

God's Gift of Strength
Advent Series
Rev. Jean Smith

In this Advent season we are looking at God's gifts to us. Last week we focused on God's gift of HOPE. Today we'll be focusing on God's gift of STRENGTH. That's something we all need. As we talk about this gift that God offers us, I want you to keep in mind some things about God. **First**, God is a powerful god. The Bible uses the word "omnipotent" to describe God. It means that God is all-powerful. There is nothing in all of creation more powerful than God. God is full of power and might. There's something else you should know about God. God is an empowering God. He is all-powerful and all-mighty, AND he wants to empower us with his strength. He's not interested in hoarding all his power. He wants to share it with us. He wants us to possess his power. He wants us to live in his strength so that others may see his power in us.

King David wrote a wonderful song about God's strength. Psalm 29 reads, "***The voice of the Lord was over the waters. The God of glory thunders. The Lord thunders over the mighty waters.***" (v. 3) What's David talking about here? He's recalling the way God shows his strength in a storm. He's remembering the power of God displayed in a storm out over the Mediterranean Sea; the loud claps of thunder that shook the earth. He says, "***The voice of the Lord is powerful. The voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars. The Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.***" (v. 4 & 5) Imagine how big the cedars of Lebanon are. They are huge, growing an average of 130 feet tall. David is recalling that a mere word uttered by God is powerful enough to turn a huge tree into kindling.

David goes on to say, "***He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.***" (v. 6) Imagine this: Mount Sirion is a 9,000 foot high mountain. David is telling us that God's voice is so powerful that it can make a huge mountain shake and tremble with fear. David says, "***The voice of the Lord strikes with flashes of lightning.***" (v. 7) Imagine the power of lightning. Within a fraction of a second a bolt of lightning releases one hundred million volts of electricity, at a temperature five times hotter than the surface of the sun.

David continues, "***The voice of the Lord shakes the desert. The Lord shakes the desert of Kadesh.***" (v. 8) Kadesh was to the south of David's kingdom. Mount Sirion was to the north. David is explaining how God's power stretches across the land, from top to bottom. He continues, "***The voice of the Lord twists the oaks and strips the forest bare.***" (v. 9) Not even the mighty oak tree can stand up to the strength of the Lord.

Have you ever witnessed that kind of power, that kind of might? One summer about eight years ago, I took a group of ten high school students back packing in Colorado. After three solid days of hiking with 45 pound packs on our backs, we were almost to the top of the mountain. We stopped at about 14,000 feet to make our final camp before the last leg of our ascent. The scenery was beautiful. We set up our tent which was really just a tarp suspended in the air with two light aluminum poles and some string. We were having a great time throwing a Frisbee around and taking in the view when all of the sudden a black cloud rolled over the top of the mountain. It was blacker than any cloud I had ever seen. It was also closer than any black cloud I had ever seen. Out of that cloud came the hardest rain I had ever seen. We all piled under the tarp with our packs and we waited. The thunder began, louder than any thunder I had ever heard and then the lightning, brighter than any lightning I had ever seen. Our guides began to shout out instructions. They told us we were to exit the tent with our thin foam sleeping mats in hand, nothing else, and form a circle with ten feet in between each person. We were to lay down on our mats until the storm passed. It was the scariest thing I ever experienced in my entire life. Somehow we survived. After the storm the sun came out so bright and hot, which was a good thing because we were soaked to the bone. Everything we had was drenched with rain. We laid everything out on the mountain side, for the sun to dry, and just as our things were almost dry, over the top of the mountain came another blacker than black cloud. We had to do it all over again – back out into the pouring rain on our mats. I thought, “This is it. Somebody is going to get struck by lightning.” As we laid there in a big circle, I could hear the muffled sounds of crying from all around the circle.

Did you know that at any given moment there are some 1800 thunder storms taking place on the face of the earth? God is more powerful than all those storms put together. How does David say we should responses to God’s power? As God’s people, how are we to respond? David says, “***And in his temple all cry, ‘GLORY!’***” (v. 9b) God wants us to respond to his display of power with an act of worship. When we do, God responds by filling us with strength and peace. David’s ends his song with this. He says, “***The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.***” (v. 11) God responds to our genuine and spontaneous worship by filling us with strength and blessing us with peace.

Our God is not only powerful but he is empowering. The Bible says, “***God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a Spirit of power and love and of self-discipline.***” (2nd Timothy 1:7) That’s good because we all desperately need God’s strength. Why is that? Why do we so desperately need God’s strength?

First, we need God’s strength to face the things we CANNOT face on our own. At some point in your life you will experience a storm that will rock your world and stop you in your tracks. Many of you know what I’m talking about because you’ve already had that kind of experience and maybe not just once, but twice, or even more than twice. Maybe you’ve lost a loved one or battled for your life against cancer. You know what I’m talking about. We all need God’s strength when we face things like that – when we face the really difficult times.

Second, we need God’s strength to avoid doing the things we SHOULDN’T do. Temptations call to us all the time. I appreciate the bumper sticker that says, **“Lead me not into temptation... I’m perfectly capable of finding it on my own.”** We all face temptations and we need God’s strength to overcome them. Temptations are those ethical and moral shortcuts that lead us away from God, down a dead end road, spiritually speaking. The problem comes when we try to face temptation in our own strength. We can’t do it on our own. We need God’s strength to avoid temptation. The Bible says, **“God can give us strength to avoid doing what we know we shouldn’t do.”** (1st Corinthians 10:13) We cannot live the sinless life without complete dependence on God.

Third, we need God’s strength to do the things we SHOULD do. We need God’s strength to avoid the things we shouldn’t do and to do the things we should. We cannot withstand temptation without God’s help. He has designed things so that we must be dependent on him in order to overcome temptation and live a holy and righteous life. We all need god’s strength to do the things we know we should do. We all need God’s strength to be people of godly character and virtue. We need the power of Christ within us in order to be Christ-like.

Acknowledging our need is only one part of the equation. The other part is receive God’s gift of strength. How do we do that? How do we receive God’s strength to face the things we cannot face on our own, to overcome temptation and to live a Christ-like life?

The first step in receiving God’s gift of strength is to AFFIRM God’s power and presence. If we’re feeling weak, it’s because we’ve forgotten how powerful and omnipotent God is. He has demonstrated his power to us story after story in the Bible. 1st Chronicles 16:11 says, **“Look to the Lord and his strength. Seek His face always. Remember the wonders he has done.”** God’s strength comes to us as we REMEMBER who he is and what he has done for us. In remembering we experience his power and his presence. The Bible is our greatest source of affirmation of God’s power and presence. If we are feeling weak, we have only to pick up God’s Word and be reminded of God’s faithfulness.

Several years ago there was a song that made its way up the Top Ten chart titled, ***From a Distance***, sung by Bet Midler. There’s a reoccurring line that song. It goes, **“God is watching us from**

a distance.” I really like that song but every time I hear those words I wanted to shout, “No. He’s not distant.” There is not place we can go where God is not present. God is not some distant and indifferent deity. He is ever present. He is always close by. He is closer than our own breath.

The second step in receiving God’s gift of strength is to ADMIT your weakness; admit your need. *God can not fill us with his strength when we are full of ourselves.* We must first empty ourselves of any false sense of our own strength before we can be filled with his strength. Only in admitting our weakness, can we be filled with God’s strength.

The third step to receiving God’s gift of strength is to ALIGN yourself with God’s will. God’s power is like an electrical current. We can’t benefit from it unless we get plugged into it. We get plugged in to it when we align ourselves with his will. He will only give power to fulfill his purposes. He will not give his power for any other reason. Jesus said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Cut off from me, you can do nothing.”* (John 15:5) We abide in him by doing his will; by obeying his commandments. God only gives us power when we are going to use that power for his purposes.

What cuts us off from God is our sin. Unless something is done about that, we will be separated from God all of eternity. No one wants that to happen. So how do we align ourselves with God? We align ourselves with God by confessing our sins and receiving the forgiveness that is ours through Christ.

The fourth step in receiving God’s gift of strength is to ASK God for the strength we need. The apostle James tells us, *“You don’t have what you need because you fail to ask God for it.”* (James 4:2) God has incredible strength to share with us, but we don’t have it because we don’t ask for it. Asking God for strength is an act of faith. God always rewards an act of faith. Asking for strength goes beyond admitting our need to believing that he can and will meet our need.

One reason why we don’t ask is because we think we can do it on our own. That’s called **PRIDE**. The other reason why we don’t ask is because we think we don’t deserve God’s help. That’s true. We don’t deserve God’s help. That’s why it’s called a gift. God has chosen to pour out his power on us in order to demonstrate his power to a hurting world. He wants us to possess his power. He wants us to live in his strength so that others may see his power in us. He wants his people to live in his strength and power! God is not honored when we live broken and defeated lives.

When we affirm God’s power and presence, when we admit our weakness, when we align ourselves with his will and ask for his gift of strength, God enables us to receive that gift. There’s something you should keep in mind. When you are empowered by God, you don’t always feel a rush of

power flowing into you. When God gives you his power, you don't always know it. It may only become evident as you face the difficulties in your life, as you resist temptations, and as you see yourself doing his will.

The fifth step in receiving God's gift of strength is to ACT in obedience. God has revealed his will to us in his Word. We learn from his Word what he expects from us as his faithful followers. We learn from Christ's example what God expects from us as his people. We are to act in obedience to God's revealed will for our lives. We are to step out in faith.

We step out in faith every time we go to the grocery store. We step out in faith as we walk up to the automatic doors and trigger the sensor that opens the door. What if we stood back, just out of reach of the sensor and said, "Oh, no. The door is shut. I can't get in." And we turned around and went home, convinced we couldn't get in. Unfortunately, we live our spiritual lives just like that. We don't trust God to open doors for us as we step out in faith. God is not honored when we fail to step out in faith. We need to ACT in obedience and let God open doors for us.

The Bible says. *"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun."* (Psalm 37:4-6)