

## OUR GREATEST STRENGTH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 4, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

There are two very interesting stories in the Old Testament to which I should like to refer. The first is the story of Gideon. During the time when the enemies of God's people held them in subjection, God raised up Gideon to rally an army and free Israel. The first call for men was answered by 32,000 men who were ready to go forth to battle. At this point, "Jehovah God said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." (Judges 7:2). At God's instruction Gideon then gave all of those who were fearful the opportunity to return home. Twenty-two thousand men returned. Of the 10,000 that remained, "Jehovah said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many." (Judges 7:4).

It is quite clear that God's purpose was to deliver Israel in such a way that the people would know that their deliverance came through the power of God rather than through the strength of their own hands. Continuing to follow God's instructions, Gideon reduced his army to 300 men. The battle that followed was designed to give glory to God, rather than to men. Gideon equipped each of his men with a torch, a pitcher, and a trumpet. At the middle watch of the night, he surrounded the great host of Midian, described as "like locusts for multitude" and having camels. "as the sand which is upon the sea-shore for multitude." (Judges 7: 12). At a given signal the pitchers were broken, revealing suddenly the lighted torches that had been within them, and the trumpets were blown. The Midianites awakened to see lights everywhere about them and to hear this tremendous blast of sound. They were confused, drew their swords, and began to strike out in every direction. They killed and wounded many of their own number, and the rest fled. With 300 men, God had vanquished an enemy numbering many thousands.

### David

The second story is that of David numbering the people. Late in his life David "said to Joab the captain of the host, who was with him, Go now to and fro through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and number ye the people, that I may know the sum of the people. And Joab said unto the king, Now Jehovah thy God add unto the people, how many soever they may be, a hundredfold; and may the eyes of my lord the king see it: but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing?" (II Sam. 24:2-3). David's triumphs, from that memorable day when he vanquished Goliath on through his whole life, had been because of the power of Jehovah. Is it not strange that in his old age he should glory in the number of men in his army? Joab seems to see the danger of this far more clearly than David, for David insisted that the census be taken. Nine months and twenty days later the census reported that Israel had 800,000 valiant men that drew the sword, and that Judah had 500,000 more.

By this time David has realized that it was an action of pride, rather than an action of humble dependence upon God, that caused him to number the people. The account of the story continues, "And David's heart smote him after that he has numbered the people. And David said unto Jehovah, I have sinned greatly in that which I have done: but now, O Jehovah, put away, I beseech thee, the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly." (II Sam. 24:10). God then proceeded to punish David for his lack of trust in him. Again, we have an example of God's desire that his people realize that their strength comes not from their own human strength, but from the power of God.

### Where Is Our Real Strength?

In this framework of thinking, we ask "Where is the real strength and power of the United States of America today?" As citizens of the most powerful nation on earth, we need to pause and evaluate our strengths and weaknesses. Wherein does our strength lie?

If you should stop an average American on the street and ask him the question we have just mentioned, I think he would begin by describing America's strength in terms of nuclear explosives. He would tell about the great power of the atomic and hydrogen bombs which we possess in great number. He would speak of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles and of the rockets that are already probing space. He would undoubtedly go on to tell about the strength of the Air Force, and especially the great striking power of the Strategic Air Command. These great bombers can deliver atomic and hydrogen destruction to any spot on earth within a matter of a few hours. He would probably go on to tell of the strength of the Army and of the Navy and the other branches of service. Truly this is a massive force and power.

In addition, America has tremendous wealth. This wealth is manifest in the vast natural resources that have made possible the development of the great industrial strength of our nation. It is hardly possible to appreciate the tremendous wealth of the timber reserves, the mineral reserves, the water power, and the productivity of the soil. In addition, America has a productive know-how that has brought these raw materials into an unbelievable array of useful, finished products. America is also rich in money, with its vast gold reserves. However, we have all been just a little embarrassed recently to learn that two of our nation's high officials have had to make a trip to Europe to ask financial help. We have all realized that sooner or later the vast wealth of America would be depleted, but

we have assumed that it would be centuries in the future. It may be much sooner than we think. It is good for us to remember that every powerful and wealthy nation of past history has sooner or later come upon poverty and defeat.

### Institutions

America's power lies also in its institutions. The government itself, the finest form of government the earth knows, is of tremendous value. Our educational institutions, from the thousands of elementary schools across the land to the great institutions of higher learning, are another source of America's strength. Yet again, the great business and industrial firms across the land add strength to the nation. The institutions of communication and transportation are also vital in this assessment of American power. Even the recreational institutions of the land, the athletic leagues, the movie industry, and other such institutions have a power in their own sphere and of their own kind. Truly, there are many powerful influences in America.

But America's real strength is a great deal deeper than these things that we have been enumerating. On the deepest level, America's strength lies in its people. As one looks back over the years, he finds a parade of strong people, who have made America strong. Beginning with the Pilgrims who crossed the dangerous North Atlantic on the tiny Mayflower, and continuing down through the generations, there have been men and women who were hardy and determined. These have been people who possessed honesty, integrity, and solid convictions about right and wrong. They have been responsible, dependable people. They have been people who believed in hard work, clean living, and self-discipline. They have practiced generosity toward those who were in need. They have been concerned for others and have respected the property and personal desires of others. These qualities of character have built America.

### Righteousness Exalteth a Nation

Centuries ago Solomon wrote in Proverbs 14:34, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." Righteous living builds strength in a nation, but sin destroys that strength. We are all deeply concerned about the future of our land. We are concerned about the kind of world that our children's children shall inhabit. In recent years there appears to have been a softening of convictions among our people. We were embarrassed last year about the television scandals, then a few years further back by the five per-centers in Washington. We have been disturbed about the extent of juvenile delinquency, especially the gang influence in some of our larger cities. Many people of our time seem far more concerned about personal privileges--vacation periods, retirement benefits, pleasant working conditions, etc. than about working to accomplish something worthwhile. In many respects ours is a land of people who are pleasure-mad, seeking their own personal enjoyment and personal gain to such a degree that it jeopardizes the real heart and strength of America. The most that we can do is to live genuine Christian lives, lives of high purpose and humble dedication, and to train our children to do the same.

Some years ago a student of mine included in his college oration this challenging poem:

God give us men.  
The time demands strong minds, great hearts true faith and willing hands.  
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;  
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;  
Men who possess opinions and a will;  
Men who have honor; Men who will not lie;  
Men who stand before a demagogue and decline his treacherous flatterings without winking;  
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog,  
In public duty and in private thinking. (Anonymous)

In the long view, the right kind of people are the greatest strength that a nation can have. "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." It is my deep conviction that goodness, or righteousness of life, cannot be permanently taught apart from the religion of Christ. It is possible for an atheist to be honest and truthful, but no man who does not have a deep faith in God and a respect for God can have the life-filling motivation for honesty and integrity that a Christian has. If circumstances should change, if pressures should become great enough, if the advantage of another way of life should be appealing enough, there is no reason why the atheist should not change. Whereas, the man who is honest and clean of life because of his love of God has a motivation that will remain constant no matter what may come. Goodness cannot be permanently taught apart from the religion of Christ.

### The Great Drift

A great many of us have become aware that the world is drifting away from religion toward secularism. Of course, this would be especially true of those nations behind the iron curtain. There, every influence that can be mustered to destroy faith in God is used to the full. The influence of government is constantly displayed through the press, radio, and other means of public communication against religious faith. In the course of the centuries it is quite likely that the religious minority may become smaller and smaller. The tragedy is even greater, however, because many of the countries in the free world are drifting toward secularism. For example, more

than ninety percent of the people who live in England are no longer actively religious. Far less than ten percent of the people attend religious services even as much as once a year.

In our own land, we see the drift toward secularism in our larger metropolitan areas. Anyone who has lived in an area like New York or Chicago knows the strong materialistic emphasis that is everywhere apparent. Religion has a firmer hold on the smaller cities and towns of America, and certain sections of the country also have a higher degree of religious activity. We in the South, for instance, are described as living in the "Bible Belt." Let us be thankful for the general religious emphasis in our area and let us do all that we can to extend it into the larger cities of America.

We need to be reminded that the founding fathers were religious men. The Pilgrims came to live on a bleak, new continent, so that they might have freedom of religion. Our coins bear the inscription, "In God We Trust." Religion has been woven into the warp and woof of American beginnings and we must not let it be lost as America grows bigger and older.

### Religion Excluded

Another area of American life in which religion has been crowded far into the background is in the area of public education. The tragic divisions among those who believe in Christ have made it impossible for the public schools to teach religion in any effective manner. Here and there it is still possible to read the scriptures, but not much more. So far as the teaching of a strong, vital faith in Christ and a dedication to Christ's church, this is outside the bounds of the work being done in public education. When one advances to the public institutions of higher learning, the colleges and universities of the land, there he finds often a complete ignoring of religion. Whenever religion is mentioned, it is more likely to be mentioned in a negative manner than in a positive manner. The universities are hotbeds of atheism and agnosticism.

The hard fact is that in the educational system, where we teach our children the heritage of the past, and the information of the present that they need in order to live effectively, we are not permitted to teach them the most important things in life--the religion of Jesus Christ. No wonder our children get the idea that religion must not be very important, for it has only scant place in their training program. More is said about spelling, or arithmetic, or geography than about Christ. This can only mean, in the minds of thousands of youngsters, that religion must not be very significant after all.

These factors form a great challenge to the Christian home. We have a great responsibility to have periods of family devotion in which the entire family breaks the pace of modern, rapid living, and quietly sits for the reading of the scriptures and prayer. These factors also form a great challenge to the church, for we must do more than we have done in the past to reach out and bring a vital faith to the hearts of both young and old in the communities where we exist. We must work doubly hard to stem the tide of secularism and to make up for the loss of the use of our educational system in the propagating of the central needs of the people.

These factors also are a great encouragement to Christians to establish private schools of their own where the Bible can be taught by Christian teachers, along with all necessary secular subjects. These schools already have rendered tremendous service, but their need becomes more and more apparent as the world drifts toward secularism. Let us be thankful for those elementary and high schools that have been established in scores of places across the land, by thinking Christians who want their children to have deeply embedded in their hearts the things that make for real strength in an individual and in a nation. Let us be thankful for those institutions of higher learning where the Bible is taught and where the environment is controlled by Christians. Let us do all that we can to extend these facilities so that other young people may drink deeply of this most important area in education.

### Conclusion

When we contemplate the strength of our nation, let us remember that the real strength lies not in military might, material wealth, nor in human institutions however valuable they may be. Our real strength lies in the God who made us and in our adherence to the way of life that he has set before us.

In the long, long ago God gave these instructions to his servant Joshua, who had just taken the place of Moses to lead Israel, "Be strong and of good courage; for thou shalt cause this people to inherit the land which I swore unto their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, to observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand not to the left, that thou mayest have good success whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate thereon day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed: for Jehovah thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest." (Joshua 1:6-9).

Joshua took this admonition to heart and lived his life in close conformity to the will of God. Not only did he live his own life in the way that God directed, but he also guided the people who were under his direction to follow God carefully. Toward the end of his life Joshua called the people together and said to them, "I am old and well stricken in years: and ye have seen all that Jehovah your God hath done unto all these nations because of you; for Jehovah your God, he it is that hath fought for you ... Therefore be ye very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye may turn not aside therefrom to the right hand

or to the left.” (Joshua 32:2-3, 6. ) When Joshua died, the inspired writer paid him this tribute: “And Israel served Jehovah all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and had known all the work of Jehovah. that he had wrought for Israel.” (Joshua 24:31).

This still has the ring of truth. May we need the same admonition, study God’s law, build the principles of his truth into our lives, trust in him, and look ever upward for his leadership. Then and only then will we have the real strength that makes a nation strong and that makes the life of an individual such that he can spend eternity with God.