

“From Strength to Strength”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
New Church Westville—March 5, 2023

“They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion.” (Psalm 84:7)

A young boy and his mother are talking. They’re watching an Olympic gymnastics competition. The boy is four, and is marveling at the strength of the gymnasts. Wishing that he could do the amazing things that they are doing, he declares, “When I grow up I want to be really strong.” His mom, smiling to herself, responds, “I want you to be strong too, my son; I want you to be strong too.”

It doesn’t take too much imagination to come to the conclusion that these two family members do not have the same concept of strength in mind even though their words agree. To the mom the meaning of the sentence is much more pervasive than bulging muscles and physical prowess. While she may rejoice if in fact her son does become a gymnast or athlete of some skill, her concept of strength is deeper. She wants him to be a strong human being—someone who is strong in character, who has many abilities, who is able to resist hatred and fight against injustice, who is confident in his ability to make a positive difference in the world, who is a contributing part of a strong family, and who has the depth of resources or a strong foundation from which to do all he seeks to do. That’s what she means when she says “I want you to be a strong too, my son.”

Today’s sermon is about strength. It is drawn from the Psalms, Psalm 84 in specific, which states, “They go from strength to strength; each one of them appears before God in Zion” (Psalm 84:7). The kind of people being described here are those who have this quality of strength in many parts of their lives. They are succeeding in living the life the Lord wants them to live. “They go from strength to strength” and they end up in heaven, which is what “appearing before God in Zion” means.

Three qualities of spiritual strength. It is useful to clarify what we’re talking about. What is spiritual strength? Or asked another way, what are the strengths of spirit that the Lord provides, and how do we get them? And let’s focus primarily today on the strengths that we most want to see in children as they grow—a message for parents, teachers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc., given the centennial celebration of Kainon School that is happening this weekend.

Three concepts come to the fore. The first is that strength is related to *goodness*. One passage in the Word says, “‘Strength’ in the Word has reference to the power of good” (*Apocalypse Explained* 316). Another passage says, “‘Being renewed with strength’ stands for growth in the willing of good” (*Arcana Caelestia* 3901). When we cooperate with the Lord He is able to flow into us with a willingness to do what is good. We want to do good things to and for the people around us, even if it takes incredible courage and fortitude.

What does that look like? It is a child caring about a friend’s feelings. It is gratitude and love that is expressed to teachers or parents. It is the goodness that comes when kids are safe and unconcerned about anything but the learning or project in front of them. For parents it is also the love that extends to protect, to provide for needs for those who cannot provide for themselves, the walking of the extra mile.

The truth of the matter is, when people are grounded in that kind of goodness, they are spiritually strong. In fact, one passage goes so far as to say, “Good is of such a nature that nothing of evil or of falsity can approach it, thus none of the infernal crew, who flee far away when good approaches, or an angel who is in good” (*Arcana Caelestia* 6423). The fact of the matter is that when people treat each other in loving and kind-hearted ways, there is a bond—a powerful togetherness and reciprocation that results. That bond is stronger than any perceived power of evil. In contrast, evil by its very nature is self-centered and leads a person to look out for number one to the exclusion of the interests of others. That breaks people apart, eventually, and is therefore inherently weak.

A second characteristic of spiritual strength has to do with truth. One passage simply says, “All spiritual strength consists in truths” (*Apocalypse Explained* 811). Another says, “Great strength is attributed to truth because nothing is able to withstand it” (*Arcana Caelestia* 426). The fact of the matter is we can’t do anything good unless we know how. Truths are the pieces of information that teach us what good is and how to do it. This is why strength in the Word is pervasively and consistently linked with truth.

What does that look like for children as they grow? Learning what the Lord wants them to do, and what He needs them to avoid. Helping them to understand the Lord’s plan for their lives, including that He wants them in heaven one day. Coaching them in the Ten Commandments as core building blocks for a heavenly life. Reminding people, when selfishness bubbles up, what might be wiser next time. And all of it founded on a knowledge of what the Lord reveals in His Word.

This too is a source of great spiritual strength. The Lord Himself showed this power when tempted by the Devil in the wilderness. To each challenge, the Lord responded: “It is written.” “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). “It is written, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God’” (Matthew 4:7). “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve’” (Matthew 4:10). So also can we be strong, if we are striving to live by a principle of truth from the Lord’s Word.

A third facet of spiritual strength comes in the word “ability.” We know from our experience that strength and ability are interrelated words. A person who is strong is capable of doing things with that strength, and therefore a person who is spiritually strong is capable of doing spiritual things. Spiritual things in this case are useful services to the neighbor. Speaking of the truths that a person knows, one passage says, “They are useful to those who are in good, because they apply them to good uses” (*Arcana Caelestia* 6917). What we are asked to consider here is the logical consequence of the former two characteristics of spiritual strength. A person who has a strong desire to be a good person, armed with the truth that shows them how, will tend to carry that desire and know-how into many useful actions. Such a person will develop a growing ability to actually help people, and his or her unique way of being of service will become to her “a strength.”

With children, there are so many ways to cultivate a useful orientation. Wise teachers notice the things that each child is particularly good at and encourages that. Parents can foster active helpfulness, even with chores. Some even build into the day some exposure to usefulness—today we’re going to write cards to people in a care home; you know what would be nice is if we cleaned up the garage together; and so on.

A spiritually strong person, then, is one who has a strong and growing desire to be good, who knows lots of truths about how to be good, and uses all their abilities to do as the Lord prescribes. It is the ultimate trilogy of good, truth, and activity, or to use a parallel series, love, wisdom, and useful service.

What is amazing to see, is that this same trilogy defines the people that we are. We have hearts, we have minds, and we are able to do things. Wouldn't it make sense, then, that the Lord would be working in so many ways to touch our hearts, feed our minds, and prepare us for living a life of useful service?

Let me focus on that trilogy in the words you just heard: Touch the heart, feed the mind, and prepare for life. That's a motto for New Church education used by several of the church schools that are supported within our organization, including Kainon here in Westville. I bring it forward today because it is another way of capturing the goal for today, of being led "from strength to strength"—from love to truth to action, and this over and over again, so that we become increasingly capable human beings. That is what spiritual strength is all about, and it is a lovely way of characterizing a goal within our New Church schools!

New Church education at its roots, however, is a parent driven process. New Church schools are designed to be responsive to parental wishes for their children to be educated in an overtly religious school. I share with you a teaching from the New Church which describes this deeper desire, which could lead people to enroll their children in a New Church school, take them to church, or holistically mentor them in spiritual pathways.

Spiritual parents love their children for their spiritual intelligence and moral life, loving them thus for their fear of God and for their piety of conduct or life, and at the same time for their affection for and application to useful endeavors of service to society, thus for the virtues and good habits in them. (*Conjugal Love* 405)

I hear a lot of "spiritual strength" in that teaching.

An essential prerequisite. With those concepts of spiritual strength in mind, I'd like to return to the Psalm which has been our focus to zero in on just who is able to be led by the Lord "from strength to strength" in these ways. It is "the person whose strength is in [the Lord]" (Psalm 84:5). This is echoed all of the Scriptures, as for example:

- The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped. (Psalm 287)
- Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

The Lord is indeed the Source of all our strength and ability, all of our capability to be wise and loving and useful human beings. And so we extend into another way of characterizing a core parenting goal—something the Lord asks parents to do—as well as a core educational goal: to bring children to the Lord and the Lord to children.

I draw attention to one passage that specifically connects this goal with the kind of strength that only the Lord can provide:

It must be understood that the angels have no power whatever from themselves, but that all their power is from the Lord; and that they are powerful only so far as they acknowledge this. Any one of them who believe that their power comes from

themselves immediately become so weak that they cannot resist even a single evil spirit. (*Heaven and Hell* 230)

The story of David and Goliath, which was the focus of the Children's Talk, illustrates this so well. David, himself a lad at the time, seemed wise beyond his years in his overt acknowledgment of the Lord, and was granted amazing strength as a result. "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 Samuel 17:37). "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, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand" (1 Samuel 17:45-46).

So we return to the mother and her son watching the Olympics. The son wants to grow up to be strong, and his mother wants him to grow up to be strong. His definition is all about physical prowess, and there's nothing wrong with that provided that strength is used for useful purposes. Her definition, however, is about deeper dimensions of strength. It includes the things we have been talking about today: strong in love or a desire to be a good person, strong in truth or a growing knowledge of how the Lord would have them act, and strong in action or the ability to do many good and useful.

If there's one message for today—one take-away for parents in terms of leading their children to develop spiritual strength, it is this: bring them to the Lord. At a time of baptism, we hear parents making a promise to raise their children with the Lord in mind. In whatever way they choose to do that, whether its sending them to a New Church school, bringing them to church on Sunday, teaching them the Lord's Prayer, talking about the Lord as a reality in their children's lives, saying blessings at meal times, and any number of other ways, they are building that key prerequisite for spiritual strength: devotion to the Lord who is the one and only Source.

The same is true for any of us. All of us are seeking spiritual strength from the Lord. We too have a yearning in our hearts, inspired by the Lord Himself, to be strong against evil, to be strong in the truth, to be strong in our follow-through, to be strong in our spiritual devotions, to be capable of useful service. It begins for us as well in turning to the Lord as the Source of strength and devoting ourselves to Him.

Blessed is the [one] whose strength is in You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion. (Psalm 84:5,7) **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Psalm 84:5-7, 1 Samuel 17:33-50; *True Christian Religion* 87.

Psalm 84

- ⁵ Blessed is the man whose strength is in You,
Whose heart is set on pilgrimage.
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
They make it a spring;
The rain also covers it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength;
Each one appears before God in Zion.

1 Samuel 17

³³And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth."

³⁴But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, ³⁵I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God." ³⁷Moreover David said, "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."

And Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you!"

...⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand; and he chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag, in a pouch which he had, and his sling was in his hand. And he drew near to the Philistine. ⁴¹So the Philistine came, and began drawing near to David, and the man who bore the shield went before him. ⁴²And when the Philistine looked about and saw David, he disdained him; for he was only a youth, ruddy and good-looking. ⁴³So the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴And the Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

⁴⁵Then David said to the Philistine, "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, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. ⁴⁷Then 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."

⁴⁸So it was, when the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, that David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth. ⁵⁰So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him.

True Christian Religion 87

The power of truth is very clearly to be seen in the spiritual world. An angel who possesses Divine truths from the Lord, even if physically as weak as a child, can still put to rout a crowd of spirits from hell, though they look like the Anakim and Nephilim, that is, like giants, and pursue them down to hell and force them into its caverns; and when they emerge from these they do not dare to approach the angel. Those who possess Divine

truths from the Lord behave in that world like lions, though they have no more strength in their bodies than sheep. Likewise, human beings who possess Divine truths from the Lord have power against evils and falsities, and so they have against serried ranks of devils, who regarded in their essence are simply evils and falsities. The reason there is such strength in the Divine Truth is that God is Good itself and Truth itself, and He created the universe by means of the Divine Truth; and all the laws of order by which He preserves the universe are instances of truth.