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## DRAWING NEAR TO GOD'S...STRENGTH

Isaiah 40:27-31

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During the month of June, we will be exploring how we can use the Bible – not only to learn more about God and how to live our lives, but how to use the Bible to draw nearer to God.

Through learning how to pray the scriptures, you will discover that the presence of God is as close as the Bible on your bookshelf.

Our verse this week is a favorite of many and many times in my life it has helped me draw near to the strength of God when my own strength was insufficient.

*But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall soar with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Isaiah 40:31

This passage shows us the spiritual steps we need to take to draw upon the strength of God for any task that lays before us.

Wait....Launch....Soar

Wait for God's timing to reveal itself, launch your energies toward the goal to which God points you, and soar on the wings of the Lord's will let the divine take you all the way home.

"To wait upon the Lord" is the spiritual task of allowing God's timing to drive our life rather than our own anxious selves. Waiting is one of my greatest spiritual failings perhaps seen most clearly in my inability to sit still through even one traffic light!

When we fail to wait, struggle and pain ensue.

As we seek the strength of God through scripture, we will learn the wisdom of patience as we realize that Jacob's stubborn, illicit actions cost him decades of his life and how Jonah's fearful fleeing endangered his life and that of others.

Waiting for God's strength comes from expectant patience in the life of faith, not from over anxious action. If we leap to action ahead of God, we stray into paths that lack divine will and guidance, like hiking ahead of a seasoned guide can land you in a snake pit, or bear country, or unnecessarily rocky terrain.

While in Alabama I felt God calling me back to the local church after serving five years in the presbytery. That was a clear, unequivocal calling. But I became restless and anxious. And, in the waiting, I let my ego allow me to be drawn to Atlanta to be the Executive Presbyter at the largest presbytery in the country. (*What was I thinking!?*)

Now God used me there; so even in our mistakes God's power is still at work. But there was no peace and my heart was still restless.

Thank the Lord for Gloria and Lee Close, who happened to attend a Sunday school class I was teaching in Atlanta, which eventually led me here to be your pastor.

Ironically, in praying the scriptures, the most challenging effort is the waiting. This is the effort of quiet, of not trying to force insight and direction out of the text too quickly. It is staying in the silence of not hearing or feeling anything, sometimes for hours or even for days in prayer... sometimes it is dry and unproductive. But I find that is the most important time to persevere because the payoff is magnified by the patience. This is true of sermon preparation as well. Sometimes, when nothing comes to the preacher, it is because God had something later in the week in mind for the sermon that does not happen until Friday...or heaven forbid, Saturday night!

To fully engage God's strength in your life means relying on God's timing, which enables us to launch with everything in our life properly aligned, which

leads us to step two in Drawing Near to God's Strength through scripture – Launch.

Launching into God's strength is using all your energy toward God's goal. One of my favorite summer activities as a child was hopping on my bike and feeling the wind in my hair through the power in my feet.

In grades 3 through 6, I lived in Roanoke, Virginia. It was there my love for bike riding took off. I would ride my bike to and from school and to visit my friends. I would run errands for my mom and use it to deliver newspapers. The greatest days were on the weekends when my friends and I would meet at the 7-11 to play pinball games and drink cherry Slurpees! Those were the days! We would ride all day and, if we were feeling strong, we would attempt the Challenge of Beer Bottle Hill! (Apparently the local teenagers gave it this name because it was shaped like a beer bottle!) The further up the hill you went, the steeper it became.

The challenge was simple, ride your bike to the top without stopping. I had tried dozens of times. On a good day, I could get to the neck of the bottle, about two-thirds of the way up. But as soon as I hit that point, my bike would begin to go backwards, and I would have to jump off. It was extremely frustrating! More so because the older kids would see us attempting the challenge and would effortlessly ride to the top! It didn't even look like they were trying! And that was the secret!

One day an actual teenager spoke to me and my friends and explained how he did it. "Even though it looks easy, it isn't!", he said. First of all, you are spending all your energy at the beginning, so you have nothing left in the tank when it gets hard. Pace yourself.

Secondly, you are all over the place! Be sure to drive with all your body into those peddles. Grip the bar firmly. Keep your knees in and not spread out, especially at the neck when it gets really steep! Don't flail your arms, keep everything tucked in, that is what makes it look easy even when you are trying your hardest!

Within minutes, we were all at the top of the hill! I think we made it to the top five times that day! But it took directing the strength of our hands, arms, and legs into those peddles with proper form. Our whole body aligned and working towards our goal.

To mount up with wings of eagles in our spiritual life is to align our mind, our will, our heart, and our soul all to God's will for our lives.

Imagine God's will has become clear for your life, but without spiritual alignment you will still flail and struggle; you will fail to gain God's strength. Even if you start in the right direction with your mind, if your heart is not in it you will fail to gain God's destiny for you. But in proper alignment, through focused effort, you can reach the top of Beer Bottle Hill invigorated by the effort, rather than exhausted and move to the final and most glorious stage of them all – Soaring! Soaring, on the effortless grace of the power of the Lord.

Once we got to the top of Beer Bottle Hill, the fun began as gravity would take us racing wherever we wanted to go. We couldn't even peddle if we wanted to! Our feet could not move as fast as the hill was taking us! The wind whipping through our hair as we went faster and faster and faster with no effort was an incredible rush.

It was fun!

Many birds look awkward on the ground, because God meant them to fly. Once they get airborne they look at home, confident and at ease. God meant us to fly on the winds of the Holy Spirit, for the Lord to be our strength.

Eagles, unlike hummingbirds, do not constantly flap their wings; once they are on the winds, they cruise on vector currents that keep them aloft with little effort.

Soaring is also like swinging on a swing set or bouncing on trampoline. The beginning takes effort but then your momentum perpetuates the process.

In praying the scriptures, the perseverance pays off. And the words pour forth in the rarefied air of

God's wondrous love as one thought leads to the next and the next and the next.

It is all very good to talk about – praying the scriptures to draw us closer to God. But without practice, it will come to naught. Praying the scriptures is as easy as reading the Bible with a prayerful disposition. So, let us bow our heads on our way into God's strength through Isaiah 40:31. It will be the words of the Bible in conversation with the stirrings of my heart.

Those who wait upon the Lord...

*Oh Lord, let me wait, let me have the patience, and the perseverance to let your timing be my timing. Let me listen and watch for your signs to show me the way. Even when it gets impossibly hard, hold me back, grab me by the neck if necessary, and yank me back in your will and your ways.*

...Wait, wait, wait and you shall renew...

*Lord, renew me within and without. Renew my love for you. Renew my hunger for your presence. Renew my passion to follow wherever you lead. Renew my courage and renew my hope.*

...Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their STRENGTH!

*Lord, my strength is all gone. It is dried up. I am weak. There is nothing left. I claim your promise to invigorate my bones and my flesh and my soul with the power of your Holy Spirit.*

*God give me strength. Strength to do your will. Strength of character, strength of the mind, strength of the will, strength of the body. Lord give me strength to persevere.*

*Help all my efforts, my whole soul and body and mind, to launch as one into your will for my life.*

Those who wait upon the Lord shall be renewed in their strength and they will mount up with wings of eagles...

*with wings of eagles!... Lord, give me those wings. Lord be my wings. Be my strength. Let those wings*

*release me from the burdens of my own making... please...Lord...*

*Oh, dearest and wondrous Lord, thank you. Thank you for carrying me my whole life. Carry me on the winds of your love and your grace. Carry me and see me to the end. Let me soar! Soar in you, soar in hope, soar in purpose, soar in love, soar by your spirit...Both now and forevermore.*

*Amen.*