

**The Strength of Grace**  
**Isaiah 40:25-31**

Brothers and sisters, a few weeks ago someone shared a Word during our congregation prayer time that encouraged us to look to the Lord for strength – that we would need to do this because we would need His strength.

And indeed I know there are things which the Lord is calling us to do as a church and in our lives which will require us to have the Lord's strength - so that's what we will be focusing on over the next couple months, learning about God's strength, how we receive His strength and most importantly being strengthened by the Lord as we do this.

Because what we read from Isaiah 40:30 this morning is true... that *“even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall...”*

Now, if you have not yet experienced the limits of your own strength and energy levels, perhaps watching this short parenting video about putting toddlers to bed will help you

understand how that can happen... (Show twins at night video)

I'm sure we can imagine how repeating this scenario night after night would bring us to the limits of our own strength rather quickly – and not just in terms of attempting the task of trying to put them to bed.

A 2018 comparative study concluded that if an adult was to “keep up” with the average toddler in terms of equivalent activity they would need to do 83 rounds in the boxing ring, or run 48km, cycle 132km, or climb over 10,000 steps – which is like taking the stairs at the Calgary tower 12 times!

And yet in spite of all this energy – which they expend when we want them to go to sleep – when we want them to come along on a nice walk, or a family outing... well then they become tired and whiny and out of sorts requiring us to carry them - pushing us again to the limits of our own physical, emotional or mental strength.

So we experience what the scripture is talking about *“even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall...”*

Now, all this reflecting on the difficulties in parenting toddlers makes me think about God’s relationship with the nation of Israel – where God sets out His covenant guidelines and expectations for Israel and calls them to the task of being faithful partners with Him but just like willful little toddlers they repeatedly disobey Him and ignore God’s warnings about the consequences for being unfaithful to Him.

And a big part of that unfaithfulness was Idolatry, which we can understand in part as looking for divine strength from the false gods of the nations around them when they had reached the limits of their own strength and abilities.

How could Israel try to guarantee a good growing season and an abundant harvest? By worshiping the fertility gods...

How could they ensure their protection and safety from invasion? By making alliances with powerful nations and acknowledging their gods and seeking guidance from the stars which supposedly revealed the will of these gods.

These are just two examples of how Israel repeatedly engaged in idolatry and neglected to trust Yahweh to provide for them and keep them safe when they had reached the limits of their own strength and abilities.

So, finally – through the prophet Isaiah – God announces to Israel that He will be enacting the covenant consequences and they are going to lose their Promised Land privileges and be sent off into exile in Babylon.

Now there is a lot more content and context to the book of Isaiah than just covenant consequences, but this judgement of being sent into exile is the background for what we read from chapter 40 this morning.

It's important to realize that Israel is in exile as captives in a foreign land, in a situation where they are extremely aware of the limits of their own strength and ability, where they are weak and weary, and this is why the Israelites complain in vs. 27 that *"My way is hidden from Yahweh; my cause is disregarded by my God"*? They feel abandoned.

And it's rather ironic that when they felt weak and weary while living in the Promised Land they ignored God and turned to idols for strength – but now that the consequences of their idolatry has caught up to them and sapped their strength and has made them weak and weary they say that God does not see them and that God has abandoned them.

Now brothers and sisters, if we are honest with ourselves we have to admit that like Israel we also struggle with idolatry – because when we are tired and exhausted and we have reached the limits of our own strength we look for something that can strengthen us.

Now, please understand – if you've worked a long hard day and you want to kick back and relax and watch some TV to unwind and recharge and then eat a good meal and get a good night's sleep so that you're ready to get back to work the next day – there's nothing wrong with that.

The pattern of working and resting in order to renew our strength is built into the fabric of the creation – Genesis 2:2 describes how God instituted this Sabbath cycle.

But the truth is that working to fulfill our calling as stewards of God's creation is cursed because there is sin and evil in the world and in so many ways our work becomes toil and it drains our strength and exhausts us.

God foreshadows this experience when He says to Adam in Gen 3:17-19 *"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground..."*

If you have a bit of life experience under your belt then you know what I'm talking about when I speak about coming to end of our own strength and feeling weak and weary. At some point we realize that no matter how hard we work we will never get on top of all the things that need to be done, the satisfaction that we seek still remains elusive, and security is not guaranteed.

Do you know what it is that I'm talking about? Do you know the limits of your strength and energy in this way?

Because brothers and sisters it is at this point, when our strength is gone and we are weary that we – like Israel before us – are willing to be foolish or disobedient to find the strength that we are looking for and we easily fall into the trap of idolatry.

Maybe it's simply the foolishness of thinking that if we just try harder and keep on working at things we will make it through – but that is only a path to burnout.

Maybe we discover that there is some additional strength to be found in drinking, or taking performance drugs, or we get a boost from pornography or an office affair - and we're not only foolish we are disobeying God's laws about drunkenness and sexuality.

You see how we struggle with idolatry in these ways?

Think of it like this for example, food is a good gift from God to give us nourishment and good taste but we turn food into an idol when we seek more from it than it was created to give us... that is how we turn a good thing into a god-thing – and we can do it with anything.

Brothers and sisters what good things are you turning into god-things in your life right now because you are tired and weary and in need of strength? What is the Holy Spirit nudging you about?

Take a moment in your heart and just admit that to Jesus and confess it to Him and receive His forgiveness that He wants to give you.

Now here's the good news from our scripture passage this morning. Isaiah 40:29 says *"Yahweh gives strength to the weary and He increases the power of the weak!"*

Brothers and sisters if you realize that you are weary and weak then God wants to give you His divine strength and power this morning – that's encouraging isn't it!

So let's take a closer look at what our scripture passage has to say about this.

Now, the toddler-parenting analogy that we started with worked well to describe Israel's repeated disobedience - but it doesn't work to describe or understand God in this situation.

This book of Isaiah and this passage of scripture do not present God as a tired and exasperated parent who's had

enough – so the comparison doesn't work both ways. In fact in vs. 25 God says *"to whom will you compare me?"* and the unspoken answer to the question is "no one"

There is no one who is like Yahweh!

Not only because as vs. 28 says that *"Yahweh is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."* and who else can claim to be the eternal Creator of all things?!

But more importantly for Israel's sake there is no one else like Yahweh who *"will not grow tired or weary and no one can fathom His understanding"*

Now in the context of Israel going into exile this is especially good news because they will hear the promise that Yahweh will not grow tired and weary of being gracious to them. In spite of their persistent unfaithfulness, in spite of their self-interested cry for help once they are in exile – Yahweh will not grow tired or weary of extending His grace and mercy to them.

Even as He sends them off to exile to bear the consequences of their unfaithfulness He gives them a promise of hope. At the start of this chapter, and elsewhere in Isaiah, there is the promise of a return from exile.

And Israel needs to know that Yahweh will keep this promise first because He never grows tired of doing what is good and being gracious and merciful to them, and secondly this isn't because Yahweh is some sort of push-over patsy of a deity... It's because this is part of His divine intentions and grand plan for ALL of His creation.

So, if Israel starts to doubt how a period of exile and feeling weak and lacking in strength can be a part of that good plan, Isaiah reminds them that God's understanding, his wisdom and arrangement of things is simply beyond us... "no one can fathom God's understanding" we don't need to fully understand it, we just need to look to God for strength to endure it.

Thus while Israel endures a period of exile in weakness, they can receive Yahweh's strength by waiting on the Lord, putting their hope in Him to bring about their release from exile and if they do so - while they wait they will be strengthened to resist being absorbed into the surrounding Babylonian culture and religion.

And this is where those famous words in Isaiah now come into play as a summary of the good news *"Those who hope (wait) on Yahweh will renew their strength, they will they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."*

And this is just as true for us today as it was for Israel back then brothers and sisters.

Do you want the strength to soar, to fly vigorously like an eagle can? Do you need to be able to run without becoming weary and walk without becoming faint?

Then begin by remembering and acknowledging what you have been taught and you know to be true - "Do you not know... have you not heard..." Brothers and Sisters God – The Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is the Creator of the Universe and meditating on how His creations show His awesome power is a means by which He strengthens us.

Isaiah 40:26 says *"Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing."*

Isn't God amazing that He gives us instructions in scripture which only become more powerful with time? Israel would have seen the stars with the naked eye... but we now have telescopes and cameras in space that reveal far more of God's creational glory and power than Israel could have ever imagined!

And when we take things like the stars, or food, or anything else that we have turned into an idol and we label it as part of

God's creation and give thanks to God for what it can do for us – The Holy Spirit is helping us turn a god-thing back into a good-thing, and what it gives us then contributes to our receiving divine strength – because it points us to God as Creator and Jesus Christ as the redeemer of His Creation. Do you understand how this works?

And this redemptive act also helps us to stop trying so hard, or striving, or pushing ahead or doing whatever it is that you do to try and make things work out in life to bring meaning or security or purpose... Instead we are able to endure and wait on God in the midst of whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

And where we had previously been acting foolish or disobedient we now receive God's strength to obey and endure and... we are strengthened even more as we realize that this is an act of God's grace – which as Isaiah 40:28 reminds us – He never grows tired or weary of doing for us... and who can truly understand why God does this for us?

It's not because we deserve it... It's not because God sees some hidden potential in us – apart from restoring His image in us... It's not because we're going to do such a good job at cleaning up our act if he just helps us out a bit... It's all because of Grace and Grace is beyond our understanding, all we can do is accept it and learn to live out of the strength that is given us.

The apostle Paul powerfully summarizes how God's tireless and never-ending grace is eternally expressed in Jesus in Romans 8:32 when he writes *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

Brothers and sisters this verse brings to mind the story of Jean-Val-Jean from Les Mis, an incredibly strong man who endured an unjust prison sentence for stealing a loaf of bread. And while his strength was enough to endure the tortures of prison – it was not enough to overcome the stigma of being an ex-convict and make people accept him. He came to the end of his strength and ability and so he resorted to running away

with the silverware of a kindly priest who had given him shelter for the night.

When the police found him with the stolen goods they brought him back to the priest – who thanked the police for bringing Jean back so that he could give Jean-Val-Jean the last two silver candlesticks which he had forgotten to take.

Jean cannot understand this act of grace but as the priest gives Jean the candlesticks he tells him "I have bought your soul for God!" And it is this act of grace which gave Jean – Val-Jean the strength to change and become a better man and use his own strength to serve others.

So Brothers and sisters – may the reality of God's grace in its many forms – but especially as it comes to us in Jesus Christ – strengthen us so that we may hope and wait on God in whatever circumstance we are in – truly being able to believe as the Apostle Paul says *"that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* (Rom 8:28) That is the strength of Grace – Amen.