

“Do I Really Have to Be Vulnerable?”

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2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NRSVUE)

(God) 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. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

There are over 700,000 words in the Bible. So if you’re looking for a specific word or phrase, or if you’re searching for what the Bible says about a particular topic, it’s not always easy to find. Of course, these days you can use an internet search engine or AI to look up a subject in the Bible – or at least how it interprets what you’re looking for. In the years before the internet, we used something called a concordance to find the instances where a word appeared in scripture. Many Bibles still contain an abbreviated concordance in the back among the indexes. Other concordances are almost as thick as the Bible itself.

Neither the internet nor a concordance will help you find *vulnerability* in the Bible, at least by that term. The word itself is not found in the pages of scripture. It didn’t become part of the English language until around 1600, derived from Latin and meaning “capable of being wounded.” As a concept related to personality or emotion, its etymology is much more recent.

But if we read the scriptures more deeply, we find glimpses of what we mean when we speak of being vulnerable. In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes about a weakness and learning to lean on God’s strength. He describes what he calls a “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know precisely what Paul is referring to; he never tells us. It could be an illness or a physical condition, chronic or debilitating pain, or an emotional or behavioral condition. Whatever it was, it was a hindrance to Paul in his ministry, perhaps observed by others as a deficiency, invoking commentary or whispers behind his back. And yet, in spite of this “thorn in the flesh,” Paul traveled throughout the known world, planted faith communities across the Mediterranean Basin and Asia Minor, collected funds for the Jerusalem church, suffered persecution from local officials and outside agitators, and continued to preach the Gospel wherever he went. That doesn’t sound like weakness to me; it sounds like a different kind of strength.

When Paul spoke of his “weakness” (his word was *astheneia*, which means “lacking strength”), what he was describing we would recognize today as vulnerability. Vulnerability is not weakness, though we often mistake one for the other. Paul experienced vulnerability as a leader with observable flaws, and by sharing his feelings about those flaws with the Corinthian church in his letter. Though the “thorn in the flesh” itself may have been experienced as a weakness, Paul’s leadership through it certainly was not.

Brené Brown writes:

Vulnerability is the core of all emotions and feelings. To feel is to be vulnerable. To believe vulnerability is weakness is to believe that feeling is weakness. To foreclose on our emotional life out of a fear that the costs will be too high is to walk away from the very thing that gives purpose and meaning to living.¹

How would you describe vulnerability? Complete this sentence: “Vulnerability is…” You can give a definition or an example. (Menti poll – read responses out loud)

Brené Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” *Uncertainty* – not always having the answer or knowing how things are going to turn out; *risk* – stepping into the unknown with the possibility of failure or loss; *emotional exposure* – sharing feelings or opening yourself to sharing feelings without knowing how or if those feelings will be returned.

Emotions are at the core of vulnerability. And some of us are naturally more expressive about emotions than others. But *all* of us have been conditioned or taught to suppress our emotions in one way or another. Men are taught that we shouldn’t cry. We don’t talk about our feelings. We’re supposed to be tough and impassive. Women are criticized for being too emotional. There is even a term created to dismiss women’s emotions: “hysteria,” which means a dysfunction of the uterus. We confuse *feeling* with *failing* and *emotions* with *liabilities*. Now, when we take time to examine cultural stereotypes, we know that they aren’t universally true. But through conditioning or upbringing, they become a part of our subconscious and linger with us. Yes, we are exposed when we are vulnerable, but “there is no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves to emotional exposure equals weakness.”²

But do we have to be vulnerable?

Well, no. And...yes. If vulnerability is *uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure*, then *not* being vulnerable is being *cock-sure, risk avoidant, and emotionally disengaged*. We can choose to be resistant to new ideas, avoid taking risks, and be emotionally closed off, but avoiding vulnerability diminishes authenticity and reduces opportunities for fulfillment. Being vulnerable not only *isn't* a sign of weakness, but weakness itself stems from a lack of vulnerability. When we don’t acknowledge our vulnerability, when and how we are tender, we are more at risk of being hurt. Think armor on the battlefield or a helmet in sports. Or the activities we choose and the diet we follow. Or the relationships we have and how we engage in them.

Another example to illustrate the point: social psychologists have studied how consumers’ perceptions of vulnerability affected the impact of advertising and marketing. They found that people who thought they weren’t susceptible to deceptive advertising were actually

¹ Brené Brown. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York: Random House (2012), 33.

² Brown, 37.

the most vulnerable to it. The researchers explained, “The illusion of invulnerability undermines the very response that would have supplied genuine protection.”³

One of the things that is so ironic about vulnerability is that we often value it in others but resist it in ourselves. We appreciate when someone is open and honest with us. We look for authenticity from our leaders and role models. We admire the courage of those who admit uncertainty, take risks, and are open about what they really feel. But we’re reluctant to practice those things ourselves. We are inclined to see vulnerability as courage in others and inadequacy in ourselves. Yet when we avoid vulnerability, we engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with who we want to be. Brown writes, “Experiencing vulnerability isn’t a choice – the only choice we have is how we’re going to *respond* when we are confronted with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (*emphasis mine*).”⁴

There should be, of course, some limits to how and when we choose to be vulnerable. Vulnerability requires trust. But trust is tricky. We need trust to be vulnerable, and we need to be vulnerable in order to trust. Over time, we learn who we can trust and who we cannot, often the hard way. Esau was vulnerable with Jacob, and Jacob stole his birthright. Samson was vulnerable with Delilah and she betrayed him. You don’t share your deepest fears with someone you just met. Some things can only be shared with those who are closest to us, who have demonstrated they can be trusted. Trust builds slowly over time, though it only takes a moment to break it. And trust must be learned as well as earned. Appropriate sharing requires that we have developed relationships that can bear the weight of what we want to share.

Vulnerability also requires boundaries. We need healthy boundaries about the appropriate ways and places we choose to be vulnerable. That includes sharing those things in a public way, like posting on social media. There is something to be said for having the courage to be honest about our struggles and being “real” in how we relate to others. But if we use vulnerability to gain attention, to deal with unmet needs, or to garner sympathy for emotional martyrdom, that isn’t vulnerability; it’s manipulation. Boundaries matter.

When Paul spoke of his thorn in the flesh to the Corinthian community, he took a risk. We don’t know what the thorn was, but we know that it created vulnerability for Paul. According to the biblical canon, this was Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth. But Pauline scholarship suggests that it was at least his *sixth* letter, and possibly even later than that. Over time Paul had built trust; he could share his vulnerability with some confidence. But he had also gathered opposition. Some people might use his vulnerability against him. So why take the risk? Paul’s choice to share was a valuable lesson – not about himself, but about the essential character of God. *First: God can be trusted.* God is not waiting to catch us in the act when we fail, but is cheering us on every minute of our lives and is there to pick us up when we fall. *Second: God’s grace is always sufficient.* God’s strength is far greater than ours. Nowhere is that more apparent

³ Sagarin, B. J., Cialdini, R. B., Rice, W. E., & Serna, S. B. (2002). Dispelling the illusion of invulnerability: The motivations and mechanisms of resistance to persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(3), 526–541.

⁴ Brown, 45.

than when we are vulnerable. It is a waste of time trying to evaluate our worthiness by weighing the opinions of others. Our value and worth are determined by God.

Being vulnerable is neither easy nor safe. But there is no authenticity without vulnerability, no reward without risk. The question we must ask ourselves is, “What are we called to do that is so important that we are willing to risk failure to do it?” Being a person of principle and character at work? Doing the right thing even when others are not? Having a conversation with someone who looks at the world differently than you? Going deeper in developing your faith by joining a small group or starting a new one? Sharing your faith story with your neighbor...and listening deeply when they share their story with you? Serving in a new capacity in your church, even if you don’t know whether you’ll enjoy it or be any good at it? Investing time and money in a ministry that stretches your comfort?

Brown developed her own “vulnerability prayer” that she offers when she is about to embark on something that stretches her: *God, give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.*⁵ Friends, may we have the courage to show up and be seen, for God and one another, as we pursue God’s hope for every life. Amen.



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⁵ Brown, 42.