

“Be Strong and of Good Courage”

The record of Deuteronomy recounts the words of Moses to Israel at the end of his life, encouraging them to go forth and take possession of the Land of Promise:

“Yahweh thy Elohim, he will go over before thee ... ***be strong and of a good courage***, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for Yahweh thy Elohim he it is that doth go with thee; ***he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee***” (Deut. 31:3, 6).

Notice the two significant phrases in this passage: there is the exhortation: “*be strong and of a good courage*” and then the reason why: for Yahweh “*will not fail thee, nor forsake thee*”. Just as Israel were on the border of the land, looking forward to taking up their inheritance, even so we, albeit in a different sense, are also looking to take up our inheritance at the appointed time. And just as Israel had to war a good warfare in order to receive their inheritance, even so we must engage ourselves in the warfare against the flesh – a warfare of faith. In this battle, “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-5). The way may be hard at times, but we “endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3), looking to share the victory of our Lord and Master. We therefore, need the exhortation and encouragement just as much as Israel of old: trusting in Yahweh’s power to save, we must ourselves “be strong and of a good courage”.

The record in Deuteronomy describes how this exhortation was repeated to Joshua, the Captain of the host, and the one who would lead Israel in their warfare against the Canaanites:

“and Moses called unto Joshua, and said unto him in the sight of all Israel, ***be strong and of a good courage***: for thou must go with this people unto the land which Yahweh hath sworn unto their Fathers to give them; and thou shalt cause them to inherit it. And Yahweh, he it is that shall go before thee, ***he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee***: fear not, neither be dismayed” (Deut. 31:7-8).

Again, in our reading for the day in Joshua chapter 1, the same exhortation is repeated three times: verses 6, 7 and 9. Joshua was the selected man to lead the people in their battle, as the captain their salvation. But the warfare would not depend upon his natural skill and ability: “*Yahweh, he it is that shall go before thee ...*”. The victory would be Yahweh’s, and not Joshua’s.

This promise echoes the promise made earlier to Moses, how that an Angel of God would go before the people, securing the victory:

“... Behold, I send an angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, ***and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared***”

And again:

“***For mine Angel shall go before thee***, and bring thee in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off” (Exo. 23:20,23).

Here we have a pattern being established: Joshua as a mortal man, as the captain of Yahweh's Host upon earth was to wage a warfare against men of flesh. But the real power to save was divine: it was of the Angel of Yahweh's Heavenly host who would secure the victory. And in each of these two personages, we have represented the Captain of our Salvation, even Jesus the anointed one, who was both human and the only begotten son of Yahweh: He warred against the greatest enemy of all; even the *diabolos* in our own nature – and he was victorious. But the power to save was not of his mortal frame: it was due to his being the Son of the Most High, the One “made strong” (Psa. 80:17) for the purpose.

Earlier, Israel had shown a great lack of faith and sight, being afraid of the enemy which they were up against. The spies sent to view the land “brought up *an evil report* of the land which they had searched unto the Children of Israel, saying, the land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; *and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature*. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: *and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight*” (Num. 13:32-33).

In these words, the ten spies made a fundamental mistake, which we can all too often repeat in our own lives. They were considering their own abilities, and how the enemy was much greater than they. However, the point of comparison was all wrong: they should have been measuring the greatness of the enemy against the greatness of their God. Yahweh had promised to send an angel: the people could not capture the land through their own might – but the power of Yahweh was their to save. That is where their faith ought to have been exercised, not in themselves, but in their God. Indeed, we can find a further parallel with our own lives: we are “without strength” (Rom. 5:6) to save ourselves, but we can obtain the victory through Christ our Redeemer. We must be strong, and have courage, trusting in Yahweh's power to save.

SOLOMON

A similar exhortation was spoken to Solomon by his father David, at the time when he was inaugurated king over all the house of Jacob:

“... thou shalt prosper, if thou takes heed to fulfil the statutes and judgments which Yahweh charged Moses with concerning Israel: *be strong and of good courage: dread not, nor be dismayed*” (1 Chron. 22:13)

The pre-eminent work of Solomon was to build the House of God: the Temple in which Yahweh would symbolically reside. And so the exhortation was also given specific to this work:

“And David said to Solomon his son, Be strong and of good courage, and do it: for Yahweh Elohim, even my Elohim will be with thee: he will not fail thee, until thou hast finished all the work for the service of the house of Yahweh” (1 Chron. 28:20).

There are two aspects to the believer's service before God: there is the warring of a spiritual warfare, and there is the building up of the spiritual house – which is the ecclesia of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15). These come together in the Master's parable as recorded in Luke chapter 14:

“which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him ... Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with

ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassage, and desireth conditions of peace. So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Lu. 14:28-33).

Here then, are the two aspects to life in Christ: to build, and to war. One is more pleasing than the other. It is a delight and a privilege to be engaged in the building of the house of God, and it is most distasteful to have to war against the flesh. But both are just as important than the other: it is only by shovelling away the rubble of apostasy that the way can be cleared for the unhindered building of God’s house.

HEZEKIAH

Another instance of this exhortation being given is from Hezekiah to his people, under siege by the Assyrians:

“Be strong and courageous, be not afraid or dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor from all the multitude that is with him: **for there be more with us than there be with him:** with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is Yahweh our God to help us, and to fight our battles” (2 Chron. 32:7-8)

Compare this spirit with that of those who were afraid of the Children of Anak! Here we see a true spirit of faith – though humanly speaking all was lost, Hezekiah compared the might of the Assyrians with that of Yahweh – which the people ought to have done in Moses’ day. “There be more with us than there be with him” – a true character of faith.

The allusion here is to an earlier event in connection with Elisha. 2 Kings 6 records how an army was dispatched to come against Elisha and his servant: “horses, and chariots, and a great army ...” Notice this – a whole battalion against two individuals! Well can we understand the fear of Elisha’s servant, in saying: “Alas, my master! How shall we do?” but Elijah’s response demonstrated what great faith he had in the Angelic Host that would deliver them:

“he answered, **Fear not:** for **they that be with us are more than they that be with them.** And Elisha prayed, and said, Yahweh, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. **And Yahweh opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha ...**” (2 Kings 6:16-17).

It is written that “the angel of Yahweh encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them” (Psa. 34:7): but we need spiritual perception to recognise that fact. How often have we been like Elisha’s servant – unable to see the Angels working around us, in our lives? We know as a matter of fact that the Angels are “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation? (Heb. 1:14) – but do we perceive that reality in times of trouble and distress? Oh that we be like Elisha in terms of his confidence and spiritual sight!

OURSELVES

We have already intimated some of the lessons that appear in these considerations for our own lives. Our role is to wage a warfare, and to build the ecclesial house. Paul exhorted Timothy to:

“be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus ... thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:1,3)

Again, the apostle gives the exhortation to the Ephesians:

“Finally, my brethren, ***be strong in the Lord***, and in the power of his might ... for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12).

In this warfare we are not alone. Just as Elisha describes, there is a power with us, which is not in the world. As it is written: “*greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world*” (1 Jno. 4:4). The angelic host encamps round about those that are heirs of salvation, delivering them in ways that may not be immediately apparent. Through the eye of faith, we behold them – but it may be only in the kingdom that we will appreciate the full extent to which they have helped us on our journey. Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, and it is he who governs the angelic hosts who deliver us: and he has the power of omnipotence. We need not fear those mockers around us: the power of Christ is infinitely greater than them, and his approval is what we seek, not that of our contemporaries.

Just as Israel looked to a Divine messenger to prepare a place before them, even so Messiah has promised likewise:

“in my Father’s house are many dwelling places ... ***I go to prepare a place for you***. And if ***I go and prepare a place for you***, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am there ye may be also” (Jno.14:3)

Taking the role of the Angels of old, Christ leads us in both our warfare, and in preparing a place within the house of God. To be granted a dwelling place in our Father’s House will be an immense privilege – but restricted to those who see the promises afar off, through the eye of faith.

CONCLUSION

It is written that:

“there hath no trial taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tried above that ye are able; but will with the trial also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13)

It may be that during our journey through the wilderness of life, that we may have to endure many trials, to shape our character and transform our thinking. But we have this assurance: “God is faithful”. He will never leave nor forsake us, no matter how dark things may seem. Though it may be that we must walk through the shadow of death, like the Psalmist, we will “fear no evil”, for God is with us, and surely “goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh for ever” (Psa. 23:6)

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