



TRUE STRENGTH

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Anybody have big Labor Day plans for tomorrow? It's always great to get a three day weekend right after school starts so you can kind of ease back into the shock of having school on a daily basis.

Labor Day didn't start as a holiday for school kids though. It was for the working class. Peter McGuire is credited with coming up with the idea. He wanted to honor the accomplishments of the miners and the assembly line workers and the craftsmen. He described them as individuals, "who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold." Apparently he wasn't too fond of pristine wilderness settings. In any case, he was mesmerized by human achievement and the sheer power of it. His idea for Labor Day was to celebrate the strength of the American work force, the strength of people united together.

So Labor Day Weekend is a great time for us to talk about strength – a different kind of power than Mr. McGuire had in mind, but power all the same. The junior highers already read our text for us this morning:

Philippians 4:13

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

What a great way to wrap up this little letter! It summarizes Paul's message very well. I'm sure that more people have chosen this as a life verse than almost any other verse in the Bible. It's such a powerful encouragement.

I can do EVERYTHING through him who gives me strength. If you had super strength and could do anything you wanted, what would you do?

I saw a news article this week about the wife of the man who is going to be Japan's new Prime Minister. She claims that she's flown to Venus on a UFO, that she knew Tom Cruise in a previous life and that she eats the sun for breakfast. Apparently it gives her an energy boost in the morning. Lots of Vitamin D.

Those are some pretty unbelievable things. And sometimes when people read this verse, they think Paul is talking about doing unbelievable things. After all, he says he can do

EVERYTHING, so that must include stuff that would be impossible, like flying through space and eating the sun.

Is that really what Paul was trying to say? Because if it is, he must have been lying. I don't see too many Christians knocking down walls or jumping over buildings or rocketing through the air. When Paul says everything, he doesn't mean literally everything. That's not reality. So what did he mean?

Knowing the full context of a statement makes all the difference in how you interpret it. And in the case of our verse, all we really need for context is the verse immediately before it.

As we said before, this letter is a big thank you note from Paul to the Philippian church for sending him some money to help him while he's in jail. He's very grateful for it. But as he wraps up the letter, he qualifies his comments with this:

Philippians 4:12-13

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

So what's the context? What's the backdrop for our verse? Paul is talking about living above your circumstances. He could be poor or rich, stuffed full of food or starving for a bite, free or in jail and it didn't matter to him. Paul was grateful for the help they had sent him, but he wanted to make it clear that even if they hadn't, he'd be fine. He could survive any conditions with the help of Jesus. He is saying, "Rich, poor, hot, cold, full, hungry, it doesn't really matter. I can do it all through Jesus."

I can do all of life. That's a very different way to think of being able to do anything than thinking "I can do whatever I want." It's way less glamorous. And it's way better. Because I don't need to be able to crush boulders. I need to be able to get through the day.

True strength is non-fiction.

Forget about what your imaginary super strength would be. What kind of real strength are you needing? What are you up against right now?

Maybe you switched schools this year and you haven't made any new friends yet. Or maybe you're wanting to be less influenced by your old friends. Maybe your job is on the line and you're worried about putting food on the table. Maybe you have too much work on your plate right now and work is overwhelming you. Maybe you're in physical pain and you dread getting out of bed in the morning. Maybe your body is doing fine but your mind is suffering.

You can see even these scenarios show life at opposite ends of the spectrum. We are always experiencing too much or too little of something. Just like Paul's extremes of poverty and wealth, we face a range of circumstances. And what Jesus gives us is enough to cope with every situation we face.

I get the need for strength in hardship. Tough times make you want to ask for help. It's not as easy to understand why I would need strength when things are good. In those times, I'm already feeling strong. But Paul recognized the danger in having everything you need, because then you can start to believe you're self-sufficient. The author of Proverbs put it this way:

Proverbs 30:8-9

*Give me enough food to live on,
neither too much nor too little.
If I'm too full, I might get independent,
saying, 'God? Who needs him?'
If I'm poor, I might steal
and dishonor the name of my God.*

No matter what our circumstances, there will always be temptations to draw us away from God, which is why we need his strength in every situation. But again – that kind of strength just doesn't sound as exciting as wishing for something spectacular to happen. I've heard stories of miraculous healings and churches that are witnessing amazing wonders in different parts of the world. It's fantastic. And it sounds so much more interesting than every day life. But I'm not so sure God sees it the same way.

I've had a couple discussions lately with people who are fascinated by end times and interpreting signs from God. One person was all wrapped up in talking about what God might or might not do in the future. The other was trying to find a message in some strange phenomena they had seen. Meanwhile, in both cases their families were struggling to stay afloat and I wanted to shake them and say, "Quit imagining what God's strength might look like in some spectacular way and start asking what it could look like at home."

We sometimes put God's strength in a fantasy world that's tantalizingly out of reach and we miss what he makes available for our reality. It may not sound as exciting, but it is concrete and rock solid. Listen to these promises from God:

Psalm 46:1

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

Psalm 29:11

The LORD gives strength to his people.

Isaiah 40:29

*He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.*

When we're tired. When we're weak. When we're in trouble. In those non-fiction moments, we can count on our God to be there for us. We'll get into what that looks like in a few minutes. But I am betting there are plenty of examples of what I'm talking about right in this room. I would venture to say that we have all kinds of people here today who can testify to Jesus giving them strength when they have needed it most. If you can think of a specific time that happened for you, would you raise your hand? Keep them up for a minute. Here's what I want to do: Take two minutes and cluster around a person near you who has their hand up and let them tell their story. And if you think of one you want to share back with them, go ahead and do that.

It's great to hear the practical ways God meets us in our time of need. Now if I wanted to be skeptical, I could say, "Well this is great, but aren't we really just talking about digging down deep and finding strength in ourselves that we didn't know we had?"

That's a good question. Is this the same thing as someone saying they've discovered their own inner power? Scholars say that Paul's language in the Greek is very insistent on the ability he has. "I can do this. Bring it on." He's showing a very optimistic outlook. But it isn't because of some secret strength he found within himself. For Paul, the key was Jesus.

True strength is more than me.

There are plenty of examples in literature and the movies of people discovering inner strength they didn't know they had. Frodo never thought he could take the ring to Mordor, but he learned he had a good heart and good friends, and that's what got him through.

Dumbo thought the only way he could fly was by holding a magic feather, but then he faced his fears and realized he had the ability himself all along.

And the Little Engine that Could found it could make it over the mountain with the power of positive thinking: I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.

Those are all good things to learn and know. And ultimately, since God is our creator, any strength we find in ourselves is from him anyway. But that's not what Paul is talking about. This isn't a call to dig down deep and tap our own hidden reserves. Finding strength in Christ is something more.

Other parts of the Bible make a distinction between people doing things by counting on their own resources and those that find their strength in God. When Gideon was getting ready to take on the Midian army that was coming to attack Israel, he started rallying the troops. And here's what happened.

Judges 7:2-3

The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

God continued to whittle that number down until there were only 300 men left! And surely you would think that if Israel had warriors, they were a legitimate resource in battle. But God didn't want Israel to have any confusing afterwards about how they won. They weren't to become too enamored with their own strength.

A different battle is described in the book of Habakkuk that we looked at earlier this summer, Instead of the Midians this time, it's the Babylonians. Listen to God's description of them and the way they plunder::

Habakkuk 1:11

Then they sweep past like the wind and go on -- guilty men, whose own strength is their god.

Here again God calls a group of people on the carpet for falling in love with their own strength. He calls them guilty men because they were so full of themselves.

It's not the same thing to find inner strength as it is to find strength in Jesus. So how do we know when we're operating on our own strength rather than God's? How can we tell if the power we find is just inside us instead of what Paul is talking about? Strength is strength, right? So if I get through a crisis, how can I tell if God gets the credit or if it was my positive attitude that won the day?

There are some character quality differences to our own strength that help us identify it. I can know I'm working from my own strength when:

1. I never bothered to ask God for help.

That's a pretty obvious one. If it didn't cross my mind to ask God for help, if my first instinct was to just try to make it on my own, then chances are he's granting me my wish and letting me make a go of it on my own resources. Again, he's the ultimate source of those too, but if we're not intentionally praying for his strength, we can't expect him to swoop in with an obvious show of power.

2. Success at something leads us to pride instead of gratefulness.

When I'm on the far side of a situation and I've survived intact, do I start congratulating myself, or do I feel like thanking God? I like to take credit for just about anything I can. If I've achieved something on my own, I find a way of making it known. But God's strength is so clearly from him that we can't make that mistake. We simply don't have it in us to do what he does, so when it happens, our hearts should feel a sense of thankfulness.

3. My “strength” is marked by strain, anxiety and exhaustion.

In a communications class I took in college, everyone took turns describing each person with a single word. When it came to me, my professor said, “fountain.” And she said, “Ask me after class what I mean.”

So I did. She said, “You know how a fountain is this display of water that people like to watch? It’s interesting.”

I thought that sounded pretty cool. I liked being noticed. But then she went on. “What most people don’t see or think about is all the work it takes to make that fountain look good. And I think you work really hard to create what people see about you.”

And she was right. I had a lot of insecurities about myself. I desperately wanted people to like me. So I was working really hard at it. And it left me anxious and obsessive and not at all at peace.

Isaiah says that people who wait on the Lord to renew their strength will run and not grow weary and walk and not grow faint. The strength of the Lord has a different quality to it. We muscle through on our own and end up worn out. When we come to Jesus for strength, we hear him saying, “I will give you rest.”

When we’re trying so hard with our own strength, we stress ourselves out. When we come to Jesus for strength, we hear him saying, “Peace be with you.”

If you are feeling spent and drained and under constant pressure to perform, you’re operating out of your own strength. You may be getting by. You may be meeting the challenge. But you will wear yourself out. True strength is more than just me finding something more within me. It’s turning to Jesus, asking for help, living in gratitude and experiencing his rest.

That’s all well and good. How do we get there?

I know grammar isn’t everyone’s favorite subject, especially Greek grammar. But in this case, I think it is extremely helpful.

Take for example the word “through” in Paul’s statement, “I can do all things THROUGH Christ.” Through can have many meanings. You could say “I’m through with you,” meaning you’re finished. That doesn’t really fit here.

You could use through to describe the means you used to do something. “Through dedication and hard work, I finished my homework.” That could fit for this verse, since Christ is the one giving the strength.

But the experts say the original Greek word is a location word. Some translations say “I can do all things IN him who gives me strength.” Through then would be referring to my position . Or to put it another way,

True strength is a place.

The New Testament is full of references to this spot, this location called being “in Christ.” That is where we as believers are to place ourselves and stay. That is what Paul says was his secret to finding strength.

Any die hard Mario Kart fans out there? I’m sure you’ve been WAITING for the day we would talk about Mario in church! If you’ve played the game at all, you know that there’s more than one way to view the course. You get the bird’s eye view at the beginning, and you kind of get a feel for how big the track is, where the turns are, etc. But once the race starts, you’re down in the car, looking at the track from an entirely different point of view. Perspective changes everything.

To be in Christ is to choose a different vantage point for looking at the course of life. Our problems don’t go away, but they look different from there. When we’re seeing things through the lens of what Jesus has done for us, when we’re interpreting our circumstances from a place of trusting God, our ability to cope with life grows.

I remember a few years ago at the ad agency. I was having an incredibly stressful day at work. Deadlines are always looming in advertising, but this time was insanely busy, the projects were piling up and I was almost paralyzed with knowing what to do next. I was all in knots trying to push through it, when all of a sudden I realized I hadn’t even prayed about it. So I took a minute and stopped, talked to God about what was going on and then went back to work. Nothing magic happened. The deadlines didn’t go away. But I had an undeniable new strength and centeredness that got me through the day. I was in a different place and viewing my workload with the conscious knowledge that God was there with me. And like Paul, I was able to do all things from that spot.

Being in Christ is simply a matter of where we place our hope, how we orient our minds and who we run to when we’re needing strength. As we run toward Jesus, we are then in Jesus and can do all things through him.

There’s a lighthouse off the coast of France called the Lighthouse of la Jument. It was built about 100 years ago because that area is notorious for its bad weather and it’s a heavily trafficked shipping lane. There had been all these terrible shipwrecks there over the centuries prior to the lighthouse being built.

Well in 1989, a French photographer by the name of Jean Guichard took this spectacular series of pictures of the lighthouse during a storm. You can see the kind of pounding it takes from the waves that crash at its base. But what’s most interesting about these pictures isn’t the waves – it’s the man standing in the doorway. His name is Theodore Malgorne, and he was the lighthouse guard at the time. The contrast between his relaxed appearance and everything raging around him is so stark.

Proverbs 18:10

*The name of the LORD is a strong tower;
the righteous run to it and are safe.*

So often we try to swim out in the sea on our own, rather than run for the safety of God. Whether it is pride or forgetting we can go to him or impatience with how slowly he seems to be answering, we choose to leave the safety of Jesus and frantically fight the waves on our own. Placing ourselves in Christ is not a difficult, complicated process. It is simply a matter of turning to him and choosing to stay close to him instead of venturing off on our own. Staying there and trusting in how solid the rock is True strength is a place.

I'd like to leave you with one final thought from this verse, and that is that

True strength calls for action.

You know what I love about our verse? The very last word: Strength. The original Greek word there is *endunamonti* which as you can hear is also the source of another English word: Dynamite.

That puts a new spin on things, doesn't it? I can do all things through the one who hands me a stick of dynamite. Talk about power at our disposal. That's an explosive kind of energy that can punch a hole through the toughest obstacle.

But dynamite isn't something to hold on to. It's meant to be used. In fact, it feels like there's an urgency to use it quickly and carefully.

Christ has given us a gift of incredible strength. And he doesn't want us to ignore it, he wants us to put it to use, to make the most of it. We can't let our fears become excuses for being passive. If we truly believe God has supplied all we need to do what's in front of us then we have the responsibility to act on what we know.

What are you being asked to do? You know the thing about Paul saying we can do all things through Christ means that this verse applies to wherever we're at, because it applies to all thing that need doing. You may be in a spot where you know you're desperate for God's strength this morning. Or you may be in such a good spot that you've forgotten that you still need God's strength. Whatever your challenge, Christ is handing you that stick of dynamite and saying, "What are you going to do now?"

Maybe the action you need to take is simply changing directions running back to the strong tower. Maybe you've been striking out on your own and it's time to place yourself close to Christ.

Maybe you're being asked to forgive someone, but you're reluctant. Maybe someone's asking you to go against your conscience and you know you need to stand up for what you believe, but you're scared of what it might cost. Maybe you've been making

unhealthy choices and God's telling you to stop, but you're not sure you can. Listen – the strength is there for you, and it is only as we step out in faith and do what we're being asked that we experience it firsthand.

I can do everything, says Paul. Whatever is on my plate, I can handle, through Christ who gives me strength. What's on your plate this morning? Where have you been running for help?

Psalm 147:11

*Those who fear GOD get GOD's attention;
they can depend on his strength.*

We can count on it. It's solid and sure, no matter what the storms of life may be.

(communion lead in)

One of my favorite stories about God giving someone strength comes from the Old Testament. The great prophet Elijah was completely worn out and depressed. He was in such a bad spot that he literally told God, "I've had enough. Take me home, Lord." And he laid down under a tree and sunk into a deep sleep.

He was wakened by an angel saying, "Get up and eat. Get up and eat Elijah. The journey is too much for you."

He turns and looks and right there by his face is this warm, fresh bread. He eats it, and the Bible says the bread strengthened him, and he was able to get back on his feet and go again.

Strength was found in the bread offered by God. And the same thing is true for us today. There is strength in the bread Jesus has prepared for us because it represents what he did on the cross. That is where God's mightiest work was done, where a safe haven was carved out for each one of us. The death of Christ gives us life that we won't find anywhere else.

We wear ourselves out struggling to make a way for ourselves, and Jesus offers us bread and says, "Take and eat. The journey is too much for you. Come sit at my table and find strength in this meal I've prepared for you."

As you come this morning to dip the bread in the cup, you're saying that you need and want that strength for yourself. To come and confess your sins as you take these symbols of Christ's body and blood is a way of positioning yourself in Christ.

Ask Jesus for the help you need. Thank him for the strength he's given.