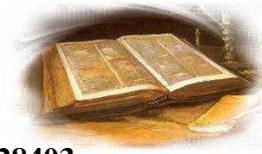


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My Brethren Strengthen Me (Continued) - by Ron Halbrook, West Columbia, Texas

When Jesus went to pray in Gethsemane in the shadow of death, he wanted his disciples near to him. In his deep sorrow, he drew Peter, James, and John close to him and said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here and watch" (**Mk. 14:26-42**). Having his disciples there meant something.

The law and example of Christ teach us to care for one another and to share our burdens and our strength with one another (**Gal. 6:2**). When one member of the body of Christ suffers, "all the members suffer with it" rather than ignoring it. When one member rejoices in good fortune, "all the members rejoice with it" rather than experiencing envy and strife (**1 Cor. 12:25-26**).

God Comforted Paul Through His Brethren

Much can be learned about drawing upon the strength of our brethren from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In **2 Corinthians 1**, Paul explains that he was "pressed out of measure, above strength, in so much that we despaired even of life." Paul had sacrificed to preach Christ and was constantly put into the jaws of persecution and death. In view of his first severe letter to Corinth, he staggered under a weight of anxious concern for the state of the Corinthian church. He struggled under the added weight of the problems which followed him while preaching in Asia. How did

Paul come through these trials? What did he learn from them?

Paul learned that God comforts us as we pass through trials so that we can comfort others (**vv. 3-5**). He also learned that no matter how much we suffer for the cause of Christ, Christ provides to us great comfort and consolation (**v. 5**). The prayers and the financial support of the Corinthians, as an expression of their love and fellowship in the gospel, had lifted his spirits (**vv. 8-11**). We learn from Paul to rejoice and glory in one another as we see mutual growth, faithfulness, and brotherly love. We rejoice in view of the day of Christ and the final redemption of our souls (**v. 14**).

Paul had been so concerned for the state of the Corinthians that he could not preach while at Troas because Titus had not returned to him bringing news from Corinth. The crisis at Corinth was more urgent to Paul than the open door at Troas (**2:12-13**). Though Paul's first letter had been very severe because of their sins, he suffered much affliction, anguish of heart, and many tears in the depth of his love for them (**2:4**).

"Nevertheless, God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (**7:6**). Titus had been refreshed and comforted by the evidence of godly sorrow among the Corinthians. Therefore Paul was greatly refreshed and comforted both by the news from Corinth

and by the encouragement they had given to Titus (**7:5-7,13,14**). When we rebuke sin in the lives of those we love, at times they do not realize the depth of our love and the anguish of our spirit on their behalf. When they repent and correct their lives, they may not realize what great strength and encouragement they give to others as well.

My brethren strengthen me when they serve the Lord in a faithful way and do what is fight! That is the point developed by Paul in the passages noted above. In **6:11-13**, Paul continues to appeal for the Corinthians to do what is right on the basis that love begets love. He had loved them enough to teach them the truth and to maintain his concern for their souls. They ought to love him enough to keep their hearts open to truth and to Paul as he continued to teach them the truth. Their hearts had partly been closed because of the influence of false teachers (**6:14-18**).

Paul had suffered much to bring them the truth. His life was a series of exposures to death. But it was all easier to bear if he could see fruit in them, share in their love, and share the hope of heaven with them (**6:4-10; 4:8-14**). Paul mourned with great sor-row when he found his brethren sinning, but was glad with great joy when they were strong in doing right (**12:21; 13:9**).

Paul discusses a thorn in the flesh which limited or hindered him in his gospel labors (**12:7-10**). Christians today who suffer many things in the flesh (from economic reverses to family problems to disease) may feel discouraged because their condition hinders them from accomplishing all that they aspire to do for the Lord. Paul learned that the grace and strength of Christ is partly given through his brethren. Those who loved him in the faith, labored with him, prayed for and with him, and encouraged him are

mentioned time and again in his letters. Paul knew no other brother who was so dear and who cared so much for him and his labors than the young preacher Timothy. Epaphroditus, a messenger from the church at Philippi, was a joy to Paul and a relief to his sorrows (**Phil. 2:19-30**).

When Do I Need Strength From My Brethren?

1. We may become physically, emotionally, and spiritually tired. Jesus recognized this weakness in our physical constitution when he said, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (**Matt. 26:41**). We need brethren who will help us with the load we bear in the midst of our weakness. We do not need flattery, but genuine commendation can lift our spirits. We need those who will exhort, encourage, and listen. Even Jesus needed those who would watch and wait with him, although he knew they themselves could endure only so much because of the limitations of the flesh.

2. Sorrow, disappointments, tragedies, and setbacks of many kinds will fall upon us during this life. Some of these affect us physically, some spiritually, and often we are affected in both ways. Let us remember how the presence of Jesus with Mary and Martha in **John 11** meant so much to them. He went first to share their sorrow, then to lift and strengthen their faith. We are the family of Jesus and we need to love our brethren in the same way that he showed love. It is foolish and hurtful for us to withdraw into a shell when we need the presence, love, and strength of our brethren.

3. When facing difficult decisions in life, we all need advice and wisdom from others. Every stage of life presents us with important decisions. These decisions may involve educations, dating, marriage, children, vocations, entertainment, where to live, etc. Remember Lot! At a time

when he needed advice, he thought only of ambition and the results were sad indeed. A spirit of arrogance and independence which shuts the door to the advice of others is self-destructive. "Without counsel purposes are disappointed; but in the multitude of counsellors they are established" (**Prov. 15:22**). No one else can make our decisions for us, but others can help us to find the strength and understanding necessary to make good decisions.

4. We need the strength which our brethren can give when we face the devices of Satan during temptation. Jesus told Simon, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (**Lk. 22:31**). Because of what happened to him in his own life, Peter was well qualified to say later, "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (**1 Pet. 5:8**). My brethren can help me to be stronger in the face of temptation and help me to see the way of escape.

5. When we stumble and fall in sin, we need the love and strength of our brethren to lift us up. Jesus told Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (**Lk. 22:32**). Jesus not only saw that Peter would fall, but also that he would repent and change. A major reason for Peter's change was the knowledge of the love and concern Christ had shown to him. Brethren who love and care about us can help us to repent and change. We must never be offended when brethren approach us in love to point out weakness, sin, and dangers to our soul!

How Can I Strengthen My Brethren?

1. Teach them the truth. We must learn all the truth we can and teach it to others with the confidence that it will encourage, edify, and strengthen them unto the salvation of their souls. This is why Paul spoke of "wholesome words, even the

words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and . . . the doctrine which is according to godliness." Error and compromise weaken and destroy our brethren. Paul warned about "questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth" (**1 Tim. 6:3-5**).

2. Set the best possible example. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (**Matt. 5:16**). We need to follow the example of Christ as closely as we can. We must put our footprints into his footprints as nearly as possible. We must stand as close to the Lord, to the truth, and to the standard of righteousness as we can. All who are watching us and being influenced by us will be led to walk on safe and sure ground in this way. Our example will not have the same influence for good if we constantly see how close we can get without crossing the line into sin, error, and worldliness. We must see how far away from all such we can get! You may think you can keep your balance standing on the edge of the ledge, but are you sure the brethren who follow you will not fall over the cliff?

3. Our spirit and attitude should reflect the beauty of Jesus. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (**Phil. 2:5**). Remember the song, "Let the Beauty of Jesus Be Seen in Me." Our brethren grow stronger when they see in us a childlike trust in God, patience, an unselfish spirit, sincerity, reverence, delight in the law of the Lord, and determined opposition to all sin and error. Brethren are discouraged rather than encouraged when they see in us a disposition of complaint, murmuring, bitterness, envy, strife, personal ambition, and compromise with sin and error for

personal advantage.

4. Strength is shared by hospitality and visiting with each other. The New Testament is full of admonitions for us to be busy in this good work (**Heb. 13:2; Jas. 1:27; 1 Pet. 4:9**). When Christians can be together on an informal basis, when they visit in order to share with one another, and when they show interest in each others' souls, their spiritual strength will abound. We need to open our homes rather than to isolate ourselves behind closed doors and walls. We need to go into the homes of others rather than to ignore them. Unity and love abound when brethren visit "from house to house (and) eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (**Acts 2:46**).

5. Pray for each other. Knowing of the trials that Peter was about to face and knowing Peter's weakness, Jesus prayed for him that his faith might not fail (**Lk. 22:32**). We ought to pray often for each other. Paul often mentioned in his letters the prayers he offered up to God, both giving thanks for his brethren and making intercession on behalf of their needs.

6. Warn, rebuke, and discipline. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to "warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (**1 Thess. 5:14**). In the next letter Paul urged that the time had come to "withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (**2 Thess. 3:6-15**).

7. Forgive and comfort those who repent. Paul said that if we fail to do this we cause the erring Christian to be "swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" so that "Satan should get an advantage of us" (**2 Cor. 2:7-11**). When we show a forgiving spirit to those who genuinely repent, we increase their resolve and determination to do what is right and to overcome the devices of Satan.

8. Be faithful in worship. "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (**Heb. 11:24-25**). Willful absence from the services shows our lack of love not only for God but also for our brethren. We strengthen and encourage one another as we pray, sing, study God's word, and on the first day of the week give of our means and share at the Lord's table together.

Even in our own time of need, we can see and meet the needs of others for comfort, strength, and edification. Jesus needed Peter's encouragement, but he considered Peter's need at the same time (**Lk. 22:31-32**). While hanging on the cross, Jesus thought of the needs of others (**Lk. 23:34,43; Jn. 19:26-27**). In the process of giving strength, we grow in the unselfish love of Christ himself and so find the strength we need in helping others!

Have you come into the family of Jesus, found his forgiveness, received his strength, and shared the blessings of the gospel with those you can help? Do not languish and despair in the family of Satan any longer! He can give you only doubt, disappointment, and eternal damnation. "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (**Acts 22:16**). If Satan has sifted you as an erring child of God, "repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee" (**Acts 8:22**). As we serve the Lord, he will give us strength according to our need. He gives that strength in many ways. One way is this: My brethren strengthen me! - **Via - Guardian of Truth XXXII: 17, pp. 543-544, 546v September 1, 1988**