

Ascribe Strength To God

A Sermon by Rev. Donald L. Rose

"Ascribe ye strength to God" (Psalm 68:34).

By our life's experience we know something about the limitations of human strength. We have learned something about our own personal strengths. We are aware of power in nature. It can be in overwhelming facts we learn about forces on the earth and in the universe. It can be in our personal experience of the power of lightning and the crash of thunder, the shaking of the earth and the quaking of mountains. We cannot but be aware of strength and power. And the Word invites us, with whatever limited knowledge or experience we have, to ascribe strength to God.

Our text is a very short phrase which harmonizes with a theme in so many of the Psalms - the theme of strength.

Psalm 27, verse 1: "The Lord is the strength of my life." We can say those words, and as we say them in sincerity we are responding to the text, ascribing strength to God. Psalm 46 begins with these words: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Another psalm says: "Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His sanctuary" (96:6). Another says, "God is the strength of my heart" (73:26).

Let us consider for a moment the 29th Psalm. It ends with the words, "The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace" (29: 1 1). (This is familiar in the Holy Supper service, p. 57 of the Liturgy.) But notice the way this 29th Psalm begins: "Give unto the Lord, O you mighty ones; give unto the Lord glory and strength" (29: 1). Can we give anything to the Lord? Can we give strength to the Lord? Can we give glory to the Lord? We can in the same sense of the text: "Ascribe ye strength to God" (Psalm 68:34).

Because this is something we can do, it is something we can also neglect to do or do too seldom. One could say that we came to church today to give glory and strength to God. In most of our services of worship we sing what is called the gloria. It comes from the first chapter of the book of Revelation beginning: "Glory and might be unto Him," and

ending with "the Almighty" (Liturgy, p. 17). And it is also rendered "Glory and power be to Him, for ever and ever. Amen."

And when we kneel in prayer we say in keeping with the text, "Thine is the power and the glory forever. Amen."

In some of the psalms we are made aware of the writer David. We are aware that the psalm was composed at a time of one of David's experiences. In one of the psalms we picture David as a man growing old. In Psalm 71 we see David thinking of the span of his long life: "You are my trust from my youth. By You I have been upheld from my birth. You are He who took me out of my mother's womb You are my strong refuge Do not cast me off in the time of old age. Do not forsake me when my strength fails" (v. 9). "I will go in the strength of the Lord God You have taught me from my youth Now also when I am old and gray headed, O God, do not forsake me until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come" (v. 18). "I have been young and now am old" (37:25).

Perhaps we picture David with muscular arms as depicted by Michelangelo's sculpture, as when he says, "He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (18:34). Swedenborg beheld a strong arm in heaven emanating power.

There was once a scene on a battlefield. David encountered a giant Philistine armed with a bronze spear and wielding a formidable new sword. No, it is not the familiar story of the shepherd boy with sling and stones. For David in this scene is old and frail. As he encountered this giant, Ishbi-Benob, could he possibly look back to his triumph over Goliath? He had spoken the truth on that day so long before. "You come to me with a sword, with a spear and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and He will give you into our hands" (1 Sam. 17:45-47). Did he look back on his fight with Goliath that day when as an old man he faced another giant? As he approached the battle with Goliath he had looked back to earlier experiences of God's strength. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Sam. 17:37).

This battle as an old man is also a victory but of a different nature. The truth was the same in both battles, that all strength is from the Lord. But whereas in fighting Goliath he knew the exhilaration and flush of triumph, in the confrontation with Ishbi-Benob he probably left the battlefield gasping for breath and trembling from exertion. Perhaps he was half carried by his men from that encounter. Abishai had killed the giant, and David knew the emotions of someone who faced death but was saved by another (see 2 Samuel 21:15-17).

The Writings say that of ourselves we yield, but from the Lord we conquer. And although we come to a sense of our own powerlessness, there is an uplifting sense of the Lord's power. This comes out vividly in the chapter near the end of the books of Samuel, the chapter in which David has to be rescued from the giant. It is the most extensive example of a psalm actually being incorporated within a story of David. (2 Samuel 22 is virtually the same as Psalm 18.) "Then David spoke to the Lord the words of this song ... 'The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, the God of my strength; in Him will I trust'" (2 Sam 22:1-3). We will continue this as a conclusion to this sermon, but let us first note some teachings of the Writings.

There is a chapter in Heaven and Hell about the great power of the angels. Swedenborg witnessed the power of angels that goes beyond belief. They can chase away thousands of evil spirits. "Numbers are of no avail against the angels; neither are devices, cunning or combinations; for they see through them all and shatter them in a moment." We are told that what we read in the Psalms is so true. "Bless the Lord, you His angels, most powerful in strength" (HH 229).

But following this emphatic paragraph about great power we have the following: "It must be known, however, that the angels have no power whatever of themselves, but that all their power is from the Lord; and that they are powers only so far as they acknowledge this. Whoever among them believes that he has power of himself instantly becomes so weak as not to be able to resist even a single evil spirit. For this reason angels ascribe no merit whatever to themselves, and are averse to all praise and glory on account of anything they do, ascribing it to the Lord" (HH 230).

It is an angelic truth repeated in the Writings that strength is to be ascribed to God, and that we are strong or weak depending on our doing that ascribing, according to the text, "Ascribe ye strength to God."

This angelic truth has found its way into human affairs and has been the way of uplifting for countless thousands who seemed hopeless. We refer to the 12-step programs. It began with alcoholics anonymous. The twelve steps actually mention alcohol only very little. There is an emphasis on power, an acknowledgment that one does not have power. There is a turning to a higher power. It is an ascribing of strength to God. This has led to several successful 12-step programs.

The Writings give the striking teaching that if we come through temptation with a sense of our own credit, the feeling that we merit the victory because of our own strength, we are going to have to endure similar or worse temptations until we are reduced to the sanity of mind in believing we have merited nothing (see AC 2273).

People who have a close experience with their own lack of power are testimonials to a fundamental truth. The same is true of people who have known paralyzing illness or those whose bodies have grown old and feeble and yet who have found a higher strength. This is in accord with the words of Scripture: "He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall. But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:29-31).

There is a saying in the Writings about what one may think of in beholding the sky. "When he sees the immensity of the heavens, he does not think of their immensity but of the immeasurable and infinite power of the Lord" (AC 1807). Sometimes we behold the sky and see the grandeur of great clouds. Sometimes either with telescope or naked eye we look at the stars and try to take in the vastness of it all.

We behold the power of the Lord in His Word, as in the Psalm: "Blessed is the man whose strength is in You They go from strength to strength' (84:5,7). And we take strength in the words of David when he has been delivered from the giant. "Then David spoke to the Lord the words of this song.. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, the God of my strength; in Him will I trust He delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me; for they were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity" (v. 18).

"He is a shield to all who trust in Him. For who is God except the Lord? And who is a rock except our God? God is my strength and power, and He makes my way perfect. He makes my feet like the feet of deer, and sets me on high places. He teaches my hands to war so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You have given me the shield of Your salvation, and Your gentleness has made me great" (v. 32-36).

"You have armed me with strength for the battle" (v. 40). "You have delivered me from the violent man. Therefore I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the Gentiles, and sing praises to Your name" (v. 50).

And sing praises to His name. Can each of us say with conviction, "I am weak but Thou art mighty"? Can each of us sing with sure belief, "I am weak but Thou art mighty; hold me with Thy powerful hand Strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be Thou still my strength and shield"? Amen.

Lessons: 2 Samuel 21,22; John 10: 14-30, AC 4932, 6344:4,5