

Strength in Christ

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[0 : 00] So I was 13 years old and it was the day of the year that I dreaded more than any other. School sports day.

And yours truly was running in the 1500 metres. I was selected to do that and in case you're tempted to think that sounds impressive, selected.

Let me just give you some of the back story. We'd been asked to sign up to put ourselves forward for an event and everyone else in my class had done so.

Except for me. And it seemed that nobody else wanted to run 1500 metres on a hot summer afternoon. And I didn't have a lot of space for negotiation when the teacher confronted me with a clipboard that had been signed up for every single event except for that one and my name was missing from it.

So me and 1500 metres were united. And I set off and I learnt a lot on that particular day about running distances.

[1 : 14] In case you haven't guessed, I'm rubbish at sports. I always have been, probably always will be. But I do enjoy running now. But I didn't much then. I started off 1500 metres ahead and just went for it.

And very, very quickly found that I was in front. And I thought, this is great. Three quarters of a lap around the field. And I was ahead of the pack.

And people were shouting me on and I thought, this has never happened to me before. Naively, I hadn't really taken on board the fact that I still had another three laps to go.

And to cut a long story short, I was not only last, but I was spectacularly last. But a lesson that it taught me was there is all the difference between a distance run and a short sprint.

Perhaps there is a danger that we can think that in our spiritual lives we can get through with the sprint.

[2 : 30] But life is not about sprinting. Life's a marathon. That's the reality of it. Those are the challenges. That's why we need strength.

And the strength that we need is not just the short burst strength. Christian faith, faith in Jesus, it's a lifelong thing. It never stops. From here, right the way through to eternity, we're called to follow him. And some days that will be easier than others. Jesus never said it would be easy. And that strength that we need, that strength that Paul is talking about, that strength in Christ, it's not about the strength needed for a short dash.

It's the sort of strength that's needed for that marathon that we call life. And that's the kind of strength that we need. When we're dealing with that difficult boss, whether we're dealing with a difficult marriage, whether we're dealing with a difficult child, teenager, whether we're dealing with a difficult health issue, whatever difficult situation, these situations come our way.

And whatever it is that we are facing in our lives, we need strength. But Paul says this, that we can do all things, not just some things.

[3 : 59] We can do all of these things that come our way through the strength that he gives us. And this passage that we have before us this evening, this morning, I just want to pull out three things that we have.

It says, that explain why and how this is so. And it begins, verse one, where he says, therefore, stand firm in the Lord. Therefore, stand firm in the Lord.

Now, it's intriguing, isn't it, when something starts with the word therefore. If I came up to you out on the street or in a supermarket or something like that and just said, therefore, and then proceeded to speak, you'd think that was a slightly strange thing to do.

Because you don't normally start a conversation or indeed anything with that word. Because it's a word that functions as a kind of a glue between the sentence that's about to come and that which has preceded it.

It joins two things together. So when we come across that word therefore in Scripture, we've got to think not what comes next, but actually what comes before it. And when we look back into chapter three of Philippians, we see exactly what Paul was talking about.

[5 : 16] Paul says in chapter three, he's talking about our citizenship that is in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven.

Yet tragically, often people seem to think that Christianity, that its message is about a ticket to heaven. It's not. It never has been. And that's a profound distortion of what it is.

Nowhere in Scripture is faith in Christ depicted as a ticket to heaven. It is everywhere presented as a passport of heaven.

That word passport probably doesn't occur in Scripture, to be honest. But citizenship does. And there's all the difference. You see, whereas a ticket is something that's just about getting you in, citizenship is about who you are and what your relationship is between a place.

And as a follower of Jesus, it's not just about access to something. It's far deeper than that. It's about knowing who you are in Christ. That's what this series is about. It's about your identity. And so if we were to talk about faith at all, let's not talk about tickets.

[6 : 28] Let's talk about passports. You see, if you've got a passport in your hand, wherever you are in the world, it reminds you of where your true place of belonging is. You may be far from home, but that is where home is for you.

When we're in those difficult places, those times of situations where we need that strength, we need to be reminded of where our home truly is. And that is the promised future of God, that eternity that nothing can destroy.

You may have heard that just recently the great American preacher Tim Keller passed away after a very long struggle with cancer. One of the things that Tim Keller once said, one of the many profound things that he said, disarmingly simple at face value, but very, very profound.

He said simply this, if the resurrection of Jesus is true, everything's going to be all right. That's where his citizenship is.

Citizenship in him. Identity, that's where we belong. And it's knowing that Paul says that and unpacks that in Philippians 3 that he's able to then start by saying, therefore, therefore.

[7 : 50] So then what does he go on to say? Well, he goes on to say many things, but knowing that life is not just about sprinting, but it's a marathon.

He says, verse 11, I've learnt to be content. Notice he doesn't say, I'm content.

I've learnt to be content. See, learning is a process. It might happen quickly. More often, it tends to happen over a period of time.

And you get the fear, as Paul is saying this, that he's referring to the latter. That contentment is not something that just happened for him. He's had to wrestle really hard.

Remember, this is a man for whom life was not a walk in the park. whose life was constantly on the edge for what he was trying to do in planting churches.

[8 : 48] A man who was put in prison. A man who was beaten. A man who went without. And so, being content with those situations in all circumstances, he says, was something that he has had to learn, to learn over a period of time.

So if we ever look at our own lives and we think, what's gone wrong? Don't be surprised because contentment is something that is supposed to take a long time if Paul is somebody that we're meant to be learning from.

And sometimes we've got to dig deep. It doesn't come naturally. It's not immediately obvious. It can be hard work. So don't be surprised. Don't think that somehow you're getting it wrong, that you're stumbling, that somehow you're not a real Christian, that you're not really safe, that there's some hidden formula somewhere that you're not following.

No. That's how it is. Contentment is something that has to be learned. That was true for Paul and we shouldn't be surprised when it's our reality too.

That strength that we need for that marathon that is life is something that comes gradually. But of course, to go back to that therefore, we can come back to it and we should go back to it over and over again.

[10:05] Our citizenship is in heaven. Our citizenship is in him. That's where we are. Or that is where we are on our way to, but that is where our home is. Remember, the resurrection of Jesus is true.

It's going to be alright. So we've got to dig deep, but how do we dig deep? Well, Paul goes on even more and he says, in verse 4, he says this, rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again. Rejoice. So he's not happy just to state that. He's really got to emphasise. He's got to bring this home. This is serious stuff, he's saying.

You've got to rejoice. I'm going to say it again. Repeat. Rejoice. Now, how do we do that? How do we do that when we actually don't feel that we've got that strength?

What do we do? Well, rejoicing actually is the greatest weapon that we have. I'll tell you a story. It's during the Napoleonic War and 18,000 troops marched upon an Austrian town where there was no military presence.

[11:27] The town council were getting ready to surrender to Napoleon's troops. except that the parish vicar begged with them and said, no, let's worship.

He reminded them that it was actually Easter and said, okay, we're surrounded here by troops and we don't have any. But it is Easter.

Let's ring the church bells, go in and worship and commit this to God. And that's exactly what they did. By the time they came out of church, the Napoleonic forces had fled.

They had heard the sound of the church bells ringing and the people praising God and assumed that they were giving thanks because their own armies had clearly arrived.

Rejoicing sends the enemy packing. it gives them his marching orders. The sound of rejoicing should never be underestimated.

[12:38] And why is that? Well, here's three reasons. Or sorry, three things, three ways in which we can go about doing this when we don't necessarily feel like rejoicing.

The first thing is this. Quite simply, make God your highest joy. Make God your highest joy. That may seem a really obvious thing to say but it's important for us to latch onto it because there are so many other choices around.

So many things that face us every day of our lives that could become our highest joy or things that we pursue but it's actually it's a choice who we choose or what we choose to be the most important thing in our lives.

and if we are to follow the way of the New Testament there is only one that can ultimately be that source of joy. Make God your highest joy.

Secondly, forgive me if I'm stating the obvious but focus on the Holy Spirit. Now it's no accident that in Scripture there is such a strong correlation between joy and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

[14:00] Repeatedly over and over and over again it's when the Holy Spirit is present that joy is present but when joy is present it's because the Holy Spirit is present. That doesn't mean to say that problems aren't present just the opposite.

Think of Paul. Think of Paul having to learn his contentment. but it is when the Holy Spirit is present that joy is to be found. Make God the focus.

Make God the supreme source of joy and secondly focus on the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, cultivate what is often called an attitude of gratitude.

Give thanks. Continually give thanks. Sometimes as I say like Paul to learn to be content we've got to dig quite deep to bring those things to mind. That's why it can be helpful to actually write things down.

Have a book write things down start the day end the day perhaps start and end the day with it. Try and think of one thing or three things whatever it is but bring some structure into it to write some things down and think okay what have I got to be thankful right now?

[15:07] Sometimes they may be really really massive things probably most of the time they will be extraordinarily ordinary mundane things but those are important things and it's when we cultivate that sense of gratitude and being thankful and knowing what we have that we are set free to rejoice more and to make more room for God and more room for his Holy Spirit and therefore more room for that strength that only he can bring that strength that we need not to sprint but to run that marathon of life.

One last story is a story about Corrie Ten Boom Corrie Ten Boom her sister Betsy were middle aged Christian women who during the Second World War they were living in Holland and they

resolved to conceal fleeing Jews from the Nazis they rescued many but eventually they were arrested and they were taken to Ravensbrook concentration camp Betsy died there but Corrie miraculously survived the concentration camp and later witnessed to the strength that God gave her when she was asked how she prepared how to prepare for persecution she used to tell this story about her childhood she said this when I was a little girl I went to my father and I said daddy I was afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for

Jesus Christ tell me said father when you take a train to Amsterdam when do I give you the money for the train ticket do I give it to you three weeks before no daddy she said you give me you give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train that is right my father said and so it is with God's strength our father in heaven knows when you will need the strength to be a martyr for Jesus Christ he will supply all you need just in time let's pray we started this service by asking the question what sort of things do we need strength for for each of us that will perhaps have a different answer right now but let's just think right now of what things we can think of that we need God's strength for and let's hold them before him in prayer Lord thank you that it's not because we are strong but because we are weak and broken that you have come to us in Christ and that it is because we are not strong but that we are actually weak that you come to us in the power of your Holy Spirit come to us now we pray come into those situations that we hold in our hearts before you now those situations that lie before us we lay them before you come Holy Spirit come in your strength and in your power fill us and renew us in your perfect strength we pray in Jesus name Amen