

“When there’s no strength left”
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Excerpts from Isaiah 40 and 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10

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There was a time when we believed that our faith was strong enough to get us through anything. A time when we were certain that God was with us, loved us, and that that was enough.

Then, something happened. For some of us, it was early in life; for others, late. A death, a loss of a job, a separation, a violation. For some, it wasn’t just one thing, but a series of many things. Abuse, poverty, discrimination, illness. Maybe, for some of us, it wasn’t any particular thing at all—just a feeling deep in our bones. Depression, anxiety, or simply the ennui of a life lacking clarity or purpose.

Whatever it was, it caught us. It caught us in a dark, sticky web. And no matter how hard we fought to get free, no matter how hard we tried to be strong, to trust and have faith, the web wouldn’t let us go.

We’re told that God never gives us more than we are strong enough to handle. But what happens when that strength runs out?

It took the famous author and theologian C.S. Lewis 58 years to discover and marry the love of his life. She died four years later of cancer. After she died, he noted how difficult it was to muster energy for even the smallest things. Lewis writes, “No one ever told me about the laziness of grief... I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth?”

I remember this feeling, when my sons, Ezra and Leo, died. All my strength—all the power of my words and training—seeped out of me. It was hard enough just to get out of bed, take a shower, eat, let alone look for God.

I always read those three famous lines from Isaiah—about mounting up on eagle’s wings, running and not growing weary, walking without fainting—as simply three ways of saying the same thing: God gives us strength.

And so, when I didn’t seem to have any strength left, these words felt like a lie.

At least they did until I opened the mailbox one day and found a little book that changed how I read this passage. It was a collection of sermons preached by John Claypool, an Episcopal priest whose eight-year-old daughter, Laura Lue, died of acute leukemia. John’s second sermon reflects on Isaiah’s words. He wrote it following a particularly painful relapse of the cancer.

For John, each of these images—the flying, the running, the walking—describes a *different* way of experiencing God’s strength. The problem, he says, isn’t God’s absence; it’s that our expectations of God are too narrow. So, when God does show up, we fail to notice, because we weren’t looking in the right places.

Generally, we expect God’s strength to come in the form of the first image: soaring on eagle’s wings. John calls this kind of strength ecstasy. It’s that pure confidence that God is with us, and we are with God. It’s Mozart at the piano. Mary singing her Magnificat. Rev. Dr. King on the mountaintop. It’s love, and it’s joy, and it’s faith at its purest.

Had John assumed, as many of us do, that this was the only way God gave strength, he would have felt abandoned. There was no ecstasy while he stood by the bed of his little girl. In fact, it would have been grotesque for him to have felt like he was soaring while she was dying.

We’re not called to float over suffering, untouched. We’re called to love, which means being vulnerable to pain.

Thankfully, Isaiah tells us that there is another kind of strength given by God: to run and not grow weary. John calls this kind of strength activism. It’s seeing a problem and making it better. It’s discovering answers. It’s lifting a car to save a child. It’s the clarity of knowing where you’re going and running there, with power and confidence coursing through you.

The problem was that there was nothing John could do to save his daughter, to fix the cancer. There were no solutions, and what’s worse, there were no answers, no explanations sufficient for something so awful.

Had John assumed that this was the only way God could strengthen him, he would have felt betrayed and alone.

But John found in Isaiah a third image of strength: to walk and not faint. It doesn’t sound like much. Doesn’t sound very divine. And yet, there are some moments of darkness that accept no other kind of strength. John writes, “When there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, and all you can do is edge along step by step, to hear of a Help that will enable you ‘to walk and not faint’ is good news indeed. It not only corresponds to the limits of the situation, it also speaks to the point of greatest difficulty; namely, of being able just ‘to hang in there,’ to endure, to be patient, and not to give down one way or the other.”

It’s this strength that kept John at his daughter’s side, even when he felt like crumbling. For hours, he stood beside her, gave her sips of water, and rubbed her head. For hours, he listened to her moaning with pain. For hours, he didn’t give up, even though there was nothing left inside him. No obvious strength. No answers. Just God keeping him in that spot, lifting his hand for another glass of water.

It was manna in the desert, enough for one more hour, one more day.

John writes, “In the dark stretches of life, the most difficult discipline of all is not that of soaring or even of running. It consists of ‘keeping on keeping on.’ ”

After our sons died, people would ask my wife Jenna and me what we needed. It was such a big question; we had no idea how to answer. There was no energy for making plans, for thinking about a future that didn’t include our sons. So eventually we changed the question. We started asking ourselves, “What do we need *now*?” This second. This hour. This day. Maybe a shower, maybe sleep, maybe food, maybe to work or pray or cry or go for a walk, maybe to dive into a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream. And, you know, a miracle happened. It wasn’t the miracle of ecstasy or of answers. It was the miracle of one more breath. One more step.

The more we let go of our expectations, our need to be strong, to have answers, to fix this, the more God showed up. The more God carried us.

It’s OK to feel weak. You don’t have to be strong all the time, to fly or run. You don’t have to know where you’re going, or how you’re going to get there. You don’t have to be brimming with knowledge or happiness.

Sometimes the greatest act of faith is just taking another step.

It’s all we can do in the dark.

In a few days, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the moment when God becomes one of us, in order to cast out the dark and bring us into the light. God will come into our lives, in order to see us fly, to see heaven and earth touch. But first, there will be the dark. First, there will be God, not soaring on eagles’ wings or running a marathon, but a baby who can’t even crawl yet. And then, when God saves us, it won’t be with answers or with might; it will be from a cross, which he can barely carry. He will seem weak to a world that does not understand the different kinds of strength envisioned by Isaiah. The world will think that God is no more, because the world won’t be looking in the right places.

But for those who have eyes to see, God will live. God will give strength. God will find us in our weakness and walk with us one more step, for a thousand steps, a million, whatever is needed, until we can run, until we can fly. God walks with us, saying, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

So, now, on this longest night of the year, when our wings are clipped and our legs too stiff and tired to run, let us find grace, and strength, simply in taking another step. God will take care of everything else. **Amen.**