

# ... but they who **TRUST** shall **renew** their strength

Isaiah 40:21-31

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"You can do anything you set your mind on!" "You can be anything you want to be!" Every heard that? Sounds good, doesn't it? But is it true? Can you really do anything you set your mind on? Can you really be anything you want to be? A brain surgeon? A rocket scientist? A professional football player? What college player doesn't want to make it to the NFL! What NFL player doesn't want to win a super bowl! A lot of people try. And what happens to most? They fail. And they are far more talented and physically fit than you or I.

We live in a world that prides itself in being able to do anything it sets its mind on, a world that has put men on the moon. A world that has so much power stored up in nuclear weapons, we could destroy ourselves a number of times over.

Where is *your* strength? Our text today brings up the idea of strength, and that we are renewed in strength. Which implies what? That we lose it. That we have times of great weakness. As we grow in our years, we know what it's like to lose our strength. Oh, to be young again! To be in the prime of our lives, physically.

Who's going to be in the Winter Olympics this month? Mostly those in their teens and twenties. Those with the strongest bodies, the fittest ones; the youth. And so too, during the days in Israel when these words were written, the youths were the ones with all the strength and energy.

But, *"Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall."*

It turns out, you can't do anything you set your mind on. Maybe you'll have the strength for a while to accomplish great things. But your strength won't last. It never does. Just as all the retired NFL players who would love to be playing in the Big Game tonight know! Why aren't they still out there? Their bodies have grown weary. They've lost the strength they once had.

It happens to all of us sooner or later. Even Christians, who emotionally and spiritually, have the strength of the Lord. It doesn't always last, does it? Life throws a lot our way. We bring on enough trouble of our own. A world, broken by sin, wears us down, even if we're a child of God. Some, more than others. Some seasons of life, more than others.

Israel had their glory years, especially under King David. Victory after victory! Prosperity galore! But that was a long time ago. By the time the prophet Isaiah was on the scene, things had changed. The people had turned away from God, to other things, as they were always prone to doing. As we are prone to do. They had turned from the Lord and following Him, to their own sinful ways. To following their own hearts and desires. To following the culture around them. To things that looked more enticing, more exciting, more fulfilling. We've all been there.

Isaiah, chapter one, gives us a taste of what that looks like. *Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: "Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged. ... Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land ... If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.*

And even though they drifted from God in unfaithfulness, as we too are prone to do, God remained faithful to them, to His promise to be their God. To not leave them. To not forsake them. *"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands ..."* (Isaiah 49:15-16)

Though many of God's chosen people no longer loved God, He would never stop loving them. Though *you* might stop loving God, He will never stop loving you.

And so, in His Fatherly love, God sends prophet after prophet, messenger after messenger, to WARN His erring children of the road they're going down. Why all the warnings? To turn their hearts back to Him. And they don't respond. They don't listen. They don't turn back to God, so that He could forgive them and embrace them.

Instead, in stubborn sin and rebellion, they turn on God and His messengers, again and again. And *still*, He won't give up on them! How many of us, if we had been God, would have given up on them long ago! But not God. He remains faithful. And so, in Fatherly love, He turns to extreme measures. Whatever it takes to bring back His wayward children. God uses the mighty Assyrian army to bring them to their knees. The northern Kingdom of Israel is ransacked and destroyed.

Yet in His grace and mercy, the southern kingdom of Judah still remains. Years later, they too are ransacked and destroyed, this time by the armies of Babylon. And their temple is destroyed. The ark of God, His dwelling place amongst them since the time He had rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh in Egypt and brought them to the promised land, is no more. His people are taken as captives to Babylon.

Who were they now? Where they God's people anymore? Didn't seem like it. Was there a way to go to Him? Was He present with them any longer? How could they worship Him without the temple, and the sacrifices, and the priests? Where could they turn?

And they were *weary* - in body, in mind, in spirit. Weary to the bone. Their strength was gone. And there was no way of getting it back. All hope was long gone.

There are times when we too might feel a bit like Israel in Isaiah's day. When life has beaten us down. It may not be our fault. Maybe we share some of the blame. Often, we do. That's the hard part to see. That part is more hidden, deep within us. A part that has always been with us from before the day we were born. That rebellious nature to God and His ways. We feel as though God Himself has forgotten all about us, even abandoned us. We're weary, down to the bone. Our strength is gone. And in God's eyes, that may not be the worst thing for us.

As strong as man *thinks* he is, in *reality*, we're quite weak. *"Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble."*

Man, at his strongest, is weak. We are inherently helpless. Even the strongest among us, compared to God, are infinitely weak. And this physical picture points to a spiritual picture - the spiritual picture of weariness and stumbling, and nothingness. (John Marcus)

Ever run out of energy? Run out of strength? Grow tired and weary? Physically? Mentally? Spiritually? To the bone? We are prone to stumbling. We are weak, especially in our spiritual lives, in our relation with God. As the Apostle Paul puts it, "Even when I *want* to do good, even on my *best* days, sin is right there with me, leading me astray."

In our weakness, there is One who remains strong. As Paul tells the Corinthians, *"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself ... But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."* (2 Corinthians 1)

*To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one is missing.*

*To whom then will you compare me?* A scientist - who can do next to nothing, without her instruments and equipment? An astronaut - who, if he gets a tear in his space suit, dies instantly? A ruler - whose rule always comes to an end, sooner or later? A Super bowl athlete - whose career, within a few short years, comes to an end? The richest person there is - who one day will have to leave it all behind and ends up like the homeless beggar?

We can build a spacecraft to go to the moon and beyond. We can win it all and become the reigning super bowl champions. But God *made* the moon and the stars and the beyond. God *made* the very DNA molecule that forms our bodies and gives us life.

Who will you compare GOD to? An astronaut? A brain surgeon? A super bowl MVP? The best of the very best! What a silly question. There is NO comparison. Before Him, we are nothing. In ourselves, in our sin, less than nothing.

And yet, He gave up everything for us. Emptying himself, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross! In ourselves, we are less than nothing. In Christ, we are everything, paid for by the precious blood of the Lamb - the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! Who takes away *your* sin, buying you back to Himself. Redeeming you as His very own!

*Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; and carry them close to His heart ... (Isaiah 40:9-17)*

*Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales ... All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness. (Isaiah 40:12 ...)*

Despite the mighty obstacles the people of Judah faced, despite the overwhelming forces of mighty Assyria and mighty Babylon, as powerful as they seemed and were, like us, they were NOTHING, compared to God. They needed to be reminded of that. Despite the difficulties and mighty obstacles you might face, even on a daily basis, you need to be reminded of who God is. A powerfully, loving God. His power is beyond measure. His love, on fullest display on the cross, is beyond measure.

In light of who God is, through the prophet Isaiah, He asks Judah a question. He asks *you* a question. Then WHY do you complain? *Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?* And then, those famous words ...

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; [Every one of us, no matter who we are, has our limits. The day will come when we our strength will fail us.] but they who wait for [trust] the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

*Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground.*

*Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre! ... His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love. (Psalm 147)*

*All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:6-8 ...)*

A Word that become flesh and dwelt amongst us. *"The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*

"You can do anything you set your mind on!" "You can be anything you want to be!" Are you sure about that? There are times when we too, might feel a bit like Israel in Isaiah's day. When life has beaten us down. When our own sin has taken its toll. We may feel like God Himself has forgotten about us, abandoned us. We're weary, down to the bone. Our strength is gone. But not God's!

Why did God give the apostle Paul, as he says, "A thorn in the flesh; something to torment him?" To keep Paul from thinking he could be anything he set his mind on. To keep him from thinking too much of himself and too little of God. To weaken him, in order to ultimately strengthen him. Not in himself, but in God. To not trust in himself, but in God, who said, not only to Paul, but to *you* as well,

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Ever face hopeless days – Physically? Emotionally? Spiritually? Ever feel like you're all alone, and that either God doesn't care and won't do anything about your condition, or He cares, but He's not powerful enough to do anything about it? May you learn to delight in your weakness. For God uses it, to drive you to your *true* strength. To lean on Another. To trust in Another, and find strength *in Him* alone.

*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

As the hymn writer puts it, "Under the shadow of Thy throne, still may we dwell secure. Sufficient, is Thine arm alone. And our defense, is sure!"

