

LAW AND GOSPEL

If Weakness Is the Goal

*On a viral graphic, a missing word, and a comfort that does not
depend on you*

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The image comes around every few months in slightly different clothing. The version making the rounds now is AI-generated: seven faces in oil-painting sepia, a lone figure walking toward a sunrise, and a list.

If marriage is the goal, Paul failed. If a perfect past is the goal, David failed. If popularity is the goal, Daniel failed. If a college degree is the goal, Peter failed. If beauty is the goal, Leah failed. If eloquence is the goal, Moses failed. If self-preservation is the goal, Stephen failed.

Then the payoff, set in gold at the bottom: *God is the God of the weak, lowly, outcast, afraid, alone, and unlovable.*

I understand why it spreads. Somebody made this for a person who has spent a long time feeling behind — unmarried at forty, no degree, a past they would pay money to erase — and who suspects that all of it disqualifies them. That suspicion deserves an answer. And the graphic is reaching toward a real one. Paul told the Corinthians to look around at their own congregation and notice how few of them were wise or powerful or well-born by ordinary reckoning. God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. Then he gives the reason: so that no one can boast in his presence (1 Cor 1:27-29).

That last clause is the hinge, and it is exactly where the graphic goes off the road.

The new credential

Read the closing line back slowly. Weak. Lowly. Outcast. Afraid. Alone. Unlovable. Every one of those is a *condition*. Not one of them is a sin.

Eight panels are spent demolishing the world's entrance requirements, and then a new one is quietly installed at the door: you are in because you are down. The reader is still the subject of the sentence. He is still being handed a list and invited to check himself against it. It is the same machinery as before, running in reverse — and it will fail him at precisely the moment he needs it.

It fails on a good day, when he feels capable and well-liked and reasonably attractive, because on that day the graphic has nothing to say to him at all. And it fails on a bad day, because it tells him his misery is his qualification, and misery is not a stable thing to build a hope on. Anyone who has tried to feel unworthy enough to be forgiven knows how that project ends. You cannot boast in your strength before God, and you cannot boast in your weakness either. Boasting is the problem. Paul says so in the same breath.

The missing word

The word this image never uses is *sinner*.

“Unlovable” is a feeling you might not have on a Tuesday. “Sinner” is a verdict that holds on your best day and your worst. And the difference matters, because the actual scandal of the gospel is not that God has a soft spot for the marginalized. It is that he justifies the ungodly. Paul puts it without softening: to the one who does not work but believes in the God who declares the ungodly righteous, faith is credited as righteousness (Rom 4:5). And again: God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

Not while we were still lonely. Not while we were still overlooked. While we were still sinners.

That is a harder word and a far kinder one, because it does not require you to sustain a mood in order to remain eligible.

Better answers than the ones offered

Take the list one at a time. In every case the real answer is more interesting than the consolation being handed out.

Paul did not fail at marriage. He wished more people shared his singleness and called it a gift from God, one man having this gift and another that (1 Cor 7:7). And when Paul does name his failures, they are not the ones the graphic assigns him. He had the credentials — circumcised the eighth day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, blameless as to the law’s righteousness — and he counted every bit of it as garbage for the sake of Christ (Phil 3:4-8). Paul is not the patron saint of the underqualified. He is a man who held the qualifications in his hand and threw them away.

David did not have “an imperfect past.” He committed adultery and then arranged a man’s death to cover it. Softening that into a blemish is not mercy; it is what makes Psalm 51 unintelligible. David does not ask God to grade him on a curve. He asks God to create in him a clean heart, and Nathan does not tell him he is lovable. Nathan tells him the LORD has taken away his sin — a word spoken to him from outside himself, which is the only kind that ever helps.

Daniel was not unpopular. He distinguished himself above the other administrators and the satraps, and the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. That is precisely why the plot against him was hatched (Dan 6:3-4). The lions’ den is not a story about a

man nobody liked. It is a story about a man whose faithfulness was inconvenient to power. Being disliked is not itself a form of piety, a distinction the internet finds unusually difficult.

Peter and the college degree is an anachronism wearing humility's coat. The council did observe that Peter and John were uneducated and ordinary men — but the punchline of the verse is the next clause, that they recognized these men had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). The credential is Christ's company. The absence of a diploma is not the point; the presence of Christ is.

Leah is the one that stings, because Scripture's answer is so much better than the one on offer. The text says Leah's eyes were tender while Rachel was shapely and beautiful, and then it says something that should stop us: when the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to conceive (Gen 29:17, 31). And out of that unwanted marriage came Judah, and out of Judah came the Messiah. The graphic uses Leah to talk about beauty standards. Scripture uses Leah to trace the line of Christ. One of those is a participation trophy. The other is the plot of the entire book.

Moses was slow of speech and slow of tongue (Ex 4:10) — and God's answer to him is not "your weakness is what I like about you." God asks who it was that gave man his mouth, and then makes a promise: *I will be with your mouth and will teach you what to say* (Ex 4:11-12). The comfort is never the deficiency. The comfort is the promise attached to it.

Stephen did not fail at self-preservation any more than a lamp fails at darkness. He saw the Son of Man standing at God's right hand, commended his spirit to the Lord Jesus, and asked that the sin not be held against his killers (Acts 7:56-60). To call that a failure you must accept, for the length of one sentence, that staying alive was the thing worth having. Stephen had already declined that premise.

The list nobody makes

There is a counter-graphic waiting to be built, and it would be just as misleading. Abraham was wealthy. Joseph administered Egypt. Deborah judged Israel. Lydia dealt in purple and ran a household. Luke was a physician. Zacchaeus was rich and short and both facts made it into the text.

God is not running a demographic preference program in either direction. He is not partial to the powerful and he is not partial to the pitiable. He justifies the ungodly, and the ungodly come in every configuration.

Where the comfort actually is

I do not want to be unkind to the impulse behind the image. It is reaching for something true: that the church is full of people who do not measure up, and that this is not a defect in the church. But it reaches for that truth by way of a list, and a list will always turn into a mirror. You will always end up looking at yourself, squinting, trying to work out whether you fit.

The gospel does not hand you a mirror. It hands you a word from outside you — *extra nos*, from outside, spoken by someone else, in the ordinary means God chose for the purpose. In baptism a name was put on you while you had nothing to say about it. In absolution a man with no authority of his own says the words Christ authorized him to say, and they are as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ dealt with you himself. In the Supper his body and blood are placed in your mouth and into the cup, given and shed *for you* — and that little phrase is the whole estate.

None of that asks how you are feeling about yourself this week. None of it requires you to be weak enough, or lonely enough, or unlovable enough to qualify. If weakness is the goal, you will find a way to fail at that too.

Thankfully, it is not the goal. Christ is the gift, and he is given away.