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THE TRULY STRONG – TRUE STRENGTH AND POWER

Introduction

In the previous message, we noted that the world is preoccupied with fleshly strength and that the history of man is filled with conflicts in power struggles. Millions of people suffer because of the abuse of power and exploitation of the weaker by the stronger.

We noted that God wants His people to be truly strong because His kingdom does not consist in word but in power, and true strength and power is vital for effective Christian living. To be overcomers, we need to learn to be strong in the Lord. In this message, we will continue to consider what it means to be truly strong and some examples of those who are truly strong.

The Lord Jesus is truly strong

The Lord Jesus is all-powerful and almighty. There were many demonstrations of power in His life while He was on earth. Yet in many contexts, He appeared weak and helpless rather than strong. In the events surrounding the Cross, the Lord Jesus was mocked, scourged and finally crucified; He was oppressed and afflicted, and yet He did not open His mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter. This is not man's idea of greatness, strength and power; rather, it is a picture of weakness and helplessness.

Why did He appear weak and helpless when He is actually truly strong? We need to understand these issues clearly because we are exhorted to follow in His steps and to adopt the same kind of spirit and attitude. But many of us find this difficult and prefer to be like the people of the world, to be able to assert ourselves, rather than to be unfairly treated and appear helpless.

Clearly, the Lord Jesus was strong at all times, even when He appeared weak. Basically, true strength and being strong in the Lord can be described as "the strength and power to live out the life of truth". A person with true strength is one who is able to submit to, and accomplish, the perfect will of God. He will persevere in the path of truth and righteousness whatever it may involve. He is not easily discouraged, deterred, provoked, or pressured to turn away from this path. This requires strength of character, firm convictions and self-control in the path of truth.

When we understand this, we can appreciate the life of the Lord Jesus – how He submitted to the Father’s will, however difficult it may be – and the meaningfulness of our following in His steps. Such a life, although very difficult, will yield true fruit. It honours and glorifies God, it is good for the person involved, and it will contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom. It will not be lived in vain.

Although the concept of strength and power has negative worldly connotations, true power and strength is vital to successful and effective Christian living. True power is closely related to true success. True success is God’s perfect will being fulfilled in our lives; and for God’s will to be fulfilled in our lives, we need to be truly strong.

Truly strong – strengthened by God with all power

Let us look at Paul’s prayer for the Colossians:

Colossians 1:9-11

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously

In verse 11, Paul prayed that the believers might not just be strong, but that they might be strengthened with *all* power in the Lord. This is what we should strive for. Notice here that it is according to God’s *glorious* might, that is, we should not be satisfied with just a taste of a little strength, but to be “strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might”.

Note that this is linked to verse 10: “so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”. If we want to walk in such a manner, to please Him in all respects, and to bear fruit in every good work, we need to be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might.

This is also linked to “the attaining of all steadfastness and patience”. If we want to be able to persevere and to be patient in the path that the Lord desires of us, however difficult it may be, we need to be strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might.

True power that is desirable comes about through the working of the Holy Spirit when He comes upon us. The Lord Jesus, after His resurrection and just prior to His ascension, said:

Acts 1:8

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

This has to do with witness and service. If we want to be effective witnesses to the truth and for the Lord – and this is an important aspect of our time on earth – then we need to be strong in the Lord and experience the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

The truly strong and the truly weak

Who is strong? And who is weak? Who is the one who has true strength and power? I want to consider this from the Christian perspective, bearing in mind how the people of the world tend to look at these things and how we can be easily influenced by the worldly way of thinking.

We shall look at two incidents described in the Scriptures. The principles we can learn from these incidents are applicable to many situations in our own lives.

Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel's three friends (Daniel 3:1-23)

Verses 1 to 6 record that Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of a great empire, made an image of gold and gave instructions for the people in his kingdom to assemble together to worship it. Whoever did not fall down and worship would immediately be cast into the furnace of blazing fire.

In those days, a king commands and his subjects have to obey; and those who disobey shall be punished accordingly. Nebuchadnezzar was in a position of authority and power. And so, the people submitted to his orders and commands. But the king received news that there were certain Jews in his kingdom who were not obeying his command.

Daniel 3:12-15

12 "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king.

14 Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?

15 "Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you do not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?"

These men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, refused to worship the golden image. Nebuchadnezzar, filled with wrath, gave orders to heat the furnace seven times more than it was usually heated (v. 19). He then commanded certain valiant warriors in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, in order to cast them into the furnace of blazing fire (v. 20).

Daniel 3:22-23

22 For this reason, because the king's command was urgent and the furnace had been made extremely hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who carried up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego.

23 But these three men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, fell into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire still tied up.

This is not a fictional story; this actually happened in history. Who then was strong and who was weak? To the world, the answer is very clear. It was Nebuchadnezzar who was strong and powerful. He was the mighty ruler of a great empire. The three friends of Daniel were helpless before this tyrannical king. They were at his mercy. He could order their deaths, and the three of them would be unable to resist.

When we are placed in a difficult situation and are confronted by those who, in the eyes of the world, are strong and powerful, and we are in a position like these three men, we may feel very weak and helpless. We may tend to look at such situations from the world's perspective. But what is the perspective from God's kingdom?

Christians need to look at the issues of life, not from the eyes of the world, but from the true perspective. What is the reality? What is God's perspective? How does He look at a situation like this? Who is strong in the eyes of the Lord, and who is weak? Is it the angry tyrannical ruler of this great empire, or the three seemingly helpless men? Note that the seemingly helpless Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego made a very courageous stand. They were steadfast and confident in the Lord. They were unwaveringly faithful to Him, whatever the cost.

Daniel 3:16-18

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, "O

Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter.

17 "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king.

18 "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego knew that God was able to deliver them. But they were not assuming that He would. God might not deliver them from the furnace, not because He could not. But even if He did not, even if God should see it fit for them to go through this blazing fire and be burnt, they would still choose to remain true to the Lord, rather than worship the golden image.

It is quite clear how the Lord looked at the situation. From the true perspective, it was the three friends who were strong and Nebuchadnezzar who was weak. Nebuchadnezzar was emotional, self-centred, lacking in self-control, and his tyrannical behaviour was clearly not of the truth. The three friends, in contrast, were commendable. They demonstrated faith in God and faithfulness to God. In that context, God had the freedom to manifest His power.

We look at what happened after the three friends were thrown into the blazing fire.

Daniel 3:24-27

24 Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astounded and stood up in haste; he said to his high officials, "Was it not three men we cast bound into the midst of the fire?" They replied to the king, "Certainly, O king."

25 He said, "Look! I see four men loosed and walking about in the midst of the fire without harm, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods!"

26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire.

27 The satraps, the prefects, the governors and the king's high officials gathered around and saw in regard to these men that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men nor was the hair of their head singed, nor were their trousers damaged, nor had the smell of fire even come upon them.

They were miraculously preserved by the Lord. The fourth man walking about in the midst of the blazing fire, who was "like a son of the gods", could very well be the Logos – the Lord Jesus prior to His incarnation.

In this context, God manifested His power by delivering them. But even if God did not deliver them in this way, it would not mean that God did not manifest His power in that context, because it would require the power of God to sustain the three men to take their stand fearlessly and with great conviction.

This incident had a very powerful impact on the people of that time and continues to have an impact, even today. There was also a powerful testimony in the spiritual realm by the deliverance in itself. But the basic aspect of the power of the testimony is in the lives of these three men – their courage, their steadfast confidence in the Lord and faithfulness to Him – and how the Lord enabled them to make that courageous stand in that situation.

Notice the significant impact on Nebuchadnezzar himself (vs. 28-30). In verse 26, Nebuchadnezzar said, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God." He could recognise that these three friends were worshipping the true God, and that the true God was the One helping them.

Daniel 3:28

Nebuchadnezzar responded and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, who has sent His angel and delivered His servants who put their trust in Him, violating the king's command, and yielded up their bodies so as not to serve or worship any god except their own God.

Contrast this with verse 15, when he asked, "What god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" He now recognised God was the One who had delivered them. The king had been very angry when they violated his command. But now, he looked at it in a different light. They had violated the king's command because they trusted and wanted to be true to their God. They would not worship or serve any god except the true God and were prepared to stand by their conviction, even to the point of yielding up their bodies. Nebuchadnezzar began to appreciate the meaning of the stand of these three friends and commended them.

Daniel 3:29

"Therefore I make a decree that any people, nation or tongue that speaks anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego shall be torn limb from limb and their houses reduced to a rubbish heap, inasmuch as there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."

As we consider this incident, we should reflect on some major principles of truth helpful for our own lives. Nebuchadnezzar, the autocratic ruler of a great empire, appeared to have unlimited, unrestricted power and authority to act and order as he pleased, but in

reality, it was not so. In reality, everything – people, things, the powers of darkness, occurrences – is subject to the sovereignty of God. There is no one else who has unlimited, unrestricted power. God is the only One who is truly all-powerful. Nothing can happen without His permission. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the permission of God.

Let us rejoice that our great God is favourably disposed towards those who love and trust Him and walk with Him. And He will cause all things to work together for their good, as Paul puts it in Romans 8:28. This ought to be a great encouragement and assurance for us to walk in faith. Let us deeply appreciate and receive this truth into our lives, to live with this deep sense of conviction.

The Lord Jesus before Pilate (John 18:33-19:16)

The Jews had delivered up the Lord Jesus to Pilate, the governor. And Pilate was sitting in judgement on the Lord Jesus.

At one level of perception of what was taking place, we can say that Pilate, the governor, was the one who wielded the authority and power over the Lord Jesus. Pilate could decide on how he would deal with the Lord Jesus and how he would sentence Him. At this level of perception, the Lord Jesus appeared weak and helpless before Pilate who could do to Him as he pleased. Pilate summoned the Lord Jesus and interrogated Him (18:33), and subsequently had Him scourged (19:1).

John 19:10

So Pilate said to Him, "You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, and I have authority to crucify You?"

Authority had been given to Pilate. He could release the Lord Jesus. He could sentence Him to be crucified. And in fact, he delivered Jesus over to the Jews to be crucified (John 19:16).

But at a deeper and higher level of perception, and this was the reality of what was taking place, we can say that it was Pilate who was on trial. He would be judged for how he conducted himself in that situation. Even as Pilate thought he was sitting in judgement of the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus, who is the true Judge, was judging him then, and would do so on Judgement Day. Note the reply of the Lord Jesus to Pilate:

John 19:11

Jesus answered, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

Pilate did not have ultimate authority over the Lord Jesus. He had no inherent authority over Him. It was authority given to him; it was delegated authority. Personally, I prefer to interpret the phrase "from above" as "from heaven, from God". He would have no authority over the Lord Jesus unless it had been given him from God, unless God allowed it. Pilate would be accountable to God, who is the ultimate Ruler and Governor of the universe.

It is also possible to interpret "from above" as a reference to a higher secular authority, but the basic truth is that the ultimate authority is still God, and Jesus, the Son of God, to whom all judgement has been given (John 5:22).

It is very clear that Pilate would not be able to do as he pleased with the Lord Jesus, but only what God the Father had permitted in that situation. Whether Pilate was conscious of it or not, he did not have ultimate power and authority over the Lord Jesus.

There are two points we can take note of:

1. The weakness of Pilate

Pilate appeared to be the one wielding authority and power over the Lord Jesus, but notice his weakness. He gave in to the demands of the crowd, under the instigation of the chief priests and the elders, contrary to his better judgement and finding. He had found no guilt in the Lord Jesus, and knew that He had been delivered up because of envy.

John 18:38

... And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in Him.

Matthew 27:18

For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over.

Pilate knew that the Jews delivered the Lord Jesus up because they were envious of Him, not because He was truly guilty. Nonetheless, he delivered the Lord up for crucifixion.

Matthew 27:22-26

22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!"

23 And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!"

24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves."

25 And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"
26 Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

Pilate was afraid when he saw that a riot was starting, and he tried to disclaim responsibility. He actually took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, and said, "I am innocent of this Man's blood."

The Roman Empire was noted for its law and order and administration of justice. As governor, Pilate was entrusted with the solemn responsibility of upholding and administering justice. But in his weakness, he succumbed to gross injustice. And no matter how hard he tried to claim innocence, he could never be innocent of the blood of the innocent Man he delivered over for crucifixion.

Here we see a manifestation of an appalling weakness of character. Pilate showed a lack of the sense of justice in such an important issue as a death sentence. He lacked the sense of responsibility. He was weak in principles and moral convictions, and lacked the strength to act according to what he himself recognised. He acknowledged that there was no guilt in the Lord Jesus. But he did not act according to his own recognition of what was right. Instead, he succumbed to the pressures of the multitude, and did what was wrong in a very serious matter – delivering an innocent Man to be crucified.

Was Pilate strong here? No. He was weak. We could even say he was cowardly.

2. The strength of the Lord Jesus

In contrast, consider the Lord Jesus. He is the Son of God, the Creator of all things, yet He was mocked, spat upon, scourged and then crucified. But in spite of the terrible treatment, He went through it with all composure and dignity. Although it was an extremely difficult time, He went through it all in faithfulness and in truth. This is described in Hebrews 12.

Hebrews 12:1-4

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

We are encouraged to focus our eyes on the Lord Jesus, and to run the race with endurance. Each one has his or her race to run – the race that is set before us – and we should run with endurance. It requires strength to persevere in this way.

The Lord's example is an encouragement to us that we may not grow weary and lose heart. How the Lord Jesus went through was a manifestation and demonstration of true strength. The one who is truly strong is not easily shaken; he can face and go through all kinds of situations well, steadfast, unshaken in truth and faithfulness to God. The Lord Jesus manifested this supremely.

Those strong in the world easily shaken

Many may appear and be regarded by the world as strong, powerful and confident. In reality, they can be easily shaken, troubled and fearful. Even Nebuchadnezzar, the arrogant, tyrannical, powerful ruler of the great Babylonian empire could be fearful. When he was exercising power, he appeared very confident and courageous. However, he could be troubled and alarmed, and that just by dreams. Let us look at his testimony and admission of fear and alarm.

Daniel 4:1, 4-5

1 Nebuchadnezzar the king to all the peoples, nations, and men of every language that live in all the earth: "May your peace abound!

4 "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and flourishing in my palace.

5 "I saw a dream and it made me fearful; and these fantasies as I lay on my bed and the visions in my mind kept alarming me.

Nebuchadnezzar was at ease, and there was nothing threatening him at that point in time. But because of a dream, he became fearful and alarmed. Daniel 2:1 records that because of his dreams, "his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him".

A very striking descriptive portrayal of such fear can be seen in Nebuchadnezzar's descendant, Belshazzar. He ruled after Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel 5:1-4 gives an account of the king having a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and he gave orders to bring out the gold and silver vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that they could drink from them. They were having a great time, or so they thought. As they were drinking and praising the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, stone,

Daniel 5:5-6

5 Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing.

6 Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

The arrogant king of the great empire grew pale, his thoughts alarmed him, his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together. He was very nervous and frightened indeed. When his wise men were not able to read or interpret the inscription, "King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew even paler, and his nobles were perplexed" (Dan. 5:9).

Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar are just two examples of many who may appear strong and confident, but in reality, they lack true strength and power.

As the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 62:11, true power – the power that really counts, the power from the perspective of God's kingdom – belongs to God; and those who do not experience it, who do not know the power of God, can never be truly strong. They may appear to be strong, and they may have a kind of strength and power – the power of the world – but they can never have true power.

The kind of power and strength the world offers can be easily shaken. Yet many are striving after it. Sadly, believers can also be enticed in that direction. It is actually feeble and unreliable. Let us see through it all clearly. All that the world offers – power, strength, security, position, riches, honour – have no true substance and quality. They may look attractive, but are vanity of vanities. They are deceptive, like a mirage in the desert, and fleeting, like the dew that appears for a while, and then evaporates when the sun shines. They are in contrast to the abiding realities, and the substance of all that truly counts, that can be found in and only in the kingdom of God. What is found in the kingdom of God endures and cannot be shaken. He who is truly strong can be compared to a building with a strong foundation and is not easily shaken, because he is grounded in the Lord, and his refuge is in Him.

Hebrews 12:27-28

27 This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

We need to ask ourselves: What are we setting our hearts on? What are we impressed by? Is there still an element in our hearts that is enticed or gripped by what the world has to offer? Are we overawed by what we see in the world? We must not be envious of what the people of the world have. We must learn to perceive the reality of what truly counts and set our hearts on it.

Those who fear the Lord are strong

Let us look at Psalm 112.

Psalm 112:1, 6-7

1 Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
Who greatly delights in His commandments.

6 For he will never be shaken; ...

7 He will not fear evil tidings; His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.

Many of us can be nervous, worried, shaken, and afraid of evil tidings. The word here translated "evil" may sometimes have to do with moral evil, but it does not necessarily have to be so. It can convey a sense of calamity, disaster, a broad sense of what people would normally describe as something "bad" happening – "bad news".

But the one who is truly strong is not shaken or afraid of evil tidings. Why? Verse 7 explains: "His heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord". When our hearts are steadfast, trusting in Him, and we have a proper basis for it, then we need not be fearful, whatever may happen. Who is the one who is unshaken in the face of evil tidings? The answer is in verse 1: "The man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments".

If we are walking well with the Lord, if we love Him, trust Him, are obedient to Him, know His way and walk in it, then we need not be shaken. We can attain such stability and steadfastness; we can properly trust in God. We need not be afraid, nervous or worried whatever we may hear or come across. Verse 4 tells us: "Light arises in the darkness for the upright". Sometimes, we may go through situations that appear rather dark, but He can cause light to arise in the darkness. God is gracious, compassionate and righteous, and if He is with us, if He is for us, why should we be afraid or shaken?

True strength – testimony of Paul

The apostle Paul testifies in Philippians 4:13 what it means to be truly strong, and what is true strength:

Philippians 4:13

I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

When Paul says, "I can do", there is a deep sense of having strength. The Greek word translated "I can do" basically conveys "having the strength or to be able" through or in the Lord Jesus Christ "who strengthens me". In verse 11, he explains that he had "learned to be content in whatever circumstances" he was and to get along in all kinds of situations. He is able to go through well, whatever situations he may be in. In the

context, the primary thrust of verse 13 is Paul's confidence that in or through Christ, he is able and he will have the strength to go through all situations well.

Many people try to "claim" this verse in a way that is not appropriate. Their lives are not consecrated to the Lord and yet, when they are confronted with difficulties, they think if they affirm, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me", they will be able to fare well.

How can Paul's testimony in this verse be true in our own lives and how can we meaningfully testify likewise? We must learn, like Paul, to walk with the Lord, abide in Him and be strong in Him. We will then have the strength and be able to go through all situations well and do all the things He requires of us. The almighty God strengthens us, and His grace is sufficient for us. We can be steadfast, unshaken in the truth.

Different manifestations of true strength

True strength can be manifested in different ways. It can appear obviously strong; it can sometimes also appear weak, helpless, and even pitiful.

Hebrews 11:32-34

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,
33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,
34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

Men of faith "conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouth of lions, quenched the power of the fire...put foreign armies to flight". All these are obvious manifestations of true strength and easily recognised as such.

But contrast verses 35-38. Notice these verses are still talking about men of faith – who are strong, men empowered by the Lord.

Hebrews 11:35-38

35 Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;
36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated
38 (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

These men appeared weak. They were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, destitute, ill-treated, afflicted, wandering in deserts.

They may seem rather pitiful, but it requires true strength to go through all these, because they were going through it all in faithfulness to the Lord. And they were able to persevere in spite of all the hardships and pain inflicted upon them because God strengthened them.

True strength can be expressed in different ways in different phases of a person's life. For example, as a fugitive fleeing from King Saul, David went through a lot of hardships and difficulties. But the Lord was with him and granted him success. He was strong in the Lord at that time. In another phase, David was a powerful king over a conquering Israel. He was still faithful to the Lord, and generally was strong in the Lord.

This was also the case with Joseph and Daniel. The Lord was with Joseph while he was a slave and prisoner. Subsequently, Joseph was exalted to a high position in Egypt and he continued to be faithful to the Lord. So in all these contexts, Joseph was strong in the Lord. Daniel was in an exalted earthly position for many years, serving different kings. During the reign of King Darius, there was a conspiracy against Daniel and he was thrown into the lions' den. But whether he was in an exalted position or in the lions' den, Daniel was strong in the Lord.

Outward circumstances may vary; we may have to go through various kinds of situations. But they are secondary. The critical issue is the inward reality: Are we strong in the Lord? Are we strong in our inner man? Are we faithful to Him? Are we able to persevere in the path of truth?

The truly strong cares for the weak

The strong in the world tend to exploit the weak. They want to get their own way, their whims and fancies, their personal selfish desires. But the biblical teaching of the truly strong is in the opposite direction. Paul tells us that the truly strong not only do not take advantage of the weak but will also help and bear the weakness of those without strength (Romans 15:1).

If we are truly strong, we will not try to get our own way, fulfil our selfish personal desires, and disregard the interests and welfare of others. Those who are truly strong

will be compassionate to those who are weaker. Their hearts will be motivated by love to edify others instead of just pleasing themselves.

In Romans 15:2, Paul exhorts each one to “please his neighbor for his good, to his edification”. We are to please our neighbour for his ultimate well-being. True strength from the Lord is intended for building up, not just for us to feel good that we have strength. The Lord strengthens us that we may be able to live out the truth, that His purposes may be fulfilled in and through our lives.

In the next message, we shall consider how we can be strong in the Lord for specific occasions, as well as generally in our lives.

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