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MESSAGE 1

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 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

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.

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?

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