

*I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Philippians 4:13)*

### **Strength in Christ**

The verse we have before us today has special meaning for me. When I was 19, I left college and joined the army. Late that summer, I went to basic training at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri. It was a huge character test for me. The army has a basic philosophy at its schools: we don't need quitters. So basic training is hard and scary and every day, you could just quit. I'll be honest, I'm a quitter from way back and I thought about it a lot. But on the second or third day I was there, the army chaplain passed out little pocket bibles. I carried one in the pocket of my uniform and found myself pulling it out every chance I got. By God's grace, one of the first passages I read was this one from Philippians. I still remember it more or less as that King James Bible had it: **"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."** Every time basic training got hard, every time I thought about quitting, I repeated those words to myself. It became a kind of mantra for me throughout that experience. I did graduate and go on to serve for four years in the army. Today is our annual Christian Education Sunday. Each year we choose a theme for the school year. This year, the theme is "Strength in Christ" and it comes from this passage. One of the greatest gifts we can give the children who attend our school and, indeed, all those who attend our church is **strength in Christ**.

#### **I.**

Are you a strong person? Our society puts great emphasis on finding "inner strength." Our children are told in a thousand different ways to reach down deep inside themselves and find the strength to stand when life gets tough. Our society believes that everyone has a well of inner strength they could tap if they just believe in themselves. But I think that most of us realize on a gut level that it ain't necessarily so. We see weakness and failure all around us. We can all think of times when we should've done better. Most of us probably realize that we haven't always been smart enough or strong enough or disciplined enough to overcome tough situations. St. Paul tells us this morning to stop looking inside ourselves for inner strength and start looking outside ourselves for God's strength. It should seem obvious, but in today's world, even here at church, it is necessary to say it: **strength in Christ comes from Christ**.

Now, some people are stronger than others and most of us probably do have some inner reserves of strength that we haven't really tapped. But if you're reaching inside yourself to overcome hurt and sorrow and your own weaknesses and failings, you're forgetting a very important reality: our hearts are sinful. While God does tell us Christians to apply all our strength to living for him, he also tells us that we're going to fall on our faces sometimes. Our sinful nature weakens us. It simply corrupts our powers. The other day, I was driving to make a call and I allowed myself to be distracted, just for a minute. And I wandered out of my lane and hit a curb at forty miles an hour and destroyed a tire. It was just dumb. But none of us is as smart or as strong as we would be if our hearts were perfect. If we had no sin, none of us would age, none of us would wear glasses, none of us would be overweight or ever have to go to a doctor. And none of us would ever make dumb mistakes because we're tired or distracted. But all those things happen to us.

But there's an even worse way that sin weakens us. It creates a conspirator in our own hearts who works against us. We Christians all have a New Man, a believer, who wants to follow Christ and who would never make dumb or sinful decisions. But we also all have an Old Man, a sinful nature, that hates God and trips us up over and over again. He loves to sin. He hates all the times we try to do what's right. So we want to do what is God pleasing and we want to sin at the same time. It's confusing and it weakens our resolve to do what's right. It makes our judgment very suspect. Again and again, we justify sin and selfishness and simple stupidity because that's what our sinful natures want.

Because we all have that sinful nature, there are so many things we just can't do. Of course, God gives every human being gifts and talents that we can use and develop. Many non-Christians develop those gifts and talents so that they can do remarkable things. But Paul wasn't talking about being a great athlete or winning a Nobel Prize when he said these words. He was talking about being content whether he was hungry or well-fed. He was talking about overcoming the temptations and difficulties that both poverty and wealth bring. He said

that had found the secret of being content in any and every situation: **“I can do all things through him who gives me strength.”** We can’t do it alone. We need Christ.

And we have him. Jesus loved us so much that he entered this world to conquer our weakness. Unlike us, he had no sinful nature to war against his faith or to weaken his natural gifts, so he was totally perfect. He never would’ve allowed himself to be distracted while he was driving and endanger other people. He never needed to justify sinning. God sees Jesus when he looks at us. And he sees Jesus dying and paying for every stupid choice, for every sinful action, for every moment of lust and selfishness and self-justification. The blood of Jesus has bleached all those sins away. Jesus rose to tell us that. He rose to tell us we are paid for and forgiven. He rose to tell us that we will win in the end and live with him forever.

That message is how Christ conquers in us. That message is how he gives us the power to overcome all things in this life. The gospel of Jesus Christ changes us. It gave us our faith and our New Man and it renews us every day to fight against the Old Man. That gospel puts the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Every time we hear it, every time we come to communion and experience it in the body and blood of Christ, every time we confess our sins and our pastor forgives us for Jesus’ sake, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. He wipes away guilt and sorrow. He lifts us up and gives us the good news that God still loves us. That gospel puts Jesus in our hearts. He lives in us and he works every day to enable us to conquer sin and despair and selfishness and stupidity. God gave us pastors and teachers to teach us that good news. He gave us a congregation where we join together in supporting ministries of education and outreach and comfort so that Christ comes and gives us strength to do all that God calls us to do.

## II.

And it works. I got through basic training. I always had the physical and mental abilities, but God gave me the strength to endure. He taught me a practical lesson about putting his word to work in my life. From basic training I went to California for a year. I didn’t have a church I could attend nearby. I only had that little King James pocket Bible, so I went out and bought an NIV. It’s in my office today. I read it over and over again for the next four years. God used that gospel to enable me to face a situation in which I was surrounded by unbelievers who mocked my faith pretty regularly. And God promises to use the gospel to get us all through life in this sinful world. That is the practical gift of Christian education. **Strength in Christ enables me to face the world.**

What have you seen on the news just this week? An earthquake in Italy and hundreds are dead. Tornadoes in Indiana. War in Syria. But it’s not just stuff out there. Sin impacts our personal lives in more ways than we can count. How is your job? How is your family? How are your finances? I bet most of us have stress in those areas. Our society creates impossible expectations that we’re all going to have perfect marriages and perfect children. It tells us that every woman should be able to spend 60 hours a week having a career and climbing the corporate ladder and at the same time still have all the joys of raising children. Somehow, they’re supposed to get all that done and feel fulfilled about doing laundry at ten o’clock at night when she really just wants to go to bed. Men have it just as bad. And of course, how often aren’t we our own worst enemies? How often don’t we do or say the wrong thing and complicate work and family life? How often don’t people we depend on disappoint us?

What’s wrong with the world? Sin broke it. It’s never going to work the way we want it to. War and poverty and strife and failure cannot be ended here until Christ returns. But he did conquer the world when he conquered sin. When he returns he’s going to wipe all sin away from the world around us. He’s going to free us from all the sin in our hearts so that we never make sinful or stupid choices again. He’s going to heal all the physical and emotional scars from life here. We will be perfect. We will live in joy. And it will last forever.

But what about now? How does that help us? First of all, it gives us hope. We are focused on the life to come. That teaches us to put this temporary, painful existence into perspective. The worst that life can do to us here will be healed. Even when we die, we live. And Jesus who conquered sin is in control today. He does all things for our good. Nothing happens in this life without his permission and he only gives that permission when it’s going to work for our good. But we have to understand that our good is getting to heaven. If we have to hurt here to get to heaven, God loves us enough to let us hurt and get us home. We have to realize that we won’t always understand how hardship does us good. Sometimes we can. I can point to hurts in my life that have helped me to minister to Christians when they suffer. That’s at least one thing God was doing when he let

me hurt. But we will not always understand why God allows the painful things we face. Some hurts we will carry to the grave and only in heaven will we clearly see what God was doing.

But faith trusts in the Savior who died for us. Faith trusts that God sacrificed his Son for you and me, so he won't let anything happen to us here except that which is best for us. Day after day, God exercises our faith. He allows us to struggle so that we return to his word for assurances that he loves us and then he uses that promise to enable us to overcome the hurts and sorrows of this life. Is it an easy process? No. Pain hurts, as my mom likes to say. But when we face pain and sorrow and loss, God is exercising our faith just like an athlete exercises to prepare for a competition. God strengthens our spiritual muscles by giving us the gospel and then putting our faith into practice. My friends, in the spiritual Olympics that we call life, God wants us to win the gold medal.

To make that happen, God gave us this church. He gave a place that we can go to every week and take a break from how hard life is. He gave us the gospel so that we can recharge our spiritual batteries and face the world. He gives us strength to endure whatever hurt we have to go through to reach eternal life. Today we hear the gospel. Tomorrow we plunge back into life again, renewed and ready to live for him.

Take advantage of his gift! When I was in college, I told a good friend about my experience at basic training and what this passage meant to me. Later, when I was struggling with my personal life and feeling stressed about it all, he asked me, "So you can do some things through Christ who gives you strength?" He reminded me that I am not alone. Christ will get me through. Today is our Christian education Sunday. All that we do in our preschool, in our Lutheran elementary school, and in our Lutheran high school is designed to teach our children to know Christ so that in this life, they can find strength and comfort and joy in his love and forgiveness, and so that they can stand firm until they reach heaven. That is also the goal of every church service, every Sunday school and adult Bible class, and every visit I make. It's why this church exists. We need to get through this life and reach heaven. And we need to bring along as many people as God will give us. The strength to do all that is found in Christ. Lean on him. Amen.