Be Strong

"….. so that you may be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst, to complete every task and still stand." Eph. 6:13

In this context "Be strong" has the sense of the ability to endure, to persevere and in all things to overcome. God is seeking to make us strong: ***"Strengthened with ample power to meet whatever comes with fortitude, patience and joy."*** Col. 1:11

But there is a paradox in all this for an acute sense of our human weakness is the divine crucible where God's strength is perfected. Divine strength usually operates when we feel our internal weakness and limitations as external pressure of various kinds building up. Paul knew well the experience of physical suffering, sickness and persecution. He knew the immense pressures of the work – the care for so many new believers as well as dealing with conflict and disputes. He knew the limitation of imprisonment in Caesarea and Rome.

It seems that there are three experiences behind all effective men and women of God:

1. What Oswald Sanders calls, **"The prostrating vision of God".**

   The result is self-abhorrence (self in the sense of 'sarx' – the flesh). Examples of this are:

   - Job – Job 3:1-16
   - Jacob at Peniel Gen. 32:27 – Jacob meaning 'he cheats'. It was really a confession of shame.
   - Moses ***"And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God."*** Ex. 3:6
   - Elijah – unbroken before Horeb and after that a broken and effective man
   - Ezekiel – after a paralysing vision of the glory of God came God's call – Ezek. 1:28

   We can see the same principle in the New Testament in the lives of Paul, Peter and John.

2. **The hidden years of testing**

You see this principle in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah (at Cherith and Zarephath), Elisha, Paul in Tarsus and in the life of the Lord Jesus when in Nazareth until the age of 30.

Yet we are often so impatient to start, to get going, to be effective! Will you have the patience to let God do His preparing and perfecting work in your life? He is waiting to be able to do this.

3. **The fruit of this** – 'Being strong'

Being strengthened with His power in our human weakness: The strength to endure – to triumph in the Lord Jesus – to rise above depression, defeat, despair, disappointment and all this in the midst of the actuality of human weakness and sin.

This may be personal – on the team – in the church – in the limitations of our service or because of security, political opposition, financial shortfalls, lack of personnel, sickness, setbacks and even the death of co-workers.

What do we know of His ways in our life and ministry? Are we prostrated? emptied? Do we feel we are in those hidden years of discipline and humbling? Are you being strengthened to serve and endure?

"The joy of the Lord is your strength." [Neh. 8:10]

To be strong you need the joy of the Lord as your strength. What is this 'joy of the Lord'? How is it transmuted into strength to endure and not just to endure, but to overcome?

There are several aspects to this:

- **The joy of the Lord and the realisation that there is no condemnation!**

  When the younger son was reconciled to his father [Lk. 15:11-32] then, ***"They began to celebrate"***. We need to look up constantly into the face of Our Father and receive all the benefits of what the Lord Jesus accomplished on the Cross: the joy of no condemnation, the joy of a great relationship with Our Father, the joy of the companionship of the Holy Spirit. There is such a joy in resting in an un-condemned heart.

- **Joy: "Delight in the will of God" – rooted in loving obedience**

  "I have come to do your will." (Heb. 10:7) ***"I delight to do your will, O God."*** (Ps. 40:8)

  This is the joy of the Lord – our delight to obey His will for our lives day by day. We follow the Lord Jesus of whom it is said, ***"Who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame"***. (Heb. 12:2)

  The Lord Jesus was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief. Who knew sorrow like He did? Yet He was full of joy! ***"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be full."*** (Mt. 26:30) ***"And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."*** So the Lord Jesus went to the sorrow of Gethsemane, the shame of the trials and to one of the cruellest deaths devised by man, with a song on His lips! Why? He was delighted to do His Father's will. His joy was rooted in loving obedience.

  Arthur Mathews of CIM/OMF spent quite a time as a prisoner of the Communists in China. Asked how he coped with the deprivation, he said, **"All came from His hands"**. He maintained his joy and remained strong because he was rooted in loving obedience to the will of God.

  So the key lies in meek (in contrast to rebellious) endurance and meek obedience. The acceptance of all God's dealings with us – of whatever complexion and however they may tear and desolate our hearts – without murmuring, without sulking and without rebellion or resistance is perhaps the deepest understanding we have of "meekness".

  The Lord Jesus said, ***"Blessed*** (joyful?) ***are the meek for they shall inherit the earth"***. (Mt. 5:5) Inheriting the earth is what missions is all about.

  So the will of God is my delight. Where am I going to be joyful and therefore strong? Where I am in my shortages, with my colleagues, with the political situation and the rising violence! God is Sovereign everywhere and nothing can separate us from His everlasting love for us. (Rom. 8:37-39)

- **The joy of the Lord in suffering affliction and persecution**

  "They (the apostles) ***left the presence of the Council rejoicing that they were worthy to suffer dishonour for His name."*** [Acts 5:42]

  Paul and Silas sang in prison with bleeding backs. This is the fellowship of His sufferings! The joy of the Lord is nourished and strengthened in adversity, hardship and trial and it is totally independent of our location or our circumstances

So the joy of the Lord makes us strong for:

- it rests on no condemnation
- it is rooted in loving obedience
- it is nourished by adversity
- it is independent of circumstances

There is a lovely hymn that has been a blessing to many. It was written by Jean Pigott (1845-1882). Her brother was with CIM in China. His name was Thomas Wellesley Pigott (1847-1901). He arrived in China in 1879 and was executed in 1910 in the Boxer Rebellion along with 76 other missionaries.

This hymn brought great comfort to Hudson Taylor in his great sadness at the loss of so many friends and fellow workers in CIM.

Jesus, I am resting, resting,
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.
Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee,
And Thy beauty fills my soul,
For by Thy transforming power,
Thou hast made me whole.

Oh, how great Thy loving kindness,
Vaster, broader than the sea!
Oh, how marvellous Thy goodness,
Lavished all on me!
Yes, I rest in Thee, Beloved,
Know what wealth of grace is Thine,
Know Thy certainty of promise,
And have made it mine.

Simply trusting Thee, Lord Jesus,
I behold Thee as Thou art,
And Thy love, so pure, so changeless,
Satisfies my heart;
Satisfies its deepest longings,
Meets, supplies its every need,
Compasseth me round with blessings:
Thine is love indeed!

Ever lift Thy face upon me
As I work and wait for Thee;
Resting 'neath Thy smile, Lord Jesus,
Earth's dark shadows flee.
Brightness of my Father's glory,
Sunshine of my Father's face,
Keep me ever trusting, resting,
Fill me with Thy grace.

The joy is the Lord Jesus! He is my strength. What of today or tomorrow? This joy is given to us by the Holy Spirit. Love, joy and peace really all go together. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to fill us continuously and we will know the fruit.

So when it comes to our weakness and our worries remember:

It is a secret joy to find
The task assigned beyond our powers
For thus, if aught of good be wrought,
Clearly the praise is His not ours.

Frank Houghton of CIM

Nothing can defeat us when we take not our strength, but all our weaknesses and offer them to God to be His weapon! Gladly then we may rejoice and glory in our weakness so that the power of the Lord Jesus may rest of upon us.