

LENGTHENED CORDS AND STRENGTHENED STAKES

"Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes." Isaiah 54:2.

This splendid and glowing chapter is a magnificent example of prophetic faith. The people were exiles in what looked like a hopeless captivity. Yet this chapter throbs and burns with the prophet's deep conviction that many years shall not pass before he and his are restored to their native land. His nation had been overwhelmed with disaster and political extinction, and when the people had been deported beyond the Euphrates, it looked as if the last chapter in the history of Judah had been written, and that its very name had been blotted out forever from the roll-call of nations. But in this chapter Isaiah dares to predict for that ruined, desolate, and wellnigh extinguished kingdom a future greater even than its heroic past.

Isaiah is looking optimistically toward the future, to a time when Zion will yet know spiritual prosperity, and through her the blessings of God will reach out to multitudes of the Gentiles. It will be like the enlarging of a tent to accommodate larger numbers of people. As the place of the tent is enlarged, so will the cords be lengthened; and correspondingly the stakes must be made strong. More is needed than a wider covering. Cords that fasten the canvas must also be lengthened, and in proportion to their length the stakes that hold them must be strengthened. It is a law of mechanics that the lengthening of the space to be spanned demands a corresponding increase of strength in the timber or in the rope.

These challenging words of this familiar verse really inspired the opening of modern missions. It was from this text that William Carey preached his famous and memorable sermon before an association which met in Nottingham, England, on May 30, 1792. As he sounded forth that bugle note of missions, he announced the memorable outline:

1. Attempt great things for God.
2. Expect great things from God.

It was a sermon whose influence was to be felt across the world. On the following October 2, the modern, world-wide missionary movement was born, and the Baptist Missionary Society was formed. In the following year, Carey went forth as the founder of modern missions, and sailed for India as the first missionary to live for Christ in a heathen land.

I. Cords Must Be Lengthened.

Many think of the organization of the first Baptist Missionary Society on October 2, 1792 as one of the most significant events since Pentecost. We are not surprised to find the vital principle set forth in our text most perfectly exemplified in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. For example, Luke 6:13 tells of the choosing of the Twelve: "And when it was day, He called unto Him His disciples: and of them He chose twelve, whom also He named apostles." The influence of His ministry was to be extended through selected representatives. Clearly this was an enlargement of the tent. But a glance at the previous verse reveals that the previous night had been spent in strengthening the stakes. "He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God." There was first the upward reach, and then the forward march.

"Lengthen thy cords" is God's appeal to our church. We must enlarge the place of our tent. Continually we must be making more room. One of our dangers is ever to be content with narrow boundaries, to be satisfied with less than what God has in store for us.

This is the day of large things. Human knowledge has been vastly expanded, and human enterprise has kept pace with the wider vision. Commercial enterprises are patterned on a colossal scale. Man's activities span the earth. Time and space have been in great measure annihilated, and the leaders in the realms of literature, music, and art have their audiences in every land and speak to the whole wide world. So, God is

calling His people to larger things. Surely the spirit of faith should stretch a vaster compass than the mere ambitions and enterprises of men. Our text advises an enlargement. That is certainly in line with both the plan and the work of God. He begins things, and then makes them to grow. From the acorn He develops the oak; from the tiny mustard seed He brings forth a bush large enough to hold the birds which lodge in its branches. He never makes one thing develop into another thing, but into everything He puts the potentialities of expansion. This also is His program for the church. The best way to grow a church is to give it ever-increasing tasks, and bring it to ever-enlarging undertakings. When growing stops, decadence sets in. In a world like this, where the vast majority are still lost in sin, it is our duty to lengthen our cords. To fail to do so is to disobey God.

1. Here is a call to self-sacrifice.

This text calls us to unselfishness, to a life that stretches out its heart strings beyond itself and reaches to God on high and to men below in the expression of its love and service. Selfishness is the very opposite of love; and if God be love, selfishness must be Satanic. Selfishness has no other aim but to get and to hoard and to absorb all the gifts of God and all the blessings of life upon its own desires, pleasures, and honors. God is calling us to a deeper self-sacrifice and a larger love, a love that will take in the unlovely, a love that will embrace the world, a love that will lay its life down like the Master, for the glory of God and the good of others. Let us ask God to give us the love that tries to see the best in everyone else, the love that is free from censoriousness, criticism, and pride; the love that finds no self-complacency in its own gifts and ministries and blessings, but turns every blessing back to God again for His glory and the good of others. Above all, we want and need a deeper love for souls, a more intense desire for the evangelization of the unsaved around us and in the regions beyond.

2. Here is a call to larger faith.

We want to lengthen the cords of our spiritual vision and expectation. We should open our minds to receive the new ideas and the larger truth that God is revealing to us from His Word. We need to see the new things which God has for us, and then to claim them with a faith that will not let them go. We need the faith that fights the battles of the Lord, that claims the salvation of men, that ventures into the hardest fields and the most hopeless tasks, that dares the impossible and rests not until the battle is won. Oh, for the faith of service, the faith of intercessory prayer, the faith of soul-winning power, and the faith that will bring about the evangelization of the world.

3. Here is a call to larger service.

This larger service is the evangelization of the lost. God wants us to rise to higher planes and to reach out to larger horizons. He wants us to have a more intelligent, intense, and world-wide grasp of the work, and greater enthusiasm for its success. God wants our faith, our prayers, our sacrifices, and our giving to grow from year to year, and to find new channels, new opportunities, and new resources. And He wants us to press forward to larger things.

II. Stakes Must Be Strengthened.

We are rightly concerned about extension. We want to go forward, to lengthen our cords and to enlarge our territories. But what could be more pathetic than religious organization without life? We must not only lengthen our cords, but we must strengthen our stakes. Just in proportion as the cords are lengthened is there need for strengthening the stakes also. To occupy more ground, to spread out more canvas, what is it but to offer a greater surface to the storms?

There must be the inward confirmation as well as the outward development. Extensions are good if they are strongly held. It is quite right to go out to the attack if the

home base is itself sufficiently strong to support the venture. The lengthening without the strengthening can only issue in disaster. Unless the heart beats strongly, the whole life is feeble. The lengthening and the strengthening must go hand in hand. The higher you build a tower, the lower you sink the foundation. For every foot of that iceberg that shows above water, and glitters like an emerald in the sun, there are nine feet that are buried in the ocean.

Our advances can only keep pace with our bases of supply. Our tent will topple over and fall if the stakes that hold it are not strong in proportion to the cords that are anchored to them. Therefore, as we enlarge our borders, let us be careful to increase our strength; and while we strengthen, let us be just as careful to enlarge.

Here we find our duty clearly set forth—"lengthen" and "strengthen". Notice how well the Holy Spirit chooses and uses words. The word "lengthen" suggests extensity; the word "strengthen" suggests intensity. And there is always danger in extensive movement that is not accompanied by intensive movement. If you lengthen your cords and do not strengthen your stakes, what will happen? Such a procedure is disastrous. A father and mother may send forth to various schools a number of children and permit them to live on a high plane or expensive scale, but they had better arrange for a larger income. It is well to send for the new missionaries, but arrangements must be made for additional income to support them. There must be foundation work, strengthening work, along with expansion.

How are we going to strengthen the stakes? One way is by faith in God. We must rivet our souls firmly on the Word of God. Prayer is indispensable. We must have an implicit faith in the inspired Word of God. Since it is His Word, when we go forth and carry it, we have all the energies of the God-head in the message that we deliver. Nothing can take the place of holy living. When the scribes and Pharisees saw the man healed they could not say a word against it. They might scourge the apostles and cast them into prison and forbid them to speak in the name of Christ, but the sight of that man who was healed was an argument that could not be overcome by logic or philosophy. And when you see a person who is absolutely living for God, and has the radiance of the Lord in his or her face and character, you have a walking argument for Christianity that is worth all the apologetics in the world. Consecrated living is the way to strengthen the stakes. Of course, holy living always results in sanctified giving. The secret of effective missionary workers and missionary contributions is true consecration in the home field.