

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Faith		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	5		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Acts 18:24-28; Ephesians 3:14-21		
Date:	July 13, 2014 a.m.		

How is Faith Encouraged?

The seemingly innocent WWJD (what would Jesus Do?) slogan has been plastered on just about everything- bracelets, baseball caps, shoelaces, note pads, T-shirts etc. Because it is a commercial success, it was only a matter of time before similar slogans made their appearance. Now we have FROG (Fully Rely on God) and PAG (Put on the Armor of God). These are touted as witnessing tools geared towards preteens and teenagers. I said that these sorts of things are seemingly innocent – but they are not. While their advocates claim that they are “a great way to share faith”- in actuality they focus attention on our behavior and not on the Gospel. Bumper stickers and bracelet slogans like these call attention to me, me, and me, not Christ. David Wells has documented that our culture is image driven.¹ We seem to be always enamored with simple (simplistic) visual ways to advertise our relationship with Jesus. The major problem with this mentality is that it ends up trivializing the Gospel. This is a far cry from what the Apostle Peter has in mind when he urged Christians to “Always be prepared to give an answer (APOLOGIA) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15). In ancient Greece an apologia was the defense offered in a court of law in answer to an accusation. Socrates was accused of atheism and of corrupting the youth of Athens; eventually he was sentenced to die. The dialogue by Plato in which we read the courtroom reply that Socrates offered is entitled *The Apology* – not indicating that Socrates “apologized” and said he was sorry, but rather that he defended his actions and integrity². Christians in the ancient world knew what it was to have accusations and ridicule directed at them for their religious conviction and practice. The report of Jesus’ resurrection was taken as an idle tale (Luke 24:11), a lie (Matt 28:13-15), and an impossibility (Acts 6:11-14). Paul was accused of being mocked by the Greek philosophers (Acts 17:18-20). On the day of Pentecost the disciples were accused of being drunk (Acts 2:13). Stephen was accused of opposing previous revelation (Acts 6: 11-14). Paul was accused of introducing new gods (Acts 17:18-20). The church was accused of political insurrection (Acts 17:6-7). Experts only contradicted what the Christians taught (Acts 13:45) and prejudicially vilified their persons (Acts 14:2). So, on the one hand, the Christian message was a stumbling block to Jews and utter foolishness to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23). On the other hand, the early Christians had to guard against the wrong kind of positive acceptance of what they proclaimed. The apostles were confused for gods by advocates of pagan religions (Acts 14:11-13), given unwelcome commendation by soothsayers (Acts 16:16-18), and had their message absorbed by heretical legalists (Acts 15:1,5). Twentieth-century believers can sympathize with their brothers in the ancient world. Our Christian faith continues to see the same variety of attempts to oppose and undermine it. What kind of response would be made to such accusations and challenges? It is clear from the New Testament record that the believers in the early church were not content to be relativists, subjectivists, or eclectics. In the account of opposition that are mentions above, Christians are not found replying that nobody can know anything for sure (especially about supernatural matters), in which case there is no absolute truth. Religious disagreements are not seen as irresolvable differences of personal upbringing, culture, and perspective. We do not read anything like “The Bible is true for me, but may not be true for you.” Nor can we find any willingness to make common cause with false religiosity as long as Christianity is accepted as one among many legitimate points of view. Instead, what we didn’t in answer to accusations, ridicule, and alternative

religions is apologetics- the defense of the truth of Christian claims.³ An equally important function of apologetics is highlighted in our text- to strengthen the faith by believers. We learn that Apollos did much to encourage the faith of these new believers. “The help he rendered was apparently not just in teaching those who were already Christians but in doing apologetics... This last verse reflects the language of public debate used of a contest in which rhetoric is used, which involves arguments (or proofs) and refutations offered back and forth to convince the audience.”⁴ The opening words of Ephesians 3:14, FOR THIS CAUSE, are presumptive of the same words in 3:1 and refer to the great privileges set forth in the latter part of ch.2. This in turn brought the Apostle to his knees in prayer.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

This one section may be broken into three separate parts. There is but one petition, yet many consequences which will result.

1. THE PRAYER ADDRESSED TO THE FATHER (vv. 14, 15) “...from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” The English text does not bring out Paul’s play on words here- “father” (PATERA) and “family”(PATRIA-denotes a group united by common descent from one source). That is being said here has to do with the relationship which men and angels have with God. He is the source of all blessing, “...out of His glorious reaches” (cf. 1:6, 7
2. THE PETITION REQUESTED FOR THE SAINTS (vv. 17-19) “...that you may be filled to the measure of all fullness of God.” That is a specific request; it is preceded by the means by which it is attained, to which we will direct our attention.
3. THANKSGIVING AND DOXOLOGY TO GOD (vv. 20-21). By this Paul in effect declares that everything in our lives and in our prayers should be for the glory of God. Having surveyed the whole, we now want to examine the central thing for which Paul prays, or, rather, the means by which the fullness of God may be attained, i.e., Spiritual Strength. What is it and how do you get it?

I. THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

- A. What is meant by “spiritual”? It is not physical, or communicated through a physical or an earthly source; it refers to that which is directly related to the Holy Spirit.
- B. Where does it occur? “...in your inner being” or, as the KJV reads, “...the inner man”; that is, the spiritual man, the new creation in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). Why do we need this? Lloyd- Jones explains: “How then does this weakness of the inner man show itself? First of all, in a spiritual sense the mind needs to be strengthened. This is so because we are assailed by doubts. Some of the greatest saints have reported that they were assailed by doubts even at the end of their lives. They have not believed the doubts, but the doubts have presented themselves and have troubled them for awhile. Then there is the problem of depression. Depression is very difficult to define. You may wake up in the morning and find your mind in a depressed condition. The mind that may have been working perfectly yesterday does not seem to be functioning happily today. WE are conscious of a kind of dullness and slowness and inability to think clearly. The mind seems to need to be strengthened. Or we may be troubled by evil thoughts that come and attack the mind. They seem to be thrown at us. Paul talks later in chapter 6 about ‘the fiery darts of the wicked one’. The devil hurls them into the mind. They start when you wake up in the morning before you have had time to think. SO the mind needs to be strengthened. Another problem is that of wandering thoughts. We all experience this. You find that you can read light literature or a newspaper with no difficulty in respect to concentration. But when you try to read the Bible, your mind seems to wander in all directions and you cannot concentrate. You are looking at words, you are reading the verses, but your mind seems to be elsewhere. You need to be strengthened in the mind also because of the nature of Christian truth. While the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is in one sense gloriously simple, it is also true to say that it is the profoundest truth in the world. This epistle to the Ephesians is not simple. You cannot understand it in a casual manner and without effort. You cannot gallop through it. There is profound truth here and subtle

argumentation. There are ‘immensities and infinites’, to quote Thomas Carlyle. You cannot take these things *at a run*.⁵

II. THE SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

- A. How is it described? It results in and is in actuality identical with the abiding of Christ in the Heart- not the reception of Christ, but the abiding (KATOITESAI- to dwell, to live in, to settle down. The verb denotes the permanent habitation as opposed to sojourning or an occasional visit). Therefore, spiritual strength has its source in the abiding presence of Christ in the heart (cf. John 15:5). The Holy Spirit is the means by which Christ indwells (cf. John 14:16-18). Christ Jesus is the ONLY source of strength for the believer (Phil. 4:13). It is by means of the Holy Spirit that HE strengthens the believer. “Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 4:16- Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” The Holy Spirit orchestrates the endowment of the strength, which is freely given to us according to the scale of his riches. We are renewed and empowered for life, and we grow stronger even while our bodies grow old. We are frail containers pulsating with divine power! In this way we become full of Christ. He “dwells in [our] hearts through faith.” This is a beautiful upward spiral: Our capacity is strengthened according to his riches so we can appropriate more of his life; his life thus fills us and thus enlarges our capacity so we can hold more of him within. And so it goes onward and upward with Christ.”⁶
- B. How is this accomplished? OBJECTIVELY, it is by the Holy Spirit that Christ indwells, but SUBJECTIVELY, it is “through faith,” or lit. “by means of the faith”- the stress is on continuance. Christ is there, but when faith fails or grows weak, so do the signs or evidences of Christ’s presence (cf. Jude 20).

III. THE DEMONSTRATION OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

- A. How does it exhibit itself? Many today point to fantastic demonstrations of miracles to the like- how astonishing that Paul says nothing of the sort! (comp. also Col 1:11). It is rather in the evidence of love and knowledge which the believer is to be “rooted (*ERRIZOMENOI*, perfect passive participle, to cause to take root, to become firmly rooted or fixed. The perfect tense points to the continual state) and established (*TETHEMELIOMENOI*, perfect passive participle, to a foundation, to be firmly established, note again the perfect tense), that you may have power (*EXISCHUSETE*, to be fully able, capable, to be strong enough. The preposition in compound is perfective and indicates a strength exerted till its object is attained).” What is the purpose of this power? “...to grasp (*KATALABESTHAI*, to comprehend mentally)...and to know this love.” NOTICE how this love is described: wide-long-high- deep. How could this ever be comprehended?! “...it surpasses knowledge,” and yet Paul prays for this very thing! – “The knowledge –surpassing love of Christ.”
- B. What does it produce? The Spiritual strengthening enlarges our spiritual understanding – and that by love! Love apprehends knowledge, for this is no mere head knowledge (it includes that): it is a deep felt heart knowledge (comp. 1:18).

IV. THE GOAL OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

Remember this petition is directed to the Sovereign Father and rests upon Him in its granting and we are not to know these things simply for the sake of knowing; we are to know so that we “may be willed to the measure of all the fullness of God.” I personally don’t know how to explain what is involved here – it is too mind-boggling! It is like trying to describe MT. Everest to someone who has never seen anything bigger than some Kansas hill. Perhaps the best explanation is 1 John 3:1-3, but to all those who have trusted in the Gospel, the process has begun, and it WILL be completed.

CONCLUSION

One of the mistakes that Christians often make (over and over again) is to measure their growth by the degree of love they feel for the Lord. This is, I submit, to get the cart before the horse. Lloyd-

Jones writes, “that one of the highest attainments in the Christian life is to know the love of Christ. There is much argument among the learned authorities and it is on this they spend most of their time in connection with this passage – as to what is meant by ‘the breadth and length and height’. Some argue that these words do not refer to the love of Christ, and that the ‘and’ indicate that the Apostle is clearly thinking of something else when he refers to these dimensions, and then proceeds to speak of the love of Christ. But surely that is very artificial distinction. If it is argued that ‘the breadth and depth and height’ refer to the whole of God’s dealings with us, I am prepared to agree, for in this case it is just another way of saying that the four words refer to the love of God and the love of Christ with respect to us. However, that is the theme, which the Apostle has been dealing with in the whole of the chapter. He has already spoken about ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’ and so on. I argue, therefore, that here Paul goes on to something even higher. Let us observe that he is not dealing with our love, but with His love to us.”⁷ Finally, please note that the means by which God accomplished this is through the ministry of the Word. As in the case of Apollos in Acts 18: 24-28, it was his apologetic effort that greatly encouraged the faith of the young believers. How so? The text tells us he *powerfully refuted* the Jews in public showing by the scripture that the Christ was Jesus.⁸ Our faith is strengthened and encouraged when we, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, see the person and work of Christ set forth in Scripture (Luke 24:32). When the Spirit of God opens our eyes to see more clearly Christ in his glory (John 16:12-15). This is what Paul has in mind when he told the church at Colossae to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Col. 3:16).

ENDNOTES

¹ D.F. Wells, *No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993), p.201.

² The Greek term *apologia* is a noun that literally means “*apology*”; the verb *apologeomai* means to give a defense. These terms occur eighteen times in the New Testament, and various Hebrew equivalents can be found throughout the Old Testament. All but a few of the references have judicial, courtroom connotations. For example, our Lord told his disciples, “when you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say” (Luke 12:11, my emphasis). Or, again, the Apostle Paul often went before such rulers as Felix, Festus, and Agrippa to set forth a case in defense of his position. C.f. William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Baker, 1996), p. 33.

³ C.f. Greg Bahnsen, “The Task of Apologetics” in *Van Til’s Apologetics: Reading & Analysis* (P&R, 1998), p.27ff.

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1998), p.568

⁵ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ: An Exposition of Ephesians 3:1 to 21* (Baker Book, 1979), p.137

⁶ Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Crossway Books, 1990), p.115.

⁷ Lloyd-Jones, op.cit. p.206. Along similar lines D.A. Carson notes “Paul does not mean to suggest that his readers have never before known God’s love for them in Christ Jesus. Far from it: he knows they are Christians, and therefore acknowledges that they have been “rooted and established in love” (v.17). He cannot think of their salvation without reminding himself that it utterly depends on God’s sovereign love. Even in the first chapter of this epistle, Paul has devoted himself to the praise of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” on the ground that “he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Eph. 1:3-6). Small wonder, then, that he thinks of Christians as those who have been “rooted and grounded in love.” *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (IVP, 1992), p.190

⁸ The Greek is *EUTONOS DIAKATELEGCHETO*. This expression appears only here in the New Testament and it means to literally overwhelm someone in an argument. Cf. Darrel Book, *Commentary on Acts* (Baker, 2007),p.593