

A Simple Guide to Walking on Water: Vulnerability

By Bobby Schuller

Well, today I'm going to speak on really what I think is the theme of Christianity, which is that in our weakness, God is made most strong. It's the theme of resurrection. It's the thing that, when I experience a death or a loss in my life, if I respond by faith in Jesus Christ, God will take any death, any loss, any huge disappointment and resurrect it into something better. And today we're going to talk about that.

We're going to talk about this passage from Paul where he says, "When I am weak, I am strong." And I love this passage because he doesn't say when I am weak, God is strong. I'm not always encouraged when I hear God is strong. I already know that. I want to know that God's going to help me, that God's going to be there for me and there's something powerful about this passage that Hannah read that we're going to talk about today that says when I am weak, I am strong. There's an understanding that when I become weak in some areas, I become much stronger actually in the areas that are important.

And so today, I'm going to say two things. And the first thing is that vulnerability, being honestly and openly seen, being seen deeply is one of the best things you can do to grow into a joyful person and a powerful person, but that requires faith.

The first thing I want to say is just, very simply, faith is the belief that God can use imperfect people to do impossible things. I think that God likes to use imperfect people because here's the secret – everybody's

imperfect. But the ones that you know are imperfect are at least honest. We see it through the scripture, I've seen it personally in ministry over and over that God loves to use broken, hurting, wounded people to make a huge difference for his kingdom. He loves doing that. He is called a friend of sinners for a reason. God loves to use people who are imperfect to do impossible things, and God's going to use you.

We always want to disqualify ourselves. But though you may be underqualified, you're not disqualified. You never are. God is going to use you in spite of your imperfections and sometimes because of your imperfections to make a big difference in the lives of other people, and for his kingdom. And so there's a certain gift in your own imperfection.

We should be vulnerable and honest about our weaknesses because that's when the great physician can get to work. And that's when we can connect deeply with others and make a big difference. So I want to say, in spite of your weaknesses and your flaws, God loves you so much. He has not given up on you. And that becoming a Jesus-kind-of-person is not an overnight thing; it is a process, it takes time, and it's hard work.

I have realized in ministry that trying harder has not made me a better pastor. That took me a long time to figure out. Early on in ministry, especially, so much of ministry was like swimming upstream, trying to manufacture things, trying to make things happen. But, the more I started living with the posture of an open hand and trust, and tried to be obedient to God, and really honest about who I am, when I started preaching and talking without a mask, and when I stopped trying to be different up here than I am when I'm hanging out with you guys, and I'm just Bobby all the time, when I'm honest and vulnerable, that's

when I started to make a difference. So, trying harder didn't help me in ministry. Letting go did.

And in marriage and in my friendships, being the tough guy and being the strong guy didn't make me a better husband and a better friend. Being the weak guy, the vulnerable guy, the deeply seen guy did. And that's still a process for me.

So, the first thing is this: When you are weak, you are strong because when you're vulnerable, you're actually very brave. And God uses those things to help you connect deeply with him and with others.

The second thing that I'm going to say today is a quote from my dad, and I just love this. He actually wrote a book on it. "When you're down to nothing, God is up to something." You've heard of that? When you're down to nothing, God is up to something. That is absolutely right. What? Yes, it actually says Bobby's dad. Yes, that's right. Guess who puts these slides together? I do. Well, no, let me say that again. Guess who puts these slides together? Hillary does when I email her on Saturday night.

Yes, when you're down to nothing, God is up to something. And this is so true. There is this bizarre rollercoaster experience in life that Christians, when we are in the valley looking at the mountain, that is exactly where we are going. Although sometimes we get to these places where we have literally lost everything, our faith is what says, "Yes, I've got nothing left, but God's about to do something great." If you live long enough, you start to see a pattern that when I lose a bunch of stuff, it's not really death; it's pruning. That very often when these things are taken from my life, I recognize that something spiritually is happening

that God's going to do something. If you're down to nothing, God is up to something.

I want you to know, no matter how deep you are down the hole, God is up to something in your life, and I want you to know, if you respond with faith, good things are going to happen. If you need hope, get it today. Good things are happening because God loves you, God has not ignored you, he has not abandoned you, he's not taken a break from you, he's not cut you off, he is with you. He is on your side, he is for you. And if you feel as though you've lost everything, have faith, and have hope, and even have joy.

In 2nd Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church and he starts talking about this thorn. And one of the things I love about Paul, he is very direct, sometimes brutish in his writing, but he's just him. He's just very raw. Like very much, this is me. This is who I am. Deal with it. Paul is a young man, was a Pharisee and a rabbi. And so Paul came from a new culture of rabbis where everything was hedged, and it was all about not only perfection, but perfection in protecting your perfection. So, it was like perfection to the law was like to honor the Sabbath, but perfection of perfection was don't spit just in case you might be breaking the Sabbath. So, they had layers and layers of stuff they had to do, and I know people and I know religion and can I tell you, I know the environment Paul was in as a young man. He was an idealistic young guy, he believed the old guys actually were perfect, and then he didn't recognize that probably a lot of those guys he thought were perfect were just really good at hiding things.

And I can tell you that in this environment, legalistic environments are always soul killing. And there's this thing that happens where you constantly feel like I can't keep up with these other people, they're so

holy. So now I need to be secret about some of these things I have in my life. I don't want to reveal these things that I have in my life because I'll deal with it later, I'll figure it out, I'll sort it out, and that is a death spiral. And what usually happens in those types of communities is everybody's doing that. And usually people melt down.

And so Paul was in this world of legalism – I have to be perfect. If you're in the kingdom of God when you do everything perfect and you're out when you mess up. He moved from that to an actual real encounter with the resurrected Jesus Christ where his life was completely transformed. And the first book Paul writes, Galatians as a young guy, is just smothered in grace. It's just God is so gracious and all of my good works are just junk compared to the glory in Christ Jesus. And it just goes on and on about how awesome and amazing the love and the grace of God is for messed up, broken sinners like me, Paul.

He moved from a world of perfection and management, sin management, to a world of grace. I remind you, and I want to say this every time, grace doesn't mean mercy. Grace is merciful but grace is an overflow of God's very person. It's an overflow of his love and favor for you. It's akin to in Greek, charis, it's what we get Eucharist from. To be thankful. There's a sort of gratitude and joy. And can I ask you a question? And this is a real question. Do you think God is thankful for you? That's what it reads in Greek. It reads like that. Charis, grace, is like thankfulness. I think there's something akin to that in the feeling God has for his children, for you and for me, and that's very good news.

Did you know when Jesus was baptized he was experiencing God's grace? He was sinless, right? He wasn't experiencing God's mercy. He didn't need mercy. He was experiencing overflow of God's love and power. When God said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," can

I tell you, that's what God says over you. You are God's beloved son. You are God's beloved daughter. And he's pleased with you. He's pleased with you.

I'm pleased with my children, even though they've never done anything that great. They're four and six. They've done some drawings and they've done this and that, but I take pleasure in them. I'm so pleased in them, but not because of what they do. Right?

So, Paul moved in this world of grace. And so he says I've got this thorn. I've got this thorn and it's been driving me crazy! And I pleaded with God three times to take this thorn from me. And you know what God's response was? "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness."

Real quick on this thorn thing, theologians for a long time have theorized about what this thorn is. It could be a sin in Paul's life, some sin he hasn't been able to defeat or whatever. It could be some kind of physical ailment. It could be a person. But everybody agrees on one thing: It's a good thing he didn't say what it was because all of us have thorns.

And he says, even though he doesn't say it in the passage, I boast about my thorn. I tell people about my thorn because in my weakness, I am made strong. He actually says I am made strong. When I talk about my thorn, when I talk about this, whatever it is - sin or this person or this sickness or this whatever - when I talk about it, I'm made strong. He said I delight in my weakness. I delight in insults. I delight in hardships. I delight in persecution for when I am weak, I am strong. I think there's something so good about that for, especially, religious people. That we are done trying to prove ourselves to others, we are done hiding, we're

done wearing masks, it's time to be honest and vulnerable. That we actually are human beings. That we actually do make mistakes. We actually do need help. That's a very strong thing to do, that's not a weak thing. It takes courage to talk about your thorns. That's not weak. That's very hard and very scary to do.

That's not what the world teaches us. The world teaches us to put your best foot forward. Show all your strengths, exaggerate your strengths and hide all your weaknesses. But in the kingdom of God, things are upside down. That's not what you do in the kingdom of God. You talk about your weaknesses. You show them first to God, and then to people who love you. You don't have to show them to everybody. Everybody hasn't earned the right to see your weaknesses, but you show them to the people that love you; people that believe in you, and you show it to God, and you say these are my struggles.

And it takes faith to do that. It takes faith. It takes faith trusting that something so radical will actually be beneficial for me and for others. Can I tell you? It is. There's nothing better than being vulnerable and honest and real, being truly you and being seen deeply by people you love and by God. God already sees you, but we trick ourselves into thinking maybe he doesn't see this thing. Maybe he doesn't see my doubt. Maybe he doesn't see my fear. Maybe, if I keep trying harder, maybe if I trick myself. So, in lying to ourselves, we think we're lying to God, or we think we're hiding something from God.

It takes faith. Faith says I do enough, I have enough, I am enough, and I have nothing to prove. That's a very hard and courageous thing to say. I do enough. You do enough. You have enough. You are enough and you have nothing to prove. All of the riches and goodness of heaven is available to you right now by faith. It takes faith to be courageous and be

honest. Very often, it's so hard. We feel like we need to make things happen, we need to manufacture, we need to push the people we love. We need to keep them from messing up. Faith says I'm going to let God be the pusher. Faith gives me the space to let God be the prover. Faith says I have nothing to prove. I just lean into grace and trust God.

I just so believe that one of the most toxic things for Christians is hiding and pretending. And one of the worst things that has been damaging in our message to society is hypocrisy, hidden people. Hypocrisy literally means actors – those who wear costumes.

Everybody's life has been hard. My life has been hard, too, actually. And I know people think, well, you had a rich and famous grandpa. That's true. I tell you, that doesn't make your life easier. My parents are both amazing parents, my stepparents are great stepparents, but there's something that happens to a kid of divorce and moving a lot. When I was young, I was a very tenderhearted. I was bullied a lot. And when I started playing sports and I got a little bigger and a little stronger, I became the tough guy. And when I was a kid, I felt deeply for people. I really loved people and I would cry when I saw somebody hurting and I would love to hug people, and loved to tell just about everybody I love you. And that was my true self. But through the woundedness and hardship of my life, I learned that it's much safer to be the warrior, to be strong, and to put on armor, and to not let anybody in. And something happened to my soul that I became calloused, and hardened, even to my faith with God, to the point where it was hard to feel emotionally.

I remember when someone very dear to me was on the brink of death. This is the first time I noticed my numbness. Someone I loved dearly. And in my head I was thinking that this is one of the people I'm

closest to, but I don't feel anything in here. And I knew something was wrong but I didn't do anything about it.

Ten years ago, I met with Bill Gaultierre who was a co-worker at the Crystal Cathedral, and happened to be a licensed therapist and a pastor to pastors. I only recognize now that he was totally planning on doing this, but we just started hanging out, getting coffee, praying together, and being pastors together. What I didn't realize for years and years, I was actually getting therapy. He tricked me into therapy! And all he was doing was teaching me to talk about the challenges of life: my stressful day, my wounds, what it felt like to have somebody insult me or disrespect me or to get my heart broken.

And I remember I started talking to him intentionally about this because I've always been a little bit of an obsessive guy. When I get something I'm into, I get really into it. And at the time, there was this totally innocent hobby that had just completely consumed my life. And I was talking to him about this. I said you know all I can think about is this thing. And I feel like it's hurting my friendships and my marriage and my church. And that was the beginning.

So this went on, me learning to be open and honest with Bill, and he started teaching me how to do that with Hannah, and with my friends. And it took years, but then it was like my emotional life, that kid that had become calloused and tough, started to come back to life. Have you ever fallen asleep on your arm, you wake up, and you could cut your arm off and it wouldn't even hurt. But you start to rub it and it actually is painful at first. It tingles and then it really hurts. That's what coming to life emotionally was like for me. And it happened because I started being vulnerable, honest, and receiving empathy from people who love

me. It's time that we get more vulnerable. It's time to start opening up and becoming more vulnerable.

And then this came to a head. So, I got to a place where I never cried, ever. And I started feeling my emotions again, and then it was the week my grandma Schuller died, I went to Holland. And I was preaching to 4,000 people in a cathedral who had come from all around the country to see me. And I was having this great sermon. It was so good and it was funny and everybody, I mean everybody was into it. And I started telling this story about my grandma Schuller when she was in her twenties and was pregnant. And I pictured my sister Christina, who at the time was pregnant, and something about that image, the death of my grandma, but picturing her as a pregnant young woman just locked me up. I completely forgot about what I was talking about, and I began to weep on stage and couldn't stop. I literally had to step away for about five minutes just weeping.

I think that was a very good thing. A lot of people there probably didn't understand why I was weeping. But even as it started coming back, I remember this is not long ago, two years ago maybe, I was telling some other story here in the second service, and I began weeping again. And I was saying stuff like oh I'm sorry, oh I never weep, I don't cry, I don't do this, and actually Chad pulled me aside, he's like don't do that. He's like if you're weeping, just weep, just own it. I was like, you're right.

So, this is not a finished testimony, this is a thing I'm in right now. I've recognized as a leader and as a husband and a dad and all of these things that those have nothing to do with being vulnerable and with being honest. I had to learn to be vulnerable about my pains and my wounds, and I had to do it with loving people, and I had to receive empathy. And you do, too. When you are vulnerable with the people you

love, it is not weakness; it's a strength. That's why you're strong when you're weak. That's why being honest when you're insulted and being honest about your hardships, being honest about when people persecute you or harm you or disrespect you, and receiving love and compassion and empathy from people, it's going to change your life because you create space for the Holy Spirit to enter in and go to work on those things. And it brings you to life emotionally. And almost more importantly, it allows you to become that person who feels what other people are feeling.

And that's hard sometimes. Many of you are very good at this. And you feel it as like a burden, like I always feel the hardships of other people. That's a good thing. Compassion literally means "to suffer with" when you suffer with others. It's not suffering that's the worst; it's suffering alone that's the worst. And compassion says you will not suffer alone. I am with you and you will get through this. And I have that for you. If you're down to nothing, God is up to something. You don't have to hide your failures, you don't have to pretend to be more successful than you are, you don't have to pretend to be holier than you are, you don't have to pretend to be a perfect parent or perfect grandparent, or if you're in ministry, you don't have to pretend to be a perfect pastor or teacher or whatever it is. You don't have to pretend anymore. You can be you. And you are loved, and God's proud of you, and I'm proud of you. I am.

Living in God's strength means that we move from shame to joy. Joy in the fact that some of these things, they just are what they are. And we can trust that God is going to work in them. Brene Brown, she did this study on how people connect deeply, and she found that the greatest thing that keeps people from connecting deeply with one another, the greatest human need to connect with others deeply, was shame. This thing, shame, is the main thing that gets between us and

connecting with God and with others. And that is the thing. Sin and shame is the main thing that Jesus came to remove from our lives. In fact, when you see Jesus on the cross, what we often don't show with Jesus on the cross is the shame. We show the woundedness and we show the pain, but Jesus was crucified naked. There was no loincloth. He was seen. He was beaten. He was treated like a pig, like an animal, and hung naked on a cross. And it is so important because the Savior of the world took our shame; he was shamed, that we could receive glory and belonging with the Father. You belong. You are loved. You don't need to feel shame. Feel hope. Feel hope that whatever it is you're facing, God is going to carry you through. Can I get an amen? Don't feel shame about your failures. Brene Brown said if you could create a petri dish for shame, it would be silence, secrecy, and judgment.

I think there are three movements that have to be done by faith in order that we can live in strength in the midst of our loss and weakness. So the first movement is to MOVE FROM SILENCE TO HONESTY. I have no problem telling it like it is. That is something I need to go the other way. But my wife, Hannah, almost never gets angry, almost never raises her voice. She is an absolute peacemaker. We talked and she said this was okay, I could say this, if you're feeling nervous. So Hannah is learning to feel angry. That's a good thing for someone like Hannah because psychologists actually say shame is when anger is pointed inward; when you're angry at yourself. So if you never feel angry, and you're constantly saying you're sorry even though you didn't do anything, you're probably someone who struggles with shame. But don't feel shame about struggling with shame.

Hannah, this is the cutest thing ever. Can I say it's cute? I don't mean that condescendingly. For example, when somebody would bump into Hannah and not apologize, or cut in line, she wouldn't say it aloud,

but she just started saying in her head, “Don’t mess with me.” Don’t mess with me. And I think that was so good because what she is doing is learning to recognize that she felt disrespected by that. And then she would bring that to me, or to her friends and say, “I felt disrespected when this person totally bumped into me. I was carrying a cup of coffee and it spilled on my dress and they didn’t even say they were sorry, and they didn’t even care.” And then I can say to her. Of course, you felt disrespected. That was super disrespectful.”

There’s something about how people don’t understand how important that conversation is for the soul. That if we don’t say that, we’re actually building into our mind and into our heart, shame. What we’re actually saying is I don’t deserve to be respected. You deserve respect and dignity. I believe that more than anything. Every human deserves dignity because every human being is loved by God. So it is important to move from silence to honesty, to talk about these things.

MOVE, then, FROM SECRECY TO OPENNESS. Allow yourself to be seen deeply. Confession is at the core of salvation. You cannot be saved unless you are honest. Confessing our sins and our flaws, and our worries, and our fears is at the heart of redemption and resurrection. But that takes faith, doesn’t it? That I’m not going to be judged, not going to be belittled, not going to be abandoned, or not be kicked out of my church or my family. Guess what? If you are, then you weren’t supposed to be there anyway. Right? Move from secrecy to openness and allow the people you love to see you deeply.

And finally, MOVE FROM JUDGMENT TO GRACE AND EMPATHY. You need empathic people in your life. You need it. People that love you, that do not judge you, that come alongside you, that defend you when you’re bullied, that are on your side. I’m one of them. This church is here

for you, but you need close friends who can incarnationally show you the grace and empathy of Jesus Christ. Move from judgment to grace and empathy.

Friends, I want to tell you that whatever you are going through, whatever you're facing, whatever your losses are, God's got it under control. It's going to be okay. Today, you can relax and you can recognize and proclaim over your life in my weakness, I am strong; that when I become weak in some areas, I become much stronger in other areas, and that is an opportunity for a permanent gift. God is offering you right now something amazing if you stop being secret, and stop being silent, stop judging yourself and others, and become the kind of person who lives in the kingdom of God, and accept the gift of God's grace. I want to tell you wherever you are, don't be ashamed, don't be worried, you have nothing to prove, God has already proved it. You are loved. You're not what you do, you're not what you have, you're not what people say about you, you are loved by God, and when you live in that place, you'll have all the power in the world to do great things, and you'll have great things. And people will say great things about you, and that is true.

Lord, we thank you for your love. You love us as we are, not as we should be. And you will bring us there. You love us enough not to leave us there. We trust you, Jesus. We follow you and we believe in what you taught us. We love you. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.