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WHEN STRENGTH SEEMS GONE

CAROLYN AND LYNN ANDERSON

“Whoever serves must do so with the strength that God provides, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ”—1 Peter 4.11.

THE STRENGTH THAT GOD PROVIDES

This past summer as Carolyn was leading a group of Pastors’ wives in an interdenominational retreat, she pointed them to 1 Peter 4.11, “If anyone serves ... do so with the strength that God provides.” The passage rang bells. One of the women acknowledged that she had never noticed this passage before—or at least had never zip-coded it to her own life. But she said that if all she took home was this one verse, the whole retreat was worth it.

We (Carolyn and Lynn) understand why she would say this. We thank God every day for the privilege of ministry. We love it. We always have. But to be honest, at times the emotional and spiritual drain, the expectations and the sheer pace have been overwhelming. And like most ministers, we can’t count the blue Mondays that found us mentally drafting a resignation letter—ready to throw in the towel or run screaming into the woods.

However, we certainly don’t claim that the strength to hang in came from any virtue of our own. Nor did it come from our rugged constitutions or our stubborn wills (though some say we have both). Rather the real reason we have been able to persevere lies in “the strength that God provides.”

LOOKING BACK

We are not sure of all Peter meant by this ringing challenge to “serve in the strength that God provides.” It seems, of course, that he wrote this to people who were riding out a storm of persecution. For most of us, the very real pressures of ministry in our day are certainly trivial-by-comparison, yet we draw enormous strength from these words from Peter.

First, we draw great strength from this reminder that we are not alone. We are by no means the first to learn that Jesus did not call us to ease. Peter said so. And Love Maria Willis said it again through song back in 1864: “Father hear the prayer we offer, nor for ease our prayer shall be,/ But for strength that we may ever live our lives courageously.”

Christian leadership is sometimes lonely, painful and wearying. At times we find in the way of tangible, encouraging results, and much resistance to be overcome. But since Peter reminds us that others have done this before us, keeping the faith alive for generations to follow after them, surely God will supply us the strength for our part in this on-going saga. So we look *back* for “the strength which God provides.”

LOOKING UP

Second, we also draw something quite immediate, personal and tangible from this challenge and promise. Whenever we confront demanding assignments, when we cannot seem to muster the energy on our own, we find ourselves turning to Peter’s challenge or its companion, Paul’s assurance in Romans 8:11: “...if the

Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

Possibly we draw something more specific from these passages than what the apostles had in mind, but we take them to mean that the Holy Spirit, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, will actually give our

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mortal bodies the vitality and energy necessary to do what God is wanting done through us at the moment.

Just a few times we have experienced this: Carolyn says, "I witnessed God's strength again this past week-end. We headed into another state for a couples retreat. When we left home Lynn was both sick and exhausted—without energy. On the way, he wondered how he was going to muster the

strength and concentration to stand up and teach. I was praying 1 Peter 4 and Romans 8 kind of prayers for him: "life for your mortal bodies" and "strength which God provides."

Somehow, God showed up at that retreat. I told Lynn afterwards, "It was as though you stepped out of the way. Your body was there but another force took over. I never heard you teach in a more compelling way. I am sure that others thought it was just Lynn at his best. But *I* knew the difference." God supplied the energy for his appointed time at that place.

Two months earlier, Carolyn left for two weeks in Guinea, West Africa—the poorest nation in Africa—wondering what had possessed her to head into such a commitment. She asked herself, "What can I do in two weeks to honor God there, much less make any difference?"

She left tired, and arrived even further exhausted, and then began two weeks of intense and draining work. "I felt so tired, and I began to pray" she remembers, "I prayed that: (1) God would give me an extra measure of energy, and (2) others would see Jesus in me."

The village people saw "that white woman" cleaning chickens for the table and swatting flies from a little girl's sores, washing faces and giving sips of water. They saw her walking through the village holding the cold hands of malaria riddled little girls or cradling them in her arms while they fell asleep. They also saw her washing dishes as the village watched through the window, and more, much more. She recalls "It was a whirlwind of action and connection that runs together in a blur now." "Of course," Carolyn acknowledges, "I know that I ran on 'the strength which God provides.' I also ran on the borrowed credibility of Caitlin, our nineteen year old grand-daughter who had been there doing these things for five months before I arrived."

On that trip, Carolyn choked back tears as she watched Caitlin, with medical tweezers, debriding third degree burns across the stomach and thighs of a little girl. Andress, Caitlin's older sister, stood along side receiving the sections of dead skin in sterile gauze. Carolyn says, "As I watched this, I Peter 4.11 kept repeating itself in my head. I knew these two beautiful girls of ours were able to serve in such nauseating circumstances because of 'the strength which God provides.'" So we *look up* for the grace of strength that God supplies.

LOOKING AROUND US

Third, God often channels his energy through others who, like Moses, hold up our drooping hands in prayer and encouragement. Just here, may we challenge our readers to be sensitive to God's nudging. He may want to use you as a conduit of God's strength to other people who feel too weary to go on. You can become 1 Peter 4.11 written "not with ink" but on "the pages of human hearts."

Sometimes even a small gesture can go a long way. For example, Carolyn recently sent a small, decorative bird's nest of brightly colored artificial eggs to the weary wife of a Tennessee shepherd, and this reply came back:

God knew I couldn't take another gray day, so he used you to send me a breath of spring. I love the bird nest. It is sitting on my mantle and each time I pass through that room I know spring is Eternal and that Carolyn Anderson loves me. I love you to the moon and back,
Rose

Most shepherds of God's flock will find dark valleys that sap the energy on their journey. Plus they will feel overwhelmed by the wear and tear of the long haul. Frequently they will feel so exhausted that with one more step their knees will buckle. But the Holy Spirit of the living God promises strength for the way. So look for the strength God provides from *around us*.

God provides strength—through the Word of those who have served *before us*. God provides strength—through his on-going grace poured in from *above us*. God provides strength—through encouragement from the community of faith *around us*. So, "Whoever serves must do so with the strength God provides, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

Lynn and Carolyn Anderson minister through Hope Network Ministries, San Antonio, Texas.

