

HOW TO BE STRONG

Isaiah 40:28-31

Isaiah forty is one of the great inspirational portions of the Old Testament. It is a tonic for spiritual depression and discouragement. It is impossible to study this message of encouragement, promise and hope without a spiritual uplift.

It was to a despondent group of Jewish exiles that this familiar and classic passage was addressed originally. War had driven God's chosen people from their homes and made them slaves in a foreign land. They had been deprived of their ancient and cherished liberties. Their magnificent temple had been destroyed. Jerusalem, which they had thought would never fall, was a heap of ruins. They were hemmed in on every side by the ruthless might of Babylon. Their courage and hope had dwindled almost to the vanishing point.

For years they had borne the yoke of oppression and sweltered in slavery. These trying years of exile had broken their spirits. Men can endure much and accomplish many things as long as their spirits remain unbroken, but, when their spirits are broken, they are crippled seriously. Concerning sorrow one remarked, "This is sorrow's crown of sorrows -- remembering happier days." Of itself sorrow had no power to strengthen or beautify. Rather, it tends to sap one's strength, both physical and spiritual, and also to rob life of its glory. Yet, there are those into whose lives something bigger and nobler has come as they have passed through the vale of sorrow.

As these exiles thought of their circumstances, any hope of deliverance seemed to be only an idle dream. They thought that God had forgotten to be gracious to them and that He was no longer mindful of them. They concluded that, if God were able to help them, He was not willing to do so. They were so discouraged that they did not know what to do. Broken in faith and courage, they did not have any desire to continue struggling.

Naturally, they questioned, "Is this the end of God's purpose for Israel? Has our cause gone down into the dust never to rise again? Is there hope for our people?" In that dark hour, when they were resigning themselves to despair, God sent His prophet to them with a message of deliverance, which seemed too good to be true. They had the thrilling experience of a great hope breaking through the thick darkness, and of a great joy moving their hearts from despair to heroic endeavor.

When the liberating message reached their ears their hearts leaped within them. Immediately, they began eager preparations for the journey as if they might be back in the land of their fathers within a few days, but there followed the stern realities of a long journey as day after day they trudged across the country. At first there was the sheer joy and excitement of being free, the feeling of "walking on air." But soon their feelings changed. The long road quickly took the resiliency out of their steps, and some of the joy out of their hearts. Then the need for strength became more pronounced. How applicable this is to our daily lives! Life has a way of starting briskly, then calming down, and finally making its supreme demand for patient endurance and steady strength.

To aid them in their perilous journey and the arduous task of rebuilding their ruined land, the prophet dwelt upon the majesty and power of God until the might of Babylon faded into insignificance. He emphasized the tenderness of God, as well as the fact that He had not forgotten to be gracious. He taught them that God's strength was sufficient to equip them for every experience which they might have. He bade them lift their eyes and behold their Creator, who "fainteth not, neither is weary." He expressed his sincere conviction that God could help them, and would help them, but that He

would do so in His own time and manner. Then he added, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength."

The experience of the exiles is somewhat similar to the history of all great enterprises. There is first the buoyant hour of inception, when glorious possibilities give wings and the spirit of man mounts like an eagle. Then follow the first attempts at realization, when friends are many, and encouragement great and progress rapid. Finally, there come the stern and testing days, when vision has to be fact, and dream has to be translated into reality. Then it is that patience is needed and faith is tested. While it is the drudgery of the long afternoon that tests strength, it is the walking that singles out the heroes. Many for the moment can mount, and some for a time can run, but it is the brave who walk and win.

The spirit of our age has carried us beyond the thing this verse calls upon us to do. The pressure is so great and the days seem to move so rapidly that many of us do not take time to wait on the Lord. The stress and strain of these high-pressure days has depleted our spiritual strength. One of the features of our time is spiritual weariness. Suffering from fatigue of the spirit, many can be characterized by exhausted ideals. Evidences of this fact appear in the cynicism, the feeling of frustration and "the couldn't care less" attitude of so many. Even though multitudes are the victims of disappointed hopes, frustrated ambitions and unanswered prayers, things are not entirely hopeless. Many are tired of meaningless living and are looking for something to fill the vacuum. They are groping for a faith to live by.

Where shall we find the secret of spiritual resilience? The life-line of our souls is communication with God. We can no more live the right sort of a life without personal contact with God than a plant can survive whose roots do not touch the soil.

In these days of commotion, confusion and uncertainty, it is indeed splendid to have one's soul filled with such a vision of God as is presented here. Regardless of the trend of events and the conditions on earth, God is unwearied and strong, and His power is available for those who wait upon Him. He has the strength to match our days.

In exposing human inadequacy and inability God says, "Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young shall utterly fall." In other words, human strength at its best will fail. But what nature cannot produce, God stands ready to provide. However, we must remember that something more than exhortations, pep talks, slogans and human enthusiasm are necessary to rekindle the inward fire and carry us through. All our efforts to work up enthusiasm for living at our best only increase the exhaustion and strain. The power must come from God. It is He Who "works within us both to will and to do."

There is a way for Christians who are weak to be strong. There are infinite resources available for every child of God. The weary may be revived, the fainting may be restored, and the weak may become strong. There is divine rehabilitation for the spiritually anemic and run-down. We can rise from weakness to power and achievement. God is an expert at stiffening wabbling knees and putting courage into wavering hearts.

Those who seek spiritual strength in their circumstances or in the world about them are headed for disappointment. When contact with the electric current which drives a machine is broken, the operator does not try to work the machine by his own strength. He restores the contact and waits for the power to set the wheels moving. It is the same with the human machine. We are only channels; God is the reservoir. We must make contact with Him and wait upon his renewing Spirit. No one has ever had spiritual power without waiting on the Lord.

What is meant by waiting upon the Lord? It is very easy to misunderstand the import of the word "wait" and to regard it as meaning nothing more than passive inactivity, or sitting still and looking into blank space. It does not mean to possess an idle mind. The Scriptures do not justify empty-headedness. Waiting carries with it the idea of being silent, waiting with expectancy, willing to receive whatever God is ready to give.

Waiting on the Lord may take different forms. It may take the form of contemplation, reading the Bible with the ear that listens for God's personal message. It reveals the true attitude of prayer. True prayer is not only speaking but listening. Most of us never go to God unless we have something to say to Him, and we never give Him a chance to say anything to us. It is a weakness in human nature to want to do all the talking. Waiting is often contrasted with working, and in a sense the contrast is correct; but, if it leads one to conclude that waiting excludes working, the contrast is not valid. It is not the waiting of an idler or a dreamer. It is the quiet waiting of one who is ready and willing to obey the expressed will of God.

This waiting on the Lord is one of the hardest things to do in this hectic age of noisy activities. Today people want to do things quickly. They rush from one rigorous round of activity to another. This continuous cycle of exertion leaves them physically faint and spiritually spent. It is only through waiting on the Lord that they can get His view of things.

Waiting on the Lord implies a sense of our own weakness, a consciousness of our need of divine help, a realization that God is ready to stretch out His hand in helpfulness through the difficulties and temptations to which we are exposed, a holding up of our emptiness for the receiving of His fulness, and an attitude of faith, hope and expectation.

What are the results of waiting on the Lord?

I. Strength For Service.

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." Man's great need is renewal of strength. We are constantly using up our energies and finding ourselves utterly exhausted. Our real problem is how to get rid of the energy of the flesh and exchange it for the strength that comes from God. Listen to this helpful promise, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." It is implied here that strength is needed; it is promised here that strength will be given; and it is affirmed here that strength thus given will be graduated according to our needs. If we are summoned to a post of great responsibility, or to the performance of an arduous duty, additional strength will be given.

II. Faith For Flying.

"They shall mount up with wings as eagles." This is inspiring language. The Christian's life is not a sighing and dying one; its scriptural image is that of the soaring eagle. The eagle is the only bird that flies so high as to be out of sight. Dr. John McNeill told the story of a captive eagle. Its owner kept it in the chicken yard with a weight on one of its feet so that it could not fly away. At last when the man was going to move away from that part of the country he decided to liberate the bird. He took off the weight, but the eagle went hopping about just the same. Early one morning he took the eagle and set him upon the wall just as the sun was rising. The eagle opened his eyes and looked for the first time at the rising sun. Then, he stretched his mighty wings, and with one scream launched out into the upper air. He belonged up there all the while and had simply been living

in the wrong place. May God help us to be eagle Christians. All of us can live on a higher plane than we have been doing.

God wants His children to be able to "mount up with wings as eagles;" that is, it is His will that we shall have the power to rise above things. Too often we see things out of their true relationships. If we could mount up and see things as they are related to one another, we would see them in their true perspective. Everything looks different from the heights. When you get up in the air, the things that bother you down here look so small. Some of us have wings about like barnyard fowls. They have wings, but just enough to get them over the mud puddles, and not enough to take them over the fence into God's boundless space. Some of us just hop, skip and jump through life; we really never get above the world and triumph in Christ. But such is possible for us when we wait on the Lord. He will endow us with power to rise above things.

III. Resources For Running.

"They shall run, and not be weary." Just to think of running without getting weary! It seems incredible, but it is the manifestation of the supernatural. Those who trust God shall move forward with vigorous strength, elevated spirit and unwearied body. In the allotments of life, cloud and storm must come as truly as sunshine and calm. Running does not have the excitement that flying does, and it takes a heavy toll on wind and limbs. For some Christians life is a continuous toil because they carry such heavy burdens.

IV. Patience For Plodding.

"They shall walk, and not faint." Walking here refers to the humdrum of life. It is plodding and unspectacular work. It is the loving purpose of God that we shall continue to be loyal and progressive when things become fearfully slow. There are times in each of our lives when things seem to be terribly slow. It seems that the long and uninteresting road will never have a turning.

Into your experience the time of crisis will come. It may be an accident, an illness, a grievous disappointment, an empty heart due to a newly filled grave, the prospect of facing the evening of life alone with no children to whom you can go, or the greater heartache of having children who do not love enough to care. Yet, if you have waited on the Lord, there is One to Whom you can go.

For every kind of experience that may come to us as Christians, there is grace enough to meet it. There will always be sufficient strength to bear it. Yesterday's strength will not do. Tomorrow's strength is not wanted. Today's strength is ours. Due to God's unfailing wisdom and inexhaustible power, there will be adequate grace, strength and guidance for every emergency that may arise.

We shall never be able to come into possession of God's best until we learn to walk with Him. We go up there in order that we may serve down here. It is only the man who comes down from interviews with God who can touch human lives with the divine power. Only to the degree in which we know the inspiration of the upper air can we either run without weariness or walk without fainting.