

## VIRTUE 8

# STRENGTH

No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. We wait in hope for the LORD; He is our help and our shield.

—Psalm 33:16-20

Scripture and the world alike define knightly traits like honesty almost identically. Honesty just is what it is. This is not so, however, with the knightly trait of strength. In fact, Scripture and the world define *strength* in quite opposite ways. Let me explain.

If we are “full of ourselves,” we are usually not “full of God.” Being empowered and acting out of our own self-will and drive will usually not get us very far, at least not in God’s eyes. God prefers us to be emptied of our own strength and ready to be filled with His strength. When wrestling with the issue of strength, the apostle Paul asked God three times to remove a thorn in his side that was sapping him of his energy and stamina. God refused to remove it, however, and instead said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for

my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul goes on to write, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). There we have it—our weakness clears the way for God’s strength to *rest on us*. Next, let’s turn to just how we can be filled with such strength.

### **JESUS: THE SOURCE OF REAL STRENGTH**

Christ says that if we drink from the waters of this world, we will continue to thirst. In other words, if we draw our strength from the wells of the world, we will continue to need this source for our strength. The world offers many such wells—wealth, fame, hobbies, and many interests that, when out of balance in our lives, can become wells that leave us thirsty.

But if we drink from the water that Christ gives, we will not only plug the hole in the bottom of our souls, Christ Himself will cause a new spring of living water to well up from *within* us. When Jesus was speaking with a Samaritan woman at a well, He asked her for a drink of water. She replied, “You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” His response to her was amazing:

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:10-14).

This concept of sourcing your well of inner strength with the Lord is also mentioned in the Old Testament:

As they make music they will sing, “All my fountains are in you” (Psalms 87:7).

They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light (Psalm 36:8-9).

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13).

The verse from Jeremiah above shows what can happen to our strength if our hearts are *not* tapped into the Lord. If we dig our own cisterns—our own sources of encouragement, support, and strength—they will eventually leak, leaving us emptier than when we started relying on them. What is sapping your strength? Are you digging any empty, broken wells in your life? Let God redirect you to the *living* well.

## **STRENGTH IN THE LIFE OF A MODERN KNIGHT**

While still very important, a modern knight’s need for strength to survive battles is no longer physical but spiritual—dealing with a person’s will. Let me explain. Have you ever experienced a situation where you felt weak at the knees? Could hardly talk? Have you ever trembled in fear? Have you ever felt like someone or something knocked the wind right out of your chest, all without even being physically touched? I certainly have. If you haven’t yet, live long enough and you will (it is a certainty!).

However these challenges come, we need to be ready for them. Unfortunately, there are no recipes for whipping up superhuman strength when these situations arise. But here comes the caveat—while we cannot control how our bodies may physically or emotionally respond when we experience shock or fright, we can load up on physical, spiritual, and emotional strength to be prepared for when these situations occur. True strength comes only from God and through our dependence on God:

Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: “I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have exalted a young man from among the people. I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him. No enemy will subject him to tribute; no wicked man will oppress him. I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries. My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted” (Psalm 89:19-24).

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:30-31).

For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God’s power we will live with him to serve you (2 Corinthians 13:4).

To keep me [the apostle Paul] from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh,

a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

There are some major differences between the strength of a worldly knight or warrior compared to God’s knight. Some of these are provided in the table below.

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>The World’s Knight is . . .</b>	<b>God’s Knight is . . .</b>
Discouragement	Self-reliant	Encouraged by God, the Bible, and the counsel of others
Hitting a road block	Determined and stubborn	Surrendered and determined
A competitive situation	Driven by pride	Driven by a desire to please God
Abundance	Used for personal gain	Purposefully used for the benefit of others
Failure	Compelled to “pull himself up by the bootstraps”	Seeks God through prayer and waits on the Lord
Injustice that involves the loss of personal pride	Compelled to take revenge	Inclined to take the high road and overlook the loss
Threatened by things outside one’s control	Moved to “stand up and fight” in one’s own strength	Moved to kneel down and take steps in God’s power and timing
Downtrodden or defeated	Forced to take action	Drawn to “pray up” and wait on God and move in His timing, plan, and way

Ultimately, a knight uses his God-given strength for serving others, laying it all on the line, and not for self-absorption and personal enjoyment: “Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time—for strength and not for drunkenness” (Ecclesiastes 10:17). In short, a knight does not use his excessive strength for creating too much personal excess. Do not get me wrong here—there are more rewards in store for those who work longer and harder at their work than for those who slack in their work, but a knight realizes that all of his resources can either be used and given away in this lifetime or be left for the survivors to divide later (which is not always a bad idea—especially if it is carefully and purposefully designated).

What is meant by strength in the context of knighthood? A knight should be strong in both spirit and body. Ultimately, a knight is victorious in battle through strength of spirit, not by flesh. The victor in a sword battle is one who fights with sheer will and spirit, not by one who competes with only mastered mechanical moves. A knight’s spirit is made strong only by God by surrendering to God.

A knight’s body is made strong by exercise, and, no matter what a knight’s vocation or physical condition, this means exercising more than six hours per week (yes—I’m using a specific minimum because most experts agree this is, in fact, a minimum!). There are many ways to stay fit. In the knightly days of old, knights stayed fit by sports (tournaments) and hunting: “Knights must undertake such sports as to make themselves strong in prowess, yet not forget their duties.”<sup>25</sup> This means within your own body type, strengths, and limitations working *what* you have and *however* you can for at least six hours per week. It also means eating like your body is the temple of the living God: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).



seized him, gouged out his eyes, and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding in the prison (Judges 15:13-16:21, paraphrased, emphases added).

Samson's power did not come from his hair. Obviously, God gave Samson his supernatural strength. Samson's hair only represented what gave him strength, his head represented a vow he made to God, and keeping that vow gave him the clear conscience to receive, access, and display God's power in his life. When Samson revealed the secret about his hair to Delilah, he lost his clear conscience with God and his physical and spiritual strength followed.

And now for some good news. For all of us sinners, God has a restoration plan. Notice how the story picks back up again in verse 22: "But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved." In other words, Samson's clear conscience and connection with the Lord began to grow again as he repented and obeyed. Then, after his arms were strapped to the temple pillars of the Philistines, he prayed, "O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes" (v. 28), and the Lord renewed his strength in such a way that enabled him to destroy the enemy temple entirely. And in this single act, "he killed many more when he died than while he lived" (v. 30).

The New Testament also reflects this "clear conscience = power" concept. First John 3:21-22 states, "Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him." As we obey, we are strengthened. And like Samson, we can fully regain our strength.

A related concept pertaining to a knight's strength is provided in Numbers 14 where Moses admonished the Israelites for moving ahead into battle without God's blessing:

When Moses reported this to all the Israelites, they mourned bitterly. Early the next morning, they went up toward the high hill country. “We have sinned,” they said. “We will go up to the place the Lord promised.” But Moses said, “Why are you disobeying the Lord’s command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, for the Amalekites and Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the Lord, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword.” Nevertheless, in their presumption, they went up toward the high hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the Lord’s covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah (Numbers 14:39-45).

The easy-to-learn (but difficult to apply!) lesson from this story is simply do not move ahead of God or without God, for if you do, you are bound to fail.

Joshua 7:10-12 tells a similar story:

The Lord said to Joshua, “Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with

you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.”

Here we see a situation where God’s presence and power was removed from His chosen people until they repented of their sin. They were unable to “stand against their enemies” until their relationship with the Lord had been restored through repentance.

By contrast, we see how God’s power enabled David to become a mighty warrior because God was with him:

Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with David but had left Saul. So he sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. In everything he did, he had great success, because the Lord was with him. When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns (1 Samuel 18:12-16).

Given the power and strength that comes from maintaining a clear conscience with God, to what lengths must a knight go to keep it? Consider how far Joseph went to preserve his clear conscience with God by avoiding sin:

The Lord was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of

the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her. One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" *But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house* (Genesis 39:2-12, emphasis added).

This passage shows that having a clear conscience before God and man apparently meant just about everything to Joseph.

When you survey your own strengths, you will realize that you have a few that stand out over others, as each knight has his own God-given strengths. These are yours to develop and give back to God, for you will gain more from working on your strengths than you will from trying to improve your weaknesses. Be aware of your weaknesses, but work on developing your strengths.

Do not waste your strengths or your time. Your personal comfort should be in last place relative to the cause of serving the needs of others. Ramon Lull argued that knights should even sleep on

hardwood floors and not soft, fluffy beds, lest they sleep too much and lose the opportunity to serve and help others. Wow—that is quite a challenge. His point was that we should be good stewards of our time. I do not believe that Ramon Lull would recommend that modern-day knights be consumed with Facebook, online gaming, watching sports, sitcoms, etc. Indeed, there are many time stealers in our day. It is so easy to lose our time and thus our strength to these. In all things, moderation and temperance is needed.

Finally, some motivation for those hard times when your strength starts failing you, and you find yourself running out of steam: Remember that Christ gave His all for you. Every last drop of blood and sweat was left on the cross the day He died. I find this quite motivating when I find my strength missing because I missed a meal or did not get enough sleep the night before.

### *REFLECT*

Observe therefore all the commands I am giving you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

—Deuteronomy 11:8

David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God.

—1 Samuel 30:6

Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.

—1 Chronicles 16:11

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

—Nehemiah 1:10

Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

—Nehemiah 8:10

“Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit,” says the Lord God Almighty.

—Zechariah 4:6

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

—Ephesians 6:10

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

—Philippians 4:13

There is nothing as gentle as true strength, and nothing as strong as true gentleness.<sup>26</sup>

—Ralph Sockman

### ***RESPOND***

1. Where do we often look for strength?
2. What are some of the ways the world encourages us to build strength?
3. How are the world's sources of strength “broken cisterns”?

4. How can we practically build “real inner strength”?
5. How do we regain our strength after we lose it?
6. What is strength for? Why does God give us strength?