



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Strengthening Yourself in the Lord

1 Samuel 29:1-30:6

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Some years ago I had a dream. I was looking at a wooden dining chair – you know, the ones with thinnish legs. It looked quite normal, but in the dream I knew that three of the legs were strong, but the fourth, despite looking ordinary on the outside, was actually made up of powdery sawdust and would collapse as soon as I put any weight on it.

I woke and thought, “That’s about me. There is a part of my life that looks normal on the outside, but will not hold me up if anything significant goes wrong.” God was speaking to me through that dream and I started to ask him what I needed to do about it.

The chair leg symbolised that fact that I lacked the strength to hold up under pressure. It made me worry about how I would cope if something bad happened to me or my family. I started reading books about suffering to see what I could do and after reading a few, I found a key: In order to survive in bad times, we need to be convinced about the goodness of God. Because if God is not good, ALL THE TIME, we are in trouble.

If God is good, then we have hope that things will work out for the best, as he promises:

Romans 8:28 *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

This is the bedrock of our faith and trust, but it is just the beginning. We must add to our trust and remind ourselves of who we are and who God is, whether we are facing a Goliath, or whether it seems as if the last straw has just fallen onto the camel’s back.

David might have thought it was the last straw, when he got back to Ziklag and found his home burnt to the ground and no sign of his dear wives. He had been chosen, anointed, called of God ...and then spent years watching the promise move not closer but farther away. He knew what it was like to lose his dearest friend.

He knew what it was like to be betrayed by the very people he laid down his life to serve. He knew what it was like to be maligned and persecuted not just by the enemies of God but by the very leader God anointed and put in authority over him! He knew the fatigue of continually having to move on to keep out of Saul’s

clutches, the pain of losing contact with his family, of losing his wife to another man. He knew the frustration of pouring out his time and effort to help someone and then have him insult you.

When he was on the run, men who were the rejects of society came to him and he trained them into being mighty warriors. Eventually he could not stay in his own country, but stayed in exile in Philistia, in a city called Gath. Then the inevitable happened; the Philistines gathered to make war against Israel. David was in a tight spot. He turned up ready to do battle alongside the Philistine army.

Then in our passage today, even his enemies, the Philistines, rejected him. You know when you've had a bad day when the devil rejects you! And as he and his men came home only to see their city burnt and ruined, all the families captured and gone. His men, his closest companions, turned on him and planned to stone him to death. There was no difference between their attitude and what is prevalent today – "If something goes wrong, get rid of the man at the top."

Wouldn't you think that was the last straw? It was devastating for David *but good for us*. Why? We can learn from what David did. If somehow he was able to get back up after all that and recapture his warrior spirit, we can do it too.

So - the first thing he did was cry. He got real with God. He acknowledged just how bad the whole, horrible mess hurt and then he received God's divine comfort—comfort that is sufficient to heal any wound the devil can inflict, no matter how severe it may be.

The word "comfort" comes from a root word meaning "to strengthen." He could then call the men back to a sense of purpose and vision for their lives. God gave him the strength to master his own distress, look past their rejection of him, and rally them together to get their families back.

This was the crunch point in David's life. I think I would have crumbled at that point, but David gathered the strength to say, "Come on, guys, we've got wives and kids to rescue!"

The Bible gives clear ways that we can tap into and pull up this supernatural strength. It is strength that you will never gain by taking steroids, and will pull you through the toughest challenge. Amazing. I just love the fact that we don't have to barely scrape by with gritted teeth. We can actually be powerful. And happy. Continually.

Ephesians 3-17-19 talks about our roots going down deep into the soil of God's love. I planted a small tree recently. In order to prevent it from being blown over, by the storms we quite often experience here, I had to stake it on both sides and tie it gently but firmly to the stakes.

There are stakes that can be put into our lives that will keep us upright until we are spiritually strong. I am sure that to some of you, these stakes are familiar, but I wonder how many of you actually put them into practice?

First, reading the Bible and discovering the character of God. God is good. All the time. All the time, God is good. Reading the Bible daily helps us to put our roots down deep into the truth about God. The discipline of daily reading is like the ties that hold the tree to the stakes. And just as it takes a while for roots to develop, it takes a while to get an overview of what God is like from the Scriptures, so we need to persevere.

Romans 15:4 says *For whatever things were written before, were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*

Remembering and celebrating what God has done in the past is very strengthening and encouraging. We can pray aloud scriptures like Psalm 23 that speak of God's faithfulness, and provision. And re-reading our spiritual journals also helps us to recall His faithfulness to us in the past.

Psalm 77 says: ¹¹ *I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old.* ¹² *I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.*

So it's not just a quick skim, as if you were reading a novel. The benefit comes when we attend to what each phrase and word means, about God and about our situation... In that way, we draw strength by meditating on the deeds and promises of God.

Second, spending time with Christian people who influence us for good, helps us to grow strong. Grab hold of a Godly friend when you are feeling tired & discouraged. He or she will call you back to your identity and purpose in God.

Identity is about knowing who we are in Christ. It makes the difficulties shrink when we know who he is and who he says we are. Do you know who you are in Christ? It can change your whole life. Read the letter to the Ephesians.

Our purpose is linked to who we are in Christ. We are loved and chosen to extend the Kingdom of God in this world. Of course there will be set-backs. Of course we will trip up from time to time, but the Holy Spirit is the Comforter and our Godly friends can be like stakes supporting us.

Third, Prayer. Learning to strengthen ourselves does not imply that we are the source of the strength. **Phil 4:13** says "I can do all things *through Christ*, who strengthens me." Prayer connects us to God and his strength.

There's a very useful prayer; a top-quality prayer that John Wimber taught us. I've often used it to very good advantage. It goes like this "HELP!!!" I bet that was one of the prayers David used when he was strengthening himself in the Lord. Another type of prayer that we as Christians have access to, is speaking in tongues. I've often spent times praying in tongues for the express purpose of building myself up. Both Paul and Jude comment on that in their letters. Let's look at those passages.

Jude 20 *But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit.*

1 Corinthians 14:3-4 ³ *But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.* ⁴ *He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.*

Praying in tongues increases our faith – using the language that God has supernaturally given us, is a daily proof that he loves us and that He can do things that are beyond our understanding. If you can speak in tongues, don't put the gift on the shelf – use it and God will strengthen you to fulfill the purpose he has for your life. If you cannot yet speak in tongues or prophesy, it often comes as a result of an infilling of the Holy Spirit. The infilling of the Holy Spirit is something we all need to ask God for and pursue keenly. It's like retro-fitting a turbo-charger!

Fourth, **Praise** strengthens us. Many times when I have felt weak and down, I have started to sing and praise God and had the heavy feeling of weakness lift off. I choose to dance and sing praise to God even if I don't feel like it. He dwells in the praises of his people, the Psalmist says and when he comes, weakness and despair lift off quickly.

Thinking of weakness, what *will* weaken us? It's foolish to try and fill up a bath if there's no plug in the plughole. In just the same way, there are things that will make the strength leak out of us: Allowing grudges to keep us from fellowship with the body of Christ. Listening to gossip. Staying in bed instead of coming to church. Dwelling on what we think God should do but has not done yet. Seeking spiritual answers to our problems, but from other sources than God. Believing that our own strength is enough.

Remember the dream about the chair with the unstable, weak leg? It reminded me of another experience. I had been leading a retreat for two or three of my friends. We were walking outside the venue and I noticed a large tree stump up on a hill. "That would be good to sit on," I thought. When I reached it, the stump turned out to be just bark on the outside and totally hollow inside! The inner substance of it had rotted away. As I looked at it, I prayed, "Lord, don't let my Christian life be like that: looking substantial on the outside, but in reality, hollow on the inside."

God has a substantial future for you and me. He has plans and a purpose for us, in our life, in our work, in our relationships.

So He sent us a message a few thousand years ago and Isaiah wrote,

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands.¹" - that means - I have marked my own hands with the sign of our covenant.

Jesus took the torture and death which we deserved, when he died on the cross. His hands are eternally engraved with the marks of the nails – the sign of the covenant he offers us.

He cannot forget us. He carefully and lovingly made us. Paul says in Ephesians 2v10:

"We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

No-one else can fulfil your destiny. No-one else can receive the promises God has made to you. Our call, from a loving Father who knows our weakness, is to strengthen ourselves in Him, to be overcomers and to work closely in partnership with him, whatever we have to face.

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¹ Isaiah 49:16