

## (A Larger Christian Life) 8. FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

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"From strength to strength."-Psalm lxxxiv 7.

This is a chapter of the "Pilgrim's Progress" through the valley of Baca, of which this beautiful psalm is a picture. It is the story of the life of trust, and its two keynotes are the fifth and twelfth verses of the psalm, "O Lord of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee." "Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee." To him the valley of Baca, the valley of weeping, at once becomes a well of living waters, and every low and dry place a pool for the heavenly rain to fill with floods of deeper blessing; and drinking from the living waters the pilgrims go "from strength to strength," and all at last go home, for "every one of them in Zion appeareth before God."

"From strength to strength!" But there is a previous chapter, from weakness to strength. For man is naturally the weakest creature in the universe. He comes into life with the wail of a helpless infant, weaker than the tiger's cub or the birdling in its nest. But his physical frailty is but a figure of his spiritual helplessness. When we were yet without strength in due time Christ died for the ungodly." But the grace of God in the conversion of the soul brings its first spiritual strength, enabling it to choose and trust the Lord, to turn from sin and walk in holy obedience. Then it sings the new song, "O Lord, I will praise thee; though thou wast angry with me thine anger is turned away and thou comfortest me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and be not afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation."

Very strong is the new-born trust and love of the converted soul; very strong its purpose, its joy and its holy enthusiasm. It truly seems as if it never could be tempted to doubt or disobey, and, like Peter, it is ready to cry, "Though all men should deny thee, yet will I never deny thee." And God meets us on this plane and helps our strength, although He has something far better for us further on. Speaking to such a heart in the forty-first of Isaiah and the ninth verse, He says, "Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away." It is the experience of the soul that has just come to God. And then He adds, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God; I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

These last three clauses describe three very distinct experiences of our early Christian life. The first comes when we begin to feel our strength insufficient and cry to God for increased strength, and He strengthens us. It is the old kind of strength, but He gives us more of it. But soon even this is not sufficient, and, as we still sink, He comes and adds His help to our strength. "I will help thee," He says. It is now the strengthened heart with the strong Lord helping. But still you will notice that we are in front and not the Lord. It is our battle, and He is simply reinforcing us with His auxiliaries. But now a greater crisis comes. Even this is not sufficient, and we sink in the conflict and are ready to fall in utter exhaustion and discouragement, when lo! our Mighty Helper comes upon the field Himself, takes the battle in His own almighty hands, lifts up our sinking form as a mother would a babe, bids us no longer to stand even in His help, but takes us bodily in His arms and carries us with His own almighty strength as He cries, "Yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." Oh, that is from strength to strength! From our own strength to His increased strength, and now from even this to the absolute all-sufficiency of God Himself.

Now we notice in the vivid imagery of the prophet a sudden and complete change upon the battlefield, and looking round, we find that all our foes have already fled before His face. Our almighty Captain has taken the field, and "lo! all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded, and they that strive with thee shall perish. Thou shalt seek them and not find them, even them that contended with thee; they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought."

In the third chapter of Revelation we see the little church of Philadelphia going through something like this experience. "Thou hast a little strength," the Master says, "and hast kept my word and not denied my name." But in the tenth verse we find a mightier strength coming to the faithful in Philadelphia. "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience I also will keep thee." It is God's keeping now, not our own; and in the twelfth verse it reached its climax. The one who had "a little strength" has now become "a pillar," with strength enough not only to uphold its own weight, but to support the edifice under which it stands. But when Philadelphia becomes a pillar its own individuality passes away, and it becomes identified with God Himself, for He says, "I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is New Jerusalem, which cometh down out of Heaven from my God; and I will write upon him my new name." This is not now mere human strength, but the strength of Jehovah.

We have now got to the great theme which we desire to impress as the Lord enables us.

It is divine, not human strength, and it is strength which is wholly divine and in no sense or measure human. It

is an exchange of strength in which we have surrendered all our fancied power and received instead the divine power and enabling. This glorious exchange of strength is vividly set forth in the animated language of the sublime Isaiah, chapter xl: "He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but they that wait upon the Lord shall exchange their strength." That is to say, the strongest human strength, the manhood of young men, the vigor and vitality of youth, shall be wholly inadequate for the exigencies of Christian life and conflict, and it is not until these have failed that God has room to display the resources of His omnipotence. When we become "faint," then He giveth His power, and when we have "no might," then He "increaseth strength," that is; gives yet more because of our utter helplessness. Waiting on the Lord, we let our strength go and take His instead, and so renew or exchange our strength.

A simple figure may help to illustrate the thought. Look at that man trying to ford a river, and with all his might struggling with the deep flood, and, by dint of tremendous physical exertions, stemming its mighty waters, and panting and exhausted reaching the other shore. That is strength matched with the strength of the elements. But look at another. Wading out a little distance into the deep flood by the exercise of his own strength, he now lets go, and falls and sinks upon the bosom of the river. Lo! it bears him without a struggle and carries him down in its swift current. He has let go his strength, and he is now carried by the strength of the stream.

So there are many of us who are trying to ford the stream by our own strong will and efforts. There is a sweeter way, by ceasing from our strength and falling into the mighty current of God's infinite life and love and being borne by a power superior to ours without a struggle. Many people never reach their true development until their difficulties become so great that they break down in the struggle and fall into the arms of God. This is what the apostle meant when he exclaimed, "I take pleasure in infirmities; when I am weak then am I strong." And this was but an echo of the Master's own assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Beloved, have you exchanged your strength for the Lord's? Have you gone "from strength," that is yours, "to strength," that is the strength divine?

It is strength for a higher spiritual plane. "They shall mount up with wings as eagles." It is a strength which enables us to mount to a higher element of life and communion with God. It brings us into the divine life and raises us up to dwell in heavenly places with Christ. It resists and overcomes the natural direction of earth, to draw us downward, and, like the buoyant wing of the fowls of the firmament, it bears us and holds us on high, in a calm and heavenly atmosphere where the world lies beneath our feet, and we are lifted above the things which once encompassed and entangled us. We are not now fighting the wild waves, but flying far above them in another element. The mightiest human strength cannot lift us up to this. Only the strong pinions of the Heavenly Dove can bear us aloft to, and hold us supremely in, this heavenly region. This is God's true deliverance from most of our troubles; not to change them, but to rise above them. Oh, how we need these seasons of spiritual elevation and heavenly inspiration to strengthen us for the practical sphere of common life, and enable us to "run and not be weary," and to "walk and not faint."

Yes, we need these times of waiting,  
When their strength our souls renew:  
Drinking at the heavenly fountain,  
Bathing in the heavenly dew;  
Yes, we need these heights of rapture,  
When we mount on eagles' wings,  
Then returning to earth's duties,  
All our heart exultant springs.  
Oh, how every labor lightens!  
As with swift divine constraint,  
We can "run and not be weary,"  
We can walk and never faint.

Strength for the practical duties of life. For they that thus "renew their strength" "shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint." It is not all for heights of rapture or hours of vision, but these experiences reach their true fruition in the consecration of our common life and the triumph of faith and patience in the routine of daily duty. This is the pathway where we have often to run the strong race of peculiar difficulty, strenuous exertion and sudden and severe emergency, but God's strength does not grow weary under the most extreme tests. Then there are the long protracted strains, the almost interminable delays, the endless minutiae of trial, irritation and care, that need the sustained strength which holds on its way and carries us through all the details of life's experiences as victoriously as through its greater battlefields. These are the things that exhaust mere human strength, but the strength of God can "walk and not faint." Beloved, have we thus

exchanged our strength and are we victoriously pursuing our onward way with calm victorious spirit, unwearied and unfainting?

It is strength to "withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand." Dr. Mackay of Hull once said that Isaiah had left out one of the things which God's strength enables us to do, for it is harder to run than to fly, and harder to walk than to run, but there is something harder than walking, and that is to stand. Now Paul has supplied this omission, if it be one, in his superb picture of the Christian conqueror in the sixth chapter of Ephesians. This chapter, by the way, is the very chapter of the life that has mounted up with wings as eagles and is dwelling on high. Its keynote is, "Dwelling in heavenly places in Christ Jesus," and, like the picture in Isaiah, the apostle ends with a very practical conclusion. The outcome of all this strength is to "put on the whole armor of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God that ye may be able to stand in the evil day and having done all to stand." This is the only strength which will enable you to stand. The sooner we discover the better, that the strongest of us is no match for Satan, and that our highest and holiest resolutions will be surely broken and our souls trodden down in defeat and despair beneath our conqueror's scornful feet, unless we meet our spiritual foes in the very presence and power of Jesus.

For this is just what all this picture means. The shield of faith is the faith of God; the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, wielded by the Holy Ghost within us; the very prayer in which we are to overcome is to be prayed in the Spirit; the armor is the armor of God; the strength is to "be strong in the Lord and the power of His might." In a word, it is to confront the devil with the living God within us and so possessing us that the battle is not ours but God's, and the enemy, from the beginning, understands that he has challenged, not a poor unequal man, but his own Almighty Conqueror, the Son of God. This is to be "more than conqueror through Him that loved us;" this is to say, "Thanks be unto God who always leadeth us in triumph through our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is strength to endure. Let us read attentively Col. i: 11. "Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness." Here is one of the advanced stations of the pilgrim's progress "from strength to strength." We may well pause and ask if we have reached this place of strength. Is this then the goal of Pentecost? Is this the great objective point contemplated by the mighty baptism of the Holy Ghost? Is this the meaning of the power from on high? "Strengthened with all might according to His glorious power!" One would surely look for a sublimer battlefield to follow such a splendid parade of the armies of God. But lo! we behold an entirely different spectacle. A solitary soldier on an obscure and weary pathway, battling with a thousand petty hardships, difficulties and trials, or standing through all the day of battle without a single opportunity of advancing, and seemingly called to nothing else but to stand under the fire of the enemy and to "endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." His whole business seems to be "patience and longsuffering;" the first, with reference to the trials which God is pleased to send upon him; the second, the annoyances and injuries of men. Ah! these are the very things human strength cannot endure. Many a brave man can stand under a cannon's fire more calmly than he can endure the taunts of a fellow creature. The highest victory of the Son of God was, that, "when He was reviled He reviled not again; when He suffered He threatened not:" and the mightiest triumphs of the strength of God in us are realized when we can receive the hiding of our Father's face and even the weight of His mighty hand without a doubt or murmur, and accept the misconceptions, opprobriums, reproaches and wrongs of our fellow men, not only with longsuffering, but with joyfulness; not only unruffled and unretaliating, but sweetly realizing and fully believing that they are to us the pledges of some richer blessing from our heavenly Father, and the guarantees of something so glorious that we cannot but thank God for giving us the opportunity of thus winning another blessing.

Beloved, have we any room for progress here "from strength to strength"?

It is strength that carries us in victory through the whole range of our Christian experience with all its extremes, and enables us to say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." The apostle had tested it in the heights and depths of human circumstances and found it equal to all vicissitudes, variations and exigencies. The force of his glorious confession lies in the "all things." Human strength can accomplish some things, but the strength of God is equally adequate for all. It is equal in its uniformity, immutability, unvariableness. Over every opening morning it inscribes the promise, "As thy day so shall thy strength be." It has such an infinite reserve of all-sufficiency that we need not question whether our strength is adequate to the duty. All we need to know is, does God require it? for if He does He will abundantly enable us. The great ships of ocean, and especially the ships of today, are scarcely affected by the storms or the elements. They are so strong that they move on with equal facility through the glassy sea or the rolling waves. The strength of God in a human life will carry it thus steadily through all life's changes.

"Calm as the ray of sun or star,

Which storms assail in vain,  
Moving unruffled through life's war,  
The eternal calm to gain."

It is strength which enables us to receive Christ's indwelling in all its fullness, and to enter into all the meaning of His mystical life. "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth and height; and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

The apostle is speaking here of the indwelling of God in the heart; "That ye might be filled with all the fullness of God," is the crowning statement of this great truth and experience. This is possible in a measure "exceeding abundantly above" all that we are enabled to ask or think. It is to be realized through Christ dwelling in our hearts, and Christ's indwelling will bring us into an experience of love in which we shall know and comprehend the height and depth and length and breadth of His love which passeth knowledge. But this indwelling of Christ is to come through simple faith. Now all this looks extremely easy on paper and in theory, but the apostle tells us that in order to enter into it we must be "strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man." This divine filling requires a vessel that can hold it, and a vessel supernaturally strengthened. You cannot put a charge of dynamite or a hundred-pound shot into a pocket pistol or a vessel of clay. You want the mightiest ordnance, the strongest barrel and breech, to bear the enormous strain of so much concentrated power. And God has to prepare us as the vessels of His power, and, in order to do so, He must take us out of our own strength into the strength of Christ. Our mere natural capacities cannot receive Jesus. The loftiest intellect, the strongest brain, is unequal to this experience; but the humblest capacity, when strengthened by the Holy Ghost, may know God as no angel ever knew Him, and exult in His immeasurable love, as only His loved ones can.

And even after we have received Christ's indwelling through the Holy Ghost enabling us, there are depths and heights in "all the fullness of God" in which we more perfectly enter, in proportion as we allow the Holy Ghost to fit us for the deeper and higher experience. This is often what our severest trials are meant for, to give to our spirit a vigor and capacity which will enable us to rise to a higher place in the fellowship.

It is strength which is established and perfected by spiritual discipline. "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you" (1 Pet. v: 20). Every new experience of Christ's grace must be confirmed by some new discipline in the school of trial, and even after we have come to know God as "the God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory," we must suffer a while, that even this knowledge and experience of His grace may be established, strengthened, settled.

And so we are ever passing on "from strength to strength," and finding, like the giant oak, that the wildest tempests, instead of tearing us from our foundation, only plant us deeper and root us the more securely to the Rock of Ages.