

SPIRITUAL STRENGTH,-ITS REALITY, DECAY, AND RENOVATION

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"But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." ISA. 40v31.

THE occasion of the words arises from the complaint of Jacob and Israel, verse 27, *"Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God."* It was with respect unto the dark dispensations of God's providence towards the whole church, the church in general, that this complaint was made.

I shall not stay to open the particulars; but as it is the complaint of the church in general, upon the account of God's dispensation in general, so it is the condition of particular believers, of many believers, internal and external, spiritual and temporal, that they may be brought to that state wherein, through their weakness and unbelief, they may make this complaint. God gives an answer hereunto, verse 28, *"Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding."* He proposeth his own infinite and glorious properties and excellencies for the relief of his people. When all other considerations fail them (as there is a time and sea-son when nothing will relieve us but that which is every way in-finite), it overbears and overwhelms them.

But in the following verses, and in that which I have read, he gives them to understand where the great mistake lay. They thought it was trouble that arose for want of kindness and evidence of kind-ness from God, when indeed their trouble arose all for want of spi-ritual strength in themselves; and therefore God speaks not unto them of further manifestations of his love and grace to deliver them out of those straits, but he speaks to them of giving them more strength, more grace, whereby they may be able to manage them-selves better under it. All our troubles and all our despondencies, they are not from want of sufficiency in God to relieve us, they are not from the greatness of our troubles and temptations; but they are all of them from the weakness of our faith and our grace. We think otherwise, but it is well if we could learn that that is the true state of things with us. When Peter was coming upon the water to Christ, the winds began to rise, and the waves to run high; and Peter cried out, "Lord, save me." And now, if you should have asked Peter why he doubted, he would have answered, 'Because of the greatness of the danger,'-because the winds and waves of the sea were against him. Christ lets him know it was otherwise: "O thou of little faith, where-fore didst thou doubt?" It was not because of the greatness of his danger, but because of the littleness and weakness of his faith, that he was put into that condition of doubting. "My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God." ' Why saith the Lord, ' you must have more strength. Therefore that is it which God promises in these words, " They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength." And I think these things lie plain in it, which I shall but little more than name:-First, That all believers have a spiritual strength. Secondly, That this spiritual strength of believers is subject to decays, to weaknesses. And, Thirdly, That the way to renew this spiritual strength and to increase it is by waiting upon God. And then we may, in a word or two, show you what it is to wait upon God, and how we do renew and increase our spiritual strength thereby.

First, It is plain in the text that all believers have a spiritual strength: "They shall renew their strength." I acknowledge the word "their" is not in the original, but the very phrase carries it, "They shall renew strength;" that is, their own spiritual strength. Who hath a spiritual strength by

nature? We have no strength, we have no power, no ability to live the life of God, nor to do any thing that tends thereunto: Rom. v. 6, "*When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly;*" and till we are made partakers of the benefits and effects of the death of Christ, we are ungodly and without strength; we have no strength at all. No unbeliever hath any strength.

But now all that do believe, they have spiritual strength: 2 Pet. 1:3, "*According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue;*" that is, whatsoever is re-quired to lead a godly life is given unto believers by the divine power of God, a power that hath given us all things that pertain to life and godliness,-strength to enable us to live, and godliness for a holy and godly life and conversation. There are expressions to that purpose in other places: Eph. 3:16, "*That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man.*" Through the Spirit, the Spirit of God, that is, the author of all grace, he strengtheneth us with might, gives might and power. And the apostle affirms the same again, Col. 1:11, "*Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering.*" And though there is a prin-ciple, a seed of grace, a habit of holiness, inlaid in the heart and mind of all believers, enabling them to live unto God, a sufficiency of grace for that end and purpose, yet so as [that] what they do by virtue thereof is not done by themselves but by the grace of God. As our apostle said,

"I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me;" giving him strength, power, and ability to go through with all those dangerous and labori-ous duties wherein he was engaged in the work of the gospel. We have no strength by nature, we are dead in trespasses and sins; but when quickened by the Spirit of God, he gives us this spiritual strength and power whereby we are enabled to live to God.

Secondly, This strength of believers, which is the actings of the principle of grace and holiness in them, is subject unto decays. "*Be watchful,*" saith Christ in the counsel he gives unto the church of Sardis, Rev. 3:2, "*and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.*" There was a decay in grace, a decay in spiritual strength, wherein their faith and love, in all the fruits of them, and works, were ready to die.

It would be worth the while, had I time, to consider the many ways whereby our spiritual strength and principle of grace, wherewith our natures are inlaid in our conversion unto God, are weakened. It is principally by our own negligence, by powerful corruptions and temp-tations, by cares of the world and the business of it, by want of attend-ing unto the frame of our hearts, and not keeping our own vineyard. There is spiritual strength. This spiritual strength is subject to decay.

Thirdly, How shall we renew this spiritual strength? How shall we increase it? It is greatly incumbent upon us to be daily increas-ing our spiritual strength, to be renewing it, to be strengthening the things that are ready to die. All the losses we are at and troubles we meet with, they are all for want of well discharging this duty, because we do not take care to renew our spiritual strength. The way whereby it is to be done is by waiting upon God. Would you be strong, lively, vigorous, active Christians? Would you have power to perform holy duties, to resist temptations, be fruitful in the world, be cheerful in yourselves? Would you have corruptions die, and wither, and be prevailed against? You will say, ' We would have all these things.' Why, the way is plain;-it is to wait upon God.

What is it to wait upon God? How is it that we may increase our spiritual strength by waiting

upon God?

There are three or four things in waiting upon God that make up waiting; for it is a peculiar kind and work of faith that is called wait-ing: and if you will read the Scriptures, you will find that there is not a duty or exercise of faith which hath greater or more precious promises annexed to it than this of waiting.

1. The first thing in waiting is looking unto God, eyeing of God. So David expresses it in the Psalms: "*As the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God.*" God expresses it by ' looking:' "Look unto me, ~~at~~ ends of the earth." " In the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee," saith David, " and will look up."

Now, this looking unto God, which is the foundation of waiting, is the fixing of the soul towards God; as when we look upon a thing, we make it the object of our consideration, and bend our thoughts towards it. If we would wait upon God, we must be, in the actings of our faith, looking towards him; that is, we must con-sider his goodness, the excellency of Christ, his promises, and his truth and faithfulness in them, and his power. We must be in the contemplation of these things if we intend to wait upon God.

2. The second thing is patience in looking. Sometimes it is called " patient waiting," waiting patiently for the Lord, not to faint, not to be weary. Many a one will cast a look towards God, but as quickly weary; this is not waiting. But he that will wait on God is to do it in patience, against all discouragements and oppositions that may arise from our own hearts and temptations. When God comes not in as we desire, nor such a progress is made as we would have, yet if we look unto God, that is patient waiting.

3. There is expectation too, and this is the life and soul of waiting. Waiting is often expressed in the Scriptures by ' silence:"*My soul is silent to God;*" which silence is a quiet waiting to hear what God will answer. It is a wondrous sorry waiting on God when we do not expect something from him. To come together in the performance of this or the like duties without expectation of re-ceiving something from God, it is the way to go as we came, with-out strength renewed or increased. We come to a duty and go from it at the same rate, when we have no expectation of receiving from God. Where there is no expectation, there is no waiting. Look to God with expectation to receive things suitable to what we expect, and then we shall see his infinite bounty and goodness. This is waiting on God.

The way wherein we exercise this grace is by prayer. I do not put it wholly upon it; for acting of faith, quiet submission of soul, constant looking up and expectation in a course of walking before God, make up a great part of this duty; but the solemn discharge of this duty is by prayer, wherein we act all these things. We ought to pray always, and to continue in prayer; and we are the strangest, kind of creatures upon the earth if we abide in this duty without ex-pectation from God. A man that looks for nothing from God had best never pray more. In prayer we are to exercise this grace of waiting upon God. They that thus wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

Whence is it that the renewing and increase of spiritual strength depend upon our waiting on God? There is not any thing in this world wherein we are more concerned, next to the securing our in-terest in Jesus Christ, than this one thing of renewing our strength, our spiritual strength. Especially it is of great concern unto us now when it is a time, as hath been confessed unto God, wherein there are great decays, visible decays, in most professors, and inward decays I fear in all. Therefore it is our duty to consider how we may improve this great duty, for this end, to renew

strength, to strengthen the things that are ready to die, that you and I that are weak may be strong, that are dead may be quickened and live, that our graces may be lively and flourishing. Saith the Lord, '*They that wait upon me shall renew their strength.*' They shall do so upon a double assurance:-

First, Upon a moral assurance, by reason of the faithfulness of in his covenant. God hath promised it, and we may really believe it because of God's promise: ' They that wait upon me shall renew their strength. If we wait upon God in that way he accepts and approves, he is faithful to do it. And upon this account we may truly say, and do believe it, that no person under heaven waits I on God as he ought, but God doth renew spiritual strength unto I him, doth revive his graces, strengthen his faith and love, and enable him to obedience, as he hath promised.

Secondly, It is the way that God hath appointed for us to draw supplies of spiritual grace and strength from him. Our judgment and our dignity are not like those of the Chaldeans, that proceeded of themselves, Hab. 1:7; but our judgment and dignity are of another,-God in Christ. All is from Christ;-our strength and honour are all from another. There must be a way, therefore, whereby we may derive strength from another, since it is not from ourselves. Now, this is the way that God hath appointed for us to derive supplies of spiritual strength from Jesus Christ, in whom are all the springs and stores of it; it is by waiting upon God in the ways before mentioned,-in the way of looking, of patience, of expectation on God in Christ,-that he will perform his promise. God hath made this the way of communicating strength unto us, and deriving strength from Jesus Christ. ' Abide in me: if ye abide not in me, ye can do nothing; but if ye abide in me, ye shall be branches that shall be purged and bring forth fruit.' Our abiding in Christ is by this exercising of faith upon God in Christ, whereby spiritual strength is renewed unto us.

I might speak of those things that are subordinate hereunto, because by this way of waiting upon God we mix his promises with faith, which God hath appointed; but I should then transgress my purpose and take up your time.

I have spoken these words to direct you and myself to the true use of this duty, that we have so frequent opportunities for, that none of us may rest in the work done, or satisfy ourselves that we have been at such a duty so often, so long, but improve it to its proper end, which is waiting on God in times of backsliding, that we may renew our strength; the consequence whereof is in the next words, '*We shall then mount up with wings as eagles; we shall run, and not be weary; and we shall walk, and not faint.*'