

Song of Moses. Bread of Heaven. Living Water. Strength.

Read Exodus 17:8-16

One of the most core theological attributes we use to define God is omnipotent. It means God is all-powerful. God is omniscient, meaning all-knowing. God is omnipresent, meaning everywhere. God is eternal, meaning the alpha and omega, beginning and end, forever and ever, amen. And God is omnipotent or all-powerful. Just to clarify, God is all these things. We are not! These attributes are the start of a long list of things God is and we are not. The good news for us though is we have access to God, who is willing to share and be all these things on our behalf. We are supposed to put away our halleluiahs and praise in Lent because it is a reflective time used to build us up to the great halleluiahs, but that news is too good not to say, "Praise the Lord!"

A young boy traveling by airplane to visit his grandparents sat beside a man who happened to be a seminary professor. The boy was reading a Sunday school take-home paper, and the professor thought he would have some fun with the lad. "Young man," said the professor, "if you can tell me something God can do, I will give you a big, shiny apple." The boy thought for a moment and then replied, "Mister, if you can tell me something God can't do, I'll give you a whole barrel of apples."

Raise your hand if you have ever heard or said to yourself, "God will never give you (me) more than you (I) can handle"? I know I have. I would like to clarify this statement because I think it often ends up more about us than about God. Some of us tend to use this statement as a statement of justification to convince us what we are going through is alright and we will make it through. Whereas that might be a good self-motivator, the importance of this statement is not simple survival. And to be clear, it is also not a measurement of what God thinks about us. At the core, I believe this statement is about the work of God, and more specifically the strength and power of God, working through us. I believe God will never give us more than we can handle with God by our side and God as our strength and shield able and willing to help us through.

I am grateful for the gift of a rock that now sits on my desk. Etched into the rock are the words of Ephesians 3:20- **"God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think."** What it reminds me of is that with God I am more. I am more loving, joyful, peaceful, and hopeful. I can express more kindness, gentleness, and self-control. I can embody more

patience, perseverance, and purpose. I have more resources to enjoy and share, connections with others, and opportunities to make a difference in the world. With God I have more strength. With God you have more strength. With God we have more strength. With God, we can do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.

Consider this: Paul is quoted saying “God is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine” right before he goes into a section of his letter encouraging unity in the body of Christ. This unity, exemplified in love and support of one another, is the calling to which God has called us. Each of us has been given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift and through God’s grace, which mends our brokenness, we are given strength. And that strength is not just an individual gift, but one for the community.

This text from Paul has a connection with our story from the Israelites wilderness journey. The connection outlines two main points for us to take away today. The first point is that God empowers Moses and Paul with strength and power directly. God works personally with us to make us stronger people for God. The second point is that God works through the community of Israelites at war and the early church communities to enhance the strength and power of Moses and Paul’s individual journeys.

God empowers God’s children with strength and power. In some cases, God empowers with physical strength. In other cases, God empowers with spiritual strength. In all cases, the strength is reliant on the ability to trust in God. 1 Chronicles 29:11 affirms that ultimately, all power (strength) belongs to the Lord, and human beings have power only because God gives it to them.

In Judges 6, we learn about God’s strength appearing in Gideon. **And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor." And Gideon said to him, "Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."** (I think we can all relate somehow to Gideon’s questions here. But can we relate to what happens next?) **And the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." And the Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man". . .But the Lord said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die."**

Because God was with Gideon, he could have peace and not fear. Gideon knew he did not have the strength within himself to defeat the Midianites. But God assured Gideon that he would be protected and would win the battle. Gideon's strength came through God's word fulfilled in him.

In Judges 13-16, we learn that the physical strength of Samson was given by God. Because of promises that Samson's parents had made to the Lord, Samson was a powerful man whom God used to fight Israel's enemy. Though God worked through him, Samson did not always obey the Lord. Samson accomplished much in his own physical strength, but it was not until he trusted in what God could do through him that he was able to accomplish his greatest victory.

In Daniel there are two other powerful stories shared of God's strength through trust in God.

Daniel 3 has the story of King Nebuchadnezzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, "Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew what the king was asking was wrong. And they did not hesitate to stand up for God. They believed God would protect them and give them the strength to withstand the pressure of the king. In the end, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were safe and God received the glory.

In Daniel 6, we learn of another story in which God's strength is fulfilled. Many years after Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were spared from the flames, there was a new king in Babylon. He and Daniel became friends. But not everyone loved Daniel as the king did. Some men tricked the king into making a law that required the people to worship him only. If they were caught worshiping any other person, idol, or god, they would be thrown into a den of lions. This law was made specifically to capture Daniel. His habit was to pray at least three times a day. The men caught Daniel praying and brought him to the king for punishment. Though King Darius was saddened at this turn of events, he still carried out the punishment he authorized. Daniel said to the king that he would trust the Lord even if the lions killed him. The lions did not kill Daniel though. He was spared through the night by God. When he emerged from the lion's den the king ordered that the men who made the law be lowered down to face the same punishment they wanted for Daniel. The Bible says they did not even touch the ground before the lions consumed them.

When faced with hard decisions or situations, especially when needing to stand up for what we believe, God gives us the strength to make the right choice. For more on this we can turn to Ephesians 6 when Paul talks about putting on the armor of God: the belt of truth, the helmet of righteousness, the shield of faith, etc. Whatever it is we may be facing - a difficult test? A broken friendship? A tough tryout? - our strength to endure and to accomplish the task comes from a God who loves us and is always with us. When our strength comes from God, we can do things we never thought possible. And whether we need physical or spiritual strength, we must trust in God to provide.

God shows up personally and sometimes God's manifestation looks a lot like you and me. Sometimes the strength we need comes from others and we should not underestimate the role God plays in putting those people in our lives at just the right time.

During the Israelites battle with Amalek, Joshua fought hard in the battle while Moses stood above the battle. Since the Israelites were successful when Moses lifted his staff toward the sky, and Amalek was successful when Moses lowered his staff, it was determined Moses would need to keep his arms lifted the whole time. When Moses' arms were tired, Aaron and Hur slid a rock under him, and he sat on it. They then took turns holding up his hands, one on one side and the other on the other side; "so his hands were steady until the sun set."

We should not underestimate the power of being next to a loved one to care for them in a time of need. I have shared before the power of presence for someone who is sick. There is healing power in having a loved one by your side when you are sick. They care for you and tend to the needs you are unable to care for and tend to. I think this has been one of the biggest weights to deal with during Covid isolations and quarantines. Not only for those who have loved ones in the hospital and those sick in the hospital, but for healthcare workers providing care. Something qualitative that medicine cannot touch or define is the assistance the presence of loved ones has on patients.

We should not underestimate the strength given by showing up to a school and helping with a small job of tutoring, organizing, or simply smiling and giving kids a high five in the hallway. Those acts empower strength in others.

We should not underestimate the strength given by a greeter opening the door for us when we come to church. Meeting someone where they are with a smile and welcome empowers strength to others.

Like a front porch on our home, or an expansion bridge cascading over a river or the ocean, without each support placed strategically to hold it up, they would come crashing down. Without the strength of community being there for us, we too would come crashing down. We need God, yes! We also need each other!

A threefold cord is not quickly broken. One cord represents an individual (you or me). One cord represents God. One cord represents the community (church, team, family).

Moses was able to remain strong because the community of people around him helped him. He was the strong one at first and gave the Israelites any belief at all that they could go to war and defend themselves. He stood strong and relied on God to provide strength through him to others. When he got weary and tired, others found a way to support him and help him stay strong. By doing so, not only was Moses able to stay strong, but the Israelites were able to stay strong through him. And neither Moses nor the Israelites were anything without God.

One New Year's Day, in the Tournament of Roses parade, a beautiful float suddenly sputtered and quit. It was out of gas. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a can of gas. The amusing thing was this float represented the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its truck was out of gas.

Even though Christians have access to God's omnipotence, if we do not avail ourselves to it, we will run out of power.

Isaiah 40: 28-31

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

God does not faint or grow weary; God's understanding is unsearchable.

God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait for 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.

In our wilderness journey, we must hope and trust in God, **who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think.**

Let all God's people say... Amen.