

Be Strong

*"Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed,
for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

Joshua 1:9

By Rev. Derek Elphick

INTRODUCTION

There are a lot of short, simple commands in the Scriptures...

- Be strong
- Don't worry
- Have faith
- Fear not
- Be still

Nothing new about these commands...

- known about them since childhood (memorized them as recitations)

What is the Lord saying, expecting?

Isn't it a bit like saying, "*Don't blink*" - we might be able to do it for a while but we're going to blink again?!

What's the point of these commands because...

- we're *not* always strong, especially when we need to be
- we *do* worry, a lot, despite our best efforts not to
- we have a hard time trusting the Lord, even when we know we should
- we let fear control us, far more than we want..
- frankly, it's hard to calm our anxious minds and "be still" in the midst of setback & disappointment

Today, I invite you to explore with me the topic of *strength* (and power)

- I want us to spend some time on this topic for 3 reasons:

- (1st) we pick up false ideas about what it means to be "strong"
- (2nd) we can go about our lives missing important "cues" that reveal the real (& true) source of strength and power
- (3rd) what we consider to be signs of "weakness"
 - doubts
 - fears
 - cries for help...

...are actually signs of strength

And the point of this sermon is that...

...these barriers and misconceptions make it hard for us to...

- grow *strong* in our faith
- grow *strong* in our commitments and responsibilities
- grow *strong* in our determination to be our "best selves," to put others before self in lives of service and use

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE STRONG?

Let's think first how society views it.

We live in a world that strives to project strength, power and confidence...

because its *opposite* - weakness, vulnerability, and insecurity -

- is considered a liability
- something that should be hidden or buried at all costs

Countries and governments

Businesses and corporations

Professional sports teams and celebrities

all tend to operate on this premise...

You must lead from a position of strength because...

"strength" breeds "success" and "success" breeds "confidence"

This tends to be the world's messaging...

strength, power, and influence can be yours...

if you happen to be physically attractive and popular
 if you're the smartest person in the room, & have the right education
 if you hold an important position and status in society
 if you amass more material acquisitions and accomplishments than
 everyone else

2. A DEEPER KIND OF STRENGTH

There is, of course, another kind of strength and power...

which "moth and rust" cannot destroy

This power and strength cannot be seen or measured in the same way as it's earthly equivalent...

But this doesn't stop us from "thirsting" and "hungering" for it

because it promises to feed and satisfy our soul in a way that the world cannot

This deeper type of strength (spiritual strength, strength of spirit)

grows ever more powerful to the degree we know how to...

access it

And when we **do** access it, it unlocks eternal character traits like...

- **grit and perseverance**
- **love and patience**
- **faith and understanding**
- **peace and hope**

Which are all character traits we desperately want to be able to use in our relationships with family, friends and co-workers.

3. NAAMAN, COMMANDER OF THE SYRIAN ARMY

So what is the barrier that makes it difficult to "access" this deeper kind of strength and power?

We all have a "Naaman" in us...that doesn't (at first) recognize the true source of our strength and hope.

Naaman had a lot of things going well for him...

- he had reached the pinnacle of worldly power & influence
- a successful career as commander of the Syrian Army
- the respect of the king
- a thriving home life

(in other words, he had full control over his life)

But he was also a leper

Through a series of seemingly unconnected events, Naaman (a gentile) finds a cure for his leprosy...

but more importantly, finds the Lord in the process

At first, Naaman's pride gets in the way.

He wanted help, but help on his own terms

Elisha's instruction to go wash in the Jordan 7 times seemed...

- beneath him (he's a powerful, important person)
- make him look "weak" (why can't I wash in the great rivers of Damascus?)
- but through the prompting of others, he agrees to do it, and is healed

***So we can picture Naaman removing his helmet, his armor, laying down his sword - all symbols of worldly power and strength and kneeling down by the Jordan River and washing**

Leprosy represents a part of our life that has "died" (something that's eating away at us)...

- a lost ideal
- a loss of focus and direction
- a lack of conviction about God or the afterlife

Washing in the Jordan represents "*using the truths of the Word to [re] introduce ourselves into the life of the church*" (AE 475).

Conversion: "*Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel*"

Point? Naaman, a Gentile, recognizes a power, a strength, greater than his own

- **humbled, had to let go of his pride in order to be healed**

Same w/us - we have to let go of our pride, our control, in order to receive the Lord's redeeming strength and power

- by admitting our own weakness, vulnerability, powerlessness

4. RE-TRAINING OUR MIND

When the Lord calls us to "*be strong*" (Joshua 1:9)...

He is talking about a type of strength that is gained via a different route than earthly power and influence

It's so different, in fact, that we need to *re-train* our mind if we are to

(1) *recognize* it

(2) *access* it

The way to access this strength and power, is of course, by going to the Word...

But do we *recognize* what's being asked of us?

What we find in the Word seems counter-intuitive...

For example:

(1). Rather than striving to be "first" (as the world would have us do)

...we must be willing to be "last" (Mk. 9:35)

(2). Rather than trying to power through life with our adult, sophisticated ways

...we must be willing to become like "little children" again
(Mt. 18:3)

(3). In the face of hardship and adversity...

Rather than trying to summon our own power (again, as the world would have us do)

...we must be willing to confess

- our shortcomings
- our weaknesses
- our vulnerability

and beg the Lord for *strength* to resist the ugly thoughts and feelings that drag us down (AC 1661).

This is *not* easy to do - puts us in an uncomfortable position (relinquishing control)

But this is how we *access* the full power and strength of the Lord in His Word...

- by, again, realizing that our doubts, our fears, our cries for help are NOT signs of weakness, but signs of strength!

- a sign that we are willing to access a power greater than ourselves

5. WEAKNESS TURNED TO STRENGTH

Like the angels, the secret to gaining spiritual strength and courage is to...

acknowledge fully and completely that all our power and strength comes from the Lord by means of truth (TC 87).

"The angels have from the Lord such power that one of them can drive away...a thousand of the diabolical crew" (AC 9410:5).

If they ascribed the power to themselves *"they would instantly become so weak that they couldn't resist one evil spirit" (HH 230).*

6. OUR STRENGTH LIES IN THE TRUTHS OF THE WORD

The veil between this world and the next is thin.

The spiritual and natural worlds are closely connected, more than we can possibly imagine.

The message of today's sermon is that there are strong, spiritual forces at our disposal that help us grow...

- stronger in our faith
- stronger in our commitments and responsibilities
- stronger in our determination to be our best selves

[Hold up copy of the Word]

Truth holds within it *tremendous* power, especially the truths of Scripture, the letter of the Word, which are the foundation of the heavens.

- Divine truths are much more than simply "ideas" or knowledge

When we call on these truths, the Lord and His angels move in with immense power and strength...

- to comfort
- to uplift
- to forgive
- to heal
- to point the way forward

We just need to utter them, access them, whenever we're feeling weak or whenever we're looking for strength to move forward:

[Examples]

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"

"He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone"

"Go the extra mile"

"Turn the other cheek"

"Forgive seventy times seven"

"Be still and know that I am God"

"Lord I believe, help my unbelief"

So...

*"Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed,
for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

AMEN.

Lessons: 2 Kings 5:1-14; True Christianity 68, 87, 124