

STRENGTHENING FAITH

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Text: Eph.6: 10,13, 16. Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

The words of Paul to the church at Ephesus which were read in the scriptural lesson are the clarion call of a man mighty through his faith. Paul was a man who had endured more than his share of the sufferings and hardships of life. He traveled all over the civilized world of his time preaching the teachings of Christ, and he did this without even the benefit of good health. He had the strength to endure however, for he forged the shield of a strong faith, and endured as seeing him who is invisible. When he tells us, then, to put on the whole armor of God that we may be able to stand in the evil day, he is speaking as one who has tested the power of faith and found in it the strength to endure. Think of what Paul did! He was not a particularly gifted man intellectually. He failed miserably at Athens because he wasn't a good speaker and didn't know the philosophical way of thought that the well-educated Athenians lived by. But he pressed on in the face of persecutions and disappointments. He succeeded in establishing a church at Corinth, a pagan city which was notoriously corrupt. A seaport town is always pretty corrupt, but Corinth had two waterfronts and was twice as rotten as any other. Paul had something that is more powerful than intellect; he had the power which comes from firm conviction, the power that comes from a knowledge that with God all things are possible. He faced the oppositions from the Jews fearlessly; although he had no tradition behind him, although he was not numbered among the chosen disciples, he defended his authority because he knew the indwelling Christ; he knew that he had available the whole armor of God. Paul's whole life was dedicated to the task of bringing to others the power and strength that comes through Christ, to teach people how they might stand amidst evil by putting on the whole armor of God. Notice what this armor is: truth, righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit, but, says Paul, above all is the shield of faith.

It is this shield of faith that we shall think about this morning; especially thinking about how we may make this shield strong and great enough to withstand trials. How may we build our faith stronger so that we shall be able to do those things that we know in our hearts we should do? One thing is certain; we cannot tap the resource unfailing of God's power unless we come in contact with Him in some way, and we do not get to know by God by putting our attention on our everyday pursuits and never give a thought to Him. To build our faith stronger then we must reach His Spirit.

One way to become aware of Him is to read the writings of those who have found Him in their hearts and lives and told us of His nature. We find the noblest and greatest of these accounts in the book that has stood the test of the centuries as embodying the Word of God - our Bible. This is the book that is the foundation of our Protestant faith; this is what we look to as the fountainhead of our religious beliefs and inspirations, finding it of more value as the basis of our

faith than an institution which in some miraculous way is supposed to pipe divine grace to its worshippers. And yet how many of us are ignorant of what is contained in the Bible.

People are illiterate for the most part today so far as the Bible is concerned. It does not seem fashionable to read the Bible any more. This tendency forms a grave danger to Protestantism; because this is the authority for our religion, our religion must decay when interest in the Bible decays for we have no established institution to carry on as authority, and center of our faith. Why is it that people no longer read the Bible? It seems that the fault is not theirs alone. The Bible is a book that was written over centuries and it contains much that is puzzling and perplexing to the modern mind. The world we live in every day seems much different from the world we read about in the Bible. This is not an easy book to read and understand; the person who says he knows it from A to Z has not plunged beneath the surface, for no one can exhaust this treasury of the religious thought of the ancients. The Bible is difficult to understand because of the many different points of view that come from the many different types of religious experience. Even the idea of God changes. Remember the story of Elisha being tormented by the little children who wanted to see him ascend in a chariot of fire as Elijah did, calling to him, Go up thou old bald head. Elisha becoming angry called on the Lord to call out two she bears which ate the little children. This picture of God can hardly stand up beside the idea that Jesus gives us of a merciful, loving father. The Bible is full of such inconsistencies; this does not in any way invalidate the teachings of the Bible; rather it means that we must read it with understanding of the occasion and times of the various parts. But when we do read with this in mind we find that the Bible helps and inspires us no matter what our problem. One of the greatest problems in all religious thought is the problem of evil. Thousands of books have been written about it, but the greatest of these is that magnificent drama in the Old Testament, the book of Job. A careful reading and study of this book will tell you why the righteous suffer. The New Testament is in some ways easier to understand and is more important for our religion. But we must not forget that the Scriptures that Jesus himself used are the Old Testament.

It is not by accident that the best sellers of all time are led by the Bible. This is the book that has been the comfort and hope of religious minds throughout the centuries. But it may surprise you to learn what the second best seller is. This is the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis, and third on the list of all time best sellers is Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Devotional reading leads the list of our reading interests through the centuries because it has been of sure help and inspiration. We must not let our everyday interests crowd out our devotion to the book that contains our spiritual and religious heritage, but faithfully read this testimony of the power and glory of God. When we do this we will find that our own thinking takes on a more lofty spirit and we will find God closer to us by seeing how He lived in the hearts of others. And when we bring the knowledge we have gained from centuries of civilization to bear upon the Bible, it will gain rather than lose anything of the significance that the message of the Bible has for us. Here we learn the righteousness, truth and faith which constitute the armor of God we so desperately need today.

To build our faith we must get close to God. Devotional reading is one of the greatest aids to this end. But we should try to come close to Him by our own direct efforts through private prayer. This is the great secret of Paul's success; he constantly consulted the will of the indwelling

Christ which he felt in his heart through prayer. And he urged others to pray steadfastly, in order to gain the power of the Spirit. More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. It is the technique of seeking and finding the will of God as it speaks in our hearts so that we may be empowered in our actions by doing those things He would have us do.