

# What is the Strength of Your Life?

The LORD *is* my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD *is* the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Ps 27:1

Sing aloud to God our strength. Ps 81:1

No really, what is the strength of your life? All Christians will say, of course, God is the strength of my life; but, honestly, is this true? Let's look at what these verses (and many others) tell us.

## **God is the strength of our salvation**

The first point is that salvation is not only *of* the Lord but *is* the Lord. Repeatedly we are told that God is our salvation, or the Lord is our deliverance (e.g. Ex 15:2; Ps 18:2, 62:7; Isa 12:2).

Calvinism correctly affirms that man has no strength to gain his own salvation; he is totally depraved and unable to produce any spiritual good, there is no one that does good (see Paul's argument in Rm 3:1-20). The Arminian case that man initiates salvation and chooses to obey the Gospel holds no water at all; man can do no spiritual good and that includes believing in Christ. So salvation is only effective because God gives it to those he chooses; salvation is all of grace and all of God.

But more than this, salvation is God. Our righteousness, which constitutes our justification, is the satisfaction of the law made by Christ on our behalf, not just in his death but in his life. Christ obeyed the law as a man, perfectly, and this constitutes the righteousness that he gives to the elect. The strange notion of some that Christ gives his heavenly, personal righteousness as God to believers is not just without scriptural foundation but is completely illogical. How could a man hold a righteousness that is divine, incorporeal and infinite in quality? No, the righteousness which constitutes our salvation is that which Christ earned as the perfect man under law. This is accounted to us in justification to enable us to stand acceptable and holy before God in the courts of heaven. However, though earned as a man, it is still earned as the person of Christ, the Second person of the Trinity; so our standing in heaven is based on God – the character of Christ's righteousness.

Then our relationship to God is now also in Christ. As a result of justification a believer is adopted into God's family by divine law and by unification with Christ. He stands with Christ the Son as a legal heir of salvation and of God; a son of God (Rm 8:15; Gal 4:5). He is also baptised by the Holy Spirit into perfect union with Christ and changed to be a new creature (1 Cor 12:13; 2 Cor 5:17). Thus the salvation that is achieved by adoption and union is also God.

Salvation also results in glory and Christians are glorified because they are in Christ,  
To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Col 1:27

For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Col 3:3-4

So this aspect of salvation is also the strength of God.

All the aspects of salvation boil down to being the strength of God. Salvation is not just an objective gift given by God to men, it is an impartation of God himself and a joining of men to God. This is the fulfilment of the prayer of Christ in the garden,

That they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Jn 17:21-23

So, the first aspect of God being the strength of our life is that our salvation is entirely down to our being joined to God through his wonderful grace. Any theological system (such as Arminianism or Amyraldism) which takes away from the glory of being focused upon God and sovereign grace is a blasphemy and a lie. God is the strength of our salvation.

### **The Lord is the strength of my life**

If the Lord is your strength then you are not capable of living the Christian life in your own power. I will say this again, you do not have the power to live the Christian life. Discipleship is not dependent upon your abilities, intellectual prowess, strong will, stability of character or anything else. This ensures that all believers are on an equal footing in development in grace – we are all only able to function as we rest in God. What is required is faith in God's promises.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Gal 2:20

This clear statement by Paul is but a reaffirmation of what Christ taught his disciples, Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. Jn 15:4-5

Apart from Christ we can do nothing. The Christian life is a dependent life, a life where the disciple realises that he is poor in spirit. In fact the beatitudes summarise this dependent life:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matt 5:3-10

The disciple recognises he is poor in himself but rich in Christ, He mourns for his sin and failures. He is meek; that is lowly and restrained, he is able to deny his natural life. He hungers for righteousness knowing that he has none naturally. He is merciful to others since he is aware of his own weakness. He is pure in heart because God has given him a new one that has replaced his old life. He is a peacemaker because he knows God's peace and, because he is following Christ not himself, he is persecuted. These things define a man who trusts in God as his strength.

The reason we have many tribulations in this life is to reveal our need of dependence, utter resting on Christ and having no faith in our own abilities.

It is important, at this point, to give an exegesis of John 15:1-11 and to point out some features that are usually mistaken.

**1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.**

**2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away [Greek: 'lifts up']; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes [Greek: 'cleanses'], that it may bear more fruit.**

**3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.**

**4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.**

**5 I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without [Greek: 'severed from'] Me you can do nothing.**

**6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.**

**7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.**

**8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.**

**9 As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.**

**10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.**

**11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and *that* your joy may be full.**

Arminians use this passage to teach that a believer in Christ can fall away and be lost. We know for sure that this is false because only a few chapters earlier Jesus emphasised that this could not happen (Jn 3:15, 5:24, 6:37, 40, 10:28). Over and over again in this Gospel the Lord reaffirms that a genuine disciple cannot lose his salvation. The Arminian interpretation is an error.

The usual Reformed explanation of the difficult verses (v2 & 6) refers to apostasy; i.e. those who appear to be in Christ from the outside but are not genuinely saved, such as Judas or Simon Magus. They give every appearance of being part of the Gospel community but, in the end, their apostasy becomes clear. While this is true as a fact of life, this is not what the passage teaches.

In this passage the Lord speaks to the disciples after Judas has left and is part of Christ's final words of teaching and encouragement to his chosen men. It is not spoken to a mixed audience. Furthermore, it clearly speaks of those who are in Christ. This term is only ever applied to genuine Christians. It is every branch 'in Me'. It is also spoken to people who are already made clean by Christ's word, i.e. those who are definitively sanctified; this excluded Judas (Jn 13:10-11). Christ's point here is not about salvation but about progressive sanctification – growth in grace by communion with Christ resulting in bearing fruit.

We now come to the chief point. There are genuine Christians who live an apparent Christian life but who produce no fruit and are useless in terms of being productive to the vinedresser (God the Father). Honest people know that this is true in experience and this

passage (with many others) addresses it directly. A vine branch is meant to produce grapes.

Branches that are bearing fruit are cleansed from those things which would diminish their crop. Just as rose bushes can be damaged by aphids collected in bunches on the stems which must be cleansed away, so a vine must be kept clean from pests, moss or pollution. A branch which is not bearing fruit is lifted up from trailing on the ground and given a chance to see the sun. The vinedresser does everything possible to make a branch fruitful. [Note the important translation errors in verse 2.]

The strength of the branch is in the vine; the root is not seen, indeed it is impossible to separate the branches from the main stem, but the root supplies all the necessary sap for growth. The branch just needs to remain in the vine to be fruitful. It does not work by itself to make fruit; it just dwells in the vine.

A branch that does not abide in the vine gradually withers. Likewise, a Christian who does not commune continually with Christ also withers and dies in terms of producing any spiritual fruit. He may be full of fleshly external works but will produce no spiritual fruit; he just dries up. The work of this man is then tested by fire; it is gathered and burned like all our works. Those works which pass through the fire remain and receive a reward; those works which are burned are lost. The saint survives this but as through fire; i.e. like a man escaping a burning house who loses all he has worked for.

Paul explains this as follows:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

1 Cor 3:10-15

We build upon the foundation of our Christian life every day. All that emanates from Christ, all that we do in the strength of God, is like precious stones which pass unblemished through fire. However, the works of the flesh, those things done in human strength, are like combustible items which the fire of judgment burns away. Everything we do is tested and what was done in Christ is rewarded. What was done in the flesh will be lost.

God chose us to bear fruit. If we fail to live in Christ, by putting on the new nature, we will get to heaven by the skin of our teeth and suffer great loss of rewards. The crucial matter in the Christian life is to live in the strength of God and not ourselves. This is why we are continually tested with difficult circumstances; in these God is trying to wean us from trusting ourselves.

The critical thing is to remain close to Christ, communing with him, abiding in him, living by faith, putting on the new man, walking in his Spirit; then we bear fruit. Without him we can do nothing because in doing so we are severed from receiving his grace and unable to do anything of eternal or spiritual benefit.

### **The Lord is the strength of my defence**

This is illustrated by David and Saul. Saul was a strong man who had been a victorious king. He was selected by God and duly commissioned. Yet he failed, being representative of

the strength of the old nature. His end was ignominy and sinful rebellion. David, when anointed to be king, was but a youth. The champion over Goliath was not a strong adult in armour but a ruddy youth with a shepherd's experience but with great faith in God. Where Saul fell apart, and the battle was all but lost, David rose to the challenge with just God's promise. With grace (represented by the five smooth stones) David was able to defeat the champion of Gath and rally the armies of Israel to victory. It was not a matter of human strength or human initiative or human intellect, but of divine strength out of human weakness. In God we are more than conquerors.

We cannot deliver ourselves from our enemies but God can, and will, as we trust in his strength. This is why the Lord told us to pray daily that we should be delivered from evil. We are dependent upon God for our defence. There are many historical stories from the Old Testament which confirm this, such as the deliverance at the Red Sea, Gideon's victory or Jehoshaphat's deliverance from the Moabites at Engedi. Jehoshaphat's prayer sums the matter up, 'we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon you.' (2 Chron 20:12).

### **The Lord is the strength of my joy and peace**

In this life we have many tribulations, just as the Lord promised us. We were never promised a happy life in this world but were given a hope for the next. Happiness is not a Christian goal in this life; for good reason it is called a vale of tears. If we could be happy in a world full of sin, blasphemy, and great suffering, it would be strange indeed. But we are given grace to be content, and this is much different. Contentment reigns in the soul whether the current circumstances of life are good or bad. It is the gift of peace despite what waves buffet our lives.

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Phil 4:11-13

Whether hungry or full, whether rich or poor, whether sick or healthy, the Christian is able to have great peace and contentment if his strength is the Lord and not his circumstances. Not only is God our strength to deal with the vicissitudes of life, but he gives us a song to sing in the midst of trials,

The LORD *is* my strength and song. Ex 15:2

The Christian can have joy in God and peace through the Holy Spirit even when his life is turbulent, chaotic and persecuted. When Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison they were not happy men but they were able to sing God's praises (Acts 16:23-25). When God is our strength, when we are walking in his Spirit, we will know joy and peace through grace even when our lot is a most unhappy one.

### **Conclusion**

The devil's greatest fear is that Christians will begin to see how much God is their strength. The amazing thing about salvation is that God has not only done everything for us, not only given us a future and a hope of glory, but also enables us to do everything we need to do in his in his power, if we would just understand, believe and obey.

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