

— TRULY — STRONG

Christians must be on guard against the enticements of worldly strength and power and, at the same time, recognise that God wants us to be truly strong.

- What does it mean to be truly strong?
- Why is it important to be truly strong?
- What is the relationship between being truly strong, how well a person is faring, and the fulfilment of God's purposes?
- How can we become truly strong?
- Many Christians are attracted by manifestations of spiritual power. Is this good or bad? What dangers do we need to be mindful of in such contexts?
- Is the manifestation of spiritual power in and through a person's life an indication that this person is truly strong?

This book can contribute towards a wholesome understanding of these issues and how God's children can become truly strong, firmly grounded in the Scriptures and in a deep personal relationship with God.

If you have no further use for this book, please pass
it to someone who may benefit from it.

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A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF TRUE STRENGTH

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Feedback and comments on this book are welcome and can be e-mailed to: feedback@godandtruth.com.

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Preface

I am thankful to the Lord that my fourth book *Truly Strong* can now be made available to God's children.

My first book, *Understanding Job* (2003), is a reflection on the meaning and purpose of Job's suffering. My second, *The Two Kingdoms* (2005), presents what I understand to be the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God and the fallen world, the meaning of our earthly existence and how we can live well as citizens of heaven in a fallen world. The third book, *Man of Faith* (2010), covers the meaning of true faith and how we can maintain unwavering faith and a heart on fire for God under all circumstances.

The warm reception of these books by brethren in Christ from various countries has been an encouragement to me to continue to make available more books for the edification of God's children.

This fourth book, *Truly Strong*, is based on seven consecutive messages¹ preached in a local congregation in 1994, and it deals with the subject of true strength from the biblical perspective.

Just as in my preaching, I have sought to exercise care in the way I present scriptural truths in all my books. Careful readers will be able to see for themselves how these truths are arrived at from the scriptural texts, and that what is being presented are not the mere assertions or opinions of man.

These four books grew out of more than thirty years of fellowship and ministry in a local congregation. I am thankful to the Lord for His many provisions and the participation of the brethren in recording, transcribing and editing the messages. Brethren in other countries have also helped in the printing and distribution of these books. They have also helped to translate

the first three titles into Spanish and *Understanding Job* into the Akha language as well. I am thankful to the Lord for their contributions which, to me, are meaningful expressions of fellowship among God's people in the local congregation and in the universal church.

Just as for the first three titles, this book is offered free of charge for those who intend to read it.

These books are part of an ongoing project to provide wholesome scriptural materials to help Christians grow and serve the Lord. The four books, together with many text and more than 500 audio messages on major issues of the Christian faith, are available on the website *www.godandtruth.com*, and they may be freely downloaded for personal use and forwarding to others.

I would appreciate your prayers for the Lord's guidance and undertaking for this whole project so that it may contribute to the growth of believers. It is my prayer that God's children may be truly strong, walking in the truth and in close fellowship with God.

Lim Kou

¹ Messages AR140–146 from the message series *Appearance and Reality*

Introduction

Some people are strong and powerful in the eyes of the world, but in reality, weak in the sight of God. On the other hand, some appear weak in the eyes of the world, but are in reality strong in the sight of God. How can we tell who is truly strong and who is truly weak, from the biblical perspective?

As Christians, we must be on guard against the enticements of worldly strength and power and, at the same time, recognise that God wants us to be truly strong.

But what does it mean to be truly strong? Why is it important to be truly strong? What is the relationship between being truly strong, how well a person is faring, and the fulfilment of God's purposes? And how can we become truly strong?

The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of one who is truly strong. He is truly strong at all times, though there are times when He may appear weak. For example, the Lord Jesus appeared weak and helpless as He hung on the Cross. But in reality, the Cross was a manifestation of supreme power and strength. What can we learn from the life of the Lord Jesus concerning what it means to be truly strong?

Many Christians are attracted by manifestations of spiritual power. Is this good or bad? What dangers do we need to bear in mind in such contexts? Is the manifestation of spiritual power in and through a person's life an indication that this person is truly strong? How can we adopt an approach to this area that is pleasing to God?

May this book contribute towards a wholesome understanding of these issues and how God's children can become truly strong, firmly grounded in the Scriptures and in a deep personal relationship with God.

Wherein Lies True Strength

The world is preoccupied with being strong and powerful. We see this in individuals. We see this also in groups and nations. The pages of history bear witness to this. Power and power struggles. Military strength and economic wealth. These are prominent themes in many books and movies.

In the world, the powerful people are often those who are rich and who hold high positions in society, such as the head of a country, a CEO in a company, a commander in the army.

It is not uncommon to find among the strong and powerful those who are cunning, shrewd, unscrupulous and proud. These people abuse their power to exploit others and assert their power and influence over others to satisfy their personal desires and ambitions. They do not even blink an eye when committing terrible deeds. Millions have become their victims, especially women, children and the aged.

When it comes to the concepts of being strong and powerful, believers tend to be uneasy, just as they are with the concepts of success, prosperity and ambition. This is understandable because these concepts often carry negative connotations of worldliness. However, from the biblical perspective, there is nothing wrong with being truly strong and powerful, and there is no need for us to shy away from considering these concepts.

The Scriptures is clear that the Lord wants us to be strong. In Joshua 1, we are told that God instructed and exhorted Joshua to be strong and courageous. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul also exhorts: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength

of His might” (Eph. 6:10). In his letter to the Corinthians, he says: “The kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20).

Strength and power are indeed an integral part of God’s kingdom. The Lord wants us to be overcomers, especially in the last days. And to be overcomers, we have to be strong. Otherwise, we will be overcome instead. It is therefore important for us to have a good grasp of this subject and be truly strong and powerful in the biblical sense, so that we may live effectively and fulfil the Lord’s intentions for our lives.

The life of the Lord Jesus Christ

I would like to begin our consideration of this subject by reflecting on the life of the Lord Jesus.

The Lord Jesus is all-powerful

Speaking of the Lord Jesus, the apostle John tells us: “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3). The Lord Jesus is indeed the all-powerful Creator.

In the Gospels, we see the Lord Jesus manifesting His power in various ways. He healed the sick and raised the dead. He exercised power over nature, stilling the storms and calming the waves. He also exercised power over demons, casting them out from the demon-possessed.

Hebrews 1:2 tells us that in these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son, through whom He made the world. Then we read in verse 3:

Hebrews 1:3

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

This verse describes the Son, who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His nature, and it tells us that He upholds all things by the word of His power. Clearly, the Lord Jesus has tremendous power.

Yet the Lord Jesus appeared weak

Although the Lord Jesus was not lacking in strength and power, He did not appear strong in many situations in the Gospel accounts. In fact, He appeared weak, and at times, even helpless, whereas His enemies appeared to be the ones wielding power.

In His earthly life, the Lord suffered much ill-treatment. However, He did not assert Himself nor retaliate, thereby giving the impression He was weak.

The most striking illustration of this is in the events leading to His crucifixion. During that episode, the Lord was mocked, slapped, spat upon and scourged. Just when He should be strong, He seemed so weak and unable to defend Himself. In the end, like a criminal, He was nailed to the Cross, suffering a most agonising, painful and humiliating death.

Let us look at the Scriptures to identify with what took place at that time.

In Mark 14:55, the Lord Jesus appeared before the Jewish Council — the Sanhedrin or the Jewish supreme court. The chief priests and the whole Council were trying to obtain testimony against Him to put Him to death, but they were unable to find any. Some spat at Him, blindfolded Him, beat Him with their fists, and said to Him, “Prophecy!” And the officers received Him with slaps in the face (Mark 14:65).

The Council then brought the Lord Jesus before Pilate. When Pilate learned that the Lord belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod.

Luke 23:8–11

8 Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him.

9 And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing.

10 And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently.

11 And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate.

Again the Lord Jesus was treated with contempt. Herod and his soldiers mocked Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and then sent Him back to Pilate.

It was the Passover, and the people asked for a prisoner to be released, as it was customary for Pilate to do during this feast. Knowing that Jesus was innocent and that it was because of envy that the chief priests delivered Him up, Pilate wanted to release Him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to demand for the Lord Jesus to be crucified. To appease the Jews, Pilate gave in to the demands of the mob.

Mark 15:8–15

8 The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them.

9 Pilate answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”

10 For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy.

11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead.

12 Answering again, Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?”

13 They shouted back, “Crucify Him!”

14 But Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has He done?”

But they shouted all the more, “Crucify Him!”

15 Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

The Roman soldiers then took over and they mocked the Lord and pretended to worship Him. After that, they led Him away to be crucified.

Mark 15:16–20

16 The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort.

17 They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him;

18 and they began to acclaim Him, “Hail, King of the Jews!”

19 They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him.

20 After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him.

While the Lord hung on the Cross, the abuse and insults continued unabated.

Mark 15:24–32

24 And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each man should take.

25 It was the third hour when they crucified Him.

26 The inscription of the charge against Him read, “THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

27 They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left.

28 [And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And He was numbered with transgressors.”]

29 Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, “Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days,
30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!”
31 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself.
32 “Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!” Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him.

The scriptural records of the events leading to the Cross present the Lord as one who appeared weak and helpless, subject to the will of the Jewish and Roman authorities and to the demands of the mob.

Centuries earlier, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about what the Lord Jesus would go through at the Cross.

Isaiah 53:7

He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

Isaiah foretold that the Lord, though oppressed and afflicted, did not open His mouth and was like a lamb led to slaughter.

This is not a picture normally associated with greatness, strength and power. Rather, it seems to be a portrayal of weakness and helplessness. And yet, we are exhorted to follow in the steps of the Lord, to follow His example in approach, attitude and spirit (1 Pet. 2:21–25).

Many Christians will find having to go through situations like these distasteful and distressing. They will find it at odds with their idea of a victorious Christian life.

Most of us want to be strong in the eyes of the world. When unjustly treated, we would rather stand up and assert ourselves than appear weak and helpless. We resent being wronged. Cao Cao, portrayed as a notorious warrior-general in Chinese history during the “Three Kingdoms” period, was said to have uttered these words: “Better that I should wrong the world than that the world should wrong me”. Such a spirit is not uncommon. There are those who consider it a privilege of the strong and powerful to wrong others. Indeed, such features as self-confidence, arrogance and aggression are prominent characteristics of the fallen world.

Wherein lies true strength?

What then is true strength, and what is weakness, in reality? We must seek the answers to these questions from the perspective of God’s kingdom, which is different from that of the fallen world.

True strength in gentleness and humility

A prominent characteristic of the Lord Jesus, often mistaken for weakness, is His gentleness and humility.

Matthew 11:28–30

28 “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30 “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

The word translated as “gentle” in verse 29 and Matthew 5:5 can also be translated as “meek”. The Lord Jesus is gentle or meek; He is humble or lowly. He says: “Learn from Me”. So we are to learn to be meek and humble. Meekness and humility are key qualities in God’s kingdom, qualities that we must nurture in our own lives.

True strength in submission to God's perfect will

True strength in God's kingdom involves strength of character and strength of convictions. One who is truly strong has unwavering commitment to the truth. He perseveres in the path of truth, whatever it may involve. He submits to the perfect will of God and actually lives out God's will in his life. Although living such a life is very difficult, one who is truly strong is not easily deterred from the right path.

When we understand true strength and power in this way, we can see that the Lord Jesus manifested true strength even when He appeared weak. He manifested true strength when He lived out perfectly the will of the Father in all situations, including those in which He seemed helpless, and especially in the events leading to the Cross.

The Lord Jesus did not always allow others to do to Him as they wished. In Luke 4:20–30, we read that while He allowed Himself to be cast out of the city, He did not permit them to throw Him down the cliff.

Why then did the Lord submit Himself to all the severe and humiliating treatment of the Jews and the Romans and endure the excruciating pain and agony of the Cross? It is because He recognised it was in line with the truth and the perfect will of the Father for Him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus prayed: "Not My will but Yours be done". This was in fact His basic posture throughout His life. He was always seeking to do what was pleasing to the Father. This was the reason He endured the agony of the Cross.

The Lord Jesus did not enjoy going through the suffering and He did not find it easy. In fact, it was extremely difficult for Him. Matthew 26:36–39 gives us a glimpse of the depth of agony in His soul:

Matthew 26:36–39

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.”

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”

39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

The Lord Jesus was deeply grieved and distressed. As He faced the prospect of death on the Cross, He knew the agony would be extremely great — not just physically but also in the emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions. His heart-rending cry: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34) was evidence of this. He was bearing the sins of the world on the Cross and the punishment due to us. Satan and the forces of darkness were afflicting Him severely.

Another likely reason for the cry of anguish of the Son of God is this: God the Father and God the Son enjoy an eternal, continuous, deep fellowship and oneness. But because the Lord Jesus was bearing our sins and the punishment due to us, something unthinkable took place. He came under the judgement of God, resulting in a disruption to the otherwise unbroken bond and oneness.¹

In verse 39, the Lord Jesus said: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me”. But He continued: “Yet not as I will, but as You will”. The Lord went through the suffering at the

¹ For more detailed consideration of the Cross and the nature and intensity of Christ’s agony and suffering, please refer to AR173–175 on www.godandtruth.com.

Cross in submission to the Father's will. It was not meaningless suffering, but one with great positive value and significance in the spiritual realm.

His death on the Cross provided the foundation for the kingdom of God and the furtherance of God's kingdom. It provided the way of salvation for mankind and the path of true freedom — freedom from bondage to sin and the powers of darkness. It is the basis for the transformation of our lives and character. All true submission to God, all suffering according to God's will, will not be in vain, but will have positive implications.

A life of true submission to God requires courage and strength of character. It requires great spiritual strength and stamina. It is not weakness at all.

True submission to God accomplishes much

A life of true submission to God has positive implications.

1. A life of true submission to God honours and glorifies God

When we live in submission to God, we will be living a life that faithfully represents the character and ways of God. Such a life may appear as weakness to others, but we need not be perturbed by that. What we need to concentrate on is being faithful to God.

2. A life of true submission to God helps us grow in moral and spiritual stature

If we walk the path God desires us to take, it will be good for us, even if we go through unjust suffering. It will help us develop our character. It will nurture true and precious qualities within us such as a gentle (or meek) and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God (1 Pet. 3:4).

The words in James 1:2–4 are a strong encouragement to us as we go through difficulties and trials in submission to the will of God.

James 1:2–4

2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,
3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.
4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If we go through such situations properly, in fellowship with God, we will grow in moral and spiritual stature. And we will deepen in our knowledge of God and fellowship with Him, and we will move in the direction of becoming “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”.

3. *A life of true submission to God advances God's kingdom*

How does submission to God advance the kingdom of God? First, when we submit to the will of God, we are submitting to the reign of God in our hearts. In so doing, God's kingdom is advanced in our own hearts. Second, when we submit to God's will, we accomplish His work and thus contribute to the advancement of His kingdom, just as the Lord Jesus did when He accomplished the work God the Father had entrusted to Him. Such a life of submission is a true testimony of God and His kingdom.

Asserting ourselves in a fleshly way may sometimes seem more effective than submitting quietly to God's will. But a proper submission to God's perfect will is actually the most effective way of promoting the values of God's kingdom and drawing others towards God and His kingdom. Such times are also opportunities for God to manifest His power through us.

Are we truly strong?

The path of true strength and meekness is not easy. It can be very painful and humiliating. At times, it can be overwhelming. But no situation need ever overwhelm us when we learn to properly walk

with the Lord. His grace will always be sufficient for us. However, to live out such a life requires conviction and determination.

Instead of subscribing to the world's views of strength and weakness, we should ask ourselves: Am I strong enough to be patient and kind? Am I strong enough to be gentle, to persevere in the path of truth, in obedience to God, however painful, difficult and provocative situations may be?

Are we strong enough to turn the other cheek or go the second mile, if that is the loving and appropriate thing to do? Turning the other cheek and going the second mile is not easy and it involves pain and humiliation. We may think it is unfair. But the Lord does not require us to turn the other cheek or go the second mile only when it is fair to us. Yet it does not mean that we allow others to do whatever they want to us. We have to consider what would be consistent with the ways and the character of God, and how He wants us to respond in the specific situations we go through.

It is easy to be impatient and unkind, even aggressive and cruel. The world would not regard such responses as inconsistent with being strong and powerful. But from the biblical perspective, these are not the responses of the truly strong and powerful, but those of the truly weak and foolish.

God wants us to be strong and courageous in the truth

It is important that we be truly strong. We read in Joshua 1 that, with the passing of Moses, Joshua was to lead the nation of Israel. In verses 6–9, the Lord told him:

Joshua 1:6–9

6 “Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them.

7 Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the

left, so that you may have success wherever you go.

8 This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

At this very important juncture in the history of Israel and the fulfilment of God’s purposes, God stressed to Joshua the need to be strong and courageous. Three times the Lord emphasised to him: Be strong and courageous (vs. 6–7, 9).

In verse 7, we see that success is linked to being strong and courageous. It is also linked to obedience to God’s laws. The Lord told Joshua: “Be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, *so that* you may have success wherever you go”. Joshua must be strong and courageous and he must act according to God’s instructions and ways if he is to be successful.

We see then that there is moral content to being strong and courageous. True success is not having strength and courage to do whatever we like, but having strength and courage to act according to God’s ways.

How can we be truly strong?

We can be physically strong or appear to be strong in the eyes of the world, but we can never be truly strong in ourselves. God has not created us with the capability to be strong in ourselves. We can be truly strong only in the Lord. Paul exhorts us: “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (Eph. 6:10). True strength that enables us to persevere in accomplishing the will of God can only be from God.

Unless we experience the Lord's enabling, we will not be able to live the life of love, truth and righteousness. Consider Romans 7:14–19.

Romans 7:14–19

14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

Paul describes the struggle and helplessness of one who knows the right thing to do and yet is unable to do it. In ourselves we will always experience this struggle and sense of failure.

Knowing the importance of being strong and that true strength can be found only in the Lord, we must set our hearts to seek Him and His strength. 1 Chronicles 16:11 exhorts us: “Seek the Lord and His strength; seek His face continually”.

If we seek the Lord consistently, we will, like the psalmist, be able to testify that “the Lord is my strength and song” (Ps. 118:14). This theme comes through again and again in the Psalms: “The Lord is my strength and my shield” (Ps. 28:7); “For You are my strength” (Ps. 31:4); “God is our refuge and strength” (Ps. 46:1).

We must pay heed to the Lord's warning in Jeremiah 17:5–6:

Jeremiah 17:5–6

5 Thus says the Lord,
“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
And makes flesh his strength,
And whose heart turns away from the Lord.
6 “For he will be like a bush in the desert
And will not see when prosperity comes,
But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness,
A land of salt without inhabitant.

The Lord warns the one who trusts in man, who relies on fleshly strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord. The Lord’s words are emphatic: “Cursed is the man”. Such a person will languish like a bush in the desert. The world’s approach is to rely on fleshly energies, capabilities and ways. Sadly, many believers are influenced by the ways of the world and they also adopt this fleshly approach.

In verses 7–8, we see a contrast:

Jeremiah 17:7–8

7 “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord
And whose trust is the Lord.
8 “For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.

The one who trusts in and relies on the Lord is described as a tree planted by the water. Unlike the bush in the desert, this person will be fruitful, having leaves that are evergreen.

True freedom in true strength

True strength and true freedom are closely related. In John 8:31–32, the Lord Jesus told the Jews who had believed in Him:

John 8:31–32

31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;
32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

The Lord Jesus was talking to them about freedom. If they continue in His word, then they are truly His disciples. And they will know the truth, and the truth will make them free. But the Jews did not quite understand what He was talking about and so they asked Him:

John 8:33

They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free’?”

They thought they were already free. But the Lord replied:

John 8:34

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.

One who habitually commits sin is a slave of sin, being held in bondage to sin. True freedom is the freedom from bondage to sin, the freedom to live out the truth. The power and strength to live out such a life of freedom come from the Son of God.

John 8:36

So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

In the Lord Jesus, there is freedom from bondage to sin and freedom to live out the perfect will of God. In Him is the power to live out the life of love and truth. There will not be that sense of helplessness we read about in Romans 7:14–19. We will no

longer be slaves to sin.

In Romans 7:24, Paul asks: “Who will set me free from the body of this death?” The answer: “Through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25).

It is only through the Lord Jesus that we can be set free. It is the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. It is a life lived in the fullness of the Spirit and with the empowering of the Spirit. When we live such a life in Christ, we will be free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8). This freedom is very precious. But to be truly free, we need to be truly strong.

When I am weak, then I am strong

To have true strength and power, we need to recognise that we are weak in ourselves. Paul testifies to this in 2 Corinthians 12:9–10. He talks about the “thorn” in his flesh, the messenger of Satan buffeting him. It was a difficult experience for him and he entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from him. But the Lord said to him:

2 Corinthians 12:9–10

9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul was content with his weaknesses, for he knew that God’s power is perfected in weakness. Paul recognised his own limitations and helplessness, his inability to live out the will of God in his own strength, especially in times of difficulties. With this sense of weakness in himself, he turned to God in faith, relied upon Him and became strong in Him. That is why Paul could say: “When I am weak, then I am strong”.

This passage helps us to see that adopting the world's way of strength — exertion of fleshly energy and self-confidence — actually hinders us from becoming truly strong. But if we recognise our own weaknesses and limitations, and adopt a posture such that God can have the freedom to manifest His power through our lives, we will have the strength to go through whatever the Lord sees fitting for us to go through. God's power is always sufficient for us. We will be strong in Him. We will be able to experience the sufficiency of His grace in and through our weak and frail bodies.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we have seen that the meek and gentle may appear weak and soft, but in reality, it requires strength to be meek and gentle. If we are not truly strong, we will have difficulty manifesting true meekness and gentleness.

True strength goes together with meekness and gentleness. He who is truly strong is meek and gentle, and he who is truly meek and gentle is truly strong. Such a person will know how and when to take his stand and be firm. He is strong and uncompromising in the truth. He has convictions and does not give way to fear. We find the perfect example of this in the Lord Jesus.

The Lord wants us to be truly strong. But we can be truly strong only in the Lord and only when we submit to His perfect will. If we learn to truly and deeply depend on the Lord, then, though we may appear weak, we are in reality strong.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. The world is preoccupied with being strong and powerful. How should Christians view this issue? Share your thoughts on whether Christians should set their hearts on becoming strong.
2. Share examples from the life of the Lord Jesus in which He appeared weak, but was, in reality, strong. What can we learn from His life about the meaning of being truly strong?
3. From the biblical perspective, what are the marks of one who is truly strong?
4. How can we become truly strong?

Message 2

The Truly Strong and the Truly Weak

In Message 1, we noted that the world is preoccupied with being strong and powerful and that the history of mankind is filled with power struggles. Millions of people suffer because of the abuse of power and exploitation of the weak.

We also noted that God wants His people to be truly strong as this is vital for effective Christian living. To be overcomers, we need to be strong in the Lord.

In this message, we will continue to consider what it means to be truly strong and powerful. We will also look at a few examples of those who are truly weak and those who are truly strong.

Truly strong — strengthened by God with all power

To be truly strong, one has to be strengthened by God's 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 believers might be strengthened with all power according to God's glorious might. Mark the words "all" and "God's glorious might". That is, we should not be satisfied with just a little taste of strength, but to be "strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might".

To what ends are we to have this power? Verse 10 tells us that it is "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". And verse 11 tells us that it is "for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience".

In order for us to be able to live a life worthy of God, and to be able to persevere in this path, however difficult it may be, we need to be strengthened with all power, according to God's glorious might.

True power comes about through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Just before His ascension, the Lord Jesus 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."

Here, the Lord was commissioning His disciples to be His witnesses. This is an important responsibility the Lord entrusts to us for our time on earth. But to be effective witnesses to the truth and effective servants of God, we will need the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

Scriptural examples of the truly strong and the truly weak

I wish to consider with you two episodes in the Scriptures that can give us a better understanding of what it means to be truly strong and truly weak. The principles we can learn from these incidents are applicable to many situations in our own lives.

Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel's three friends (Daniel 3:1–30)

Nebuchadnezzar was a great king of a great empire. He made an image of gold and instructed the people in his kingdom to assemble together to worship it. Whoever did not fall down and worship would immediately be cast into a furnace of blazing fire (vs. 1–6).

In those days, when a king commands his subjects, they have to obey. Those who disobey will be punished. 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 became enraged and he ordered that the furnace be heated seven times hotter

than usual (v. 19). He then commanded his valiant men to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego and cast them into the furnace of blazing fire (v. 20). And so, this was what they did.

Daniel 3:21–23

21 Then these men were tied up in their trousers, their coats, their caps and their other clothes, and were cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire.

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.

Who then was strong and who was weak? To the world, the answer is clear. It was Nebuchadnezzar who was strong and powerful. 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 not be able to resist.

When we are confronted by the strong and powerful in this world, like these three friends were, we may feel very weak and helpless. And we will tend to look at such situations from the world's perspective. But is that the correct perspective? How does God look at a situation like this? Who is strong in the eyes of the Lord? 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 had made a very courageous stand.

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 had confidence that God was able to deliver them from the furnace, though they did not assume that He would. If God did not deliver them, they knew it wasn't because He couldn't. If God should see it fit for them to be burnt in the blazing fire, they would still choose to remain true to the Lord, rather than worship the golden image.

From the true perspective, it was Nebuchadnezzar who was weak and the three friends who were strong. Nebuchadnezzar was self-centred, lacking in self-control and driven by his emotions, and his tyrannical behaviour was clearly not of the truth. In contrast, the response of the three friends was commendable. They demonstrated faith in God and faithfulness to God. In that context, God had the freedom to manifest His power.

Let us see 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.

The three friends were miraculously preserved by the Lord. A fourth man was seen walking among them in the blazing fire. He was “like a son of the gods”, and could well be the Logos — the Lord Jesus before His incarnation.

Here, we see God manifesting His power by delivering the three friends. This incident had a powerful impact on the people of that time and continues to have an impact, even today. The deliverance itself was a powerful testimony in the spiritual realm. 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. They were truly strong.

Notice the impact on Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 26, Nebuchadnezzar said: “Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God”. In verse 28, we see that he could recognise 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?” The king now recognised God was the One who had delivered the three friends.

The king had been very angry with the three men when they violated his command. But now, he looked at them differently. He realised that they had violated his command because they trusted their God and wanted to be true to their God. He now knew that they stood by their conviction, even to the point of yielding up their bodies, because they would not worship or serve any god except the true God. Having understood the meaning of the stand taken by these three friends, he commended them. He went even further by decreeing that nothing offensive should be spoken against the true God.

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 a major truth that is helpful for our own lives. Nebuchadnezzar, the autocratic ruler of a great empire, appeared to have unlimited, unrestricted power and authority to act as he pleased, but in reality, he did not. No one has unlimited, unrestricted power except God. Only God is truly all-powerful. All things — people, objects, the powers of darkness, circumstances — are subject to His sovereignty. Nothing can happen without His permission. Not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the permission of God (Matt. 10:29).

Let us rejoice that our great God is favourably disposed towards those who love and trust Him and walk with Him. 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 for us to walk in faith. Let us deeply appreciate and receive this truth into our lives and live with this deep sense of assurance.

The Lord Jesus before Pilate (John 18:28–19:16)

In this passage, it is recorded that the Jews delivered the Lord Jesus up to Pilate, the governor, and Pilate was sitting in judgement over the Lord Jesus. Pilate summoned the Lord Jesus and interrogated Him (18:33), and subsequently had Him scourged (19:1).

A short while later, Pilate questioned the Lord further, asking where He was from. When the Lord did not give him a reply, Pilate responded:

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?”

Pilate claimed to have authority over the Lord Jesus. He could release the Lord Jesus, or he could have Him crucified.

At one level of perception, we can say that Pilate wielded authority and power over the Lord Jesus. Pilate could decide on how he would deal with the Lord Jesus. From this perspective, the Lord Jesus appeared weak and helpless before Pilate.

But what was the reality of the situation? Note the Lord’s reply 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.”

The Lord said that Pilate’s authority had been given to him from above. The phrase “from above” is best understood to mean “from heaven, from God”. Pilate would have no authority over the Lord Jesus unless it had been given him from God, unless God allowed it. And therefore, Pilate would be accountable to God, the ultimate Ruler and Governor of the universe.

So it is clear that Pilate would not have been 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.

So at the deeper and higher level of perception, we can say that it was Pilate who was on trial. In reality, Pilate was being judged for how he conducted himself in that situation. Though Pilate thought he was sitting in judgement over the Lord Jesus, it was the Lord Jesus, the true Judge, who was judging him then, and would do so again on Judgement Day.

From this encounter between the Lord Jesus and Pilate, we can take note of two points:

1. The weakness of Pilate

Although Pilate appeared to be the one wielding authority and power over the Lord Jesus, he was in reality a weak man. Matthew 27:22–26 captures the tension Pilate was under:

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.

Under the instigation of the chief priests and the elders, the crowd was pressing for the Lord Jesus to be crucified.

Pilate became afraid when he saw that a riot was starting, and

he tried to disclaim responsibility. He took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying: “I am innocent of this Man’s blood”.

Pilate had found no guilt in the Lord Jesus (John 18:38) and he knew that it was out of envy that the Jews delivered the Lord to him (Matt. 27:18). Yet, contrary to his better judgement, he yielded to the demands of the crowd and delivered the Lord up to be crucified.

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 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 sense of justice in such an important issue as a death sentence. He did not act responsibly. He was weak in principles and moral convictions, and he lacked the strength to act according to what he recognised to be right. Instead, he succumbed to the pressure from 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, even cowardly.

2. The strength of the Lord Jesus

Now, 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. In spite of all the terrible treatment and intense agony He had to endure, He maintained His composure, dignity and faithfulness.

This is how Hebrews 12 puts it:

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;

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to focus our eyes on the Lord Jesus, and to run the race with endurance. Every believer has his or her race to run — the race that is set before us — and we need strength to run it with endurance.

The Lord's example of endurance is an encouragement to us not to grow weary and lose heart. How He went through the Cross supremely manifested true strength. If we are truly strong, we will not be easily shaken. We can go through all kinds of situations well, remaining steadfast in the truth and unshaken in faithfulness to God.

Strong in the world, yet easily shaken

Many may appear strong, powerful and confident, but in reality, they can be easily shaken, troubled and fearful. Even Nebuchadnezzar, the arrogant, tyrannical, powerful ruler could be fearful. When exercising power, he appeared very confident and courageous. However, he could be troubled and alarmed, 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 a point in his life when everything seemed to be going well for him. He was at ease and flourishing. Then he had a dream, and he became terrified. Daniel 2:1 tells us that because of his dreams, “his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him”.

Another striking 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 hosting a great feast for a thousand of his nobles. During the feast, he gave orders to bring out the gold and silver vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so they could drink from them. They were having a great time, or so they thought. Verses 5–6 tell us what happened as they were drinking and praising the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and 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.

On seeing the back of the hand writing the inscription on the wall, the king’s face grew pale. He became nervous and frightened.

Verse 6 paints a vivid picture of how terrified he was. When his wise men were unable 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, are lacking in true strength and power.

As the psalmist tells us, true power belongs to God (Ps. 62:11). Those who do not experience it, who do not know the power of God, can never be truly strong. They may appear strong, but they only know the power of the world, not the power of God.

The kind of power and strength the world offers is feeble and unreliable and can be easily shaken. Yet many are striving after it, and sadly, even believers.

All that the world offers — power, strength, security, position, riches, honour — has 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 vanishes in the sun.

They are in contrast to the abiding realities, the substance that truly counts, that can be found only in the kingdom of God. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, what is found in the kingdom of God endures and cannot be shaken.

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;

He who is truly strong is like a building with a strong foundation. Because he is grounded in the Lord, and because he

takes refuge in Him, he is not easily shaken.

We need to ask ourselves: What are we setting our hearts on? What are we impressed by? Are we still enticed by what the world has to offer? Are we overawed by what we see in the world? Are we envious of what the people of the world have? Have we perceived what truly counts and set our hearts on it?

Those who fear the Lord are strong

Let us look at Psalm 112.

Psalm 112:1–2, 6–7

1 Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
Who greatly delights in His commandments.
2 His descendants will be mighty on earth;
The generation of the upright will be blessed.
6 For he will never be shaken;
The righteous will be remembered forever.
7 He will not fear evil tidings; His heart is steadfast, trusting
in the Lord.

Many people are nervous, worried and afraid when they hear of evil tidings. The word translated as “evil” here may have to do with moral evil, but it does not have to be. It can convey a sense of calamity, disaster, a broad sense of what people would normally describe as something “bad” happening or “bad news”.

The one who is truly strong is not shaken by 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 having such a posture, then we need not be fearful, whatever may happen. Who is the one who is unshaken in the face of evil tidings? It is “the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments” (v. 1).

If we are walking well with the Lord, if we love Him, trust Him, know His way and walk in it, then we need not be shaken. We can attain stability and steadfastness. We can properly trust

in God. We can go through any situation without being afraid or worried. Verse 4 tells us: “Light arises in the darkness for the upright”. Even when we go through situations that appear dark, if we live a life of righteousness, God can cause light to arise in the darkness. God is gracious, compassionate and righteous, and if He is for us and with us, why should we be afraid or shaken?

True strength — testimony of Paul

The apostle Paul testifies in Philippians 4:13 of what it means to be truly strong.

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” conveys the meaning “to have strength, to be able”. In the preceding verses 11–12, Paul tells us he has learned to be content and knows how to get along in all kinds of circumstances. He continues in this verse to say he has the strength to go through all situations well through Christ who strengthens him. This includes having confidence to accomplish what the Lord desires of him.

Many people try to “claim” this verse, but inappropriately. When they are confronted with difficulties, they think they can fare well by simply affirming, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” However, if their lives are not consecrated to the Lord, they will not be able to “claim” the realities of this verse.

How can Paul’s testimony in this verse be true in our own lives? How can we meaningfully testify likewise? By learning, like Paul, to walk with the Lord, abiding in Him and being strong in Him. Only then will we have the strength to go through all situations well and do all the things He requires of us. The almighty God will strengthen us; His grace will be 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 also appear weak, helpless, and even pitiful. Let us look at the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11.

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 people of faith — people who are strong, who are 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 and women of God may appear weak. They were tortured, mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts.

They seem pitiful, but it requires true strength to go through all these difficult situations 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 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, when Joseph was exalted to a high position in Egypt, he continued to be faithful to the Lord. In all these contexts, Joseph was strong in the Lord.

Daniel was in an exalted position for many years, serving different kings. During the reign of King Darius, as a result of a conspiracy against him, Daniel 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 these are secondary. The critical issue is the inward reality: Are we strong in the Lord? Are we strong in our inner being? Are we faithful to Him? Are we able to persevere in the path of truth?

Those who are truly strong will care for the weak

The strong in the world tend to exploit the weak to get what they want. But this is not the biblical teaching on the truly strong.

Paul tells us that the truly strong not only do not take advantage of the weak, but will also help and bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please themselves.

Romans 15:1

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.

If we are truly strong, we will not try to get our own way, fulfil our selfish desires, and disregard the interests and welfare of others. Those who are truly strong will be compassionate to those who are weaker. Instead of pleasing themselves, their hearts will be motivated by love to build others up.

In Romans 15:2, Paul exhorts each one to “please his neighbour 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 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.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Who are truly strong and who, truly weak, in the episodes involving
 - (a) King Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel's three friends (Dan. 3:1–30)?
 - (b) Governor Pilate and the Lord Jesus (John 18:28–19:16)?

Give your reasons.

2. Those who are strong in the eyes of the world can be easily shaken, but those who are upright and who fear and trust the Lord are steadfast. Why is this so?
3. What do you understand by Paul's testimony: "I can do all things through Him (Christ) who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13)? How is it possible for Paul to testify to this reality? How can we meaningfully testify in the same way?
4. What are the different ways in which true strength may be expressed? Consider the examples in Hebrews 11 and other scriptural passages.

Becoming Truly Strong

In the first two messages, we looked at what it means to be truly strong. In this message, we will consider how we can be truly strong, what it involves and how it comes about.

Two senses of being strong in the Lord

I would like to first distinguish two senses of being strong in the Lord:

- Strong in the Lord on specific occasions
- Strong in the Lord in the general sense

Strong in the Lord on specific occasions

We may strengthen ourselves in the Lord on specific occasions even though we may not be strong generally. This is especially true when we are under stress or are facing difficulties. Even when we are generally strong, we may still need strengthening on specific occasions.

An example of strengthening oneself on a specific occasion can be found in 1 Samuel 30. In this chapter, we are told that the Amalekites had made a raid on Ziklag while David and his men were away. When David and his men found out that the place had been burnt and their wives and children captured, they lifted up their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep.

1 Samuel 30:6

Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.

It was indeed a very distressing situation. At such a time, a person may feel greatly discouraged. But it is at such a time that it is crucial for him to be strong. The Scriptures tells us how, on this occasion, David “strengthened himself in the Lord his God”.

Although David was generally strong in the Lord, he specifically strengthened himself in the Lord on this occasion.

Strong in the Lord in the general sense

It is more important for us to be generally strong than to be merely strengthened on specific occasions. Being generally strong is an important aspect of quality of life and being, and it is strength of the more stable kind. When we are generally strong, we will be more able to live an overcoming life and live out God’s will for us.

Being strong on specific occasions and being generally strong are related. If we are generally strong, it is much easier for us to be strong on specific occasions. Conversely, if we learn how to strengthen ourselves in the Lord on specific occasions, we can also grow to become stronger generally.

Characteristics of the truly strong

If we want to become truly strong, it is helpful to know the characteristics of the truly strong and how we can make good progress in the various aspects.

Being truly strong, especially in the general sense — the more stable kind — is very much related to the moral and spiritual stature of a believer.

There are many aspects to the moral and spiritual stature of a believer. In this message, we will consider the following:

- True knowledge and wisdom
- Faith
- Joy
- Quality of prayer life
- Character and quality of the inner man
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Hope

We will look at various passages in the Scriptures and reflect on these characteristics and how they contribute to our being truly strong.

1. True knowledge and wisdom

Proverbs 24:5

A wise man is strong,
And a man of knowledge increases power.

Being truly strong is vitally related to having knowledge and wisdom. Proverbs 24:5 tells us: “A wise man is strong”. This tells us that wisdom is an important aspect of being truly strong and contributes to it. And if we are also men of true knowledge, we can be truly powerful.

True knowledge is knowledge of the truth, knowledge of God and His ways. But to be truly strong, it is not enough just to have knowledge, even true knowledge. We need to go beyond that and live it out. We need to respond positively to God and walk according to His ways. Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge in response to various situations in a manner pleasing to God.

Knowledge and wisdom are very important in spiritual warfare, where deception is a major form of attack. If we are ignorant and foolish, we can be easily deceived. Having

knowledge and wisdom helps us understand what is happening, recognise the strategies and wiles of the evil one, and know how to take our stand and overcome him.

Part of true knowledge and wisdom is the ability to perceive and recognise truth. As we go through various situations in life, it is important that we perceive accurately what is going on, what the issues involved are, what really matters in that situation, and how to strengthen ourselves in the Lord to face the situation well.

True knowledge and wisdom have a positive moral and spiritual dimension. So, to grow in true knowledge and wisdom, we have to go beyond a mere mental recognition of the truth God has revealed in the Scriptures and seek to incorporate truth into our lives.

To appreciate this, let us look at Romans 12. In verse 2, Paul says: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. This follows from his description of a life consecrated to God (v. 1).

The renewing of our minds does not involve only the mental faculties. It involves spiritual understanding and a moral response. Our minds are renewed when we receive the truth into our hearts and commit ourselves to live by it. It is the moral and spiritual mindset of the person. The more we incorporate the truth into our lives, the greater will be the renewal and transformation.

When our minds are renewed, we will be more able to appreciate the truth and respond to life’s situations with wisdom. If we merely understand things at the mental level, we will find it difficult to go through trying situations of life. But if truth has become a part of us, we will be able to perceive issues of life more wholesomely. When confronted with difficult issues, we will be more able to deal with them. This is the kind of knowledge God desires us to have.

2. Faith

Isaiah 30:15

For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said,
“In repentance and rest you will be saved,
In quietness and trust is your strength.”
But you were not willing.

This verse teaches us that if we want to be strong, trust or faith in God is very important. Note that “in quietness and trust is your strength” is preceded by “in repentance and rest you will be saved”.

Sometimes, we try very hard to trust God, to exercise faith, but we find that we are not able to. This could be because we have not repented and put our lives right before God.

If our attitudes in significant things are not right, for example, if we have wrongful desires or bitterness in our hearts, and we refuse to put them right, then no matter how hard we try to trust in God, we may find that we are not able to truly trust Him.

It is also helpful to see the close relationship between faith, wisdom and knowledge. When our exercise of faith goes together with wisdom based on our knowledge of the truth, it becomes very powerful. Exercising faith in what is not true will not work; neither will knowing the truth without the exercise of faith.

Only faith in the truth will work. To go through a situation well, we need to understand the principles involved. We need to know the truth and God’s will for us in that situation. We also need to know the correct way to go through it and the posture to adopt. Having recognised these things, we must then exercise faith whatever the outward appearance, no matter how difficult or impossible a situation may appear to be, no matter what others may think of us. If we go through situations with the right kind of attitude and posture, we will overcome in the Lord.

Often we fail to go through situations well. We stumble and

falter. We are spiritually weak because we are anxious, troubled, and full of doubts. We fail to properly exercise faith in God and trust God in what He has revealed and promised in the Scriptures. But when we have learnt to exercise faith in God and trust His promises, we will be strong.

Many of us have been through situations where we found ourselves faltering, but when we were helped to recognise the issues involved and encouraged to exercise true faith, we found ourselves more able to go through those situations well. While it is good that others could offer help and encouragement, it would be better if we learn to be strong so we could trust God, exercise faith in Him and live out the truth accordingly. In this way, we need not always rely on help and encouragement from others.

As we trust God and walk in the truth, He will see us through every situation in life. Our lives will not be lived in vain. Even when we appear to be faring poorly in the eyes of others, there will be true meaning, quality and accomplishment in our lives.

But we must go beyond just learning to exercise faith in particular, specific, situations. We must learn to have a restful faith in God all the time. If we are convicted of the major truths God has revealed to us and we live by them, we can have quiet confidence in Him as we go through life. In this way, we can be stable and strong in the Lord, whatever the circumstances. It is important for us to have a contrite spirit, always seeking to put right our lives and consecrating ourselves to live by the truth. In so doing, we can have a quiet and unshakeable confidence in the Lord and in the truth.

3. Joy

Nehemiah 8:10

... Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Nehemiah 8 records Ezra reading the Law of Moses before an assembly of God's people. When the people heard the words of the Law, they were grieved, for they were conscious of their failures.

There is a place for such grief. The Lord Jesus Himself says: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4). Nehemiah was, however, concerned that the people might become discouraged, because that kind of grief could turn into worldly sorrow and sap spiritual strength and true quality of life. So he encouraged them, saying: "The joy of the Lord is your strength".

If we learn how to rejoice in the Lord, we will be strengthened. When we encounter difficult and distressing situations, we need not be discouraged. We can instead choose to be joyful.

In Philippians 4:4, Paul says: "Rejoice in the Lord always". This is an instruction and an exhortation. It implies that we can and should choose to rejoice in God. Paul says "rejoice in the Lord *always*", which means it is a posture that we are to maintain continually, even when we are going through difficult and painful situations. This posture will strengthen us and help us go through not just specific occasions, but all situations well.

When we rejoice in the Lord, it facilitates God's working in our lives. It also facilitates the efficient functioning of our faculties. When we are discouraged or depressed, we can neither think well nor exercise our spirit well. Our spirit becomes stifled. Our ability to choose and respond well to situations will be hampered. We must choose not to be depressed. We must choose to trust in God. Even when negative things are taking place, we can continue to rejoice in God and affirm our faith in His goodness and sovereignty. As we love Him and walk with Him, we can have the confidence that He will continue to cause all things to work together for good to those who love Him.

If we are walking with the Lord, there is meaning in what we go through in life, and there will be good lessons that we can learn. And so, we can rejoice in Him. Having such a positive

posture of rejoicing in God provides the environment for the Spirit of God to have greater freedom to work in us and help us go through situations well.

4. Quality of prayer life

Another aspect of being truly strong is that of having quality prayer life. It is not just about being prayerful and being conscious of God; it is also about the depth of our fellowship with God and the quality of our dependence on Him. Also important is *power in prayer*.

In Luke 21, the Lord Jesus speaks of the last days, before the Second Coming of Christ. In verse 34, He tells us to be on guard, that our hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation, drunkenness and worries of life, lest the day comes on us suddenly like a trap.

He continues in verse 36: “But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength”. In this verse, “praying” refers to a continuing posture of prayer. We should be alert and praying at all times, so that we may have strength.

In Matthew 26, the Lord Jesus again speaks of the need for watching and praying. The context here is that of significant spiritual pressures that the disciples were going through as part of the circumstances surrounding the significant event of the death of Christ.

Matthew 26:41

“Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

During times of stress, difficulties and testing, we often find ourselves failing. We want to do what is right, to be overcomers and not yield to temptations, but we fail time and again. Our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak. So what is the answer to our predicament? Prayer.

Through prayer, we can be joined to the almighty God. And when we are joined to the almighty God, we can experience His power and strength. The flesh is always weak, but when we are praying and depending on God, we can overcome the weakness of the flesh because we are enabled by God's power and strength.

We can look at praying in Matthew 26:41 from two angles. One angle has to do with praying that calls upon the Spirit of God to work in us so that we can go through a situation well. The other has to do with the Lord Jesus exhorting us to be continually alert, watchful and prayerful. And it is this continual praying that will deepen our relationship with God, contribute to the quality of our prayer life and strengthen our inner man.

As we learn to be vigilant and pray continually, we will find that the principle of “the spirit is willing” becomes very meaningful, because the Lord will strengthen our spirit. So even though the flesh is weak, we will grow and develop and we will be able to overcome its weaknesses.

We are in the context of ongoing spiritual warfare and therefore need to be prayerful at all times, especially during times of intense spiritual opposition and severe testing.

Prayer and being strong in the Lord are closely linked. This is alluded to in Matthew 26:41. As we pray, we strengthen ourselves in the Lord.

We noted earlier that David strengthened himself in the Lord when he was very distressed (1 Sam. 30:6). We are not told how David did so. But it is likely that a major aspect has to do with his posture of looking to God. He strengthened himself in the Lord through prayer, through his dependence on God and exercising faith in Him.

In a life of continual prayer in faith with knowledge and wisdom, we can properly rejoice in God always, and have proper confidence in Him at all times.

We can pray for ourselves to be strengthened. We can also be

strengthened through the prayers of others. In Ephesians 3, we see Paul praying that the believers would be strengthened.

Ephesians 3:14, 16

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,

We can therefore pray for one another that God may strengthen us and that we may be able to live well for Him.

5. Character and quality of the inner man

Another factor that helps us to be truly strong is the quality of our character.

Quality of character refers to the degree to which we are conformed to God's character. It is needful for us to develop wholesomely in every aspect of our moral character and not neglect any aspect of it. How well we have developed our character is closely related to the depth of our oneness with God, our fellowship with Him and the degree to which Christ has been formed in us. The quality of our character bears a relationship with the freedom the Spirit of God has to teach and strengthen us, and to work in and through us.

Let's look at Ephesians 3:16 again. Paul prays that God the Father "would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man". The way Paul prays helps us appreciate the significance of the issue being communicated. He prays for the Spirit of God to strengthen believers because we cannot be strong in ourselves. Also, such strengthening takes place "in the inner man".

True strength is not in our physical muscles, and it does not depend on our mental knowledge, skills or talents. True strength has to do with the inner man being strengthened by the almighty God, according to His bountiful grace and through His Spirit.

It has to do with the strength of the spirit and the development of the inner being as well as our spiritual maturity and stature. The truly strong have the spiritual strength and stamina to carry on well even under mounting spiritual pressures and difficulties.

Paul's prayer continues in verses 17–19:

Ephesians 3:17–19

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith;
and that you, being rooted and grounded in love,
18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the
breadth and length and height and depth,
19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,
that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

These verses show the close link between being strong in the Lord (v. 16) and our faith, character and relationship with God.

Being strong in the Lord is linked to *faith* — “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”.

Being strong in the Lord is also linked to *character* — “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love ...” Love is a major aspect of good character.

It is also linked to the quality of our *relationship with God* — “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts”. When we are strong, we are able to develop further the quality of our relationship with God and our character. Conversely, the quality of our relationship with God and our character will have a bearing on our growing stronger in the Lord — it is a mutual relationship.

When Paul prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts”, he is not referring to Christ coming to dwell within them, since Christ already dwells in believers. He is talking about a life that is consistent with Christ dwelling in them — that more and more, they may be conformed to the character of Christ. This transformation of life and character is related to the quality of

their relationship with Christ and their oneness with Him, their submission to His lordship, and the freedom with which Christ can express Himself in their hearts and lives. Paul adds: “that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God”. This refers to the goal of moral and spiritual maturity and stature and oneness with God — what God intends for every believer in Christ.

6. Fruit of the Spirit

When we are strengthened by God’s Spirit in the inner man and are walking according to the will of God, we will manifest the fruit of the Spirit, and with it the qualities of God’s character.

Galatians 5:22–23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

One who is strong in the Lord will continually manifest the fruit of the Spirit. And if he is growing stronger in the Lord, he will manifest these qualities in increasing measure.

An important aspect of the fruit of the Spirit I wish to highlight is self-control. To what degree we are able to exercise self-control is an important indicator of our true strength. When we have self-control, we will be more able to persevere in the truth and bring our body and emotions in subjection to the truth.

7. Hope

In Psalm 31, the psalmist exhorts us to be strong.

Psalm 31:23–24

23 O love the Lord, all you His godly ones!
The Lord preserves the faithful

And fully recompenses the proud doer.

24 Be strong and let your heart take courage,
All you who hope in the Lord.

If we want to be truly strong, to be able to face all situations with courage, we must have hope in God in the context of loving Him and being faithful to Him.

Our hope in the Lord is grounded in our confidence in the Lord and in His assurances to us of what awaits those who love Him and walk with Him. These are the things which will strengthen us to persevere in the midst of trials and spiritual pressures: our faith in the power, knowledge and wisdom of God, His steadfast love towards us, His watching over our lives and keeping of all those who trust Him, and our looking forward to what awaits us in God's eternal kingdom for those who are true to God.

Identification with God and His purposes

I would like to go on to a very important aspect that can help us to appreciate how we can become spiritually strong and stable in the Lord.

Let us consider Ephesians 3:18 again.

Ephesians 3:18

may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

In this verse, we find another aspect of truth related to being strong in the Lord and to the development of the inner man (Eph. 3:16). This aspect of truth has to do with the areas of knowledge, understanding and comprehension. Paul desires the believers to “comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth”. But what does Paul desire us to comprehend? Verse 18 does not mention what it is that Paul desires the reader to comprehend in such great depth.

One interpretation is that it refers to the comprehension of God's love, since verse 17 talks about being rooted and grounded in love, and verse 19 talks about knowing the love of Christ.

Personally, I think this interpretation does not fit in well. The verse does not say: “the breadth, length, height and depth of God’s love”. Instead Paul tells us that being rooted and grounded in love enables us to comprehend this thing.

I think a more meaningful interpretation is to connect the phrase to the subject that Paul is absorbed in. A central theme of the epistle to the Ephesians is Paul’s deep concern for the fulfilment of God’s eternal purpose. This is at the heart of his ministry. It is reflected in the preceding verses. Let us look at some of them:

Ephesians 3:8–11

8 To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given,
to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,
9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the
mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created
all things;

10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made
known through the church to the rulers and the authorities
in the heavenly places.

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which
He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

At the heart of the mystery (v. 9) is the eternal purpose of God, which He carried out in Christ Jesus (v. 11), the unfathomable riches of Christ (v. 8), and the manifold wisdom of God being made known through the church (v. 10).

Paul prays for the believers to be strengthened through the Spirit in the inner man, and that being rooted and grounded in love, they may be able to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth. It seems to me that this has to do with comprehending the eternal purpose of God and the issues involved — what is in God’s heart, what He desires to accomplish, how it is to be fulfilled, how this is bound up with the unfathomable riches of Christ, how it is carried out in Christ,

and how the manifold wisdom of God can be manifested through the church.

Being rooted and grounded in love is a major link in appreciating all these things (vs. 17–18). And as we appreciate these truths and realities in increasing measure and enter into what God intends for us, we will know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (divine love that is deep and rich), and increasingly, we will be filled up to all the fullness of God (v. 19). We will be men and women who understand God's call in all its breadth and length and height and depth; men and women of deep conviction and strong motivation, who are not easily distracted or shaken, and who will not waver in our commitment to the Lord and in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Comprehensive, wholesome knowledge of the whole counsel of God

What I want to highlight is the importance of comprehensive, wholesome knowledge. It is knowledge concerning the whole counsel of God, especially those aspects that are very important in God's heart. It is only as we gain insight into the whole counsel of God, His eternal purpose, His calling for us in Christ, that we can grow well in a comprehensive and wholesome manner, in all aspects of our being, and become stable and resilient in the truth. When we understand all these things, we can then effectively exercise true faith and develop healthy prayer lives. All these are closely related to being strong in the Lord and the development of the inner man, and to the work of the Spirit of God and our experience of the fullness of God.

In Ephesians 4, Paul encourages the believers to walk worthy of the Lord. He then speaks of how Christ has ascended and given gifts to believers. He also speaks of the oneness of the body. In verses 11 to 16, he tells us how we can be equipped and grow well in the Lord. The desired outcome is expressed in verses 13 and 14:

Ephesians 4:13–14

13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

Believers who are weak in faith will find themselves tossed here and there, confused and deceived by false doctrines. But it is not just false doctrines that will toss us here and there. There could be other ways by which our faith can be shaken and become unstable. Behind the trickery of men, behind their “craftiness in deceitful scheming”, are the powers of darkness and the evil one at work. The evil one is described in Genesis 3:1 as the crafty one and in Revelation 12:9 as the deceiver. He is the master deceiver, deceiving us through wrong doctrines and through many other means.

Paul encourages us to grow towards full maturity, towards comprehensive and wholesome development. We will then no longer be children, easily tossed here and there by every wind of doctrine. We will not be weak, faltering easily, or easily deceived. In other words, we will become strong in the Lord.

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of knowledge and wisdom. We need true knowledge and wisdom to grow unto maturity in Christ and for Christ to be formed in us. We also need knowledge and wisdom if we want to grow deeper in our relationship with God and in our oneness with Him. It is such living knowledge and wisdom which can help us to respond well to all situations, including the craftiness of men and of the evil one.

Growing in knowledge and wisdom is an important aspect of the equipping of the saints. The Lord Jesus gives gifts to the church: “some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping

of the saints” (vs. 11–12). And we are to be equipped so that we become mature, “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). This comes about as we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, as Christ is formed in us and as we grow in our relationship and oneness with the Lord. It is this deep personal knowledge of Christ and relationship with Him that can make us truly strong and stable. It is this that prevents us from being easily tossed to and fro and enables us to persevere in the truth consistently.

Ephesians 4:15 speaks of that kind of relationship with Christ and His being formed in us, and verse 16 links the body being built up to growing up in all aspects into Christ.

Ephesians 4:15–16

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ,
16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Let us look at another passage dealing with the same theme.

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

This passage shows the importance of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, and their relationship with being “strengthened with all power”.

In verse 11, Paul speaks of his prayer for the believers, that they may be strengthened with all power according to God’s glorious might for the attaining of all steadfastness. Here, “steadfastness” clearly has to do with being able to take our stand, to carry on faithfully in the truth, even when we are buffeted by difficult circumstances or when we come under attack by the evil one or by men.

In the midst of trials and testing, we need to be strengthened with all power according to God’s glorious might so that we will be truly strong and will be able to go through these difficulties with patience, endurance and steadfastness.

Paul begins his prayer with “that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”. This shows that it is important for us to have the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Only then can we walk worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way, bearing good fruit, continually deepening in our knowledge of God and strengthened with all power. And we are to press on in this path, never to be self-satisfied.

The passages we have seen show that the major issues — knowledge, wisdom, growth and spiritual stature, being strong in the Lord, the quality of relationship and oneness with the Lord, the fullness of Christ — are all intertwined. They bear a vital relationship with one another; there is an organic unity.

Concluding remarks

The world’s idea of being strong and powerful is often associated with the desire and ability to fulfil one’s personal ambitions without due regard for what is important to God. As Christians, our desire to be strong must not flow from the same motivation. It must instead flow from our love for God and our desire to be

faithful to Him. This is what it means to be truly strong from the perspective of God's kingdom, and it is in sharp contrast to the perspective of the fallen world.

To be truly strong, we must develop a strong, healthy spirit and a renewed mind. A strong, healthy spirit and a renewed mind will help us to have self-control and to bring our bodies and our emotions under subjection to the truth. We will then be able to live out a life of commitment to God and truth. We will be steadfast and be able to fight a good fight of faith. We will have strength and stamina and competence in spiritual warfare, all of which are important characteristics of the truly strong.

There is a well-known saying: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". That is what we often see in the world. But true power is not corrupt and does not corrupt. It is not self-serving. True power helps us to be pure, holy and faithful to the Lord. It helps us to respond to God and fulfil His purposes for us in this world.

Consecration an important pre-requisite

To be truly strong, we need to first consecrate our lives to God, and this consecration has to be deep. It has to be seen in our love for Him, our commitment to Him and in our relationship with Him.

If we do not consecrate our lives to God, we will not be able to properly develop the various characteristics of the truly strong, such as true knowledge and wisdom, faith, joy, power in prayer, the qualities of the inner man, and spiritual maturity and stature.

In Romans 12, Paul urges us to consecrate our lives to God. It is only as we consecrate our lives to God that we will be effectively transformed by the renewing of our minds. It is only when we have consecrated our lives to God that we can meaningfully look to the Holy Spirit to fill us, teach us, guide us and empower us to live according to the truth and the will of God. When this takes

place, we will become strong, not just in specific situations, but in the general sense.

God's training process

Growing strong in the Lord is a process. The final objective is maturity in the Lord. Moral and spiritual stature takes time to develop. God has His training programme for us. The varied circumstances we go through in life are intended to help us grow strong in the Lord. This is a primary reason for God placing us in this world — that we may be perfect, complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).

When we consecrate our lives to God and experience the empowering of the Spirit, we will be able to go through life well. This then leads to growth in moral and spiritual stature and in spiritual strength and stamina. We will thus be properly grounded in truth, in love, in knowledge, guided and empowered by the Spirit. This, in essence, is what it means to grow truly strong in the kingdom of God.

Take time to ponder over this subject. What are the areas in your life that are lacking? Have you neglected the development of your prayer life and your character? Are you deficient in knowledge and wisdom? Have you deeply consecrated your life to God? Are you responding well to God's training process?

Let us ask the Lord to help us recognise the steps we need to take to progress well in the direction of His calling. May the Spirit of God have the freedom to speak to us, and may we respond well when He does so.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Share your understanding of the two senses of being strong in the Lord as discussed in this message. How are these two senses related?
2. How do the following areas contribute to our becoming truly strong?
 - True knowledge and wisdom
 - Faith
 - Joy
 - Quality of our prayer life
 - Our character and the quality of our inner man
 - The fruit of the Spirit
 - Hope
 - Our identification with God and His purposes
 - Our deep consecration to God

Overcomers: Competent in Spiritual Warfare and an Effective Army for God

In this message, I wish to consider with you the important subject of competence in spiritual warfare. The truly strong must learn to counter the attacks of the evil one and overcome him so that God's purposes can be accomplished.

They must learn to be good soldiers of Christ — at two levels:

- At the personal level
- At the corporate level: an effective army for God

Before I go into the subject of competence in spiritual warfare, I wish to make some brief comments on two related points:

- Different levels of strength
- Some issues that sap our strength and render us vulnerable

Different levels of strength

We can have different levels of strength. It is not simply a matter of whether or not we are strong. Spiritual growth is a process, and we can grow to become stronger and stronger.

It is possible for a person to have a wrong assessment of the level of his spiritual strength. When he finds his life smooth-going, he may think he is strong when in fact he may not be. It could be because he is not facing much spiritual pressure and opposition. It could also be because he is receiving significant spiritual support

like prayer, encouragement and help from others.

Another person may be coping well in most circumstances. But when difficulties increase and spiritual pressures mount, he may find himself overwhelmed and unable to cope. When this happens, he may then think that he is weak. In reality, what is within him has not changed. This is an aspect we should bear in mind when trying to understand the true state of a person.

We must aim towards being able to go through all kinds of situations well, whether they are easy or difficult. If we are unable to cope in times of distress, our strength is limited. We read this in Proverbs 24:10:

Proverbs 24:10

If you are slack in the day of distress,
Your strength is limited.

Some of us are not able to cope well even in relatively easy contexts. Consider God's reply to Jeremiah after he complained to the Lord about the difficulties he was going through.

Jeremiah 12:5

“If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out,
Then how can you compete with horses?
If you fall down in a land of peace,
How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?”

The Lord asked Jeremiah: “If you fall down in a land of peace, how will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?” The “land of peace” refers to a relatively easy context, while the “thicket of the Jordan” refers to a more difficult one. If we are tired out when we run with footmen, how can we compete with horses? When the pressures mount, when the challenges are greater, how are we going to cope? How are we going to fare well?

These are words we must take to heart. We must prepare ourselves for the difficulties that lie ahead. As we approach the

Second Coming of Christ, spiritual pressures will increase.

If we want to serve the Lord well and have a more meaningful part in the fulfilment of God's purposes, we must prepare ourselves for significant spiritual pressures and warfare. If we are already finding it difficult to cope in relatively easy circumstances, we must sense the urgency to develop our lives well, so that we can cope when times are more difficult.

We must not just lament over our weaknesses, but must also look to the Lord to help us overcome them by developing well and consider how we can help one another to grow truly strong together in church life.

Let us learn to be like the blessed man whose strength is in the Lord and who goes from strength to strength.

Psalms 84:5, 7

5 How blessed is the man whose strength is in You,

In whose heart are the highways to Zion!

7 They go from strength to strength,

Every one of them appears before God in Zion.

Verse 5 tells us that true strength is in the Lord. Let us therefore not trust in our own strength, but in the strength of the Lord. Verse 7 tells us that our strength can grow. Let us therefore not be complacent or discouraged. Instead, let us look to the Lord to help us grow stronger and stronger, for He has made every provision for us to do so.

Some issues that sap our strength and render us vulnerable

Sometimes we wonder why we are so weak. I would like to consider with you briefly some issues that sap our strength. They are opposite to the positive characteristics of the truly strong, which we considered in the last message.

In the last message, we noted that true strength is closely related to our moral and spiritual stature, faith, joy, width and

depth of knowledge, wisdom and quality of character. However, sin, doubt, fear, anxiety, discouragement, worldly sorrow, ignorance, foolishness and all negative traits of character render us weak and vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one.

1. Sin in our lives

A major issue that saps our strength is sin. Sin in our lives is contrary to and hinders the development of positive moral qualities of character and the inner being.

Psalm 31:10

... My strength has failed because of my iniquity,
And my body has wasted away.

The psalmist says: “My strength has failed because of my iniquity”. Sin in our life will sap our strength. If we do not deal with it, we will become weaker and weaker.

Let us look at another psalm:

Psalm 32:3–4

3 When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away
Through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.

These two verses talk about the effects of unresolved sin. “When I kept silent about my sin” — when we try to hide it, when we refuse to face or acknowledge it, to repent of it — there will be adverse effects on our body. Our body will waste away.

“Through my groaning all day long” is likely to refer not just to outward groaning, but also to something deep within. We are not at peace within.

“For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me” — this tells us that God is not pleased with us when we leave sins unresolved, and His disciplining hand will come upon us.

“My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer” — “vitality” is important in enabling us to fare well. The margin of the NASB gives the literal meaning of “vitality” as “life juices”. Life is drained away when we refuse to deal with our sin.

When we rationalise, justify or hide our sin, or when we refuse to face it, our strength will drain away and our being will suffer. This is because true strength is linked to a healthy relationship with God. When we sin, there will be a barrier between God and us. God will not have the freedom to work in us, and it will affect the free flow of His life and strength in us. That is why the psalmist says his vitality (or life juices) was drained away.

The psalmist continues in verse 5:

Psalm 32:5

I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”;
And You forgave the guilt of my sin.

The psalmist found forgiveness when he confessed his transgressions to the Lord. We must be careful not to sin. But when we do sin, let us learn from the psalmist and confess our sin and repent of it, so that we may receive God’s forgiveness and be restored to fellowship with God.

2. Doubt, fear and anxiety

Another area that saps spiritual strength is doubt, fear and anxiety. These are indications of lack of faith and they hinder God’s working in our lives. If we are filled with doubt, fear and anxiety, our strength will be sapped because we are not able to properly trust God, rest in Him and do our part well.

The evil one seeks to promote doubt, fear and anxiety in us in order to weaken and render us vulnerable to further attacks. We must learn how to take our stand in rejecting and overcoming these darts and missiles of the evil one.

3. Discouragement and worldly sorrow

When we go through difficult times and we are unable to cope, we may become discouraged. When we are discouraged, we may become depressed, and our hearts will be robbed of joy. Worldly sorrow produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).

In the last message we noted: “the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). But depression, or worldly sorrow, produces death. It is the opposite of joy and it saps our strength.

It is important not to allow discouragement or worldly sorrow to set in. We can overcome discouragement and worldly sorrow by drawing near to God, looking to Him to strengthen us, and affirming our faith in Him and rejoicing in Him.

4. Ignorance

Some of us may think that ignorance is bliss. We may think that the more we know, the more we will be held accountable, so it is better to know less. But ignorance or lack of true knowledge renders us weak and vulnerable. We have seen that knowledge of the truth and what is revealed in the Scriptures is very important for true strength.

5. Foolishness, complacency and carelessness

Foolishness, complacency and carelessness are the opposites of wisdom, diligence and vigilance. The latter are features of spiritual health and they are important for true strength. The former render us weak and vulnerable.

6. Negative character traits

Negative traits such as impatience, bitterness, pride, greed, being unkind and aggressive grieve the Holy Spirit. The evil one will promote such negative traits within us because they render us spiritually weak and easy prey to his crafty schemes. The Scriptures warns us not to be ignorant of his wiles.

Let us ask the Lord to help us decisively resolve the various areas that can sap our strength. Some areas can be dealt with quickly, while more deep-seated areas like pride may require more time. If we want to be strong in the Lord, we must be determined to resolve all of them. Let us not excuse ourselves from making the effort to work at them.

We will now consider the subject of competence in spiritual warfare and how it is related to our being truly strong.

Spiritual warfare

Whether we recognise it or not, we are in the midst of intense spiritual warfare. The evil one seeks not only to oppose the will of God, but also to work actively in the lives of all people, believers and unbelievers. How we fare in spiritual warfare has great eternal significance, both for our personal lives and for the work of God.

Do not give the devil an opportunity

Ephesians 4 has significant relevance to this whole subject of spiritual warfare and being truly strong. We read in verse 27:

Ephesians 4:27

and do not give the devil an opportunity.

Here, the apostle Paul tells us not to give the devil a place or ground to work in our lives. Rather, we must order our lives in a manner that facilitates God's working in and through our lives.

We cannot afford to be sinful, foolish, ignorant, careless, complacent or just let things be. If we do, we will be easily overcome. The evil one is actively at work and he will take advantage of any weakness where he can.

The Scriptures emphasises the need for us to strive according to the power of God which mightily works within us. Time and again, the Scriptures exhorts us to grow strong, to be diligent

and vigilant because we are in the context of spiritual warfare. It is critical that we are diligent in the truth and vigilant against giving the enemy an opportunity to work in our lives.

Competent in spiritual warfare

An overcomer

The one who is truly strong is an overcomer. And an important aspect of an overcomer's life is that of overcoming the evil one and the powers of darkness.

1 John 2:14

I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

The phrase “you are strong” is closely related to “and you have overcome the evil one”. This is also linked to “and the word of God abides in you”. When we know the truth and are living according to God's instructions and revelations, and not according to our own thinking and desires, we will be truly strong, and will be able to overcome the evil one.

This “overcoming the evil one” will culminate in the decisive battle described in Revelation 12:11, in which the overcomers — those who are strong — will have a vital part.

Revelation 12:11

“And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

The overcomers overcome the evil one on the basis of the victory of the Cross — by the power of the blood of the Lamb; and on the basis of the quality of their lives — the word of their testimony; and on the basis of their deep commitment — they

do not love their life even when faced with death. They are committed to the Lord and to the truth, and they are prepared to lay down their lives for their cause. They do not waver; they do not withdraw. They take their stand in the power of the Lord and overcome the evil one.

Our personal development and preparation for that day, as well as the continual overcoming of the works of the evil one in our own lives and in the lives of others, are all part of the total plan of God.

We should have a strong sense of urgency and a deep sense of the significance of growing strong. To wage battles effectively in the spiritual realm, we must be ready. The stronger and more mature we are, the more effective we will be in spiritual warfare and in overcoming the works of the evil one.

Besides learning to overcome the works of the evil one in our lives and in the lives of others, we should also learn to do so in broader issues, such as in church life.

There are many problems among God's people and in the outworking of church life. Various trends present in church life grieve the heart of God. They hinder the work of the Spirit of God and give ground to the powers of darkness.

In many congregations, we find wrong doctrines, negative attitudes, worldly values and ways. Behind the scene, the powers of darkness are very much at work, multiplying and magnifying the problems. However, what takes place in the congregations and the way the evil one works are dynamic, and the situation may change for better or for worse according to the response of believers. Those who are truly strong can fulfil a significant role in the battle against the forces of darkness and overcome their attacks and negative influences in church life, and contribute towards the health of the universal church.

How God's people pray, and how effective they are in prayer, will have a significant bearing on the major issues and trends

in society. Many people are steeped in spiritual darkness and gripped by superstitious beliefs, idolatry, worldly philosophies, materialism, and the pleasures of the world. They are in deep bondage and deception, being blinded by the powers of darkness. If God's people are strong, their witness and prayer can have a significant bearing on the realities in the spiritual realm and the spiritual state of such people. They can help to remove hindrances and barriers, and facilitate the penetration of the gospel into their hearts.

Our enemy, the evil one, opposes God's work and seeks his utmost to hinder it, in every part and at every point. Thus, an important area in the prayer ministry of a congregation is that of overcoming the powers of darkness and removing obstacles that obstruct the advancement of God's kingdom. A major aspect of the advancement of God's kingdom is in the hearts of men — both believers and unbelievers — in their submission to the reign of God.

Our weapons of warfare must be divinely powerful

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks about the weapons of spiritual warfare.

2 Corinthians 10:3–4

3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh,

4 for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

Paul teaches us that to overcome the powers of darkness and destroy their fortresses, we cannot use fleshly weapons and we cannot “war according to the flesh”, that is, we cannot depend on our own wisdom, capabilities and fleshly resources. Our weapons must be divinely powerful and we must learn how to wage spiritual warfare according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit

and in His power. This involves learning to exercise our spirit in prayer, and praying with all spiritual wisdom and understanding, concentrating on the right areas.

Spiritual warfare and the fulfilment of God's purposes

We have considered in the last message that a central theme of Paul's epistle to the Ephesians is his deep concern for the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

In chapters 1 and 2 of Ephesians, Paul speaks about the mystery and the summing up of all things in Christ, and how God seeks to work out all things after the counsel of His will. He also speaks about what God has done and provided for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul prays that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened to see these things. He tells us what we were before our conversion, how we walked according to the course of this world, and how we have been saved through faith.

In chapter 3, Paul speaks about the stewardship of God's grace, about the mystery that was revealed to him, and which God is now seeking to reveal to believers. Paul sought to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ and help believers understand how God wants us to fulfil our part in the outworking of His purposes, so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church, in accordance with God's eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In chapter 4, Paul encourages us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling. He also speaks of our oneness in Christ, our growing well in church life, and God's provisions for that purpose.

Verse 16 tells us that the proper working of each individual part helps the whole body to grow healthily. And from verse 17 onwards, Paul exhorts us to live out our faith well in daily life. He reminds us to walk no longer as the Gentiles walked, as those darkened in their understanding. Instead, we are to lay aside the old man and put on the new man, that we may be renewed in the spirit of our mind (vs. 22–24).

And in this context, he warns us against giving ground to the devil (v. 27), against speaking unwholesome words (v. 29) and grieving the Holy Spirit (v. 30).

In Ephesians 5, Paul urges us to walk in love, just as Christ has loved us (v. 2) and to stop all filthiness, silly talk and coarse jesting (vs. 3–4). He also urges us to walk as children of Light (v. 8), trying to discern what is pleasing to the Lord (v. 10), walking circumspectly and making the most of the time (vs. 15–16). He further exhorts us to understand what the will of the Lord is (v. 17), and not get drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit (v. 18). He then speaks of the proper relationship between husbands and wives, patterned after the relationship between Christ and the church.

In chapter 6, Paul continues with proper relationships between children and their parents and slaves and masters. Then in verse 10, he says: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might”.

It is helpful to see how these various passages fit into the whole Epistle of Ephesians. The underlying theme of Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians is the fulfilment of God’s purposes, and that for this to take place, we need to live our lives in accordance with the truth so that God will have the freedom to work in and through us.

It is not enough just to have some concepts in our minds, some recognition of truth. The truth must become a part of our lives and be reflected in daily life. We are to make sure that in daily life we do not give the enemy any opportunity to work, and we do not grieve the Spirit of God. When this is true of our lives, we will be in a position to understand what it means to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (Eph. 6:10).

Fighting the good fight of faith

An important aspect of being truly strong is to be competent in spiritual warfare — to be able to fight the good fight of faith.

In Ephesians 6:10–17, Paul teaches us how we can be strong in the Lord in spiritual warfare.

Ephesians 6:10–17

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

14 Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,

15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

After telling us to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, Paul immediately stresses the need to put on the full armour of God, so that we may be able to stand firm. He repeats the importance of standing firm in verses 13 and 14. Being truly strong is to be able to stand firm, that is, to persevere, to remain steadfast, not to compromise and not to be overwhelmed. Here, Paul is talking about standing firm, not when everything is peaceful or when there is no spiritual pressure, but in the midst of spiritual warfare.

As we consider the subject of true strength, it is important for us to bear in mind the reality of spiritual warfare for two reasons.

1. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of darkness (v. 12)

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood” does not mean that we do not face difficulties from people or that the temptations of the world and the stresses of life are not relevant or real. They are. But what Paul is trying to tell us is that we need to see beyond the visible realm and recognise the powers of darkness at work behind the scene — that the real battle is in the spiritual realm. We therefore need to be strong in the Lord, that we may be able to overcome the powers of darkness.

2. Advancement of God’s kingdom is directly related to overcoming the powers of darkness

Every progress, every advance of God’s kingdom is always at the expense of the kingdom of darkness. So we can expect that there will be spiritual opposition. The forces of darkness will not be happy when we are advancing against them. The powers of darkness are intelligent beings. They know when they are being threatened.

Paul talks about the wiles and schemes of the evil one (2 Cor. 2:11), implying that the evil one is an intelligent being. Whenever the evil one recognises a threat to his domain of darkness, he will, if he can, attack first. He will protect his domain and vehemently oppose all attempts to advance God’s kingdom.

The evil one is working in the lives of both non-believers and believers and many are under bondage in varying degrees. To align our hearts with God and His purposes, we must resist the attacks of the evil one and overcome his influences in our own lives and in the lives of others. As the hearts of men are being set free and brought into submission to God, the kingdom of darkness recedes, and the kingdom of God advances.

This is what the Lord Jesus said to the apostle Paul when He sent Paul to minister to the Jews and the Gentiles — to open their spiritual eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God.

Acts 26:18

to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

Satan has dominion over the people of the world. They are living in darkness and sin. There needs to be a turning from darkness to light, a setting free of the captives, that they may be transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col. 1:13). This will involve a struggle in the spiritual realm. It is spiritual warfare. That is why fleshly strength and energy can never qualify us to be truly strong — they are powerless in the spiritual realm. To truly advance God’s kingdom, we need to be spiritually strong.

The full armour of God — the importance of moral and spiritual qualities

In Ephesians 6:13, Paul goes on to emphasise again the need for us to “take up the full armour of God”. The armour of God has to do largely with the moral and spiritual qualities of the believer.

“Having girded your loins with truth” (v. 14a) underscores the importance of sound knowledge. We need to understand the truth, to assimilate it into our lives and to walk in it. We must be men of truth and all that we do must be consistent with truth.

“Put on the breastplate of righteousness” (v. 14b) speaks of our character, our relationship with God, our positive moral traits, our life of righteousness.

“Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace” (v. 15) refers to our spiritual readiness. “Preparation” can also be translated as “readiness”. All believers ought to be involved in spreading the gospel. Spreading the gospel involves spiritual warfare. It is therefore important for believers to be properly equipped and ready so that they can fight the good fight

of faith. A good foundation in the truth is important to prepare and equip us so that we will be effective ambassadors for Christ and ready for spiritual warfare.

Faith is an important aspect of being truly strong, so we need to take up the “shield of faith” (v. 16). We can then fight the good fight of faith. The life of faith has a positive moral and spiritual dimension to it. It involves knowing God and submitting to Him, understanding and absorbing the truth God has revealed in the Scriptures and walking in the truth.

The “helmet of salvation” (v. 17a) is a crucial piece of armour and it refers to our experience of the salvation of God. Salvation goes beyond conversion. It encompasses all that God intends for us in Christ, including the abundant and overcoming life in Christ, which can be our experience as we abide in Him and He in us.

“The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17b) is vital for overcoming the evil one. The Spirit is “the sword” just as “righteousness” is “the breastplate”, “faith” is “the shield” and “salvation” is “the helmet”. “The word of God” refers to the Spirit of God. Spiritual warfare takes place in the spiritual realm. We can only fight the good fight of faith according to the guidance and empowering of the Spirit. To be competent in spiritual warfare, we must look to the Holy Spirit to help us grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding, nurture our spiritual strength and stamina, teach us to exercise faith, and enable us to pray effectively.

The moral and spiritual qualities of the believer are vital in spiritual warfare. When Paul exhorts us to “put on the full armour of God”, he is telling us to be men and women of faith and truth — people of good character, who are grounded in the truth, who live righteous lives, and know how to trust God and live by faith. When this is true of our lives, we will be able to stand firm in the midst of the attacks of the evil one, and overcome him in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let us now consider how healthy church life in the fulfilment of God's purpose involves our being effective in spiritual warfare at the corporate level. The picture is that of overcomers fighting together as a mighty army of God.

An effective army for God

God's will is not merely to have believers who are strong in the Lord at the personal level, but believers who are also able to function well in the expression of body life. When believers function well together, they become an effective army for God.

We are God's army engaged in spiritual warfare. Soldiers in an army do not battle alone. It is impossible to fight effectively and win a war alone.

Consider the picture in Ephesians 6. It is a picture of a whole army of believers, each one strong in the Lord, each one putting on the full armour of God, learning to fight the good fight of faith together as an army. Each believer must learn to fight well, not just as an individual, but also with other believers as an army, each one fulfilling his part well. This concept is just as critical for the army of God as it is for a physical army.

Proper working of each part

In an army, there are many roles. Some people are in the frontline, like the scouts, commandos and the infantry soldiers. Others are in the rear, like the engineers, the cooks and other support staff. In an effective fighting force, all of them, whether frontline or otherwise, perform vital functions.

If those not in the frontline do not contribute their part, the army will be rendered ineffective. If the engineers do not build a proper bridge or do not build it on time, or if the cooks are unhygienic in their preparation of food, there will be serious consequences for the soldiers. So for there to be a strong, effective army, each individual in the army must perform his or her role well. It is no use having a good general when the rest of the army

is not well-trained. A good general needs good, well-trained soldiers and support staff to win a battle.

We can also consider the analogy of the human body. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul likens the body of Christ to the human body. In the human body, every member is important. Take the eye and the nose. They may have different roles, but each must perform its role well for the body to function as it should. Likewise, every member of the body of Christ is important. Each member has a different role and function, and God has given each one of us different gifts. And for the whole body of Christ to function well, every believer must fulfil his or her part well.

All of us can contribute to the effective working of church life. Whatever our responsibilities, even if they appear insignificant, we all can and ought to contribute to the advancement of God's kingdom.

This is the picture in Ephesians 4:11–16. This passage comes before and is related to the passage on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6. Here Paul is not talking about isolated believers growing well on their own, but about healthy church life. God provides apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers so that they may help the saints be equipped and grow in maturity together. All believers have to function together in organic unity in order to fight well as an army. As each individual part works properly, it “causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16).

1 Chronicles 12 — a picture of overcomers, a parallel of an effective army for God

In 1 Chronicles 12, we read an account of David and his mighty men, with various descriptions of the qualities in these men.

As we read this account, we can see striking parallels between David's men as a mighty force in war and a healthy church as a mighty army for God in spiritual warfare.

1 Chronicles 12:1

Now these are the ones who came to David at Ziklag, while he was still restricted because of Saul the son of Kish; and they were among the mighty men who helped him in war.

By this time, David had already been chosen by God and anointed king of Israel, as a replacement for Saul, who had proven himself an unworthy king.

But verse 1 tells us that at this time, David “was still restricted because of Saul”, which is to say that Saul was still holding on to kingship, against God’s will. Saul was relentlessly pursuing David in order to kill him. He was exercising his power and authority contrary to God’s will.

In the same way, the evil one is holding on to power and exercising it in a manner contrary to God’s will. The evil one and the powers of darkness are opposing and hindering God’s will from being done on earth.

But verse 1 also tells us that the people who came to David “were among the mighty men who helped him in war”. This finds a parallel in the truly strong in the church who stand with the Lord Jesus in spiritual battle against the forces of darkness.

1 Chronicles 12:2, 8

2 They were equipped with bows, using both the right hand and the left to sling stones and to shoot arrows from the bow; they were Saul’s kinsmen from Benjamin.

8 From the Gadites there came over to David in the stronghold in the wilderness, mighty men of valor, men trained for war, who could handle shield and spear, and whose faces were like the faces of lions, and they were as swift as the gazelles on the mountains.

David’s men were well-equipped and well-trained, men who could wield their weapons effectively. They could handle shield and spear, and they could use both the right hand and the left to

sling stones and shoot arrows, something that is not easy to do. They were mighty men of valour, well-prepared for war. They were fearless, fit, and swift.

Likewise, to be effective soldiers in God's army, believers must be men of courage, spiritually fit, well-trained, and capable of wielding the weapons of spiritual warfare effectively.

1 Chronicles 12:14

These of the sons of Gad were captains of the army; he who was least was equal to a hundred and the greatest to a thousand.

See how powerful and effective these men of David were — the least among them “was equal to a hundred and the greatest to a thousand”. This is indeed a good portrayal of overcomers.

1 Chronicles 12:22

For day by day men came to David to help him, until there was a great army like the army of God.

This is an interesting verse as it makes a direct reference and comparison to the army of God. It is God's intention to raise an army — a great army. Like the men who came to help David, we should come to the Lord Jesus and submit to Him, that we may fight His battles under His kingship.

1 Chronicles 12:23

Now these are the numbers of the divisions equipped for war, who came to David at Hebron, to turn the kingdom of Saul to him, according to the word of the Lord.

David's army was well-organised. There was structure, there were divisions, and his men were all equipped for war. They came to David to turn the kingdom from Saul to David — according to the will and word of God. As Christians, we are to function well in church life so that we will be a well-equipped army, ready

to rescue the captives, so that they may be delivered from the dominion of Satan to God and transferred from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved Son — according to the will and word of God.

1 Chronicles 12:32–33

32 Of the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do, their chiefs were two hundred; and all their kinsmen were at their command.

33 Of Zebulun, there were 50,000 who went out in the army, who could draw up in battle formation with all kinds of weapons of war and helped David with an undivided heart.

David's men recognised the times they were living in, the role they should fulfil, the significance of the issues involved, and they knew what Israel should do.

We should know the times we are living in as we approach the Second Coming of Christ. We should know what we should do as God's people, what God requires of His army. Are we men and women with a strong sense of purpose and mission, according to the mind of God, according to what God has revealed to us in the Scriptures?

That David's men were men of war who could draw up in battle formation is repeated several times (vs. 33, 35, 36 and 38). This emphasises the importance of the men fighting as a well-coordinated army. However capable they were on their own, they did not fight as individual soldiers, but as an army, well-coordinated, with each soldier knowing his role and responsibility, and thus able to fulfil his part well and fight effectively.

In the same way, we must be able to fight a good fight as a united, well-coordinated army, each knowing his part. And, like David's men, we are to fight with an undivided heart for the sake of our Lord. For us to succeed in warfare, loyalty, unity and commitment are crucial.

Verse 33 also mentions “all kinds of weapons of war”. We all have different roles in spiritual warfare, and different kinds of weapons are necessary to fight a war. God has given us different spiritual gifts so that we can fulfil our different responsibilities and complement one another.

1 Chronicles 12:38

All these, being men of war who could draw up in battle formation, came to Hebron with a perfect heart to make David king over all Israel; and all the rest also of Israel were of one mind to make David king.

Just as David’s men “came to Hebron with a perfect heart to make David king over all Israel; and all the rest also of Israel were of one mind to make David king”, we too should come to our Lord Jesus with a perfect heart, fully submitted to Him as our King.

The Lord’s army is committed to the advancement of God’s kingdom — that the hearts and minds of all peoples be submitted to the lordship and kingship of Christ. As soldiers of the Lord’s army, this is our task and we are to do it with complete devotion.

To be a mighty army for God, we need strong, healthy believers, each properly working out his or her individual part. When we are able to function well in healthy church life, the manifold wisdom of God can then be manifested — not just in the visible realm, but also in the spiritual realm — “to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places”. This is what Paul tells us in Ephesians 3.

Ephesians 3:8–10

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,
9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;
10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

As believers enter more and more into the unfathomable riches of Christ, as they grow strong in the Lord, and serve Him effectively according to the unfolding of God's plan, the manifold wisdom of God will be made known through the church in the spiritual realm. This is in accordance with the eternal purpose that was carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (v. 11).

All this cannot come about in our own strength, but only as we are strengthened through His Spirit in the inner man (Eph. 3:16).

Conclusion

God's intention is not just to raise strong individual believers, but also a mighty army for the Lord to fight the good fight of faith, contribute to the advancement of His kingdom and set the captives free. His intention is that those in bondage will be delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God, and that every believer will overcome the evil one in every aspect of his life.

We can contribute well in the struggle against the forces of darkness only if we are strong in the Lord and are properly grounded in Him and in the truth. We should therefore work at growing from strength to strength, being properly integrated into healthy church life, learning and growing with the brethren and fulfilling our part well.

It is vital that we grow strong spiritually, and that we are properly equipped for spiritual warfare and competent in it. As we learn to fight the good fight of faith, we continue to learn and grow stronger in the Lord.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What is your understanding of the reality of different levels of spiritual strength? Why is it important that we look to the Lord to help us grow stronger and stronger in Him?
2. How and why do sin, doubt, fear, anxiety, discouragement, worldly sorrow, ignorance, foolishness and all negative traits of character render us weak and vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one?
3. Why is it important for Christians to be competent in spiritual warfare? What is the relationship between being truly strong and being competent in spiritual warfare?
4. How does the account of David and his mighty men in 1 Chronicles 12 help us appreciate what constitutes an effective army for God, competent in spiritual warfare?

Strength and Power: Concepts, Issues and Dangers

In this message, I wish to consider with you the different kinds and concepts of strength and power and the issues and dangers involved.

Worldly perspective vs God's perspective of strength and power

People often associate strength and power with wealth, status, positions of authority and capability. However, from the perspective of God's kingdom, this is not true strength and power. This area of worldly power is a snare for both non-believers and believers, and the pursuit of worldly power has corrupted and destroyed the lives of many.

Some believers, on the other hand, think that worldly power is not worth pursuing, but spiritual power is. They seek spiritual power, thinking it is something commendable and highly desirable.

Indeed, spiritual power that is of the Lord is worth pursuing. It is positive and it builds up. It empowers us to serve the Lord and overcome the enemy. This is the kind of power manifested in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus and through the life and ministry of Paul and the other apostles. But not all spiritual power is of this kind. It is therefore important, as we seek to be strong in the Lord, that we have a clear understanding of the issues and dangers involved, so that we are not unduly drawn towards manifestations of spiritual power or seeking for spiritual experiences.

Spiritual power can be of the evil one

Though the kingdom of God is spiritual and invisible, there can be manifestations of spiritual power. But not all manifestations of spiritual power are of God. There are also the kingdom of darkness, the domain of Satan, and the manifestations of spiritual power that are of the evil one.

The Scriptures reveals to us that the forces of darkness can exercise spiritual power and manifest it through human beings. Let us look at two examples:

Pharaoh's magicians

Exodus 7:8–12

8 Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,

9 “When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, ‘Work a miracle,’ then you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, that it may become a serpent.’ ”

10 So Moses and Aaron came to Pharaoh, and thus they did just as the Lord had commanded; and Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent.

11 Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts.

12 For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs.

Verses 8 to 10 show God’s power manifested through Moses and Aaron, but verses 11 and 12 show the power of the evil one manifested through the magicians of Egypt. Note that the forces of darkness have limited power. We are told, in verse 12, that Aaron’s staff swallowed up the staffs of the magicians. We see a further indication of their limited power in verses 16–19.

Exodus 8:16–19

16 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats through all the land of Egypt.’”

17 They did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt.

18 The magicians tried with their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not; so there were gnats on man and beast.

19 Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God.” But Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

Here, we see God, through Moses and Aaron, turning the dust of the earth to gnats throughout Egypt. Pharaoh’s magicians tried to repeat the act with their secret arts, but failed. They then acknowledged that what Moses and Aaron had done was a manifestation of God’s power.

Simon the magician

In Simon the magician, we see another example of the forces of darkness manifesting spiritual power through a human being.

Acts 8:9–11

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.”

11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

For a long time, Simon had been practising magic and manifesting the power of the forces of darkness. He claimed to

be someone great and the people regarded him as “the Great Power of God”. But he was not. What had transpired was the evil one working through him. Yet, the people were deceived into thinking that it was something positive, something to be admired. Mistaking it to be a manifestation of the power of God, they called him “the Great Power of God”.

In many societies, manifestations of power by the forces of darkness are often regarded as manifestations of the power of God, causing either fear or worship or both.

It is important for believers to take note that not all manifestations of spiritual power and not all spiritual experiences are of God. It is very helpful to have some understanding of this subject and learn how to safeguard ourselves from being deceived by the evil one.

Deception in spiritual experiences

The forces of darkness can operate in a way that causes believers to mistake manifestations of spiritual power that come from them to be manifestations of God’s power. Many have indeed been led astray by spiritual experiences and manifestations of spiritual power that are not from God. In 2 Corinthians 11:14, Paul warns us that the evil one can disguise himself as an angel of light.

Often, when believers have a pleasant spiritual experience, especially when accompanied by a sense of peace and joy, they quickly conclude that it is from God. Concluding quickly in this way can be very dangerous. We must not assume that every experience that seems spiritually uplifting and helpful for our growth comes from God. It could be a deception of the evil one and if we welcome it, we can enter into a relationship with the forces of darkness. This can allow the deception to grow and become more and more serious, and we may come under deep spiritual bondage.

The apostle John warns us not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirits, to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1). Paul

warns us against being influenced by deceitful spirits, especially in the last days (1 Tim. 4:1).

Desiring a sense of power and authority

There is a place for us to seek for spiritual power. But we need to understand the issues and dangers involved and the proper way to seek for it.

Let us look again at Acts 8.

Acts 8:12–13

12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike.

13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

When Simon heard Philip's preaching, he believed along with many others. As he continued on with Philip, he was drawn towards the more obvious manifestations of power — miracles, signs and wonders.

Some time later, Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem. They prayed and laid their hands on the believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This amazed Simon even more.

Acts 8:18–23

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!

21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

22 “Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

23 “For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.”

When Simon saw the Holy Spirit coming upon those whom the apostles laid hands on, he wanted to be able to do the same. His motive was clearly impure and his approach improper. He desired a sense of power and authority. He wanted people to admire him; he wanted to be the centre of attention. He actually offered the apostles money so that they would bestow on him such power and authority!

When we read this passage, we may think it is not applicable to us. However, we need to pause and reflect over the matter more carefully.

Many believers have a desire for spiritual power and authority, thinking, “If I can have this kind of power, this kind of authority, then I can really serve God and be effective and powerful. I can do great things for the glory of God and for the advancement of His kingdom.” Believers with such longings may not realise something could be amiss in their hearts.

Yes, it is commendable to have the desire to serve God. But is there also a desire to have power and authority so people will look up to us or admire us?

Even though Simon professed faith in the gospel and in the Lord Jesus Christ, the impure desire in his heart remained. Peter, in verse 22, told Simon to repent of his wickedness. Peter said: “You are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity” (v. 23). “The bondage of iniquity” could refer to Simon’s involvement with magic or the forces of darkness working in his life in times past, and his still being in bondage to the forces of darkness. It could also refer to the wrongful desires in his heart for attention, the desire to be great and to be recognised

as such. Although he professed faith in Christ, he was still in bondage because of his impure desires and longings, which were complicated by his past association with the forces of darkness.

Proper motives for desiring spiritual strength

We should long to be empowered by the Lord so we can be truly strong. But it is important to examine our motives. Proper motives would include:

1. Love for God and desire to live out the truth

The longing for spiritual strength must be motivated by love for the Lord, love for the truth and a desire to live out the truth and the perfect will of God. This must be the overriding motivation for desiring to experience the power of God.

2. Longing for the fulfilment of God's purposes

God empowers us for a purpose. He does not empower us so we can enjoy a sense of power or authority. He does not empower us for our self-indulgence and self-exaltation. He does so for the fulfilment of His purposes. Thus, a longing to experience spiritual power of the Lord must go together with a longing that God's purposes be fulfilled.

3. A desire to develop good character and attitudes

The longing to be truly strong must also go together with the nurturing of positive attitudes and a good character. Otherwise a longing for power, even for God's power, can be unwholesome, even dangerous. Developing good attitudes and character must take precedence over acquiring power. If there is improper motive such as pride in our hearts or a desire for recognition, we will be giving grounds for the evil one to work in us.

4. Recognising our weakness and need of God

The desire to be truly strong must also come from the recognition that we are weak in ourselves and that we are unable to live out

the truth on our own. We know that unless we are empowered by the Lord, we will surely fail. So we seek His strengthening that we can be true to Him.

Wrong motives, wrong approaches, wrong understanding

If our desire to experience spiritual power is tainted with impure desires and with wrong motives, we will be hindered in our experience of true power. More serious than that, we will become vulnerable to the evil one. This can lead to serious bondage and complications, especially if the wrong motives in our hearts are coupled with wrong approaches and wrong understanding. I will consider with you three aggravating scenarios.

Scenario#1 — “Emptying” of oneself

Some have the idea that for the Holy Spirit to come in and fill their hearts, they need to “empty” themselves. This idea is not uncommon. It may be practised in a group or individually. The person seeks to “empty” himself by not holding onto anything. He blanks his mind, not thinking about anything. He cries out to the Holy Spirit to come in and take control of his life. In doing so, he opens himself up to an external spirit to come into him and take over his life and his faculties. Such an approach renders him very vulnerable to evil spirits coming into him and possessing him. This approach is wrong because the Holy Spirit does not want to come into our lives to take control of us and our faculties in this way. On the other hand, the evil spirits are eager to come into us and take control of our lives and our faculties.

Senario#2 — Strong or overwhelming emotions that hinder clear thinking, self-control and proper exercise of faculties

An atmosphere that encourages the expressions of strong, overwhelming emotions can aggravate the situation. In such an atmosphere, loud music may be played, voices raised and people may cry loudly. Again, this can take place individually

or in a group setting.

Some associate emotionalism with spiritual earnestness and having a genuine experience of God. They think to be spiritual, they need to experience strong emotions of deep love and longing for God and manifest it outwardly. Although our relationship with God does involve our emotions, such an emotional spiritual experience may be the work of the evil one. The person may mistakenly believe that he is experiencing the Spirit of God and becoming more spiritual. He may think that the Spirit of God is encouraging him to move further in that direction.

We need to distinguish between feeling emotional and having a deep love and longing for God. There is a place for emotions. But a proper experience of emotions in the Lord will not be at the expense of clear thinking, self-control and proper exercise of our faculties. God wants us to exercise self-control and to have proper exercise of our faculties at all times. The fruit of the Spirit includes self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Therefore, if our experience is truly of the Holy Spirit, we should be able to exercise our faculties more efficiently rather than less efficiently or not being able to exercise them at all.

The forces of darkness, on the other hand, want to take over and dominate our lives. They seek to hinder the proper exercise of our faculties to make us easy prey.

The way the forces of darkness work is different from the way the Holy Spirit works. The forces of darkness want to control us and force us to do their bidding. The Holy Spirit wants us to actively choose to cooperate with Him. This is a very important principle to take note of.

The Lord Jesus tells us to love the Lord our God with all our mind (Matt. 22:37). Paul stresses the importance of the renewed mind in Romans 12:1–2. God wants to renew our mind. We are to love Him with all our heart as well as with all our mind — a mind that has been transformed. He wants us to cooperate with

Him with clarity in our minds. And the Spirit of God within us seeks to help us to think clearly along biblical principles.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:32 that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”. The principle is that when the Spirit of God is working within us, our spirit is still subject to us. We can control our spirit. The Spirit of God does not come in and take control of our spirit such that we are no longer able to exercise our spirit properly.

We must, at all times, maintain and exercise control over our faculties by actively choosing to cooperate with the Spirit of God in what He is seeking to do within us and through us.

Scenario#3 — Linking speaking in tongues with being filled with the Spirit

A notion held by some Christians is that being filled with the Holy Spirit must be evidenced by speaking in tongues. They say that if you are truly filled with the Holy Spirit, then you must speak in tongues. This is not the teaching of the Scriptures.

Linking speaking in tongues with being filled with the Holy Spirit may lead to an intense desire by believers to be able to speak in tongues. Such believers may try all sorts of ways to achieve that. This can provide an environment for the forces of darkness to introduce counterfeits. And believers may gladly receive such counterfeits without realising they are not of God. When this takes place, the believer enters into a relationship with the evil spirit who is the source of the counterfeit and comes under its influence and bondage.

Importance of exercising care and being open to help from the brethren

In seeking to become truly strong, we need to understand the spiritual principles involved and be able to discern when things are not going on well. In our desire to serve the Lord and to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, we ought to be mindful of the

dangers involved and the proper approach to take. If we do have a spiritual experience, even though it may seem to be of God, we should still be careful. We must not assume it is from God and quickly receive it. If we do so, and if it is actually from the forces of darkness, we can end up in spiritual bondage. So we need to be alert, especially when we have unusual spiritual experiences. It is helpful to take a stand in our hearts to receive only what is of God and reject all that is of the evil one.

When the forces of darkness are actively at work in our lives, it can be difficult to seek help because the forces of darkness may try to hinder us from doing so. For example, they may impress upon us that we are specially called of the Lord, that God is bringing us through a special experience, that we must trust God and not depend on man because our experience is something special between us and God. If we believe them, we will not be open to receive help when we need it most.

But in healthy church life, God provides us brethren who can help us. God does not want us to isolate ourselves and live independently. He wants us to help one another and watch out for one another. So, when we have unusual spiritual experiences, it is important that we seek clarification from more mature Christians to avoid getting into serious spiritual difficulties.

True strength and manifestations of God's power

While there is a tendency, even among believers, to be impressed by and drawn towards the more obvious and spectacular manifestations of power, like miracles, healings and casting out of demons, there are those who are sceptical of such manifestations of power. They think that God no longer performs such manifestations, like miracles and healings, through people, and that such gifts have ceased after the New Testament times. To them, such manifestations today must be of the evil one.

I have read some writings of those who hold this view, but

I have not come across convincing biblical support for such a position. This position is also not in line with spiritual reality.

True strength and power in God's kingdom can include genuine experience of manifestations of God's power.

It is a grave error to attribute what is of the Lord to the evil one. If it is a genuine expression of the power of God, and we categorically state that it is of the evil one, we can incur the wrath of God. If we are not sure whether it is of God or of the evil one, we should not make a categorical statement either way. In this area, as in all others, we need to adopt a wholesome, balanced, and biblical approach.

God is sovereign. He has the prerogative to work as He sees fit, according to His perfect wisdom. He can still perform miracles and healing through people. He is the almighty God, and He can grant such spiritual gifts to His children. Such gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12–14. It is the Spirit of God who distributes as He sees fit. We should not say that God no longer performs such manifestations of power through people, or that there can be no genuine exercise of such gifts after the New Testament times, unless we have clear scriptural basis for taking such a position.

There is a distinction between the exercise of a gift and a manifestation of power in this area. A person may manifest the power of God without having the spiritual gift in that area. God can work a miracle through a person, but it does not mean that he has the spiritual gift of effecting miracles.

Manifestation of God's power does not imply spiritual health and maturity

God does not perform miracles only through those who are truly spiritually strong. He can do so even through those who are spiritually weak.

Consider the Christians in Corinth. As far as spiritual gifts are concerned, they were not deficient (1 Cor. 1:7). But Paul has this to say about them:

1 Corinthians 3:1–3

1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

Paul could not speak to them as to spiritual men for they were men of flesh, infants in Christ. He could only give them milk to drink because they were not able to receive solid food. They were not spiritual, but carnal. Yet, they exercised various spiritual gifts, including tongues, miracles and healing, as listed in 1 Corinthians 12–14. They tended to be preoccupied with these things, especially tongues. It is important to have a wholesome understanding of the issues involved and Paul sought to help them in that direction.

Those spiritually strong may not manifest God's power in spectacular forms

In contrast to the Christians in Corinth, the Scriptures highlights a man who was truly strong, yet performed no signs. And this was during the New Testament period when signs and wonders were manifested in the ministry of those who served the Lord effectively.

Let us look at three verses that describe this man, John the Baptist:

Luke 1:15

“For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb.

Luke 1:80

And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

John 10:41

Many came to Him and were saying, “While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true.”

Although strong in spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit even while yet in his mother’s womb, John the Baptist performed no sign. This shows us that God may not perform obvious works of miracles or healing through one who is truly strong.

We need to ask ourselves: Are we concentrating on the right things? Do we concentrate on external manifestations or on truth, sound knowledge, good character, oneness with God in heart and direction, which are the critical things?

It is when we concentrate on the right things that we are ready to ask God to fill us with His Holy Spirit. We seek to be faithful to God, but recognise we are weak in ourselves and need to be empowered by the Spirit of God. So we ask God to fill us with His Spirit. And from time to time, it is helpful to ask God to fill us afresh with the Holy Spirit.

Empowering on specific occasions

Even when we are filled with the Spirit, it is proper for us to ask the Lord to specially empower us for occasions that are especially demanding or more significant.

Consider an illustration in Acts 4:8. Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and he was ministering with power (Acts 2 and 3). Signs and miracles were being performed through him and he was preaching the gospel with power. On one occasion, he was brought before the Council, the Jewish supreme court or the Sanhedrin, and they questioned him.

Acts 4:7–8

7 When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, “By what power, or in what name, have you done this?”

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people,

Peter was already filled with the Spirit. But here we are told Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit” (margin of NASB: or “having just been filled”), addressed the rulers and elders. He was filled afresh and specially empowered to face this situation. It was important that he should give a bold, effective and accurate testimony before the Council, which comprised the secular and religious leaders of Israel.

Acts 4:13

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

Peter was an uneducated and untrained fisherman. But, empowered by the Lord, he was able to bring forth an unusually effective testimony before the Council comprising learned men.

Will our service and manifestation of power be acceptable to God?

There is a helpful passage to reflect upon in relation to the issues we have been considering. In Matthew 7:22–23, towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus says:

Matthew 7:22–23

22 “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’

23 “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’

The Lord Jesus says many will say to Him on Judgement Day that they prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name. But the Lord Jesus will say to them: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness”.

It is not very clear what categories of people the Lord Jesus is referring to. There are two possibilities.

- These people may be true believers at one point in time. They addressed Jesus as Lord; they prophesied and cast out demons in His name. But they have since degenerated. Even then, they continued exercising these spiritual gifts. However, what they were doing was no longer meaningful. Not only will the Lord reject their works and service, He will also reject them. It is not clear from this passage whether the spiritual gifts they were subsequently exercising were of the Lord or were counterfeits from the evil one.
- These people were not true believers, but thought they were. They addressed Jesus as Lord and performed miracles and cast out demons in His name. In reality, the spiritual gifts were counterfeits of the evil one, and so they and their works will be rejected by the Lord.

In the preceding verses, the Lord Jesus warns us about false prophets.

Matthew 7:15

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

The Lord Jesus says we will know them by their fruits. He then speaks about the bad tree producing bad fruit and the

good tree producing good fruit (vs. 16–20), and warns that not everyone who calls Him, “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 21). In this context, He says: “Many will say to Me on that day ...” So it is possible that Matthew 7:22–23 is a reference not to true believers, but to false prophets.

Let us take note of three points arising from this passage:

1. What seems right may actually be negative

It is possible to say and do things that seem right and positive, but in reality, are negative. In Matthew 7:22, these people addressed the Lord Jesus as “Lord”; they prophesied, cast out demons and performed many miracles in His name. Outwardly, what they did seemed positive. But in reality, they were not because there wasn’t the corresponding positive inward reality.

2. We may think we are serving the Lord when we are not

The passage suggests that these people thought they were serving the Lord. The fact that they thought they were serving the Lord does not mean they were truly serving Him, or that what they did would be acceptable to Him.

Some may be deceivers trying to take advantage of others by claiming they are of the Lord. But there are also those who may themselves be deceived, thinking that they are serving the Lord, when in reality, they are being used by the evil one.

This can also be true of believers. We may think we are serving the Lord when, in fact, the evil one is manipulating and using our lives. If our lives are not right, we may actually be doing negative, destructive things in the name of the Lord.

3. Quality of life and character determines the true value of our service

The quality of our works and service is not determined by their outward manifestations. Performing miracles, casting out demons, prophesying in the name of the Lord may appear

impressive, but they will not be of value in the eyes of the Lord if our hearts are not right. The Lord Jesus says: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (v. 23). The practice of lawlessness indicates something is amiss in the heart. When the heart is not right, what comes forth will not be good fruit. It will not be pleasing to the Lord. It is the true nature of our lives and character and the inward realities that determine the quality of our works and service.

Concluding remarks

If we want to fulfil the will of God and live a fruitful and overcoming life, we need to experience the power of God at work in and through our lives. Such a life must be grounded in the positive qualities of the inner man, knowledge of the truth and a close walk with God. Good character and positive qualities in the heart of the believer, together with knowledge of the truth and a good relationship with God, enable the believer to bear good fruit continually — as he walks in fellowship with God, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This, indeed, is the essence of the Lord’s teaching in John 15:5: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Is it desirable for Christians to seek for spiritual power? Why or why not?
2. Spiritual power may be of the evil one. What are some biblical examples of the forces of darkness manifesting spiritual power through human beings?
3. Share your understanding of the warnings in 2 Corinthians 11:14, 1 Timothy 4:1 and 1 John 4:1 against being deceived by the forces of darkness. How can we guard ourselves from being deceived?
4. What would be proper motives for desiring spiritual strength and experiences of spiritual power?
5. What is your understanding of the dangers concerning the presence of wrong motives, wrong approaches and wrong understanding in the pursuit of spiritual strength and experiences of spiritual power?

Spiritual Experiences and Manifestations of Spiritual Power

In this message, we will consider scriptural examples of meaningful manifestations of spiritual power and the different ways God communicates with men. We will also examine the dangers involved when we experience what seems to be direct communication from God, including dreams and visions and voices claiming to be God speaking to us. And lastly, we will consider how we can guard ourselves against spiritual deception.

Meaningful manifestations of spiritual power

There is a place for manifestations of spiritual power of the more dramatic kind. I will consider two examples of such demonstration of spiritual power — one from the New Testament and the other from the Old Testament.

Peter healing the lame man

In Acts 3, the apostle Peter healed a lame man in the name of the Lord Jesus. When the people saw the miracle, they were amazed, and they fixed their gaze on Peter.

It would have been easy for someone in Peter's position to feel proud and self-important. But Peter did not revel in the limelight. He was conscious that it was the power of the Lord that had healed this man. He therefore drew the people's attention to the Lord, away from himself and the miracle. Peter preached the truth to the crowd and gave a powerful testimony of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 3:11–16

11 While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement.

12 But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, “Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?

13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him.

14 “But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,

15 but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses.

16 “And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.

This event had a great impact on the people. Acts 4:4 tells us that “many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand”.

We see from this example that manifestations of God’s power can take place in the context of effective and meaningful service with right motives and according to God’s will.

Moses delivering Israel out of Egypt

In the Old Testament, we see many obvious manifestations of spiritual power that took place according to God’s instructions. For example, God commanded Moses to deliver Israel out of Egypt, and through him, performed many signs and wonders. These signs and wonders were a demonstration of the power of God and for the fulfilment of His purposes. They were not meant to be viewed by others as a manifestation of the power of Moses.

It is helpful to note that God worked through Moses in this way after having trained and equipped him for the task. At the age of forty, Moses was not ready. He rashly killed an Egyptian and had to flee Egypt. For the next forty years, in the wilderness, God trained him. After the years of training, Moses was ready to be used by God to manifest His power for the fulfilment of His purposes.

Periods of obvious manifestations of God's power

God's power may be manifested in obvious forms or in forms that are not obvious, yet equally or more significant. It seems to me that during certain periods or phases in the outworking of His purposes, God manifests His power in more obvious forms. He does so for specific purposes. I will give three examples.

One such phase is Israel's deliverance from Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and their entry into Canaan. This is an important phase in the fulfilment of God's purposes. During this phase, God performed many miracles.

Another phase is during the times of Elijah and Elisha. Both prophets performed many signs and wonders. This could, in part, be because of the spiritual poverty and darkness of the times. God demonstrated His power in this way to help draw the people of Israel back to Himself. He wanted them to turn away from gross forms of idolatry and the worship of Baal. When Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal, he performed miracles that demonstrated unmistakably the power of God so that the people of Israel might recognise who the true God is and come back to Him.

1 Kings 18:21–24

21 Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people did not answer him a word.

22 Then Elijah said to the people, “I alone am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal’s prophets are 450 men.

23 “Now let them give us two oxen; and let them choose one ox for themselves and cut it up, and place it on the wood, but put no fire under it; and I will prepare the other ox and lay it on the wood, and I will not put a fire under it.

24 “Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, He is God.” And all the people said, “That is a good idea.”

1 Kings 18:36–40

36 At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word.

37 “Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again.”

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.”

40 Then Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.

The inauguration phase of the New Covenant is another phase — a major phase. This phase stretched from the days of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus to the days of the early church. As He proclaimed the gospel and taught the mysteries of God’s kingdom, the Lord Jesus healed lepers, made the lame walk, gave sight to the blind and cast out demons. God also imbued the apostles with spiritual powers to perform many signs and wonders.

Wholesome approach to obvious manifestations of God's power in our personal life

We should not long to experience the power of God in spectacular forms; neither should we be prejudiced against it. It is not for us to lay down the conditions on which God should work in our lives. Sometimes He may work through our lives in spectacular ways in spite of the dangers involved.

The healthy approach is to concentrate on developing our inward qualities, and at the same time, be ready for the Lord to work through us as He sees fit. This would mean that we concentrate on equipping and preparing ourselves, such as by developing our attitudes and character, and growing in the knowledge of the Scriptures, of God and His ways. As we grow in spiritual health and maturity, we submit to God and allow Him to work in and through us as He deems best.

The danger of deception and the importance of positive inward qualities

When we seek spectacular spiritual experiences, we expose ourselves to many dangers, one of which is deception.

If we receive a “spiritual gift” which involves obvious manifestations of spiritual power, would we know whether it is from God or from the evil one? If it is a gift of God, would we know how and when to exercise it? Are we able to cope with the attention that others may shower on us? Would we be drawn towards seeking more spectacular spiritual experiences, resulting in our having an unwholesome sense of power and a false sense of spirituality? Such experiences in themselves do not make us truly strong or mature. What makes us truly strong or mature are the spiritual health and qualities of the inner being.

Let us look at Luke 10:17–20:

Luke 10:17–20

17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.”

18 And He said to them, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

19 “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.

20 “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven.”

The Lord had sent the seventy out to proclaim His kingdom and to heal the sick. In verse 17, we are told they returned with joy, highlighting the fact that the demons were subjected to them in Jesus’ name. In response, the Lord Jesus said: “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning ... I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy”. What the seventy had experienced was clearly a genuine experience of the power and authority of God.

But the Lord Jesus realised that the seventy were taken up with the fact that the demons were subject to them in His name. So He said to them: “Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven”.

The critical issue is not the experience of God’s power in itself. We should not be preoccupied with that. What counts is having our names recorded in heaven, which is a moral and spiritual issue. It involves true repentance and faith in Christ, and our relationship with God and with the brethren in His eternal kingdom. It means having a part in the outworking of God’s purposes.

There is a place to rejoice in God’s victory over the powers of darkness, but what the Lord Jesus wants us to concentrate on is being diligent and faithful, good stewards of what He has entrusted

to us, and that would include the proper exercise of spiritual gifts. This is the thrust of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30), and this is the way to be ready for His Second Coming.

God communicating directly with people in various ways

Miracles, tongues, healings and casting out of demons are not the only manifestations of the more obvious, dramatic spiritual experiences. There are also the more obvious, direct spiritual communications between God and man, for example, through visions and dreams. The Old Testament records many instances in which God spoke to and through the prophets in clear, precise details about what they were to do, say, and how things were to be done. God can still communicate with men in such clear, direct, spiritual ways today. But this is an area fraught with dangers.

I will now consider in greater detail this area of God communicating directly with people in various ways, and in Message 7, we will consider this proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

God speaking directly to people

The experiences of Cornelius and Peter

Acts 10 records the experiences of Cornelius and Peter. Cornelius was a Gentile. Acts 10:2 tells us that he was a devout man who feared God. He gave alms and prayed to God continually. He was not a mature believer at that time, yet God spoke to him clearly through an angel in a vision.

Acts 10:3–4

3 About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, “Cornelius!”

4 And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said,

“What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

Here, we see the angel calling Cornelius by name and telling him that his “prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God”. The angel then instructed Cornelius:

Acts 10:5–6

5 “Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter;
6 he is staying with a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.”

In the meantime, the apostle Peter also had a spiritual experience. This is recorded in Acts 10:9–20.

Peter was praying on the housetop when he fell into a trance. He saw the sky opened up and an object like a great sheet descending. In the great sheet were four-footed animals, crawling creatures and birds. Peter then heard a voice asking him to kill and eat the animals. As Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit instructed him on what he needed to do (vs. 19–20).

It is clear from this episode that God communicated directly to both Cornelius and Peter in a spiritual form.

The experience of Paul

In Acts 22, the apostle Paul testified about his conversion and the events that followed. As he was approaching Damascus around noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around him. He then heard a voice that said to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Paul asked: “Who are You, Lord?” The Lord answered: “I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting”. Paul then asked the Lord Jesus: “What shall I do, Lord?” The Lord Jesus instructed: “Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do” (vs. 6–10).

Paul narrates another incident in verses 17 to 21 in which the Lord again spoke to him clearly and directly. While praying in the temple, he fell into a trance. Then he heard the Lord saying to him: “Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me” (v. 18). And while Paul was reasoning with the Lord, the Lord told him: “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (v. 21).

These, then, are some examples of God speaking directly to people. But God also speaks in other ways.

God speaking through dreams

Another way that God communicates with people is through dreams.

Joseph's dreams

In Matthew 1:18–21, we are told that God communicated to Joseph in a dream. When Joseph found out that Mary, who was to become his wife, was with child before they came together, he considered ending his relationship with her. It was at this time that the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream:

Matthew 1:20–21

20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

21 “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

Because Herod wanted to kill the Child Jesus, the angel of the Lord again spoke to Joseph in a dream after the magi had left:

Matthew 2:13

Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up! Take the

Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him.”

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in yet another dream to Joseph in Egypt, instructing him: “Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child’s life are dead” (Matt. 2:20). All these instructions were clearly communicated through dreams.

In an earlier verse, we are told the magi were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod and they therefore departed for their own country by another way (Matt. 2:12).

Although God does speak to people through dreams, having God speaking to us through dreams does not mean that God is pleased with us or that we are spiritual. The Lord has His reasons for communicating in this way. It often involves the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes. Consider the dreams of Pharaoh and the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar.

Pharaoh’s dreams

Pharaoh was not someone the Lord was particularly pleased with, but he had dreams that revealed the outworking and fulfilment of God’s purposes.

Genesis 41 tells us Pharaoh dreamed of seven cows, sleek and fat, and seven cows, ugly and gaunt. The seven ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven fat cows. Then he dreamed a second time. He saw seven ears of grain that were full, and seven ears that were thin. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. No one could interpret his dreams except Joseph. When Pharaoh called for him, Joseph replied: “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer” (v. 16). Joseph made clear to Pharaoh that the answer and interpretation to the dreams would come from the Lord.

Joseph then interpreted the dreams to Pharaoh. He told

Pharaoh that the two dreams carried the same message from God. There would be seven years of great abundance followed by seven years of famine. Egypt therefore had to prepare for the famine that lay ahead by storing up during the seven years of plenty. It was under these circumstances that Pharaoh appointed Joseph over the land of Egypt and made him second in command.

Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers had earlier sold him to be a slave in Egypt. But Joseph saw a higher purpose and the hand of God in all that took place. He saw that God had sent him to Egypt to preserve a remnant in the earth, and to keep them alive by a great deliverance (Gen. 45:5–7). Joseph being in Egypt, Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's interpretation, and the events that followed, were all key parts of the outworking and fulfilment of God's purposes.

Nebuchadnezzar's dreams

Let us now look at Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. In Daniel 2 we are told Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by his dreams. His magicians and sorcerers were not able to interpret them. God revealed the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great statue to Daniel in a night vision (v. 19) and Daniel made known the interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar had this dream in no way indicates that God was pleased with him. In fact, the dream was not even primarily for his benefit but for a wider context and purpose. The whole scenario — the dream and its interpretation — was a broad sweep of what would be taking place in this world.

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed about a great statue, with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, its feet partly of iron, partly of clay. A stone cut out without hands struck the statue at the feet of iron and clay and crushed them. The interpretation of the dream was that there would arise one empire after another, but these would be put to an end by the kingdom set up by God. Daniel then interpreted

the meaning of the stone cut out without hands striking and crushing the statue:

Daniel 2:44–45

44 “In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever.

45 “Inasmuch as you saw that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy.”

The message is that earthly empires would come to an end, but God would establish His kingdom which would endure forever.

Again, when God speaks to a person through dreams, it does not mean that God is pleased with him. God could be sending that person a severe warning. This was what happened to Nebuchadnezzar on another occasion.

One day, while lying on his bed, Nebuchadnezzar saw visions. He then saw an angel descending from heaven and bringing this message:

Daniel 4:14–16

14 ‘He shouted out and spoke as follows:

“Chop down the tree and cut off its branches,

Strip off its foliage and scatter its fruit;

Let the beasts flee from under it

And the birds from its branches.

15 “Yet leave the stump with its roots in the ground,

But with a band of iron and bronze around it

In the new grass of the field;

And let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,

And let him share with the beasts in the grass of the earth.

16 “Let his mind be changed from that of a man

And let a beast's mind be given to him,
And let seven periods of time pass over him.

Daniel interpreted the dream as a warning from God to King Nebuchadnezzar (vs. 20–23). The tree represented King Nebuchadnezzar. He was great and strong — from an earthly viewpoint — and he had become proud. Daniel explained the meaning of the dream and the divine decree and also gave Nebuchadnezzar good advice:

Daniel 4:25–27

25 that you be driven away from mankind and your dwelling place be with the beasts of the field, and you be given grass to eat like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven; and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.

26 'And in that it was commanded to leave the stump with the roots of the tree, your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules.

27 'Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity.'

Nebuchadnezzar failed to heed Daniel's advice and Daniel's interpretation of the dream was later fulfilled (vs. 28–37).

Years earlier, the Lord also sent a warning through a dream to Abimelech who had taken Sarah, Abraham's wife (Gen. 20). Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Abimelech heeded God's warning and allowed Sarah to be reunited with Abraham.

These, then, are some examples of God speaking to people through dreams as part of the outworking of His plans and purposes.

God's direct words of instructions and prophecy

In the Old Testament, God often spoke clearly to the prophets, instructing them what to do and say. In many passages, the prophets introduced their prophecies by saying: "Thus says the Lord". And the words they uttered were direct words from the Lord. Let us look at some examples from the Book of Ezekiel.

In Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel testified that he saw visions of God. Among other things, he saw "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (v. 28). And when he saw it, he fell on his face and heard the Lord speaking to him. In the whole Book of Ezekiel, we see the Lord, on many occasions, speaking to the prophet clearly and directly. For example:

Ezekiel 2:1, 3, 7

1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!"

3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day.

7 "But you shall speak My words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious.

Ezekiel 3:1

Then He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel."

Ezekiel 3:17

"Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.

The instructions from the Lord to Ezekiel were very clear. The Lord told him what it meant to be a watchman and what would be required of him. In Ezekiel 4, the Lord instructed the prophet to portray the siege of Jerusalem. He was to get a brick

and inscribe on it the city of Jerusalem and then to lay siege against the brick. He was to lie on his side, first on his left side, then on his right, and to lay the iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah on it, to bear the iniquity for the number of days he was to lie on it, corresponding to the years of their iniquity. Ezekiel obeyed accordingly.

God's instructions continued through Ezekiel 5 and 6. In the first three verses of Ezekiel 6, we read:

Ezekiel 6:1-3

1 And the word of the Lord came to me saying,
2 "Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel,
and prophesy against them
3 and say, 'Mountains of Israel, listen to the word of the
Lord God! Thus says the Lord God to the mountains, the
hills, the ravines and the valleys: "Behold, I Myself am going
to bring a sword on you, and I will destroy your high places.

Ezekiel was to utter these exact words in prophecy. God again instructed Ezekiel, in chapter 12, concerning the portrayal of the exile of Israel. The Lord told him in verse 6: "I have set you as a sign to the house of Israel", and in verse 11: "Say, 'I am a sign to you. As I have done, so it will be done to them; they will go into exile, into captivity'".

I will now refer to various examples where the phrase, "Thus says the Lord" occurs. Often what follows is a lengthy prophecy. They are not the words of the prophet, but those of the Lord. In those situations, the prophet was speaking exactly what God wanted him to communicate.

Ezekiel 13:3

'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing.

Ezekiel 13:8

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, “Because you have spoken falsehood and seen a lie, therefore behold, I am against you,” declares the Lord God.

Ezekiel 13:13, 18, 20

13 Therefore, thus says the Lord God, “I will make a violent wind break out in My wrath. There will also be in My anger a flooding rain and hailstones to consume it in wrath.

18 and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Woe to the women who sew magic bands on all wrists and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature to hunt down lives! Will you hunt down the lives of My people, but preserve the lives of others for yourselves?

20 Therefore, thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am against your magic bands by which you hunt lives there as birds and I will tear them from your arms; and I will let them go, even those lives whom you hunt as birds.

Ezekiel 14:4, 6

4 “Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols,

6 “Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Repent and turn away from your idols and turn your faces away from all your abominations.

Other examples of clear, direct instructions are God’s detailed instructions to Moses on the construction of the tabernacle and the laws for Israel, and God’s instructions to Samuel to anoint David as king. Such communication by God to His prophets was common in the Old Testament; it also occurred on various occasions in the New Testament.

God can still communicate in such clear and direct ways to man today. But this area has its dangers. A major problem is deception, which the evil one is a master of. Paul warns us against paying attention to deceitful spirits, who are out to cause the downfall of believers, especially in the last days (1 Tim. 4:1).

“Hearing voices”—dangers and safeguards

I want to elaborate on this issue of “hearing voices”, the dangers involved, and how we may safeguard ourselves.

A person who hears a voice claiming to be God’s can be in a dilemma, especially if the voice demands absolute and immediate obedience. If he does not pay heed, he fears he would be disobeying the Lord. Yet if he does, he fears being deceived, as the voice may not be the Lord’s.

Evil spirits can impersonate God in very convincing ways. A person may hear voices when having seemingly uplifting spiritual experiences. He may experience an unusual sense of joy and peace and feel a spiritual presence. He may see a bright light, or feel a sense of being special, or of being entrusted with a special mission.

He may initially receive instructions that seem reasonable and helpful. For example, he may be instructed to pray and read the Scriptures, and to be concerned for various people and issues. Later, he may be instructed to wake up at odd hours to read, to pray, and to urgently look into issues. The evil one may be doing all these to wear him out, reduce his alertness and the efficient use of his faculties, and to complicate his relationship with others.

The instructions may become more and more bizarre. But the person may continue to follow the instructions because he may be told that his faith is being tested and that he must trust and obey “God”. As the deception grows, the evil one can then manipulate this person’s life for his own purposes.

While manipulating the person, the evil one may hinder

him from getting help from others. This is a key strategy of the evil one. The person may be told that he is undergoing special training, which he must not divulge. He may be told that he must learn to walk with “God” by faith and he must learn not to depend on man. The person finds that he does not have the freedom to share with others or explain his actions. When this happens, it is difficult to help him come out of the deception, and the deception gets more serious.

The end result is that the person enters into a relationship with the powers of darkness and comes under their bondage.

Safeguards against such deception

How then can we safeguard ourselves against such deception? This is a complex subject but there are four points we can bear in mind:

1. We should be very slow to follow instructions from such “voices” or to conclude that they are of the Lord until we have very clear basis for deciding and are very clear that they are indeed of the Lord. This approach also applies to dreams and visions.

When we are unclear of the source, we should not act in obedience to it, even when such instructions appear consistent with biblical truth, for example, instructions to read the Scriptures or to pray for others. If we consider it reasonable to pray or read the Scriptures at a certain time and for a particular length of time, we should act on the basis of these objective grounds and not in obedience to the voice. This distinction is important. If we act in obedience to the voice and in reality the voice is from the forces of darkness, we would then be moving towards having a relationship with the source and could end up in spiritual bondage.

2. Our primary emphasis should be to develop purity of heart, to have a sound knowledge of God and the Scriptures, and be alert to the wiles of the evil one. Blots in our character, like wrong desires and negative attitudes, make us vulnerable. But if we maintain purity of heart, the evil one will have little room to work in us. If we know God and His ways, and have a good grasp of the Scriptures, we will be in a better position to distinguish what is of God and what is of the evil one. We will be more discerning when confronted with the works of the evil one, which are contrary to our knowledge of God and His ways. If we understand the wiles of the evil one and how he operates, we will not become easy prey.
3. When we are unclear whether it is the Lord speaking and do not act on the voice's instructions, we are not disobeying the Lord. We must not be threatened into obeying the voice, and we need not be afraid that we may be disobeying the Lord. God Himself has warned us against deceitful spirits. The Scriptures reveals Satan as a crafty, deceiving and scheming enemy. The apostle John tells us to test the spirits. So we are in fact obeying the Lord when we do not assume that any spiritual experience is of the Lord.
4. It is prudent to discuss our situation with those who can help us be clearer. The evil one wants to isolate us such that we cannot benefit from prayer support, fellowship, and the help of the brethren. But God has provided us the church. It is not His intention that we live in isolation, especially when dangers abound, when the danger of deception is very real. He wants us to seek Him together as His people,

that the glory and truth of God can be manifested and the wiles of the evil one exposed. We should therefore share and discuss with those who love the Lord and who are in a position to help us.

Concluding remarks

It is important for us to distinguish between worldly concepts of strength and power and being truly strong in the Lord. In the area of spiritual power, we must distinguish between what is of God and what is of the evil one. We must not readily assume that manifestations of spiritual power are from the Lord.

The desire for spiritual power and the experience of it are not necessarily positive things. They can be damaging to our lives, and can result in serious bondage, especially if our motives are impure, and there are various negative traits or deficiencies in our lives. If we are not knowledgeable about the ways of the evil one and how he deceives men, and if we are not careful in safeguarding ourselves from such deceptions, we can easily become his victims.

God can manifest His power in more obvious and spectacular ways like performing miracles and healings through people, even today. That is His sovereign prerogative. However, we should not be overly impressed and drawn towards such manifestations. We must also recognise that the person through whom various miracles and healings take place may not be truly strong.

An important point I want to put across in this message is that we should not be drawn to the more obvious manifestations of spiritual power. Although God can work in such ways, we must not harbour longings for these kinds of experiences. Do not equate them with spirituality or with being truly strong.

The other point I want to emphasise concerns our whole approach to life. What is it that we really long for? Is it in line with biblical emphasis and the heart of God?

We must set our hearts to grow in maturity and develop quality of life and character. If we do so, we will have wisdom and sound knowledge, and will be more ready for the Lord's use. If we do not, we become vulnerable to the evil one, especially when we seek spiritual experiences. We need to exercise great care in this area because once the evil one succeeds in influencing and deceiving us, our lives and the Lord's work can suffer serious setbacks. It may be difficult for us to free ourselves from such deception and spiritual bondage.

Let us examine our own lives. Do we long for obvious or dramatic spiritual experiences that may give us a sense of spirituality and power?

Let us ask the Spirit of God to search our hearts and show us our deficiencies. And when He does so, let us repent and take corrective steps, so that we may grow well in the Lord, and not be susceptible to the working of the evil one. Let us long to be truly strong in the Lord.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. The Scriptures records many instances in which God is pleased to manifest His power through men in the context of effective service. What are some of these instances? Share what you can learn from the way God worked in those situations.
2. Seeking experiences of obvious manifestations of spiritual power has its dangers. What then would be a wholesome approach to the issue of obvious manifestations of God's power in our personal lives?
3. Give some examples from the Scriptures of the various ways in which God communicated directly with people. When God communicates directly with a person, is that an indication that God is pleased with that person?
4. What are the dangers of paying heed to instructions from voices claiming to be God speaking to us? How can we guard ourselves from being deceived?

God's Preferred Way of Communication and Working: Training Us To Be Truly Strong

In this message, I would like to consider with you this proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

God's preferred way of communication — promotes our understanding and participation

In what I termed “God’s preferred way of communication”, we would not be hearing God’s voice telling us to do this or that. In fact, we may sometimes not be conscious that He is speaking to us, or we may not be very clear what He is actually trying to communicate to us. Yet we shall see that this is generally God’s preferred way of communicating and working in our lives.

This way of communication may take place, for example, when we are reading the Scriptures. As we read prayerfully, the Spirit of God may impress upon our hearts certain truths and principles. He grants us spiritual insight into these truths and principles, and helps us develop stronger convictions. He draws our attention to areas that we need to work on. He helps us make better decisions based on truths and principles we have learned. And all the while, we may not be very conscious that the Spirit of God has been helping us.

This can happen during times of prayer too. When we pray,

the Lord may guide us in the direction of our prayer and may draw our attention to areas that we need to concentrate on.

And when we seek the Lord in decision-making, He may help us think through the matter at hand, impressing upon us the relevant issues and principles to consider so that we can make a wise decision.

At times we may not be very clear what the Lord's will is in a particular matter, or how He is actually guiding us. And we may wish for more definite guidance, thinking it would be more desirable and a mark of spirituality. But is this necessarily so? Is it better for us to hear a voice, or for the Lord to make very clear His instructions to us and let us know exactly what we should do?

An important point to note regarding the way the Lord communicates with us is that He wants us to grow in fellowship with Him and learn to perceive the meaning of situations and what actually is taking place, beyond the obvious. He wants us to learn how to view things from His perspective, which we can do only with His help.

In the Scriptures, God has revealed the major concerns of His heart: How His purposes are to be fulfilled; how church life is to be worked out; and how we can grow and develop spiritually. But we need spiritual perception to be able to understand these truths and principles and how they are to be applied.

As far as I can understand it, *God's general approach in communication is not dramatic and this is God's preferred way of communication today, especially to those who have access to the Scriptures.* I have three reasons for saying this.

1. The danger and complications in dramatic forms of communication

There is danger when communication comes in dramatic forms. For example, if we hear a voice, we may not know whether it is of the Lord or an impersonation by the evil one. It is easy for the evil one to deceive those who rely on this form of communication

from the Lord. If we unknowingly act on the instructions of the evil one, thinking they are the Lord's, we may end up doing things very detrimental to the Lord's work. We may also come under spiritual bondage to the evil one, and seriously damage our own lives.

2. God has given us the Scriptures

The Scriptures is the primary source for knowledge of God's revelation of truth — to teach and train God's children so that we may be adequate and equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The Scriptures is a unique book. It is the only book with content and teaching that we can wholeheartedly receive, absorb into our hearts and live by — because it is inspired by God for this purpose. The authority of the Scriptures rests on the authority of God. We submit to its teaching because we submit to God.

The Scriptures is the main source of clear, reliable revelation of who God is and what He desires to communicate to us. Although God can speak to us and communicate the truth to us directly, it is through the Scriptures that He reveals to us an inexhaustible wealth of knowledge, and this includes:

- Who God is — His attributes, character and ways
- Why God created man, His intentions for man, and what He requires of man
- What has been in God's heart concerning the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes

- The plight of man and God's salvation plan for us in Christ
- Spiritual warfare and how to fight the good fight of faith
- The importance of man's moral and spiritual stature
- God's provision of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Scriptures
- The role of the church and how church life ought to be worked out
- The kingdom of God
- Moral and spiritual principles that can help us fare well in this fallen world and bear fruit in every good work

All the wealth of knowledge and spiritual understanding that God wants to reveal to us is not revealed to us directly, but through the Scriptures.

Moreover, whatever we think God is revealing to us directly needs to be examined in the light of what the Scriptures teaches, so that we may ascertain its authenticity — that God has indeed spoken to us, and that it is not a thought or idea of our own or from the evil one.

One major reason God has given us the Scriptures is to provide us with an objective basis for knowing the truth. Those who live their lives on the basis of what the Scriptures teaches are better equipped to guard themselves from being deceived by the evil one, by wrong teaching, and by the vulnerability of the human heart and mind.

At the heart of scriptural revelation of truth is the revelation of who God is and how we can know Him, relate deeply with Him, walk with Him and serve Him. It is therefore important

that we seek to gain insight into the truth revealed in the Scriptures, absorb it, and live it out. What is equally important is that we learn how to interpret and apply the Scriptures correctly and wholesomely.

3. The less dramatic forms of communication require greater participation and more understanding on our part

When God does not speak to us clearly and directly, then if we want to do His will, we will have to look to Him as we ponder and consider what is taking place. When He does not tell us exactly what to do or say, we would be “forced” to try to understand His ways and what He may want us to do or say based on our understanding of spiritual principles. This can then promote our fellowship with God, our spiritual development and the renewal of our minds, all of which are at the heart of God’s concern for us. God is concerned about our relationship with Him and that we grow in true strength and maturity.

Compared to the more dramatic kinds of communication, the less dramatic kinds have more reliable safeguards against deception and subjectivity.

For example, we may prayerfully consider a particular matter before the Lord, looking at the relevant factors and issues. As we do so, we may sense the Lord impressing upon us to take a certain course of action. We may then share with others, saying, “As I prayerfully consider this matter before the Lord, this seems to be the decision I ought to make, and here are the reasons I think the Lord is impressing upon me to make this decision.” There is a basis for our decision, and as we share it with others, the matter can be discussed and considered together.

Likewise, as we read through the Scriptures, we may be impressed with certain truths and principles, and think the Lord is using these to lead us towards a certain course of action. These truths and principles and their applications can be examined and discussed. The fact that we are not certain it is the Lord speaking

to us and guiding us to make the decision in this way can be an advantage. We are less likely to be dogmatic or to categorically say, "This is it." Instead, we are more likely to be open and say, "Though I understand it this way, it is not very clear to me." And because it is not very clear to us, we are more likely to seek for a clearer understanding on whether the Lord is really guiding us towards that course of action.

There are those who confidently say, "God spoke to me, even though I may not be able to tell you how." Or, they may just say, "God clearly impressed upon me that I am to go to Africa." Or, "God told me to get married to this young man." They make bold assertions, but it is difficult to examine the validity of their assertions. In such a situation, it can be very difficult to discuss whether what they have received is indeed of the Lord or is a deception.

There have been instances when sisters-in-Christ sought my counsel because some brothers-in-Christ had told them, "God told me you are to be married to me." Without further information, it can be very difficult for these sisters to consider whether it is indeed the Lord's will for them to get married to these brothers. At the same time, they can also be disturbed because they fear that by rejecting these brothers' approaches, they could be disobeying God.

It can be difficult to discuss whether such things are really of the Lord or are deceptions. Nevertheless, it is still possible to try to understand what actually is taking place. We can ask how the person has come to such a conclusion, and what the surrounding circumstances are. These can indicate to us whether the assertions are really of the Lord or, quite clearly, deception or subjectivity, or the person's own desires. When we are not clear that something is of the Lord, it is important that we do not rashly act upon it. If there is no clear basis for the claims, we should not simply go along with what the other person says.

I now want to go on to another aspect, which is to highlight a major difference in the way God communicates the truth through His servants in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. There are indications in the Scriptures that there is indeed such a difference, and its implications are relevant to what we are considering.

How God communicated to and through His servants as seen in the Old Testament

A significant proportion of God's revelation, instructions, exhortations and warnings in the Old Testament consists of clear, direct communication to and through His servants. Very often, God's spokesmen prefaced their warnings and exhortations with the words: "Thus says the Lord".

God spoke to the prophets very clearly. Sometimes, these words were intended just for the prophets. At other times, they were meant for the people. And the prophets repeated the words of the Lord. These were not the prophets' own words. In fact, the prophets at times might not have fully appreciated or understood the meaning of the words they uttered.

Let us look at some examples.

Instructions through Moses

The detailed instructions concerning the Law and the building of the tabernacle are examples of clear and direct instructions from God to the people of Israel through His servant Moses. God told Moses exactly what to say to the people.

In the building of the tabernacle, we are told the people constructed it "according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses". God gave detailed instructions through Moses, and the people built it exactly as instructed (Exod. 39:42–43).

The word of the Lord to and through Jeremiah

We read in the first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 1:4-5

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
5 “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

“Now the word of the Lord came to me” tells us that these are the very words of the Lord.

When Jeremiah told the Lord he did not know how to speak because he was just a youth (1:6), the Lord responded:

Jeremiah 1:7, 9

7 But the Lord said to me,
“Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’
Because everywhere I send you, you shall go,
And all that I command you, you shall speak.
9 Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my
mouth, and the Lord said to me,
“Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.

The Lord intended to send Jeremiah and would instruct him exactly what to say. He would put His words in Jeremiah’s mouth.

The following verses show us that God instructed Jeremiah in very precise terms, giving him the exact words to speak to the people of Israel.

Jeremiah 2:1-2

1 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
2 “Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus
says the Lord,
“I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.

Jeremiah 3:1

God says, "If a husband divorces his wife
And she goes from him
And belongs to another man,
Will he still return to her?
Will not that land be completely polluted?
But you are a harlot with many lovers;
Yet you turn to Me," declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 7:1–4

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,
2 "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there
this word and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you of
Judah, who enter by these gates to worship the Lord!'"
3 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your
ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.
4 "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the
temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of
the Lord.'

Jeremiah 8:1

"At that time," declares the Lord, "they will bring out the
bones of the kings of Judah and the bones of its princes, and
the bones of the priests and the bones of the prophets, and
the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves.

Jeremiah 8:4, 13

4 "You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord,
'Do men fall and not get up again?
Does one turn away and not repent?
13 "I will surely snatch them away," declares the Lord;
'There will be no grapes on the vine
And no figs on the fig tree,
And the leaf will wither;
And what I have given them will pass away.'"

The vision of Obadiah

The whole Book of Obadiah is basically also of this form. Obadiah begins in this way:

Obadiah 1:1

The vision of Obadiah.

Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom—

We have heard a report from the Lord,

And an envoy has been sent among the nations saying,

“Arise and let us go against her for battle”—

“The vision of Obadiah” is basically in the form of words: “Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom”. The words came to Obadiah in a spiritual experience that he describes as a vision. The words are not from Obadiah himself, but are directly from the Lord.

The oracle of the word of the Lord through Malachi

The Book of Malachi begins this way:

Malachi 1:1

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

It was the word of the Lord for Israel, spoken through Malachi. The message was clear. It was not adulterated by Malachi’s own thoughts and thinking. It was all from the Lord, exactly what the Lord wanted to communicate to Israel through Malachi.

Malachi 1:2

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have You loved us?” “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob;

Malachi 2:1–2

1 “And now this commandment is for you, O priests.

2 “If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart

to give honor to My name,” says the Lord of hosts, “then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart.

Malachi 3:1

“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 4:1

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the Lord of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

We thus see that God can and He did communicate directly and clearly to His prophets and also to His people through Moses and His prophets in this manner. A significant proportion of the content of His instructions to His people in the Old Testament is in this form.

How God worked in and communicated through His servants as seen in the New Testament

In contrast to the Old Testament, a significant proportion of the truths and instructions, exhortations and warnings in the New Testament does not consist of such clear, direct communication from the Lord to His people through His servants, the apostles.

What is conspicuous is the absence of these introductory words: “Thus says the Lord”. But it is not merely the absence of this introductory phrase. What is significant is the way God chose to communicate in the New Testament.

Many of the exhortations and instructions from the Lord to

His people through the apostles in the New Testament are by means of epistles. There are relatively few clear, direct instructions and words from the Lord in the epistles. In other words, the Lord did not tell the apostles, “I want you to communicate these words to the people”, and they then repeated the words of the Lord.

Rather, the epistles or letters were written by the apostles, addressing specific individuals or groups of people in their contexts. The apostles dealt with various issues that they were concerned about. They spoke from their own understanding of the situations and issues involved. What they wrote in the epistles flowed forth from what they had learned, from the store of spiritual wisdom and knowledge they had accumulated, and from the spiritual stature that they had attained to. The content of the epistles flows forth from this reality, from their hearts and from their lives.

Let us look at some examples.

The epistles of Paul

In 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed various issues confronting the church in Corinth. Paul did not say, “God told me to tell you this” or “These are the words of the Lord.” It was Paul writing to them: “Paul ... to the church of God which is at Corinth”.

The Epistle to the Corinthians begins this way, which is common in the other epistles of Paul:

1 Corinthians 1:1–2

1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

In 1 Corinthians 1:10–13, Paul exhorted the Christians to be made complete in the same mind:

1 Corinthians 1:10–13

10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.

12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."

13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

It was Paul himself, not the Lord, who was exhorting them. Yet Paul exhorted them "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement". He was an apostle called by the Lord. He spoke according to his understanding of the situation at hand, in fellowship with God and with the authority of the Lord.

Paul expressed concerns over various aspects of the lives of the Corinthian believers:

1 Corinthians 3:1–2

1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

He addressed and dealt with the problem of immorality in the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 5:1, 3–5

1 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

In chapter 6, Paul addressed the issue of bringing a brother to court:

1 Corinthians 6:1, 5

1 Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?

5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren,

He gave instructions concerning marriage:

1 Corinthians 7:1–2

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

He shared his understanding of how the believers should consider issues relating to things sacrificed to idols and spiritual gifts:

1 Corinthians 8:1

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

1 Corinthians 12:1

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

Paul also addressed various issues regarding the Galatians in the same manner, and shared his views. Paul began his epistle to the Christians in Galatia in this way:

Galatians 1:1–2

1 Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),
2 and all the brethren who are with me,
To the churches of Galatia:

In Galatians 4:1, he expressed his view:

Galatians 4:1

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything,

In the Old Testament, God rebuked the people, chastening and warning them. In the New Testament epistles, we see instances of Paul rebuking believers. And here, in his epistle to the Galatians, we see him rebuking the believers in Galatia:

Galatians 3:1–3

1 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?
2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?
3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

These words of rebuke are not directly from the Lord. However, because Paul was an apostle “not sent from men nor

through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1), and because he had attained to that stature where he could meaningfully speak on behalf of God, we can say that God was also rebuking the Galatians through Paul.

What Paul expresses in his epistles are in line with what God wants to communicate to His people. They addressed issues relevant to the groups of people and the various churches the epistles were written to. And, as part of the Scriptures, they are also relevant to God’s people of all times.

However, we must bear in mind that the epistles of the apostles in the Scriptures belong to a special category. There are other epistles written by the apostles which are not part of the Scriptures and they do not have the same weight and authority. What God desires to communicate to us through the Scriptures (of which the epistles in the New Testament form a part) is intended by God to form the basis for our knowledge of the truth and how we ought to live our lives.

Paul’s epistles are very rich in content, revealing major issues, such as what is in God’s heart, His will for His people, how they should live, and how they can fulfil God’s eternal purpose, including church life. Paul’s letters do not come in the form of God telling the apostle Paul exactly what to write to His people. Rather, they come in the form of Paul addressing various churches according to what he had understood and learnt from the Lord. However, what God intends for us to understand and learn from Paul’s epistles can go beyond what Paul himself understood in meaning and reality.

Let me make an observation from 1 Corinthians 7.

1 Corinthians 7:25

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

It is interesting that Paul said: “I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion”. God did not command him to say these things. Paul was giving his opinion. He said: “I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy”. Paul’s opinion is not frivolous or fleshly. It is trustworthy — from a trustworthy servant of the Lord. It is an opinion that flows forth from what the Lord had taught him and the spiritual stature he had attained. It is opinion that he gave prayerfully. He communicated to the degree he understood of the situation.

Paul expressly states: “I have no command of the Lord”. He is expressing what he has come to understand, which is in line with God’s intention and desires. If Paul’s spiritual state were not good, if he were not in fellowship with God, then the opinions he expresses would not be trustworthy.

God speaking to us through the epistles

Like the epistles of Paul, the epistles of Peter, John and James were written according to their understanding of the situations and the principles and issues that were relevant and important. What they wrote flowed forth from the reality within their hearts and from the spiritual wisdom, knowledge and stature that they had attained to.

From the New Testament, we can draw some important principles concerning the way God works in and communicates through His servants. The apostles were men of great spiritual stature and understanding — men in deep fellowship and partnership with God. God intends that the epistles they wrote communicate what has been upon His heart concerning the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes, and that these epistles should form an important part of the Scriptures.

The epistles are important documents. They are an important source of revelation and the basis on which God wants us to work out our lives. Yet they come to us not in the form of God speaking directly, but through the lives and teachings of the apostles.

God's intention for us: nurturing of spiritual reality in our lives

As can be seen in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, there is a progression in the way God desires to work in and through us, from Old Testament times until today.

We can say that this is how God desires to work in and through our lives. He wants to help us grow in spiritual stature, wisdom and knowledge, and respond to issues, situations and people in fellowship with Him, with understanding that flows forth from the reality within. It would not be so meaningful if God were to always tell us exactly what to say or do and we merely carry out His precise instructions and repeat the exact words.

In my understanding, from the angle of fellowship, participation, our growth and development, this is God's preferred way of communication to us. And all these have to do with the very heart of God's intentions for man, that we grow in spiritual stature and that we can have a meaningful part in the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes. A person may appear spiritual when he can receive very clearly God's instructions, telling him exactly what to do and what to say, but in fact, this may not be so helpful or desirable in the long term.

The Lord desires that we not only communicate the truth, but also live out the truth. Our lives should be an embodiment of truth — the truth becoming a part of our lives — so much so that when we look at situations and people, we do so from the reality of having seen and lived out the truth in our own lives.

When we have such a reality in our lives, our ministry will have a greater impact. We will not just be communicating words, but also spiritual life and reality. The more the truth is lived out in our own lives, the more effective our ministry will be. This communication of truth from our lives will flow forth not just from the words that we speak, but also from the very lives we live. This is how God wants His children to speak on His behalf and

this is what it means to be faithful representatives of God. We will consider further in the later part of this message how this area of truth can be lived out as we reflect on the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having obvious spiritual experiences may not make a difference to the quality and stature of our lives, and may not be evidence of spiritual health and maturity. What is important is for us to develop true inward quality, to become more and more like the Lord Jesus in the beauty of His character and in His closeness with the Father. This is what it means to be truly strong.

Thinking through issues — vital to the process of growth

Some of us may be concerned that if God does not communicate clearly to us in the way He did to the prophets, we may be in a predicament as we would be unsure what the will of the Lord is. What if we make a mistake? Yet if we pause to ponder — the fact that we are uncertain and the possibility of making a mistake can be meaningful in the whole process of growth.

If God were to constantly speak very clearly and directly to us — telling us what to do and what to say at every turn — then it would no longer be needful for us to prayerfully consider each matter and the issues involved. If we were to ask the Lord, “Lord, what is Your will?” and the Lord tells us, “Do this”, do we need to think through any further? No. The will of the Lord would have already been revealed, and it would then be simply a matter of getting it done. This is not helpful for our development or for our participation in His work.

When God does not make things clear to us in this way, it becomes needful for us to exercise ourselves to prayerfully consider and to think through the issues. The fact that we may be uncertain or may make mistakes helps us to exercise greater care, especially if the issues involved are significant.

It is good to learn to be careful and responsible. The very process of thinking through the issues and the principles

involved — trying to understand what is taking place and how to respond wisely — is a very important part of our learning process and our growth to maturity. This is what God desires of us, and we must not be complacent, negligent or slothful in these areas.

The Scriptures has been inspired by God for our learning. The principles are there to guide us. God wants us to think through how to apply these various principles in the situations we go through. When we go through this process well, our minds are renewed and the truths and principles become more and more a part of our lives.

Even when we do make mistakes, we can learn from them and try to understand what went wrong. God has a sovereign hand in each situation and does sometimes work to alleviate the negative consequences of our mistakes where He sees fit.

We can see similar principles at work in the bringing up of children. Is it good for parents to always tell their children exactly what to do? Is there not a place to encourage them to think through issues, and within a certain framework, to allow them to decide for themselves? If they make a mistake, they can learn from it so they can fare better the next time. However, we must be more careful when major issues are involved. Where there are areas of danger, we need to exercise greater care in supervising and guiding our children. Likewise, God guides and supervises us according to His perfect wisdom for our good and our spiritual growth.

Growing in spiritual wisdom and knowledge

God working in this way is also an incentive for us to seek to grow in spiritual wisdom, knowledge and stature. We learn to value highly spiritual knowledge and wisdom. This is in line with scriptural teaching and emphasis. How well we grow in spiritual knowledge and wisdom is related to our attitude and moral qualities.

Let us look at chapters 1 and 8 of Proverbs, which extol wisdom and knowledge. The Book of Proverbs begins in this way:

Proverbs 1:1–5, 7

1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:

2 To know wisdom and instruction,

To discern the sayings of understanding,

3 To receive instruction in wise behavior,

Righteousness, justice and equity;

4 To give prudence to the naive,

To the youth knowledge and discretion,

5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning,

And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,

7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;

Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Wisdom is associated with “righteousness, justice and equity” (v. 3). There is a moral content to it. It is found in a right relationship with God and reverence for God. This passage tells us it is important to learn to be wise, to grow in knowledge, and not to be naive or foolish.

Proverbs 1:20

Wisdom shouts in the street,

She lifts her voice in the square;

Proverbs 1:24–28, 31, 33

24 “Because I called and you refused,

I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention;

25 And you neglected all my counsel

And did not want my reproof;

26 I will also laugh at your calamity;

I will mock when your dread comes,

27 When your dread comes like a storm

And your calamity comes like a whirlwind,

When distress and anguish come upon you.

28 “Then they will call on me, but I will not answer;

They will seek me diligently but they will not find me,

31 “So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way

And be satiated with their own devices.

33 “But he who listens to me shall live securely
And will be at ease from the dread of evil.”

These verses warn us not to neglect wisdom and knowledge. We must seek to grow in wisdom and knowledge so we know how to go through all situations well.

Growing in wisdom and knowledge is a process. It takes time. We cannot desire wisdom only when we need it. If we do not value knowledge and wisdom and do not pay attention to nurturing this aspect of our lives, we will not have the wisdom to respond to situations when we need it. On the other hand, verse 33 assures us that those who pay due attention to this aspect of life “shall live securely, and will be at ease from the dread of evil”.

I shall now refer to some passages in chapter 8.

Proverbs 8:8, 12–13

8 “All the utterances of my mouth are in righteousness;
There is nothing crooked or perverted in them.

12 “I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,
And I find knowledge and discretion.

13 “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverted mouth, I hate.

Again, it shows there is a moral content associated with wisdom. Wisdom is related to righteousness, prudence and discretion, and disassociates itself from pride, arrogance and the evil, perverted way.

Proverbs 8:17–21

17 “I love those who love me;
And those who diligently seek me will find me.

18 “Riches and honor are with me,
Enduring wealth and righteousness.

19 “My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold,
And my yield better than choicest silver.

20 "I walk in the way of righteousness,
In the midst of the paths of justice,
21 To endow those who love me with wealth,
That I may fill their treasuries.

We should long for wisdom and knowledge and seek for it with the right attitude of heart. With it come the benefits — true riches and honour, enduring wealth and righteousness in God's kingdom.

The path of wisdom and knowledge is one of blessedness, abundant life and God's favour. Rejection of wisdom and knowledge results in death and destruction:

Proverbs 8:34–36

34 "Blessed is the man who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates,
Waiting at my doorposts.
35 "For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the Lord.
36 "But he who sins against me injures himself;
All those who hate me love death."

The importance of wisdom and knowledge can also be seen in the way Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae. He prayed that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened and that they may grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding (Eph. 1:17–18; Col. 1:9).

What I have mentioned as God's preferred way of speaking to us and His approach in communicating with us is an incentive for us to seek for and grow in true knowledge and wisdom.

Let us now learn from the way God communicates to us through the Lord Jesus so as to appreciate God's manner of working and how God desires to work in and through us.

God's communication through the Lord Jesus Christ — the Word

Why is the Lord Jesus known as the Word (John 1:1)? One major aspect has to do with communication. God communicates truth to us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus — the Word of God.

Let us consider what Hebrews 1:1–3 says about God speaking to us through the Lord Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1–3

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,

2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

In the past, God spoke through the prophets in many different ways. But in these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son, who is the God-man. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature (Heb. 1:3). Arising from this perfect reality within the Lord Jesus, God communicates to us perfect, unadulterated truth through His life and ministry, through His conduct and words.

Through the Lord Jesus Christ, God is demonstrating to us that it is possible for divine truth and reality to come forth through humanity. The Lord Jesus is not merely God; He is also human. But His humanity does not blur nor diminish the divine truth and reality that emanates from within. He is the faithful representative and expression of the will, the character and the life of God the Father. He communicates unadulterated truth in all its fullness and richness of meaning because He is Light and Truth and the exact representation of God's nature.

God desires man to be His faithful representative

God desires that we too become His faithful and effective representatives — with the Lord Jesus as our perfect example. The divine life and truth in all its depth and richness must become increasingly real in our lives. As this reality is lived out and expressed through our lives, we become more and more effective as God's faithful representatives on earth.

As God's ambassadors, we are to proclaim the truth. But it is not just a proclamation of words. God wants to communicate the truth to the world through the words we speak and also through every aspect of our lives and conduct — in the same way He has done through the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be true ambassadors for Christ, we must proclaim the truth with words that flow forth from the realities within. How can this be done? By learning, growing and then living, acting and speaking with meaning, reality and life. And this is possible because God is working within us. As we submit to His working, our minds are being renewed and our lives transformed. Increasingly, Christ will be formed in us. As we live in fellowship with God, guided and empowered by His Spirit, we not only can meaningfully experience, but also express the life and the reality that God intends for His faithful children and representatives.

Concluding remarks

Those of us who love the Lord would want to serve Him well. To be able to do so, we must learn to say what God wants us to say and serve in the strength which God supplies. We must be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. This is what the apostles Peter and Paul tell us in 1 Peter 4:11 and Ephesians 3:16.

1 Peter 4:11

Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is

serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:16

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,

We need to set our hearts on learning and growing well so that we may become truly strong. Being truly strong and serving the Lord well is not just a momentary spiritual experience or for specific occasions. It is meant to be a continuing experience and reality. We must become strong in the inner man and strive to grow in spiritual stature and effective service. If we do so in our own strength, it will get us nowhere. It must be according to His power.

Colossians 1:29

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Paul tells us how he laboured and strove according to the power of God which mightily worked within him. We must learn from Paul's example to labour and strive according to God's power.

2 Thessalonians 1:11

To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,

We should concentrate on growing well in the Lord, so that we will be transformed and be in a position where God can meaningfully work out His plans and purposes through our lives, in whatever form He sees fit.

Blessed are they who do not see, and yet believe

Let us learn deeply from the words of the Lord Jesus to Thomas in John 20:27–29.

John 20:27–29

27 Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.”

28 Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

29 Jesus said to him, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed.”

Thomas had expressed doubts when he was told by the other disciples they had seen the Lord.

John 20:25

So the other disciples were saying to him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”

The Lord Jesus appeared to Thomas so he could see the risen Lord for himself, as well as feel Him with his own hands. When Thomas then expressed faith in the Lord Jesus, He said to him: “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (v. 29).

I see here the Lord Jesus is trying to teach us that the principle of living by faith means we do not live merely on the basis of the visible realm. This does not mean that we should just believe whatever we are told, especially when there is no proper basis. Paul exhorts us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7), and God is pleased when we learn to live in this way. When we are preoccupied with or unduly impressed by obvious, dramatic spiritual experiences, it may be an indication that we are spiritually immature

and that something is amiss in our walk with the Lord.

When we have faith of reasonable quality, it is feasible to appreciate the truth, perceive reality and recognise God's ways, even when these are not in obvious forms. This is a manifestation of true faith.

Warning against an unhealthy desire to see obvious manifestations of God's power

In Mark 8:12, we see the Lord Jesus sighing deeply in His spirit. It is not often that we are told the Lord Jesus sighs. So there is something significant here for us to take note of.

The Pharisees were arguing with Him and seeking from Him a sign from heaven to test Him.

Mark 8:12

Sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, "Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."

Out of their hardness of heart, they wanted to see a sign — a manifestation of God's power in a more obvious form. The Lord Jesus, sighing deeply in His spirit, said: "Why does this generation seek for a sign?"

In a similar verse in Matthew 12:39, He expresses it this way:

Matthew 12:39

But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;

Let us be careful in our whole approach to life. Yes, we desire to know the Lord and His ways more deeply, and we desire to grow well in the Lord. But we must not have an unhealthy desire and craving for the spectacular, for the obvious — for "an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign".

Let us learn to be able to recognise what is important in the eyes of the Lord, to concentrate on meaning and reality, rather than be unduly impressed with and attracted by the outward appearance of things, the dramatic and spectacular and what appears spiritual.

God can work in spectacular ways, according to His perfect wisdom. But let us leave it to the Lord to work as He sees fit. On our part, let us concentrate on what really matters — to learn to grow well, that we can be ready and available to the Lord for whatever He desires for our lives.

Let us prayerfully ponder over our lives. Do we seek to understand the will of God? Do we seek to grow in true wisdom and knowledge, with right motives and attitudes? Are we sensitive to what He desires to communicate to us? Are we cooperating with Him? Are we responding well to the different situations and issues of life? Let us seek the Lord in learning to be true, effective, faithful representatives for Him in this fallen world.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Share your understanding of the proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

Do you think there are good reasons for God to adopt this approach today? If so, what are they?

2. Reflect on the way God communicates truth to and through His servants in the Old Testament, and the way He works in and communicates truth through His servants in the New Testament. What are the implications?
3. What can we learn from the way God communicates truth to us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus — the Word of God? How does understanding this help us appreciate how God wants us to be His faithful and effective representatives?

Closing Words

In the preceding messages, I have sought to consider with you from various angles the subject of being truly strong, and its implications for our lives. In these closing words, I would like to summarise the consideration of this subject by bringing together the main points.

Worldly pursuit of strength and power vs being truly strong

The world is preoccupied with the negative pursuit of strength and power. Being strong and powerful connotes worldly status and wealth, power to do as one pleases and indulgence in personal desires. Christians are often influenced by these worldly concepts of power and strength.

The pursuit of true strength according to the biblical perspective must arise from a heart of love for God and love for others, a desire to be faithful to the Lord and a commitment to live out the truth. Instead of pursuing worldly strength and power, we must seek to be truly strong in God's kingdom. It is the way to an overcoming life, a life pleasing to God, one that bears fruit in every good work.

Learning from the Lord Jesus — the truly strong

The most striking and beautiful picture of what it means to be truly strong is the Cross. However, to the onlookers, including Christ's disciples, the Cross was a pathetic sight. There on the Cross the Lord Jesus hung, weak and helpless, dying and in great pain and agony. Indeed, in the eyes of the world, the Lord Jesus died a sad and pitiful death. But in reality, the Cross was the greatest manifestation of true strength and power.

On the Cross, the Lord Jesus bore our sins and the punishment

due to all mankind, and He endured all the afflictions the evil one and the forces of darkness could freely inflict on Him. It required supreme strength to endure the indescribable suffering and agony of the Cross.

The Lord Jesus Christ could endure it all because of His strength of character, His moral and spiritual stature, His deep love for mankind and His unwavering commitment to accomplish the will of God.

He is our perfect example and we need to learn from Him. We need to learn to be like Him, conforming more and more to the character and image of Christ, learning to walk as He walked.

Characteristics of the truly strong

The one who is truly strong has a deep knowledge of God and an intimate personal relationship with Him. He is firmly grounded in the truth revealed in the Scriptures. He understands God's intentions for mankind in Christ and is identified with the heart of God.

The one who is truly strong has a healthy spirit and a renewed mind. He manifests the fruit of the Spirit. He exercises self-control, bringing his body and emotions, yes, even his whole being, under subjection to the truth. He lives out a life of commitment to God and perseveres in the path of true discipleship with a heart of joy and thankfulness, however difficult this path may be.

He is meek and humble. He knows the flesh is weak and he places no confidence in his own capabilities. Instead, he places his trust in the Lord and is prayerful in all situations. He learns how to be strong "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:10), how to walk by faith, walk in Christ, and be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, responding to people and situations with all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

As he walks with the Lord each day, he learns much from Him, including learning deep lessons as he goes through trials and difficulties with the Lord.

His deep longing is that God's glory be manifested, that God's kingdom be advanced, and that the hearts of men and women be submitted to God's reign. His deep desire is that God's will and purposes be accomplished — in his own life and in the lives of others.

The truly strong is a valiant soldier in God's army. He puts on the whole armour of God and fights the good fight of faith. He has spiritual strength and stamina, is alert to the wiles and attacks of the evil one and knows how to discern, counter and overcome them. He is able to carry on well even under mounting spiritual opposition and difficulties.

He understands that God's intention is to raise not just strong individual believers, but also a corporate body, the Church, a powerful army of the Lord, one that is effective in advancing God's kingdom and setting captives free. As a member of the body of Christ, he fulfils his part in the expression of body life, both receiving life from the body and contributing to it. He understands the tremendous potential of healthy church life in the local context and the significance of the universal church in the fulfilment of God's purposes, and he looks to God to guide and enable him to fulfil his part faithfully.

Experience of spiritual power may not be positive

As we aspire to be truly strong, we need to be mindful that not all manifestations of spiritual power are from the Lord. Yes, in the context of our faithful and effective service, God can manifest power, and He can do so in spectacular ways. But manifestations of spiritual power can also be of the evil one. The Lord Jesus warns us that prior to His Second Coming, "false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24).

We must also be mindful that the desire for spiritual power or to experience it is not necessarily a positive thing. Having such

experiences does not mean one is spiritual or truly strong. The Lord warns us that many who prophesy, cast out demons and perform miracles in His name are actually lawless people who are not recognised but rejected by Him (Matt. 7:22–23).

Balaam is one such example. Though he prophesied according to God's revelation, he was not truly strong in the Lord and his life and character were not pleasing to God. The apostle Peter warns us not to follow "the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15).

When we are drawn towards obvious manifestations of spiritual power and experiences, we expose ourselves to unnecessary dangers and deception by the evil one. We may damage our lives and come under serious bondage, especially if there are impure motives and negative traits in our character, and we are lacking in knowledge of the wiles of the evil one. We may be led to think of ourselves as spiritual and important, even though we are not.

God's preferred approach in communication

God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, whether in dreams or visions or in some other obvious forms. But from what I can understand, God's general approach in communication is not dramatic, and this is God's preferred way of communication today, especially to those who have access to the Scriptures.

Compared to the more dramatic kinds of communication, the less dramatic kinds have more reliable safeguards against deception and subjectivity. One main safeguard is the Scriptures God has given us. The Scriptures provides an objective basis for us to know God and His ways. The Scriptures is intended by God to help us know the truth, grow in moral and spiritual stature and be properly equipped for every good work. It is therefore critical that we hunger for God and truth, seek an accurate understanding of what God intends to teach us through the Scriptures, and then absorb the truth and live out our lives accordingly.

The less dramatic forms of communication also require greater participation and deeper understanding on our part. This can promote our fellowship with God, our spiritual development and the renewal of our minds, all of which are at the heart of God's concern for us.

A healthy approach to growing strong in the Lord

Some people are easily impressed with the outward appearance of things — the dramatic, spectacular and that which appear spiritual. But we would do well to remember the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:39: “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign”.

Yes, God can work in spectacular ways. But let us leave it to Him to work as He sees fit, according to His perfect wisdom. On our part, let us consider our basic approach to life and concentrate on what really matters, the things that truly count in God's kingdom, which is to grow well and be ready and available to the Lord for whatever He desires for our lives.

Growing strong in the Lord is a process. Moral and spiritual stature takes time to develop. The final objective is maturity in the Lord. This is God's primary reason for placing us in this world and allowing us to go through all kinds of trials — that we may be perfect, complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).

For us to attain to spiritual maturity, we must respond well to God's training programme for us. The many varied circumstances of life are intended to help us grow strong in the Lord. When we consecrate our lives to God and experience the empowering of the Spirit, we will be able to go through life well. This then leads to growth in moral and spiritual stature and in spiritual strength and stamina. We will thus be properly grounded in truth, love and knowledge. This, in essence, is what it means to grow truly strong in the kingdom of God.

Personal reflection

Let us then examine our own lives. What do we really long for? Do we long for obvious and dramatic spiritual experiences that may give us a sense of spirituality and power? Are our longings in line with biblical emphases and the heart of God?

Let us ask the Spirit of God to search our hearts and show us our deficiencies. And when He does so, let us repent and take corrective steps, so that we may grow well in the Lord and not be susceptible to the working of the evil one.

Ask yourself: Have I truly consecrated my life to God? Am I developing well in my prayer life? Am I spending sufficient time to read the Scriptures? Am I absorbing God's truth and letting it renew my mind? Am I growing in true knowledge and wisdom? Am I sensitive to what God desires to teach me in daily life? Am I responding well to God's training process and to the different situations of life God brings me through? Does the Holy Spirit have the freedom to transform my life and character? Am I seeking to understand the will of God and what is important to Him in the outworking of His purposes? Am I an effective member and soldier in the body of Christ, contributing my part to the advancement of God's kingdom? Am I growing strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might?

Let us learn to be true, effective and faithful representatives of God in this fallen world. Let us learn to be truly strong in the Lord.