

Made Alive By Exceeding Greatness!

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I am going to begin by setting the stage for the greatest miracle that happened to us in our lifetime.

True power, which is the ability to exercise authority, effectively belongs to God alone. In Scripture, the ultimate strength is the omnipotent sovereignty exercised by God, or ability that finds its source in God. Jesus Christ's source of power is in His Father, which He shares with us. And the apostle Paul reminds us of this:

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

In the Old Testament, power and might are attributed above all to God. His power is shown both in the fact that He created the world and sustains it. He remains more powerful than all the forces within it. And His power is also seen in His mighty acts of salvation.

Some of the names of God point to His power. El Shaddai, which means God Almighty; Ahbir, Mighty One or Strong One; Omnipotent, All Powerful, to name just a few.

Revelation 19:6 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns!"

Please turn with me to Genesis 1. When God delegates His authority to human beings, there is a certain power that it provides. And so humanity has a great deal of God-given power over the earth to care and properly use it. Here in Genesis 1, we are going to read verses 26 through 28. You are very familiar with these scriptures, you probably almost have them memorized.

Genesis 1:26-28 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion [or authority] over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion [again, authority] over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Although God has given limited authority and power to humanity, He still often explicitly intervenes showing His power in miraculous works, especially of deliverance. It was with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm that He brought His people out of Egypt and demonstrated His power in giving them the Promised Land.

And as we see in the New Testament, the emphasis of God's use of His power shifts more to the spiritual. Christ had all authority given Him by His Father and He used it to forgive sins and to cast out evil spirits. He gives authority to His disciples to become members of the Kingdom of God and to share in His work. And the greatest show of His power of deliverance is in our individual calling and conversion to His truth, to His way of life. Just before His ascension to heaven, Jesus told the apostles,

Luke 24:49 "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

This was to happen on the Day of Pentecost when the power of God's Spirit would become operative in the life of the church.

Now, even after the great demonstration of God's powerful Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost of the church era, the apostle Paul found it necessary to encourage the church regarding the exceeding greatness of God's power. Please turn with me to Ephesians 1. He prayed for knowledge to be given to the Ephesian members so they could know the power of God that was

already working in them. He wanted to assure them that true Christians can always be confident in God's promises.

Ephesians 1:18-23 [T]he eyes of your understanding being enlightened, that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

What tremendous power there is involved in our calling, and especially with Jesus Christ and all that He does, and all that God the Father does! It is just beyond understanding how much power there is emanating from our God.

Paul looks back to the resurrection as the primary evidence of God's power and sees the gospel as how that power comes to work in people's lives.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes [or has faith], for the Jew first and also for the Greek .

In Ephesians 1, Paul is emphasizing the power of God in the saints rather than the power which God gives the saints. It is important to realize that Paul does not say that salvation is the result of something we do plus the power that is given to us by God. It is not a matter of "I *plus* the power of God." Salvation is the result of God's power at work in us and through us. So verse 19 reads, "What is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe." Paul is emphasizing the power of God in us. Of course, it is true to say that God gives us strength and power and we do need that power constantly for faith and obedience and overcoming sin.

Paul is trying to make the Ephesians understand, and us with them, that the greatness of God's power is in us and what He is doing in us, and the result should be that our fears vanish. We should have a new confidence, assurance regarding our salvation with no doubting whatsoever. Paul is very clear in his letter about the nature of our calling and how it is founded on the character of God. And he gives us a glimpse into the glory for which we are destined. And then in verse 19, he emphasizes the power of God working in us.

So Paul is very concerned about the Ephesian members and he knows that they have believed, that they have trusted in Jesus Christ, and that they have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. Even still, he is praying for them without ceasing and praying that they will progress into greater knowledge and understanding of what God is working out in us and what our spiritual potential is. Our spiritual potential is unlimited.

When we consider the power of God involved in our calling, no one can have any conception at all of that inheritance, that glory to which we are going, without immediately becoming conscious of certain things. The greatness of the glory on the one hand, and our weak human state and condition on the other, tend to create doubts about our future glory. Are we worthy? Are we trying hard enough? Will God really forgive all our sins?

When we turn to the 21st chapter of the book of Revelation and read of the Lamb in the midst, and of all the glory, and that outside are dogs and all that is evil, it is easier for some people to have doubts about whether our inheritance of the Kingdom of God is truly possible. And to the weak human mind, it is impossible. When we consider our frail bodies with seeds of decay in it, we know that we are susceptible to illnesses and we find it almost impossible to believe and even to imagine enjoying a state of spiritual glory, where there is no sickness and no pain and no negative thoughts that affect our health.

Our human nature can easily succumb to a preoccupation with worldly things and business affairs and the need to make a living to sustain our families and ourselves. All these things—the pressures of life and of circumstances—conspire together to make it seem impossible for us to find

the time to work with God in preparation for this glory. Ultimately, God accomplishes it, but we must be willingly compliant.

Now, behind it all we know that we are confronted by a powerful adversary, a subtle spiritual enemy, "as a roaring lion roaming about seeking whom he may devour," confronting us at every weakness, and who in his subtlety is constantly enticing, attracting, and luring us into lethargy, sin, and failure.

In addition, we realize that between us and that glory there lays the last enemy, the power of death and of the grave. These are the thoughts that sometimes may crowd into our minds. In Ephesians 1, Paul deals with our problems and difficulties, and he prays that we may know "the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power."

Let us look at two principles of the power of God in us that Paul emphasizes here in Ephesians 1. First, the greatness of the power in and of itself. Second, how we can be sure that this great power is working in us.

Expanded, the first main principle is that the process of Christian conversion and ultimate salvation is a demonstration of the power of God in us. And the eventual trouble with those who spend so much of their Christian lives in the shadows and miseries of doubt and vagueness and hesitancy is that they have never really understood this first principle.

Turn with me, if you will please, to I Corinthians 1. No human can make himself a Christian. God alone makes Christians. But let us consider several supporting statements in Paul's epistles that shows the spiritual power in us.

I Corinthians 1:22-24 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

It was not on human terms and initiative by seeking a sign or wisdom, but on God's will that humans find what they need. It is by the power of God and the wisdom of God. In the preaching of Christ crucified God calls people by opening their eyes of faith to believe the gospel.

Flip over to I Thessalonians 1. In Paul's eyes preaching is of no value unless it is in demonstration of the Spirit and of the power.

I Thessalonians 1:5-6 For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.

So the response of the Thessalonian converts was a supernatural work of God, not a natural response to a clearly delivered sermon. When Paul preached to them, he did not share human opinion and philosophy. Rather, his message was discernible by the power of God and it was brought into their hearts with deep conviction by way of the Holy Spirit.

Now, Paul also tells us that Christians are God's workmanship. Notice this in the next four scriptures.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

This truth is fundamental to an understanding of the Christian.

And again, in writing to the Philippines, Paul says,

Philippians 1:6 [B]eing confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 2:13 [F]or it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

And then the fourth one, referring to his own preaching, Paul tells the Colossian members,

Colossians 1:29 To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

Paul did not want the saints remaining spiritual novices. He wanted them to become spiritually mature. Elsewhere, he prayed for complete sanctification of the saints. He preached the fullness of the gospel so they could have the fullness of life Jesus promised. His great effort is still having an effect, a positive and a great effect to this day to take his words with the value that God has placed in them.

Paul expended all his God-given strength for this purpose. Helping believers develop spiritual maturity took a lot of extremely tiring work. He struggled and agonized like an athlete in an arena. The power to meet the struggle came from God through Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And that same power through the Holy Spirit is available to us. There is a saying, "If you don't use it, you lose it." Well, in one sense, you could say that about the Holy Spirit.

We are a new creation. Christians are nothing less than that. We are not merely a member of a church. We are not merely good people, we are not merely someone making a decision. We can do all that and still not be a true Christian. Look at the world, look at mainstream Christianity, and you see a lot of good people (by the world's standards and even by God's standards), who do righteous acts, but that is not enough.

When we are called, we have the responsibility to obey and overcome, but the entire teaching of the New Testament emphasizes above all else that we can do nothing until God first has first done something in us, that has called us. We are all spiritually dead by nature and nobody can do anything until he has been given life and is created new. And so, we are born from above as a

new life. The power of God is the beginning and the end of salvation; everything is of Him and His power.

Now, the second main principle of how we can be sure that this great power is working in us is by the exceeding greatness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In describing the power of God, Paul seems to struggle to describe that power with human language, which is always totally inadequate. Nevertheless, Paul tries in Ephesians 1.

Ephesians 1:19 And what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power.

He prays here that the Ephesians will know what is the exceeding greatness, not only the greatness but the *exceeding* greatness. The word used by Paul that is translated into English as "exceeding," can also be translated surpassing. God's power not only surpasses our power of expression, but it also surpasses our power of comprehension. For example, take all the dictionaries of the world, exhaust all the vocabularies, and when you have added them all together, you still have not begun to describe the greatness of God's power. Paul uses the best terms available—the surpassing greatness, the exceeding greatness—but they are not a sufficient description. So he adds to them by saying "according to the working of His mighty power."

Let us analyze this new phrase because it is one of the greatest that Paul uses, and we have to know "the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power." Now, a better word than "working" would be "energy." Energy is a much stronger word because it gives the impression of something that is effective, or valuable or successful. It is not merely static or potential power, energy is power that has been liberated and is working to accomplish something. It is a kinetic power, manifested power. It is the energy working itself out and permeating everything.

Then take this second word "mighty," which stands for strength; strength in a unique way. Paul's word mighty suggests a strength that overcomes, that prevails, and that conquers. It is a strength that, when it comes up against resistance, always overcomes it. It is the kind of strength that can take down

every high mountain or it can raise every valley. There is nothing that can resist it. And Paul is describing this power of God as the 'energy of the strength' of God to whom nothing is impossible. That is what it is working for us and in us. Thankfully, we do not have full access to it or we might be destroying some things by accident, there is so much power involved in it.

The third word that appears as "power" really stands for might—the might of God, God's own essential might and inherent power. Paul is not using words in verse 19 in a haphazard manner. There is a definite progression in their use. Paul first speaks of energy as a power and action, then says that it comes from a force that is overwhelming and overpowering. That energetic force comes from the ocean of God's might, which is limitless and infinite.

Now, a similar description of God's power is given by Isaiah in the 40th chapter of his prophecy. He expresses it by asking a series of rhetorical questions: to whom can we liken God? With whom can we compare Him? Once that is said, all comparisons are totally useless.

Isaiah 40:22 It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.

No idols, no political or governmental powers, no presidents, no prime ministers, no governors, no scholars, no philosophers of the wisdom of the world, nothing can compare with God's power and no one can advise Him or give Him anything. He is everything in and of Himself; He is everlasting in might and strength and power. You can see why Paul struggled to find the proper description.

Please turn back to Ephesians 1. Paul emphasizes that this eternal might and strength of God's power is exerting itself in us and overcoming all obstacles and resistances. In other words, Paul is telling the Ephesian Christians, and us, that he is praying for them to know the effectiveness of the force of God's strength; or for them to know the energy of the might of His strength towards them.

The making of a Christian is the result of the manifestation of the might of God exerting itself. And that is what is happening to us. This eternal,

inimitable might of God has been working energetically in us. When we talk about the energy of the strength of the might of God's power, our minds short circuit at the awesome magnificence and the majesty of it all. So Paul continues to help us with an illustration of it. The energy of the strength of God's might has already been manifested in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Ephesians 1:19-21 [A]nd what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at the right hand of in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.

It is interesting that Paul illustrates the might of God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, rather than by the creation. The creation was a significant manifestation of the power of God because all He had to do was have Christ, the Spokesman of His Father, say, "Let there be light," and there was light. His word was enough, and He made everything out of nothing.

Or why did not Paul use the comparison of God's power and might as exercised in the design of the universe? All these spinning spheres in the heavens are maintained and sustained by God's power. Everything is ordered by Him. The world would collapse if God, by His supernatural power, ceased to sustain it and keep it going. All things work and work together because God has made them that way. They are even better than the clocks that man makes as far as their timing. And He did not merely make them and then leave them, He is still energizing them. The power of God is manifested in divine intervention and in the whole ordering of the life of the planet.

Or why did Paul not refer to the might of God as manifested in some of the great judgments of history? Has there been anything more momentous than a manifestation of God's power in the Flood, when God opened the windows of heaven and the mountains were all covered with water? Or why did not Paul use the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Or the amazing miracles in connection with the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, the dividing of the Red Sea, and the dividing of the Jordan River?

Or why did Paul not choose one of these or other similar events, but instead he chose the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead. It also shows us how great a miracle that was compared to all the rest of those, and still it shrinks the other miracles into insignificance almost compared to that resurrection from the dead of the Son of God.

Christ's resurrection was an objective demonstration of the power of God. It is a perfect analogy of what happens to us. It also helps to show our spiritual union with Christ. When Christ was raised, we were raised with Him out of the watery grave of baptism and given life by the indwelling of God's Spirit.

Ephesians 2:1-5 And you He made alive [speaking to you and I, the church of God], who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).

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Something must happen before we who were dead and under the anger of God can ever be made alive. We cannot receive any benefit until something has been done to satisfy the wrath of God, because we were not only dead and creatures of lust and controlled by the god of this world, but we are by nature of the children of wrath. People are by nature destitute of holiness and exposed to destruction. God used His power to make something happen to change our previous state.

Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for our guilt and in how we lived our sinful lives before. Christ not only died and was buried, God raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named; and all that involved exaltation and making Him alive. But Paul says the same thing is true of us because we are in Christ, made us alive together

with Christ. And this has happened to everybody who is truly a Christian. It is God's action.

What can the person who is dead in sins and under the wrath of God do for himself? What power does he have? Well, none at all. God must make him alive just as He made His dead Son alive. He makes us alive spiritually by way of His Spirit. That was the beginning of the whole process. But nevertheless, it is a tremendous miracle in our lives that is unequalled.

To make alive means to impart life. The first thing then that is true of us when we receive the Holy Spirit is that we came to the end of our death in trespasses and sins. And although we are all given a human spirit when born into this world, there was no divine spark in anybody because we were born children of Adam, born without God's Spirit. I Corinthians 15:22 says, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ, all shall be made alive."

We cannot be Christians without being in Christ and He in us. And it follows then that if we are in Christ, then in a sense, what is true of Him is also true of us. So Jesus died to sin once and we have died to sin once in Him.

Will you please turn to Romans 8. Since He has made us alive, it stands to reason that if we are alive, we are no longer dead. It must be one or the other, so we cannot merely hope to become alive, we are either alive or else we are dead. And if we are alive spiritually, it means that God has put a new Spirit of life in us.

Romans 8:1-5 There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but walk according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

So what is yours and my mind on? Is it on the things of the flesh or is it on the things of the Spirit?

The law of the Spirit of life in Christ is in every true Christian and this is the opposite of death. Before this new Spirit of life in Christ came into us we were dead in trespasses and sins and subject to a very different spirit, the prince of the power of the air, and the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience. But that is no longer true of us. We have a new Spirit of life.

Please turn to II Corinthians 4. God has made us alive and He has renewed us, and this is an ongoing daily process. Paul told this to the Corinthian Christians:

II Corinthians 4:16-17 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

So the keeping of the Day of Pentecost is meant to remind us every year that we are only the first small harvest of God calling people out of this world for salvation. The world has been completely cut off from God since Adam. But we have been given this tremendous opportunity to be among the firstfruits of God's Kingdom. But the rest of the world is still cut off. We have been predestined to be called now and we have been called to receive the Holy Spirit. And it is the second spirit a person needs to combine with the human spirit. It is the essence of God life which makes us children. Now we are heirs but not yet inheritors.

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of understanding, imparting to the physical brain spiritual intellect, the ability to comprehend spiritual knowledge. It is the love of God placed within us. It is the faith of Christ, the same faith with which Jesus performed miracles; now given to us—placed in us.

The Holy Spirit is also God-given spiritual power to overcome. It is the spiritual power to help us turn from and resist self-centered living and turn to

and embrace God-centered living. So it is the power by which we can develop the holy, righteous, perfect character, which is God's purpose for having put humanity on earth so He could reproduce Himself.

God has given us new life by a powerful act of God. He has implanted in us a principle of new life that has become the governing disposition of our being. God, by His mighty action, puts a new disposition into our heart and mind.

What is a disposition? It is the prevailing tendency of something to act in a certain manner under given circumstances. It is the dominant quality or qualities distinguishing a person. Disposition involves customary moods and attitudes toward the life around oneself. Disposition depends on, really, your world view or your outlook on life.

A Christian spiritual disposition is the automatic character action or reaction that comes from a righteous heart and mind led by the Holy Spirit.

What a person in sin needs is not new faculties but a new disposition. What is the difference between faculties and disposition? The disposition is the thing that determines how the faculties are to be used. In other words, the disposition is the thing that governs and organizes the use of the faculties which makes one person a musician and another a poet and another something else.

So the difference between the sinner and the Christian, the unbeliever and the believer, is not that the believing Christian has certain faculties which the other person lacks. No. What happens is that this new disposition given to the Christian directs his faculties in an entirely different way than they had before. We are not given a new brain. We are not given a new intelligence. We have always had these and they are our servants, our instruments and our members, as Paul calls them in the sixth chapter of Romans. What is new is a new disposition. We have turned in a different direction and there is a new power working in us and guiding our faculties.

Romans 6:11-13 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in

its lust. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Romans 6:19 I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

This principle of life, this new disposition, produces spiritual fruit because it affects the whole person. It affects our minds, it affects our heart, and it affects our will.

Please turn over to II Corinthians 5. We are in a spiritual relationship with Christ because we believe the message of the gospel and are identified by faith with Him. And this new life of devotion to God and Christ means that we have new attitudes and actions.

II Corinthians 5:14-17 But the love of Christ compels us, because we judged thus: that if one died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh, even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

A Christian is a new creation; and there is only one who can create, namely, God. God is the author of creation and Christ is the word or the instrument by which He does it. Becoming a new creation and being in Christ is something that happens spiritually, in a sense, in our subconscious. We do not notice it on a minute-by-minute basis. We may generally understand it, but we cannot explain it fully. We cannot explain it physiologically, anatomically, or in any other physical way.

All we know is that we were blind to understanding God's truth and now we can understand it, but we cannot fully explain it. We were dead, now we are

alive. It is mysterious, it is miraculous, and it is incomprehensible, but we know the effects, we appreciate the results, and we are aware that it has taken place. It is a creative act of God. Therefore, we often find Paul and other apostles referring to it as a new creation. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new."

So when God uses His power to call us into His church, we keep the same eyes and we look at the same things that we looked at before, but we cannot see them as we used to see them. Let me illustrate this. When God calls an alcoholic, who had eyes and could look at a bottle of beer or wine or hard liquor, he saw certain things. But when he receives the Holy Spirit, he still has eyes and he still sees the same bottle, yet it is not the same, it is completely different. He is looking at the same thing, but he sees something completely different. Why? It is not the bottle or the liquid that has changed. The alcoholic has changed, or rather has been changed. And he has a new creation, a new predisposition, a new governing principle, a new life—as a result of the power of God.

We were dead, we were lifeless. We could not move ourselves spiritually. We had no appetite spiritually, no understanding spiritually. But if we are Christians, that is no longer true. We have been made alive together with Christ. The life principle has come in, and we have been and are being renewed day by day.

The life of the Head goes through the members. "You are the body of Christ and members individually." Are we able to say the same thing? Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me." That is our goal. That is what we strive for and that is what we should be able to say.

It is not that we should not be trying. Of course, we have to endeavor to study, to pray, to fast, to obey, and to overcome. We must do all those things. But the first thing that happens is that the power of God provides this knowledge of life. Sometimes God withholds His strengthening of us until we do something. What can we do to remove any obstacles of weaknesses that we tend to inadvertently place in our own way?

Let us briefly look at seven principles that will advance God's strengthening of us.

First, we can advance spiritual strengthening by dependence on God. (These are very obvious, but they are very important.) In David's absence from Ziklag, Amalekite raiding parties had burned the town and carried off his family and everyone else as prisoners. After great lament and his men's threat to stone him, David inquired of the Lord through the priest concerning God's will in the matter.

I Samuel 30:6 Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.

Instead of saying strengthened, you could say, had faith in or strengthened his faith.

David knew that the encouragement he needed could only come from the Lord and he ordered Abiathar the priest to bring the ephod and together they sought the will of the Lord. Saul had consulted the Lord but had not received an answer. But the Lord graciously replied to David's request. David was hardly in a place of complete obedience. He made a lot of mistakes. He had to repent of many things, but God answered him just the same. Once David strengthened himself in the Lord, he turned to God in faith.

Second, we can advance spiritual strengthening by having the joy of the Lord God. As God's children, we carry burdens and know what it is to weep. But we also experience power that transforms sorrow into joy. Speaking from experience, David writes that the king who trusts in the Lord will have joy.

Psalms 21:1 The king shall have joy in Your strength, O Lord; and in Your salvation how greatly shall he rejoice!

The secret of Christian joy is to believe what God says in His Word and act on it. Faith that is not based on the Word, is not faith at all; it is presumption or superstition. Joy that is not the result of faith is not joy at all; it is only a good feeling that will soon disappear. Faith based on the Word will produce

joy that will weather the storms of life. That is why we are always encouraged to turn to the Psalms to read those for encouragement, and other any of the other books of the Bible.

Third, we can advance spiritual strengthening by prayer in accordance with God's Word, which is according to His will. in Psalm 119, the psalmist makes it clear that he is suffering because of his commitment to God and His Word, and was risking his life to obey the Lord. Yet he did not rant and rave against his enemies and seek to destroy them. Rather, he wept for them and turned them over to God. All he wanted was strength to keep on living for God and magnifying His Word.

Psalm 119:28 My soul melts from heaviness; strengthen me according to Your word.

Psalm 119:50 This is my comfort and my affliction, for Your word has given me life.

There is great encouragement there to turn to both Jesus Christ as the Word and also the written Word of God. The psalmist discovered that God's grace through His Word was all he needed to strengthen him. He would walk in God's truth and avoid the enemy's deception.

When we find ourselves pressured by the enemy, our first response is usually to want them to change. What our response should be is to pray that God would change us and enable us to understand and overcome, and for God to take care of our enemies.

Fourth, we can advance spiritual strengthening by gaining the wisdom from above. The nature of wisdom's benefits is such that we are encouraged to search for it and guard it continually. It is an invaluable treasure. But humans tend to be spiritually lazy and morally negligent. The realm of the wisdom from above is of selflessness and leads to peace, which is in sharp contrast to the realm of the wisdom of the earth that is of selfish ambition and leads to disorder.

James 3:17-18 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without with hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

The better we know God, the deeper we will be our knowledge and discernment when it comes to the central decisions of life. Wisdom is grounded in the fear of the Lord and ultimately, it is given by Him.

Proverbs 9:10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

Wisdom helps us face life with stronger resolve, for us to have convictions rather than preferences. The wise person fears God and therefore does not fear anyone or anything else. He walks with God and has an abundance of spiritual strength to face the challenges of life, including war.

Ecclesiastes 7:19 Wisdom strengthens the wise more than ten rulers of the city.

True wisdom is not only better than wealth, but also than physical strength. Wisdom is a consolation to sufferers because it gives purpose and hope.

Fifth, we can advance spiritual strengthening by quietness and confidence in response to God. Isaiah prophesied during the decline of Israel. He spoke the Word of God to the Israelites, who refused to listen to his warnings of looming disaster. Please turn with me to Isaiah 30. The design of Isaiah 30, verse 15 is to give a reason for the destruction that would come upon the Israelites. That reason was that God had indicated to them the path of truth and safety, but they chose not to follow it and refused to put confidence in Him.

Isaiah 30:15 For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel [so right away we want to take note of this]: "In returning and rest, you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

Consider quietness of mind. It means strength of purpose, combined with calm connectedness of thought, as well as of word and action.

Isaiah 32:17-18 The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever. My people will dwell in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

Now consider the other word there in verse 15 of chapter 30. Consider that "confidence shall be your strength." It is the result of guaranteed assurance. Confidence is something more than a dead baseless theory of belief; it is the exercise of faith which makes it an act of faith.

Sixth, we can advance spiritual strengthening by patiently waiting on God. We must change our frame of mind from presumption to patience. We are especially tested in this area when we are persecuted or going through some severe trial. Rather than fighting back, we are called to patient endurance and to trust in God to vindicate us. We are to wait until the coming of the Lord when He will right all wrongs,

James 5:7-8 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You will also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

David looked at it as God's storing up goodness to use when it was needed. God's goodness never ran out because David could go to God in prayer and receive all he truly needed, not all he wanted. The key was faith that God's will always ends in good.

Psalm 27:14 Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He will strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!

So instead of rushing ahead, David calmly waited on God because faith and patience always go together.

Hundreds of years later, Isaiah reminded the doubting Israelites about the same principle.

Isaiah 40:31 But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

There are multiple scriptures that show us that we are to be patient, that we are to wait for God to answer our prayers and not be too anxious. It does not mean we cannot repeatedly ask Him, but it means that we must reach a point where we have to just wait for God to answer. That answer may be "no" at this time, but His will will always end in good and we can always depend on that very thing.

Seven, we can advance spiritual strengthening by reliance on and contentment with God's grace. As you recall, God gave the apostle Paul a constant reminder of his weakness. Countless explanations concerning the nature of his thorn in the flesh have been offered. Turn with me to II Corinthians 12. Among the explanations that have been offered have been chronic problems such as malaria, migraine headaches, and epilepsy, or perhaps a disability in speech. No one can say for sure what this thorn was, but it was a major problem for him. It probably was a physical affliction of some sort.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my

infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities and reproaches, in needs and persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak [that is, physically], then I am strong [that is, spiritually].

It is understandable that Paul would consider his thorn in the flesh a hindrance to his physical performing of a more effective ministry and that he would repeatedly appeal to God for its removal. But he learned from this experience the lesson that pervades his letter: divine power is best demonstrated against the backdrop of human weaknesses so that only God is praised.

Rather than removing the problem, God gave him grace in it. God's grace is sufficient; it is adequate and even abundant in the sense of providing contentment and spiritual growth. Paul accepted God's will patiently.

Let us begin to wrap this up. The apostle Peter, in the first sermon delivered under the auspices of the Christian church on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, says,

Acts 2:24 [W]hom God raised up, having loosed pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

Of course speaking of Jesus Christ. God had such great power that it was impossible for Christ to be held for any length of time by death. It was not possible because God's mighty power cannot be overcome, conquered, or prevailed over by anything.

In addition to all our weaknesses and disobedience, our last enemy is death. The Bible bears constant witness of the power of death. Please turn with me to Hebrews 2. The power of death and the grave is the power exercised by Satan himself. That is why the author of the epistle to the Hebrews takes comfort in the fact that Jesus Christ came and lived and died in order to destroy the Devil, who has the power of death.

Hebrews 2:14-15 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death,

that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

So by raising Jesus Christ from death and the grave, God has given us this public demonstration and manifestation that the enemy has been conquered by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now turn with me to I Corinthians 15. The apostle Paul uses Christ's resurrection to illustrate God's might because it is the proof that every obstacle and hindrance and enemy set in our path will be overcome. The raising of Jesus from the dead is proof positive and absolute that even the last enemy has been conquered and defeated.

I Corinthians 15:26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.

I Corinthians 15:54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory."

I Corinthians 15:57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whatever may be true of our experience, whatever may be true of the world and its darkness, whatever may be true of the seeds of decay and of illness and of death that are in our bodies, and however great is the power of the enemy, we can be certain and confident that nothing can prevent the carrying out of God's purpose with respect to each and every one of us.

For a final scripture, please turn to Ephesians 2. There is no power that can withstand God. There is no might or influence that can match Him. There is no possible antagonist that can equal Him. The strongest enemies, Satan and death, have already been vanquished. God is working in us, influencing us, molding us, guiding us, convicting us, and leading us.

Ephesians 2:4-7 But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in

trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come, He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

So may God enlighten our understanding so that we may comprehend the mighty working of His majesty and His power.