

Of Weakness and Strength

“Out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, and put to flight the armies of the aliens” (Hebrews 11:34).

It is much easier to be strong than to be weak. But the laurels always go to the strong or to those whom we perceive to be strong.

The central question is, whence comes strength? We are accustomed to think of strength as something we cultivate and possess, like a personality trait; and that might serve us well for the human scene, up to a point. However, we must always be aware of the fact that as the people of God, we are under siege by the arch enemy of God—Satan—who is admittedly more powerful than we humans. If we don't realize that, we are not taking an adequate measure of the enemy (a fatal error in any battle).

A common misconception is that by religious exercises—prayer and fasting; fervency and faith—we can equip ourselves to go up against Satan. The assumption is that the more intense we are and persevering, the more likely God is to respond to us. This concept, which seems very pious and spiritual, is actually rooted in the Old Testament. The children of Israel, not possessing the Spirit within, were often urged to hold solemn assemblies and fastings, to say nothing of the continual stream of feasts and sacrifices and holy days. This tended to keep them much more closely in touch with God and under the umbrella of His own Spirit. And this was the spirit in which Jesus reminded the people that their power with God was connected with their religious observances. *“This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.”* But that was prior to Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell within. Later, Paul would discount these religious observances as having significance in the realities of the presence of the Holy Spirit, of which these Old Testament observances were but a type and forerunner.

When the Holy Spirit came to dwell within the individual, there was no need for external observances *per sé*, as a means of staying in touch with God. As Paul tells the Romans in chapter 10—there was no need to call God down from above, because He was already near them—*“In their hearts and in their minds.”* And, of course, in Romans 8 the familiar statement about the Spirit Himself *“making intercession for us with unuttered sighs.”* In other words, there is something of a perpetual altar within us wherein our spirits are in touch with His Spirit continuously, like the old “altar of incense.” Christ is but a “breath” away. Indeed, the prayers of the Apostles in the book of Acts were quite brief and responses from God based upon a few words. For example, in the case of the lame man at the gate of the temple, Peter merely told him to rise up and walk. The efforts to merit or muster responses from Christ on the basis of human perseverance or piety or faith is purely of the flesh and puts the focus on us instead of God. Instead of seeing the grace of God at work, human efforts are an attempt to merit the responses of God. Then, of course when there are responses from God, a certain amount of credit for it is assumed by the human who “did his share” to merit God's help.

But then where do we get the faith that seems to be required as a condition of help?

To assume that the faith that the Bible talks about is something that humans can develop in their fleshly minds, is a misunderstanding of faith. Often, faith is perceived as something akin to human trust or confidence. It is seen as a conviction that God is going to do some particular thing. Thus, the effort is continually made to convince oneself that this is true. So faith in that sense becomes a human effort to convince oneself that one really believes God is going to do something particularly. At this point, one's whole relationship to God is "put on the line." There is often great anxiety and distress. "Am I good enough?" "Do I have enough faith?" "Does God have anything against me?" "Does He care about me, after all?" These and many other questions trouble the poor soul who is seeking for help.

The truth of the matter is that the faith the Bible speaks of is strictly a process of Divine Energy, instilling within one the basis for interaction with God. In a rough analogy, God provides something of a receiving set for receiving signals from Him. Thus faith is a "God-side" process and not a "human-side" process. On the human side, "faith" as a word is totally confused and is applied to a host of feelings and fancies, all of which have to do with some nebulous sense of conviction. The faith that is from God is a highly defined response from Him to the human predicament. "*The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit.*" Apart from God's gift, it is impossible for humans to interact with Him at all.

But how does that work when I am in need of special help?

Fortunately it works quite beyond the human capacity to "make it work." It is not dependent on our own feelings of human trust. Nor is it dependent on our own human worthiness or efforts. No human can ever be good enough to merit God's help. The thing to remember is that if we didn't have faith, we wouldn't call on God in the first place. We may call upon Him in human weakness (the usual state) or in doubt or in fear, but those are all products of the human mind and not of the Spirit. Galatians says that faith is a fruit of the Spirit. It does not say that faith is a product of human goodness or effort or trust. The faith of God functions in spite of our human feelings. In a certain sense the entire human race is caught in weakness. All degrees of human strength are still within the framework of that general human weakness. The greatest strength that the flesh may possess is all weakness as compared to the strength of God.

The sketches in Hebrews 11 are vignettes or cameos, if you will, of episodes revealing the application of faith as far as human deeds and exploits were concerned. It is most interesting to compare the actuality of the Old Testament accounts with the commentary on them in this chapter of the New Testament. The Old Testament narratives would not have led one to the conclusion that the individual characters really had much in the way of faith as it is generally conceived. For example, it is said that Sarah had the faith to conceive Isaac and brought forth a son of promise. The truth of the matter is that when the angel announced to her that she was going to have a son, she laughed. Therefore the angel said that she must name her son Isaac, which is a Hebrew word meaning "she laughed." Of Isaac, it is said that by faith he blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. Actually the whole episode was a study in deception. And then of course there is Moses, of whom it was said that he fled Egypt by faith, when in fact he fled from before the face of Pharaoh and the people, when

it was learned that he had killed a man. And you have references to others, including Samson, Gideon, and David, all of whom had their fleshly flaws.

The truth of the matter is that the faith that God placed within them to accomplish their deeds had little to do with their own human failings and doubts and fears. God accomplished through them what He wanted, by using them as a channel of His energy and strength. They did not possess any strength of their own. And thus the text that we have been looking at—*“Out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight and put to flight the armies of the aliens.”*

It is comforting to know that God is carrying on His work in us in spite of our own human inadequacy. It is natural to have doubts and fears and anxieties, but these are only products of the human mind and have little to do with the process of energy and faith that is going on in our spirits. The evidence that such is true is that whatever happens we always cling to Christ. If our weaknesses had cut us off from Him, that would not be true. However weak you may think you are, your continued interest in staying with Christ is the evidence of His presence within you.

And He will give strength and grace according to the need, and not according to our own human desires. He does not give us the grace to think about something in the future, but He will give the grace when the time comes. Hebrews 4:16 indicates that the grace comes “in time of need.” Nor does He give us grace to think what we would do if we were in someone else’s shoes. We can never really put ourselves exactly in their place because at the time of need they have the grace to handle it. We sometimes think “I don’t know what I would do if I had to go through that”—but then we would only have the grace if we had to go through it.

If weakness is the general human condition, we can really only survive in the strength of Christ. There is a constant appeal from many quarters to become strong; and a consequent disapproval of weakness. And in a certain human sense, strength is admirable and weakness to be avoided. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the limits of human strength and to recognize the potentials of weakness in all of us humans. In many ways we humans are very fragile. Life always hangs by a thin thread. James says that life is but a vapor *“that appeareth for a time and vanisheth away.”* The immediate instant is all that we really have. The recognition of our weakness and fragility is as important as the recognition of our strength and capacities. Until we have plumbed the depths of our own weakness, we will never know the adequacy of the grace of God. In fact, weakness is the matrix in which the strength of God is formed in our lives. Paul tells the Corinthians that it is the weak of the world that God uses to bring to naught the mighty. Too much strength in the flesh can sometimes get in the way of the working of the Spirit.

Paul gives the classic statement of this to the Corinthians. In the flesh, Paul was a man of much strength and many talents. Some of it was his by birth and some by his own cultivation. This, of course, brought about a tendency toward pride. To counteract this, God had allowed Paul to be buffeted by “a thorn in the flesh”—a messenger of Satan—to keep him from being overexalted. Apparently the messenger of Satan was some demonic presence that troubled him continuously. Paul was certainly not possessed by the demon, but was

outwardly troubled in one respect or another. It is not exactly clear just how the “messenger of Satan” troubled him, but there is much speculation. In any event, Paul prayed three times for the removal of the “thorn,” but God’s response to him forms the classic basis of our understanding of the interaction between Divine strength and human weakness. *“My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong”* (II Corinthians 12:9,10).

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