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MESSAGE 4

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.

Psalm 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?

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