

## Strength and Weakness

Human nature is a curious compound. Samson's life is a strange contrast in strength and weakness. Then the apostle Paul had an infirmity in his flesh which, to his mind, detracted from his effectiveness in preaching the Gospel. Several times he besought God to remove it from him. God finally said: *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness."* When Paul understood this, he could say, *"When I am weak, then am I strong"*—2 Cor. 8.

Natural power, ability, or favourable circumstances are nothing to the Spirit of God. All natural ideas are backward. *"That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."* *"God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"*—Luke 16:15 and 1Cor. 1: 27.

Why? The Scriptures give us the clear answer, *"That no flesh should glory."* Any glorification of the flesh is false and abominable to God. Moses forgot this great principle just for a moment and under great pressure. In consequence, he was cut off from entrance to the promised land as a standing example to all following ages.

All the world's institutions are based on false beautification and glorification of the flesh. Therefore they reject the true Christ. *"His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men."* *"He hath no form nor comeliness, no beauty that we should desire him"*—Isa. 52:14 and 53:2. There was in Him no appeal to the flesh. He was and is despised and rejected. The flesh hates the principles He typifies and enunciates.

So with God's great ambassador to the Gentiles—*"his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account."* Again, why? And the Scriptures answer—so that the power and glory and influence should be with the message and not with the messenger—2 Cor. 10:10, R.V.; 1 Cor. 2: 3-5. The principle is clearly enunciated in the case of the Immerser. *"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Verily, they that wear soft raiment, and live delicately, are in king's houses."* John dwelt in the wilderness, clothed with skins, and eating the meager fare of the desert, and all who would be with him must go out unto him—Matt. 11. The Gospel message is a call to come out—not go in!

Strength is made perfect in weakness—in mortification, in humiliation, in simplicity. Never in glorification, or exaltation of the motions of the flesh, or vain show, or false appearances. As soon as we begin to glorify the flesh, we immediately lose contact with the power of God.

*"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time."* Mortification of the flesh and glorification of the flesh cannot exist together—they are mutually antagonistic. One will surely destroy the other.

Samson is only mentioned once outside of Judges, but that one mention is vitally important to the true picture, for it tells us two things: one, that Samson was a man of faith, and second, that he obtained a good report. Apart from this, apparently so casual reference, the life of Samson would appear to be a tragedy of weakness.

Samson, like David, was a true man of God at heart but he had to learn wisdom by great suffering and humiliation. He was trained in the hard bitter school of everyday life.

His name is listed in the divine roll of honour of the outstandingly faithful—Hebrews 11. We are glad to learn that his great strength was a result of his intense faith—not merely the self-pleasing vanity of a capricious giant. A careful examination of the record will confirm

this view—Judges 15.

Here we see Samson in the same light as David before Goliath. All Judah was in abject fear of the Philistines—so much so that they came to bind Samson, their God-given judge, to deliver him to the Philistines to appease them for the sake of shameful peace.

Samson permitted himself to be bound and delivered. Then, we read:

*"And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands."*

The clear meaning surely is that he permitted himself to be bound and delivered in faith that the Spirit of God would come upon him when needed.

Following this, he judged and defended Israel twenty years. Then, at the end of this long and faithful service, he joined himself to a woman of the world, who could not rest until she had broken down the sacred bond of faith and obedience between him and God, and sold him in shame to his enemies. His punishment for this lapse of his lifelong vows was very great. The Philistines put out his eyes and used him for sport in the worship of their idol Dagon.

But, says Paul, he died in faith, having learned wisdom by suffering. Out of weakness he was made strong by faith. The loss of his natural vision opened the eyes of his understanding, and in his death wrought the overthrow of the temple of the ungodly.

Paul's own experience was similar. He, too, was blinded that he might see. He, too, was reviled, despised, buffeted and set forth as a spectacle to the world, yet, in his humiliation and death, he pulled down the strongholds of wickedness.

But Jesus himself is the pre-eminent example of dying in a public spectacle of shame, yet in death destroying his destroyers and delivering His people. All the great men of the Philistines were destroyed in Samson's death, and the Philistines did not bother Israel again for many years.

The lesson of Samson is clear. It is the lesson of Adam. Adam was not deceived, but persuaded. Samson was worn down by continual contention until he finally gave in foolishly against his judgment for the sake of peace. The peace never came.

With Samson, it was the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh. With Hezekiah, later, it was the pride of life. Hezekiah was flattered by the attention of the great king of Babylon, and drawn into exposing himself to the cunning and cupidity of his enemies. God, we are told, was trying him to see what was really in his heart.

This, like Samson, was at the end of a worthy and useful life.

What was wrong with Hezekiah showing all his possessions? Why was God's judgment so severe upon so good a man? It is the same lesson man never learns—No flesh should glory. Many times God strikingly demonstrates His utter abhorrence of glorification of the flesh. Sometimes the retribution is slow—sometimes it is terribly sudden. Herod gave not God glory, *"and immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, and he was eaten of worms and gave up the spirit"*—Acts 12.

All glory belongs to God, and He is very jealous. He will dispense glory at the last day to those whom He chooses to honour. Until then, all man's glorying is vain and abominable. The flesh is so unclean and corrupt that any attempt to glorify it is the height of presumption before God. How man loves to bedeck and glorify his vile body, and to parade his possessions, purchased through unfaithful stewardship of his Lord's goods!

*"But ye have not so learned Christ, if so be ye have been taught of him"—Eph. 4.* The mortification and humiliation of the flesh is the low, small gateway into the Kingdom of God—never pomp and show.

Hezekiah was a very good king. He had great zeal, for he rooted out all idol worship in the land. He had much faith, for he stood up against the mighty host of Assyria, when all nations were falling before it. And he was very careful to be obedient to all God's commands. These fine points in his career are illustrated in 2 Kings 18.

*"He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan. He trusted in the Lord God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor any that were before him. For he clave to the Lord, and departed not from following him, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses. And the Lord was with him; and he prospered whithersoever he went forth: and he rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not"*

He was the greatest of all the kings of Judah. And God wrought on his behalf one of the greatest deliverances recorded in scripture. The most powerful nation on earth, Assyria, came to destroy Judah in its sweeping march of conquest. Hezekiah put his faith in God, and defied the Assyrians—2 Chron. 32.

*"And for this cause Hezekiah the king, and the prophet Isaiah the son of Amos, prayed and cried to heaven. And the Lord sent an angel, which cut off all the mighty men of valour, and the leaders and captains in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned with shame of face to his own land. And when he was come into the house of his god, they that came forth of his own bowels slew him there with the sword. Thus the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all other, and guided them on every side. And many brought gifts unto the Lord to Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah king of Judah: so that he was magnified in the sight of all nations from thenceforth."*

A glorious reign, with a fitting climax. A mighty delivery in the sight of all nations, so that all nations sought his favour.

*"In those days Hezekiah was sick to the death, and prayed unto the Lord: and He spake unto him, and He gave him a sign."* Turning back to the record in 2 Kings 20, we read :

*"In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah the son of Amos came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live."* God said he had done well. The time had come for him to rest. He was forty years old. He had a good record and God was willing to terminate his period of trial and probation. *"The righteous man is taken away from the evil to come"—Isa. 57:1* But Hezekiah was not ready, and he prayed to God to live. In this, he questioned the wisdom of God, and rejected His merciful rest. Having failed in this test, his life was lengthened for further testing and trial. Continuing, there is evidence that a declension had in part set in, and the king's character was seen in a less favourable aspect.

*"But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem. Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto his to enquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was that was in his heart."* In his pride he showed off all his possessions and glory to the ambassadors from Babylon. There was not a thing that he failed to display. Humility and

prudence were alike forgotten. God directly connects this incident with the later carrying away of all these treasures into Babylon, as cause and effect—Isa. 39.

Here was Judah's first dealing with Babylon. The Babylonians get a full catalogue of all their possessions, and see Judah as a small country with much wealth. This incident sowed the seed for later conquest and plunder. Instead of being permanently impressed with the power and terror of God—the consideration that first caused them to send the ambassadors—they find a foolish little king wrapped up in his own glory and vainly displaying his treasures, and the glory and power of God—Hezekiah's real treasure—is forgotten.

The prophet Isaiah is sent to rebuke him, and tell him the consequences of his foolishness. And Hezekiah answers, *"Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken."* He recognized and accepted the justice of God's condemnation.

Going back again, in 2 Chron. 32, *"Notwithstanding Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah."* We here see the real and true Hezekiah emerging from the crucible of test.

*"He said, moreover, for there shall be peace and truth in my days."* Not just peace, but peace and truth. He recognized their relationship. He determined, henceforth, as long as he lived, that the evil should be averted and peace prolonged by a rigid and well-pleasing conformity to God's way of truth. Here is true humility and repentance. *"So the wrath of God came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah."* Hezekiah, like Samson, finally triumphed over himself.

There is one character in the New Testament to whom our minds particularly go when we think of strength out of weakness and success out of failure. That is Peter.

*"This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance."* No matter how pure minds may be—that is, no matter how thoroughly they have freed themselves from worldly things, they still need constant stirring up to remembrance. Here is the wisdom of constant reading of the Word.

God Himself is a great Remembrancer. He forgets nothing except that which He wills in mercy to forget. The scriptures contain many exhortations to remembrance. Forgetfulness is one of the greatest enemies of the spiritual mind in the present day of weakness. The Apostle speaks of those who get all worked up with zeal and determination—then straightway go and forget. "Keeping in memory" is the distinguishing mark between a substantial and a superficial faith—James 1.

All flesh truly is weak and forgetful, but it will be noticed that memory generally follows the line of interest, and the things people love, those things they remember. Notice the class of things people remember and discuss without difficulty. It is a good index to their heart and mind. Three things combat forgetfulness—search the Scriptures daily, exhort one another daily, and *"forsake not the assembling of yourselves together,"* but *"do this in remembrance of Me."* Any who neglect these salutary admonitions court disaster. This principle, like other scriptural principles, works both ways. It is recorded that God keeps a book of remembrance for those who remember Him, and talk often together about Him—Mal. 3.

*"There shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the Creation."* One of the greatest and most recent signs of the times is the significant fact that the day of the scoffer is nearly over. Things no longer remain the same, and few are left that would pretend they do. People now rather look with

fear of heart upon the dark shadows of the things that are coming to pass on the earth. The destruction of heaven and earth is now no longer a lightly ridiculed fancy—it is becoming a common dread. The scoffer is ceasing to scoff, and beginning to tremble. Peter's prophecy is now revealed in all its naked truth—2 Peter 3. Today the world gasps!

*"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness."* What is the connection? The exhortation gets its point from the fact that all that is not holy and godly will share in the universal destruction. Only the things that cannot be shaken will remain. *"Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless."*

How exacting is this demand for diligence. Webster defines diligence as "careful attention, persevering, application;" but the concordances show that the original word carries the idea of haste, dispatch and promptness. It is the word used when Mary is said to go to the hill country with haste—Luke 1. The underlying thought is that there is no time to lose. Do this first. Give it first attention as the most pressing consideration. Jesus said: *"Seek ye first the kingdom of God."* And Paul: *"Do it now, while it is yet called to-day, for the night comes quickly, and to-morrow will be too late."*

*"Without spot and blameless."* We speak of high standards. Here is something we are told to labour diligently for. It may be said we cannot be perfect. That is beside the point. Let us concentrate our attention upon the positive, constructive aspect—what we can do in this direction of perfection, towards attaining to that divinely set standard.

*"Without spot."* A spot is a very small thing—quite insignificant, we would say, in comparison with the whole. But one small dirty spot on an otherwise spotless white garment can be very noticeable and very embarrassing. The Spirit, through Solomon, records, *"Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour"*—Eccl. 10. God will not accept a stinking savour. Let us be careful we do not offer Him one by permitting small spots to appear.

What are these little spots composed of? Jude says: *"Hating even the garment spotted by the flesh."* And James: *"Keep unspotted from the world."* The flesh and the world. The flesh is that part of the world that is in our own members: the world is the whole aggregate of the mind and activities of the flesh that is outside ourselves. Paul says that Christ loved the church and gave His life for it, so that He might be able to offer it without spot unto God, and the way Paul says He was to cleanse it was by the washing of the Word. The Word will remove the spots if we humbly seek guidance from it with a sincere mind—Eph. 5.

*"Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness."* The world lieth in wickedness. Therefore the "errors of the wicked" are the "customs of the world." Our steadfastness consists in maintaining our spotlessness from them.

*"But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."* Grace and knowledge are mutually essential. Neither can truly exist without the other. Grace is a word that is difficult to define. It is the harmoniously balanced sum total of many virtues. It is a definition of the Godly character in all its relations.

It is, in the original, derived from the root word meaning "joy, gladness, rejoicing." It is very closely related to the words of Jesus, see John 15:11. *"These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy may be full."* A life built around this principle, and always in harmony with it in all associations with God and with man is a life of grace.

A few examples will help define grace as scripturally used. The original word is *charis*. *"If ye love them which love you, what charis have you? If ye do good to them which do good to you, what grace have you?"* Even sinners do that much—Luke 6:32-33.

*"For this is charis (grace), if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is grace with God."* So writes Peter by the direction of the Spirit.

*"It is a good thing that the heart be established with grace"*—that is, settled and grounded on an inward unshakable joy and peace that leads it to act in a spiritual and godly manner in all circumstances—Heb. 13:9.

To grow in grace and knowledge is to take firmer and deeper root in divine things, so that the disposition and viewpoint is less and less affected by outward things, and the conduct more and more truly motivated by spiritual perception and discernment.

These closing words of Peter's epistle define the whole purpose of our present existence. The success or failure of our life will be measured in relation to this one consideration—how far we have, through faith, transformed our fleshly weakness into spiritual strength, and to what extent we have grown in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

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