

Ephesians - Commentaries by Alexander Hume Rule

Strength and Courage: Service and Conflict, Strength and Courage: Service and Conflict Require It

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3) The ground of strength and courage is the fact that God has commanded, and is with the one who obeys. "Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." Josh. 1:9.

The difficulties might be like mountains, the enemy might be great and powerful, but Jehovah was greater than all, and was with His obedient servant, so that he had nothing to fear. He had delivered Israel out of Egypt and brought them through the Red Sea, the wilderness, and the Jordan; and He who had done this could lead them on to victory. He could give strength and courage against which no foe could stand.

This same strength and courage we need. "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might," it is said, where it is a question of Satan's power and wiles. And when Christianity began to decline, and Timothy was losing heart, the Apostle Paul encouraged him in these words, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God"; and again, "Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Timothy needed this encouragement, and we need it; and what is more, God is able to give it, and will give it to those who go on in dependent obedience to His will.

But we need to have faith in God. There is a maxim of this world which says, "Knowledge is power"; but with the believer power is rather connected with "faith." Faith brings God in, and to His power there is no limit. Hebrew 11 gives us many examples of this faith which acted with God, and in which His power was displayed. Moses "endured, as seeing Him who is invisible." "Through faith" they "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the enemies of the aliens." In the midst of weakness faith made them strong. As Paul also said, "When I am weak, then am I strong."

"Have faith in God," Jesus said to His disciples, and then adds, "for verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith." And how could it be otherwise if there is the faith that brings God into the matter? He who created the mountains can surely remove them also if He be pleased to do so. The real question is, Are we walking with Him? Have we the knowledge of His will so that we can act with confidence? Can we bring Him into what we are doing? Are we standing with Him and for Him in the carrying out of His will and His purpose, so that we can connect His name with our service? If this be so, no difficulty can be too great. We can go forward in the name of the Lord with strength and courage of heart, and undismayed by all the power that Satan can raise up against us. And here let us observe that diligence of heart is needful, and I may add, as of equal importance, prayerful dependence. "Meditating day and night," and "praying always," is what the warriors of Christ are called to. Joshua was to meditate on the words of the law day and night, and the Ephesian saints were to pray always with all prayer and supplication for all saints. Paul says to Timothy, "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all." Oh, if we were more diligent as to the Word of God and prayer, how different our state would be! What fervency of heart in all our service, and what devotedness to Christ and His people, there would be; and how much greater blessing would be enjoyed!

How much we lack this diligence of heart! How many moments every hour, and hours every day, are wasted—time that might be given up to prayer and meditation on God's blessed Word, in which we should find the Holy Spirit refreshing our souls and filling them with that which flows down from the heart of Christ in glory. Hours spent in foolish talk and idle gossip, grieving the Spirit, blighting spiritual growth, and drying up the springs of divine love in the soul, might be spent in holy, edifying conversation about Christ and His things. "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon His name." Mal. 3:16. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another." Col. 3:16. In this we need diligence of heart so that the Lord may be honored, and our blessing and the blessing of others secured.

I may add also that strength and courage are needed more in a day of decline than when all is going well. There is the enemy to contend with, and instead of having the support of our brethren, we may meet with that which chills the heart and fills it with sorrow. Here the heart is tested, and God only can sustain.

There is not only conflict with a common enemy, but there is the state of the saints to be borne as a burden on the heart. Will you bear this burden? Will you cleave to the saints in the power of divine love when they turn away from you as all in Asia did from Paul? Will you seek to serve them when you are misunderstood, misrepresented, or even maligned, as Paul said to the Corinthian saints, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you: though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved"? The state of the saints with whom we have to do will often be the means of testing the state of our own hearts. It is easy to love my brethren when they love me and heap their favors upon me. But do I love them just the same when they turn against me or forsake me? Do I still cling to them when they have given me up? Do I intercede for them night and day when perhaps they are only speaking evil of me? The real question is, Have I got the heart of Christ about the saints? And do I see Christ's glory bound up in them? Then I shall act toward them according to His heart, and seek His glory in connection with their state, regardless of personal rights or present advantage. Paul could appeal to God as his witness, how he longed after all the Philippian saints in the bowels of Jesus Christ. It was wholehearted devotion to the saints for the sake of Christ, and as having the heart of Christ about

them. And this too we need to have; but it requires strength and courage to persevere in it, and the more so if the saints are in a low and carnal state. And we need to be continually cast on God who alone can give strength amid weakness, and lead us on to victory.

Diligent seeking of God's face, and patient waiting on Him for His will, His help, and His guidance, are indispensable. Why have we no strength? Why is there decline among us? Why breaking of ranks, and scattering of the saints? Is it not because we have not lived close to Christ, and gone on in humble dependence on God? And God's Christ, God's truth, and God's people have not had their rightful place in our affections. We have seen one growing careless, and another going wrong, and we have perhaps talked about them, and criticized them when we ought to have been on our faces interceding for them.

But will we lay to heart our own state and that of our brethren? Will we own our slackness of soul—our guilty carelessness—and with diligence of heart seek God's face, and walk with Him? Then we might expect His blessing and the enjoyment of His favor which is better than life (Psalm 63:3). There is no time for loitering, no time for idle gossip, no time for pampering the flesh and feeding it with the vanities of this world. "Wherefore He saith, Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." Eph. 5:14-16.

The blessed Lord give the writer and the reader strength and courage in this evil world to live for Himself and for His own, serving Him and them in lowly grace until we are taken out of the scene of conflict and service to rest in the eternal brightness of His own presence, and in the joy of His unchanging love.

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Selected Ministry of A. H. Rule Volume 1, Man's Condition; and What Is the Remedy? Part 2

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Let us now look a little further at man's condition as ruined in his nature, and dead in his trespasses and sins; and let us see how God in His grace answers this need.

"If one died for all, then were all dead" (2 Cor. 5:14). "Who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:1-2). "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6).

Such is man's condition as described by the Spirit of truth. What a deplorable condition! Spiritually dead — dead in trespasses and sins! Not a pulsation of life — not a movement of the heart — toward God! The nature incorrigible enmity against God, and unchangeable as the leopard's spots, or the Ethiopian's skin!

The cross brings all this fully to light; and in the cross, too, is found the remedy for the evil. In the cross man's enmity and God's love meet — man's enmity in putting God's Son to death, and God's love in giving His Son to die as a sacrifice to meet man's need. What a meeting between God and man! What an unfolding of the character of each! All the dark hatred and malignity of the human heart exposed, but exposed in the presence of infinite Love itself providing a sacrifice to put it away! "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20).

Let us notice a little the two expressions, "enmity against God," and "dead in trespasses and sins." They express two different aspects of man's hopelessly ruined condition. The former is the disposition towards God, or the state of the nature, looked at in its activity. It is "enmity" — incurable, unchangeable enmity. For this, there is no remedy but DEATH. Thank God, it is found in the death of another, the death of Jesus on the cross.

"Dead in trespasses and sins" expresses the fact that while alive to sin, and walking in lusts, under the power of Satan, there is no life toward God. This is the condition of all who are connected with the old creation. "If one died for all, then were all dead" (2 Cor. 5:14). To meet this need there must be a new creation.

In Romans and Ephesians the truth as to these two points is developed.

In Romans the sinner is viewed as alive in his sins, and in bondage to sin, and needing justification and deliverance. In Ephesians the sinner is viewed as dead in his sins — that is, dead to God — and needing to be made alive.

In both it is the absolute grace of God that meets the need. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20-21). "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

As has already been stated, it is the cross that has brought fully to light man's condition. He was never declared to be dead until after the cross. The incorrigible evil of his heart was being brought out in one way or another, all through the ages, under the dealings of God; but it was in the cross that all was brought to a final issue, and God's irrevocable judgment on the flesh pronounced.

Man's condition was bad enough before, but not declared hopeless. Nearly eight hundred years before the cross we see a sad enough picture of man's condition in Israel; they are declared rebellious; more stupid than the ox or the ass, laden with iniquity, corrupt, sick and faint, but

not yet dead. "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken; I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, My people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment" (Isa. 1:2-6).

Sad and pitiable condition indeed! wounds and putrefying sores from head to foot, stupid, sick and faint, but not yet dead; and still called on to recover themselves by ceasing to do evil, and learning to do well! But this is all over now. Man's true state has been brought to light by the cross. He is now declared dead in trespasses and sins. The cross is morally and judicially the end of the old creation; and redemption and a new creation are needed. Thank God, in Christ we have both.

"Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24).

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature [or, it is a new creation]: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

In these Scriptures, then, we have the statement of God's remedy for the terrible condition into which man has been plunged by sin. The remedy is in Christ. But it is in Christ as having accomplished redemption through His death — Christ crucified, risen, glorified. In His death on the cross all the evil was met in the presence of God, and judged and put away before Him; and in Him, risen and glorified, the new place and condition of blessing for man are found. In His death sins were borne, the flesh judged, the old creation ended. "Old things are passed away." Risen from the dead, Christ has left sins, sin, death and judgment behind forever, and has entered a new and eternal scene of blessing and glory, where sin and death can never enter.

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