

~~7-29-29~~ "POWER TO MASTER LIFE"
"I can do all things through Christ which strengthenth me."-
Phil. 4:13.

These are among the most familiar and oft-quoted words in the N.T., but I am not sure that we fully understand their meaning or realize their significance. What exactly did Paul mean by this exhilarating statement, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthenth me."? Was he saying that he could do absolutely anything? No. Paul was no braggart and he ~~was not~~ had no illusions about himself. He did not consider himself to be some sort of superman. He ~~is~~ was not another Mr. Belvedere, able to perform spectacular feats in almost any realm you could mention. In these words Paul is not tightening his belt, rolling up his sleeves, drawing himself up straight and saying: "I can do anything; just watch me!" Like the rest of us, the apostle had his personal limitations. There were some things, perhaps many things, which he could not do, and he knew it.

Paul was simply saying what any thoroughly committed Christian can say; namely, that in the wonderful strength of the indwelling Christ he could do anything that was in the mind of God for him to accomplish, and, above all, that he could transcend any difficult situation which Providence allowed.

Some of the recent translation of the N.T. express more clearly than does the older King James Version the precise meaning of the apostle's words. Here are five such renderings: "In Him who strengthens me, I am able for anything"(Moffatt). "I am ready for anything through the strength of the one who lives within me."(Phillips.) "I have strength for all things in him who gives me inward power."(Scott) "I can do all things through Him who infuses strength into me." (Barclay)

This verse is closely related to the two immediately preceding it, and they throw considerable light on Paul's meaning. This early Christian is not claiming that he can do anything and everything. His claim is that through vital union with Christ he is capable of meeting and handling successfully "all sorts and conditions of life"(Moffatt) . Paul is insisting that through the bracing energy of God's indwelling Spirit, he can stand up to any conceivable trial, circumstance, or pressure and carry off a spiritual victory in spite of it. He is saying that a deep, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ furnishes one with power to master life.

And how we all need such power- some of us very badly and right now! Modern living is strenuous and depleting; its demands are at times overwhelming. There are occasions in the lives of most of us when we feel that we simply cannot go on- when we want to

"throw in the sponge" and run away. In our secret hearts we echo the words of the Hebrew psalmist, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest."

Our real problem, of course, is not the strain of outward pressure and adversities so much as a spiritual inadequacy within. We feel helpless and insufficient, not because our work and our problems are too great, but because our inner reserves of power are too low. Our real predicament is not that Providence has handed us more than we can bear or do but that our spiritual resources are insufficient to meet the demands of our crowded complex and burdened life. Dr. E. Stanley Jones is right when he says that "most people do not break down from overwork but from under-being."

This idea that the Christian faith offers real help for daily living has not dawned upon hosts of people. They think of religion as a load instead of a lift; as something they must lug about instead of a power which energizes and carries them. They conceive of Christian discipleship as just another addition to their heaviness; another duffle bag of duties and responsibilities to be added to an already overburdened and distracted life. Faith is treated as if it were only a problem. Bible reading and study, public worship and prayer are thought of as things which "every Christian ought to do" instead of means to courage and zest, radiance and power.

This conception of religion is a very common one and it is to be deplored. I'll be honest about it- Christianity does have its rigorous and demanding side. There's no use dodging that. It assigns duties and responsibilities and calls at times for real heroism and self-sacrifice. Elton Trueblood was speaking the truth when he said that to become a Christian is to join Christ's band as a recruit and to engage forthwith in a task. A good many soft and complacent church members need to be reminded of that. When one refuses involvement and dodges responsibility, exploits and emasculates the Christian gospel and blunts its cutting edge.

But Christianity is more than a task, it is a new power- an energizing force available for daily needs. This is certainly the impression one gets from reading the N.T. Those first-century Christians were not stooping and stumbling under new and heavier burdens; they were walking "in newness of life."

What Christianity promises you and me is that through "the strength of the one who lives within" we can accomplish things we thought were quite impossible, and we can stand up under pressures and adversities we knew would crush us. This was not only

true in the experience of the apostle Paul but has been true in countless other lives since his day. William James, after studying a large number of people who were living victorious lives in the midst of great hardships and testings, wrote this sentence: "Every sort of energy and endurance, of courage and capacity for handling life's evils, is set free in those who have religious faith."

If people could just believe this- really believe it- the problem of living triumphantly in "any and all circumstances" would be half won. But most people do not believe it. They do not expect such a boon from their faith. They have it rather firmly fixed in their minds that religion is something for them to hold instead of something which helps them; and that it can do little or nothing to assist them in the solution of their problems or in the bearing of their burdens.

Paul found his strength in Christ and not in himself. His was not a "do it yourself" kind of religion. "In Him who strengthens me," he said, "I am able for anything." He did not say, "In the fell clutch of circumstance... I am the Master of my fate; I am the Captain of my soul." No, Paul was no weakling; he was strong-willed, independent, and gifted; but he never relied solely upon his own strength or ability. His confidence was in God, not in himself. He was a Christian, not a stoic.

I believe that Paul would have scorned the shallow philosophy so prevalent in our own day which says, "You can do anything, if you only believe you can. The trick is to have faith in yourself." I suppose there is some truth in this point of view. It does help some to have a reasonable amount of self-confidence. Certainly one must believe in himself. But as a full view of life this philosophy is empty and dangerous. The injunction "believe in yourself", standing by itself, is a poor gospel. It is bootstraps religion and is about the most discouraging advice you can give people who are battling the strong currents of life. The human self is capable of magnificent things; but there are times when we know that it is a poor crutch to lean upon. What we must have at such times is a power beyond self and greater than we are.

A vital religion provides such a power. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." God does not promise to lighten our load nor to head off difficulties. He does not offer to remove the hazards in the game of life. What God promises is inner stamina and enabling power which will cause us to transcend our problems ~~and which will cause us to transcend our problems~~

and which will keep us from being "spiritual casualties." As Dr. Samuel Shoemaker has remarked, "Religion is not meant to save us from trouble, but to save us from defeat."

We should not, therefore, As Phillips Brooks put it, pray for tasks equal to our powers; we should pray for powers equal to our tasks. So often we pray for a change in our outward circumstances, when what we need is a change in our inward condition. We ask God for a lighter load when we should be asking for an infusion of new power. We yearn for a new situation when what we need is to be a new person. We seek immunity from trials, disappointments, and temptations when what we really need is to be ~~a new person. We seek~~ "strengthened with might through his spirit in the inner man," so that we can be victorious over them.

It is not right or necessary that you and I should go down in defeat before "the sling and arrows of outrageous fortune." God allows no circumstance to invade our lives without at the same time making available to us the wisdom and strength with which to handle it.

~~In 1951 I read~~ Sometime ago I read an address delivered by Judge Harold R. Medina to the Church Club in Ny. City. Judge Medina, you may remember, was the judge before whom the eleven communis leaders were tried and convicted in 1949. In speaking of that dramatic trial, Judge Medina gave the following personal testimony:

" I do not see why a judge should be ashamed to say that he prays for divine guidance and strength to do his duty. Indeed, there came a time...when I did the most sincere and most fervent praying that I ever did in my life.

As I mentioned in passing, at the beginning of the address, I suddenly found myself in the midst of that trial of the communists. It took me a long time to realize what they were trying to do to me. But as I got weaker and weaker and found the burden difficult to bear, I sought strength from the one Source that never fails.

Let me be specific. There came a time when, doubtless due to previous planning, one of the defendants was on the stand and he refused to answer a question, pleading a supposed constitutional privilege which obviously had no application. I gave him time to consult with his counsel about it. I held the matter in abeyance overnight to make sure that I was making no misapplication of the law; and then the next day, Friday, June 3, of the year 1949, I sentenced him to prison for 30 days unless he should sooner purge himself of contempt by answering the

the question.

5

Pandemonium broke loose. The other ten defendants and their lawyers, and many of the spectators, rose to their feet; there was a great shouting and hullabaloo and several of the defendants started toward the bench. In all that excitement, I felt as calm as I do now when I speak to you.

And I tell you, as I stand here, that my unguided will alone and such self-control as I possess were unequal to this test. Ever a man felt the presence of someone beside him, strengthening his will and giving him aid and comfort, it was I on that day. And so it was later and toward the end of August, when I finally left the courtroom one day and went to lie down, thinking that perhaps I should never go back. But, after ten or fifteen minutes, I was refreshed and I did go back; and I gained in strength from that moment on to the end."

Is that the kind of strength Paul was talking about?

Well, if a first century missionary and a twentieth century judge found such inner reinforcement, we can find it also. If it was available to them, it is available to you and me. We, too, can experience faith as a great and mighty power. All that is required is that we shall receive Christ into our hearts by faith, yield our lives to his control, and believe- really believe- that he can and will do for us all that he has promised.