glory resting upon any of those conquerors of the past whose names are upon God's roll of fame.

But it is the other of these every-day, commonplace achievements for which I here desire your thought — out of weakness were made strong.

Now the weakness from which the Prophets and worthies of old suffered was similar in many respects to that with which we have to deal today. Human nature remains ever very much the same. But out of their weakness they were made strong. Let us see how it is with us.

1. And, first of all, there is physical weakness. Many of the greatest of God's warriors have been very weak and feeble creatures physically. Whatever they may have been in spirit, in the body they have often been little more than shadows. It is well known that, among the most triumphant of the martyrs of the early Church, there were delicate girls and little children, and that both men and women arose from beds of pain and weakness to go to the rack and the stake for their Lord. The history of the world teems with examples of great works accomplished for God and man by those who were dying by inches while they wrought them, and whose flickering lives became literally the vital force of the services they rendered. Nor does this apply only to the past, for unto this very day we have constantly before our eyes the achievements of those who are the weak, the delicate, the sick, who are the feeble folk of The Salvation Army. We have seen the shy, nervous, hesitating girl rise up, completely forgetting her weakness, while her appeals laid hold of the crowd, or while she poured out her soul to God in strong cries and entreaties for the deliverance of the captives. We have seen Officers go straight from beds of sickness and pain to the platform, and speak to the people like giants, without giving any one the idea that there was anything the matter. We have seen the heart crushed by personal grief, or worn by ceaseless care, readily and lovingly taking more and more on itself of others' griefs and cares. We have, in fact, seen in these and in a hundred other ways the fulfilment of these words, 'Out of weakness



# The H. Mann will. Prook. Collection

were made strong.' And faith has been the secret of it all. Faith in God, in duty, in the opportunity, in the future: above all, faith in the Divine Call.

Do you find anything of this kind in your experience? Is it not sometimes too easily accepted as a reason for not doing some unpleasant duty, or for not facing some serious difficulty, that you are not well enough, or strong enough — in fact, that you are weak? Was that the true reason? At any rate, was it a sufficient reason for your failure? Was it not merely an excuse? Was not the real difficulty a want of faith?

2. The same truth appears when we consider intellectual weakness. For here, again, God has 'chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty, and the things that are not to bring to nought the things that are.' How many people I have known — I do not need to go further afield than my own observation in this matter — whose mental powers have been of the very simplest type; people who have had practically no education, no reading, no mental training; and yet who out of weakness have been made strong in His cause, and have been mighty with 'the mind that was in Christ'!

Take an example of what I mean, an example which must have come within the knowledge of many Officers who will read these lines. Can we not call to mind cases of young Officers who, when they began their service, were terribly deficient in mental power? It was the greatest labour for them to think out any message for their people. In personal conversation they rarely impressed any one as having any gifts at all. In fact, they seemed to lack the very elementary capacity necessary to acquire knowledge, much more to influence the minds of others; and we sometimes wondered how on earth it came about that they were Officers at all. And then, as the years went by, we met the same people again in order circumstances, and discovered to our surprise their power. With what success they could speak to the crowd, with what freshness of thought and word they could clothe the old truths, and how wonderfully memory and habit had both contributed to bring them to the front, so that we were compelled to say, 'the last has become first!' Out of their weakness they were made strong,



# The *H. Mann willbrook* Collection

Now, I am well aware that such a transformation as this can only be accomplished by dint of industry, patience, self-restraint, self-control, self-denial. Nothing which is worth having in this world can be had without those things. But, at the same time, I am quite convinced that their means alone would not have sufficed to bring about such a change as I have described. Indeed, those means would probably never have been employed even, much less have been effectual, had it not been for the presence of that other force — faith. Look below the surface, and you will find that the motive power in all this was faith in God. Faith enabled these men to struggle on, to think, to learn, to master their own weakness; nay, more, it was faith in God which was at the root of the very desire to conquer; it was faith in God that led them to dare to hope that in those points where their weakness and insufficiency were most conspicuous, even there they might yet be made strong.

3. Then there is moral weakness. The greatest of all the wonders of God are those wrought in character; that is, in the moral nature of man. It is, for example, a greater achievement to change a man who is false by nature, whose whole being leads to what is untrue and unreal, into a man who is true and straight, than it is to heal a leper of his leprosy or to create a star. Our nature has become so demoralised by the Fall, and so weakened by generations of sin, that moral weakness is the greatest weakness of all.

And, yet, look at the marvels which have been wrought by faith even here. I thank God for the triumphs that I have been privileged to know! How many Officers there are on whom I can lay my hand, who, when I first knew them, were so lacking in strength of character — in what we call 'moral force' — that it seemed impossible that they could ever be qualified to take positions of authority and responsibility, but who — so wonderfully have they been strengthened — are already in the very front ranks of influence and opportunity amongst us, or soon will be.

That man with the weak and imperfect will, the wobbling nature, with all his uncertainties of choice, the wavering mind and unfixed purpose, — I see to-day that he has been completely transformed. That woman whose whole being a little while ago seemed but a flood of emotion, and about whom even the Training Home authorities doubted whether she had any real anchorage at all, so easily was she lifted up at one moment, only to be cast down the next, I see



# The H. Mann Willbrook Collection

her today with a renewed mind, with an inflexible determination, and I find her pointing to covenants in her life which she is able to declare have never been broken, while those for whom she labours find her abounding in the love of God and of her fellows, steadfast and unmovable in her devotion as the mountains that are round about Jerusalem.

Out of their weakness — Weakness of will, weakness of affection, weakness of purpose, weakness of character of one kind or another — these people have been made strong.

4. Then I must also name spiritual weakness. Long after men are saved — yea, often after they are sanctified — there still remain spiritual weaknesses and infirmities in their nature, which are amongst the greatest trials that fall to the lot of sincere souls. It is this form of weakness which gives the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil their grappling point. We are ever assaulted where we are the weakest; the struggle is always most severe at the point where we are most likely to fail. It is, above all others, at that weak point that we must win, or all will be lost.

Now, I am very far from limiting the power of God. I do not know that any man has yet discovered how much our Lord will do in the way of hardening the soul against attack, and making it so strong that nothing can move it. But I am not thinking just now of that, nor do I think this wonderful passage refers to it. I am thinking rather of those experiences in which personal trials and strong temptations are allowed to remain with us for the very reason that, amidst them, and in spite of them, we may prove victors. I do not know what that sore trial was which Paul called the 'thorn in the flesh.' It may have been some physical infirmity, it may have been some moral weakness or insufficiency intimately associated with his spiritual life, and with his work as an Apostle. All that we know is, that he cried to God thrice that it might be removed. But it was not removed. On the contrary, instead of being taken away, it received a kind of confirmation from God as a part of the Apostle's life. My grace is sufficient for thee, He said. In other words, Paul was to be made strong while in his weakness; he was to struggle on, conquering, not by reason of his strength, not by reason of those miracle-workings, of which I spoke just now, transforming



# The H. Mann will Brooks Collection

his nature, but conquering by simple, child-like, common-place faith in the ever-present power of his Saviour's grace.

My Dear Comrade, does your experience square with this? Are you — I hope not — among those foolish persons who are waiting for some great change to take place in you which will enable you to show yourself strong because you are strong? Are you looking for some far-off event — which, although you get older, does not seem to get much nearer — that will give you the victory always, because no trial will be able to try you, and no temptation to disturb your peace? Or are you living — I hope you are — like our dear Paul, day by day conscious of your own weakness, dependent every hour upon God, and humbly crying to Him in the midst of the fight against evil, and from amidst the struggles with your common trials, 'Master, I trust in Thee that out of this my weakness Thou wilt make me strong'?