

HOW TO DEVELOP SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

Burnout can strike unexpectedly, but if it does it will have been building for some time. Last issue we looked at some of the causes, and how to avoid it. Continuing with the theme of the *inner life*, this issue we take the next step and look at developing spiritual strength.

Paul prayed: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (Eph 3:16f) He's praying for spiritual strengthening and resourcing in the inner life.

Did Winnie the Pooh ever suffer from burnout? Probably not. However, the following proverbs could be "words" for Winnie the Pooh:

Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.

Prov 24:13

It is not good to eat too much honey ...

Prov 25:27

If you find honey, eat just enough — too much of it, and you will vomit.

Prov 25:16

He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.

Prov 27:7

Putting them together, the point is clear. Too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. Balance is needed between "not enough" and "too much".

We may readily recognise that individualistic Christianity is an unbiblical deception, that the Body of Christ is of primary importance, and that we are the people of God *together*. Yet as vital as the revelation of the Body of Christ is, corporate Christianity can lead to a dependence on the *Body*, without dependence on the *Head*. We can be drawing life from the *Body*, the people, but not be in active relationship with the Lord—and our Christianity is therefore second-hand.

As new covenant people, we each have a great *privilege* and a great *responsibility*. Your privilege is: *to hear God for yourself*. And your responsibility is: *to hear God for yourself*. In the first-hand exercise of that privilege and responsibility, spiritual strength is developed.

What is spiritual strength?

It's not Superman! Spiritual strength is not the Christian equivalent of Mr Universe, with bulging, bodybuilder biceps and Atlas-stone ability. It's not: "I'm strong—I can lift heavy weights", but rather: "I'm strong—I can stand up on the inside and not give way or cave in when the pressure is all around". It's not about *muscle* so much as *resilience* and *robustness*.

We instinctively want the quick fix, the hypodermic of instant spirituality.

Popeye may be in trouble, but as long as he is able to crack that can, and have the spinach arc into his mouth, strength instantly comes and he can *deal* with whatsoever! So we spend our time looking for a spiritual spinach can. We look in sermons (for "keys"). We look for some life-changing spiritual experience. We see in the Scriptures where Moses met God through a burning bush (Exodus 3); or where Isaiah saw Him high and lifted up with the train of His robe filling the temple (Isaiah 6); or when Saul of Tarsus encountered Him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)—and we think, "That's what I need! If that happened to *me*, I'd be set up for life. I'd *never* falter or look back!" But would we?

More powerful than *encounter* is *consistency*. Spiritual experiences can surely help. They can suddenly deal with a number of problems and accelerate our progress. But we can't

coast in the glow or on the memory of spiritual experience. There's no substitute for the regular and steady disciplined approach of consistency, as any athlete knows. With much wisdom, Bob Mumford once said; "I don't care how high you jump. What I care about is—do you walk straight when you come down again?"

The "quick fix" can help, but will not by itself be permanent or even long-lasting. Your garden may be overrun with weeds through inattention and neglect. The "quick fix" approach will blitz it and get rid of all the weeds. That will surely help! But if the underlying pattern of inattention and neglect is not addressed, for all your "powerful weeding experience", the weeds will gradually grow back.

The secret of spiritual strength

The secret may not sound very impressive (because we're looking for a quick fix)—consistency in personal time and relationship with God.

Some find early morning the best time. Some find late at night the best time. There are no rules; but whatever is the best time for you, apply consistency! It may help to set the time as an *appointment*, an appointment with God at an agreed time and place. Then you have the extra motivation of imagining the presence of God "rolling in" at the appointed time. How can you be late, or stand God up?

The two main ingredients of the time are the *Word* and *prayer*, but beyond that there's no prescription. You can't know and interact with God by formula. However, here are some suggestions and hints ...

Read good-sized chunks of the Bible—it's spiritual food, building strength. You may "get a lot out of it", in which case have a little book and write it down. You may have questions about it—ask God, look it up, ask others. You may feel you "got nothing out of it", but amazingly you're still feeding your inner man whatever your mind thinks!

It's good to follow a Bible-reading plan. In terms of spiritual food, some passages of the Bible are like steak and some are like liver—and you need a balanced diet. If you live on *choice* passages, you'll inevitably go for the steak (or even the Mars Bars), but liver is good for you too. A Bible-reading plan means you live on *chosen* passages. It's okay to have *choice* bits if you also have *chosen* bits. Let someone else balance your diet or you'll live on steak and Mars Bars!

Popular Bible-reading notes may be helpful, but don't settle for them long term. It's still *choice* bits (it may not be *your* choice, but it's still bits!). Expect to need more than that.

When it comes to prayer, take the time you need. Gordon MacDonald said: "We are indoctrinated that the only way to achieve is through action. But prayer seems to be a form of inaction." Overcoming the "this is a waste of time" thoughts, we essentially pray for the will of God to be *done*.

The tools of spiritual strength

A task is much easier and much less frustrating if you have the tools! The tools of developing spiritual strength are spiritual disciplines. There are many, and some are intensely personal. Here are four:

Silence and solitude

This can be a hard battle, but it's worth it. It's like closing a double-glazed window on the noise of outside traffic: the difference is amazing. We often find ourselves in a conspiracy of noise, and it's difficult to be undistracted. Indeed solitude itself can test our inner reality: some are extremely uncomfortable in the absence of other people. Jesus said, "Go into your

room and close the door" (Mt 6:6). We can hear God in a noisy room, and even in a conversation. But it's in the quiet place that we develop spiritual strength.

Listening to God

We can easily forget to do this! We "get through" the readings, we pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17!!), and then we're done. But God wants to speak to us. He wants to communicate and interact with us. Listening may take more time, but it is essential to the reality of relationship.

Reflection and meditation

We may come to this time with God still preoccupied with the things we were doing, or rushed from all the things that need to happen when we're finished. It may take a while for us to settle and become open. Gordon MacDonald calls this the "out-of-breath principle". We may need a few minutes to catch our spiritual breath. A little time to reflect and meditate may be make-or-break to the development of spiritual strength.

Journaling

One practical activity that may help us "catch our breath", reflect, and indeed listen is to *journal*. Much has been written about this, and there are many helpful insights. Here I mean simply writing down our thoughts and our prayers to God, and also what He may be saying to us. The very act of writing will crystallise things, and reading over and reflecting on these notes later may be very enlightening. Without a journal, the immediate tends to overwrite the recent, and the latter is lost.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (Eph 3:16f)

Will these things *really* develop spiritual strength? Our tendency is to try them for a few days or a week, or even two or three weeks, and then decide. But that may not be long enough. And it indicates how prone we are to "quick fix" thinking! The approach of consistency along these lines may yield dividends in *years* rather than days.

To paraphrase John Wimber: Let's try it. Let's do it for two hundred years; and then we'll all get together again and talk about it. And if it doesn't work, we'll try something else!

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June 2005

Note: All Bible quotations are NIV unless otherwise stated.