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Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden  
at Galeed Chapel, Brighton  
on Wednesday 25 July 1923

BE STRONG AND WORK

Text: Haggai 2 v 4 and 5

"Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work; for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts; according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you; fear ye not."

These people were in a case greatly to need this word. They had been, and were still, for the most part, in a solemn captivity because of their sins. A goodly number of them, about fifty thousand, had been enabled, at the time when the Lord would fulfil His prophecy by Jeremiah through the proclamation of Cyrus, to return to Jerusalem to build the temple; and upon their return there they were withstood. The enemies of the Lord and of the Jews desired to build with them; and finding that futile, they sought power from their ruler to stop the building by force. And it seems to me that this shows to us what the people of God may even encounter in their spiritual life. Frequently, especially in some whose disposition is naturally of a moral and religious kind, nature desires to assist and amplify the work of God. And some of the people of God may, for a time, be greatly deceived and puffed up by the workings of nature, having a little grace but much nature in their religion. But the time comes when, by the mercy of God, they have to say, as the Jews said to the enemies of God and their own enemies: "Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build (Ezra IV, 3) The time comes when all nature, all natural religion, which seeks to mix itself with any little spiritual life there is in the soul; must be renounced; and a mercy it is when the subtlety of our old man,

with the devil, is perceived. How far that kind of false building may be carried on in some by the permission of God, none can say; but it is to the great damage of the soul and to the weakening of it. When the time comes, and the eternal Spirit empties the man of all that he supposed was religious and shows him, if he has any grace at all, how little grace he has; if any life and fear of God, how low it is, and how dependent that life is for all renewals and exercise of it upon the Author of it; then likely enough, the old man, the old corrupt nature, will turn round and seek and find plenty of authority from the devil to seek to stop all spiritual building, and liveliness, and exercise by force and by power. The sovereignty of God is in this, but the shame and the guilt of it is our own. This force and this power are our own, working together with the devil, who gives all power to fallen nature. And O how the evils of the heart, unthought of before, may rise - lusts, unbelief, malicious thoughts, covetous desires, recklessness, hardness of heart, how many things come by force and by power, and do effectually it may be, in some cases for the time stop the work.

Now the Jews were in this case literally, the work was stopped; hardly begun, yet stopped. At this point in their history the Lord raised up these prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets that came back with them from Babylon, to prophesy and speak the words of God to them. And Haggai did not commence with them, as God will never do, by comforting them. When sin brings us into poverty, and leanness, and trouble, and distance, when we are minished and brought low through oppression, affliction and sorrow, we must learn that it is because of our sins and transgressions; that it is because we have rebelled against the counsel of the Most High. The Lord will ever teach this to His people before He recovers them from their evil state. And so the prophet Haggai, prophesying the Lord's word to the Jews, begins by convincing them of their wicked forgetfulness of God, for it seems that, as the work was stopped, they had forgotten God, and had turned to their own houses, and were just living as if the purpose of their return from captivity was not to set up the worship of God again, but to have deliverance from captivity. How this does discover the evil state of men

who, though having the fear of God in their hearts, are dejected and cast down, listless and slothful, and near despair; and yet they seem as if they do not stir themselves. They are glad to be spared, glad to be living, glad to have some temporal deliverance, it may be; but O, what forgetfulness of God! The lusts of our hearts, the inward workings of sin, are not sufficient of themselves alone to cause us to cry to God, to seek His face; alone they are not. When these people had been some years in captivity they, through Daniel, confessed that though this trouble had come to them, yet they "had not made their prayer before the Lord their God that they might turn from their iniquities". No; if we are left to ourselves, to the power of our corruptions, we shall be in the state these people were in "Let God take care of Himself so that we are spared". O the evil of our unbelieving self-loving, God-forgetting hearts! "Thus speaketh the Lord of Hosts, saying, this people say, the time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built... Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of Hosts, consider your ways". What a mercy if the Lord should send such a convincing word to us who need it, and effect in us this thing - a consideration of our ways! Do we complain, as the Lord here says the Jews did "Ye have sown much, and bring in little" - many prayers, little answer. "Ye eat" - you attend the service of God's house, you read, "but you have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes". Do we complain of our evil state, are we ready to complain of the littleness of God's mercy and goodness? Are we ready to think that He is straitened? Why are we not out of bondage? Why are we not filled with bread? Why do we not give thanks at the remembrance of God's holiness? Why is there not more of this "Come, and I will declare what God hath done for my soul?" I say, are we complaining of God in this? Are we complaining of the ministry in this? Are we forgetting ourselves in this? "Now therefore thus saith the Lord of Hosts, consider your ways." Well, these people obeyed that divine injunction. May the Lord give to us grace, and honesty of heart, and tenderness of conscience, and quickness in the fear of His Name,

to do the same, to look at our cases and consider our ways.

Then He gave to them a commandment, and told them that the reason of their getting so little was that they thought more of their comfort than of the Lord's glory. "Ye looked for much, and lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of Hosts. Because of My house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house. Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit." Are you fruitless in a profession? Is the Holy Scripture, is the holy gospel dry in your heart? If it be so, consider your ways.

Then the people heard, received, and humbled themselves under this word of God; and the consequence was what will be the same consequence in us if we are brought to this. They feared, the people feared before the Lord. Ah, you may by such teaching be brought down into that case which we were reading of in the 107 Psalm, be brought to your wit's end by fear. It is a fearful thing to have in this particular respect despised the gospel, forgotten God, thought much more of personal comfort than of His glory and our soul's real prosperity. No hiding behind the sovereignty of God will bring healing or true comfort in such a case; no saying "God is a Sovereign and He gives in various degrees to His people, according to His sovereignty." That will not satisfy a soul who is brought to submission to God's Word. No; you will be filled with such shame, with such fear, and with such a sense of weakness, as to be fitted for the text.

But there is one other thing that these people had, which also went to fit them for such a gracious word, and it was this: "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? Is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" Now when the Lord convinces a person of his low condition, of his poor, weak, barren state; when the Lord shows him, by causing him to consider his ways, what has brought him into it, and causes him to fear therefore before Him; and then discovers to him a little of the solemn condition of the churches, the falling-away there is in this evil day, and the

withholding of the power of God in comparison of former days when the power of truth was manifest; that will increase the weakness, increase the fear. And the fear will be lest one should conform to that awful word in Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews: "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance." You will fear, and be weak by fear. Fear is a weakening thing; it is a thing that makes a person dismayed and faint.

Now for one poor weak man to say to another, both having the life of God in their souls "Be strong", what a mockery it would be! But "where the word of a King is there is power." And when God gives a command, there is a response. When He said at the creation, "Let there be light," there was light; and when He commands the strength of a poor sinful child of His, who has made himself weak by his own sin and folly and forgetfulness of Him, then that poor sinner is strengthened. "Yet now" - notwithstanding this your case, notwithstanding the shame that the consideration of your ways brings to you, notwithstanding that this house is nothing in comparison with olden times, notwithstanding all this, "yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the Lord." There is power in God's word, a power felt in the soul where that word comes, nothing can stand before it; when He commands it is done. You will observe here that it is repeated: "Be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest," and also, "be strong, all ye people of the land." They all needed it; and this may be a comfort to some. It is not only those who may be outside of a public profession, private professors, but also the officers of the church; all need this word as they may be convinced of their case.

"Be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work." Why, when dismay and tormenting fear worry the soul, what spiritual order is there in the mind? What true spiritual occupation and exercise to a good issue is there in the soul? Tormenting fear occupies the poor sinner, shame fills him,

weakness impoverishes him, he can do nothing but forget God by his sinfulness. But when God commands the strength of a poor sinner, then he has a liberty to work; that is to say to be active in his soul, to seek for the prosperity of his soul; to look to his goings, to watch, and to seek to know where he is; to seek some increase in his experience. This work is not a legal work. Of this building of which literally the prophet was speaking, though he was also speaking prophetically of the kingdom of Christ - of this building it must be said that the people literally wrought on it. But it was for God's glory, not for self; and it was by God's commandment and by His power they wrought; they were given wisdom to build. And so it is not a legal work to which the Lord calls His people here; not a work to mend their cases, not a work to hide their sins, or to take much soap and nitre and wash them clean; it is not that work.

What work then is it that, when He strengthens a poor sinner, He calls him to? Why that which He Himself commands where He says "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life." Then they asked Him what they should do, that they might perform that labour. He said "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." It is the work of faith to which the Lord calls one whom He commands to be strong. And you will find, as the Lord condescends to strengthen you in your evil case, this will be the first acting and response to that gracious command, and the effect in your soul - faith will move, faith will begin to work, it will begin to support the soul, and go out from the soul to its blessed Object in humble confession of sin and in a gracious power laying hold and pleading the work of Christ, the Person of Christ, the atonement of Christ. O this is the work that every invigorated soul is occupied with! And what an amount of work needs to be done here, to clear your case and your way! And what a mercy when the Lord strengthens the soul so as to cause it to begin again, as it were, to work out its own salvation! Are you stagnant? Do you find nothing coming in, and therefore nothing going out to God? Do you find the Scriptures dry and the ministry dry? Do you find no power to meditate in the truth? And do you find a listlessness with regard to it?

Well now, having these things opened to you, and a gracious spirit of prayer put into you by the word of God commanding your strength, you will find power to confess them. This is the work of faith. One great branch of the work of faith in the souls of the people of God is confession of sin. And how deep this goes! According to the gracious and solemn light and piercing word of the Lord, so deep does this confession go, and is carried on in the heart. "Pardon mine iniquities O Lord, for they are many and great." Acknowledgement of this barren condition being self-procured, acknowledgement of an unthankfulness for past mercy, acknowledgement of secret sins now discovered by the light and teaching of the Holy Ghost. O my friends, there is no confession without this strengthening! You must be strengthened by God to confess your sins, though you will feel weak when you have to confess some things; only there is a strength put into the soul. The Psalmist said in one place "In the day when I cried Thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul." And it is so sometimes. Such conviction comes in and such a solemn sense of an evil condition, that the poor sinner finds himself stirred up and filled with power before the Lord; and then in trying to pray, the Lord comes and strengthens him, helps him to plead, invigorates his soul, puts something there that is greater than his sins. "Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world." There is something greater in the heart at that time than all the world of sin that is in your nature working, and all the shame that you feel on account of your condition. And what is that something, but the Person of Immanuel, and the work of the Redeemer? That is where the source of strength is, that is where the spring of confession is that is in the sinner's heart - from Christ.

"Be strong, saith the Lord and work." Plead the promises; this is part of the work. But one may say, "It is presumptuous for me to plead the promises." Well, who are the promises for? For needy souls. How are they given, and to whom? They are given freely and given to sinners in Christ. Now as you are strengthened in this work, you may find your faith in the scriptures strengthened; and some promise, some gracious work that just fits in with your desires, you look at and say: "If the

Lord would fulfil that promise in me it would do for me just what I want, it would bring me just into the position I want to be in and faith, by this strengthening, works on that promise. You may work on a promise this way. You know I do not mean by the power of nature, but by the Lord's teaching mercy you may for a long time plead, and plead, and plead a promise. Who keeps you at this? Why, the Lord who says, "Be strong."

Perhaps some of you who have not all you want by a long way, and who were until recently in, as it were, a morbid state, not able to move or rise, have been strengthened to lay hold of a promise, and are now working on it; have not given it up, but have it now in your hearts. For instance, take such a promise as this: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Though that is a statement of doctrinal truth, it also is invested with a promise, and a poor sinner sees it, and says he "O, if I might be cleansed from all unrighteousness!" And faith, as it never makes haste, working on this promise, will look into it and see a little of the depth of it - "all unrighteousness", and "faithful and just to forgive us"; not only merciful to forgive, but just to forgive. And how faith will look at this matter, and by the light of the Spirit see how that the perfections of God are in the forgiveness of sin; and then he may and will plead this word before the Lord, until the time comes for the Lord to do with him as in the 107 Psalm it is said of the church "They cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses;" and what a deliverance this is! "Be strong and work". Before, you durst not, it seemed like presumption; now you cannot help working, cannot help asking, cannot help praying to the Lord.

Perhaps this is in the work of faith in your heart - that the Lord would reveal His dear Son in you. This work, I said at the beginning, is the setting up of Christ's kingdom; and this revelation, so much needed and so attractive to the soul, is a great part of the setting up of Christ's kingdom. The Lord shines in His glory, and puts His glory into that heart in which He shines in the Person of Jesus Christ. Now you may see that

this is an experience that is possible; you may see that Paul had it, David had it, and you may say "O that the Lord would give it to me!" "Be strong and work" - plead, wait, wait on the Lord. Waiting upon Him is a part of the work of faith; and if you do wait upon Him, you wait for something, you wait for Himself, for His coming in, for His word. You wait for Him to speak to you some word of confirmation, some word of encouragement. "Be strong and work".

And part of this work is fighting. Faith has a fight. Poor weaklings, strengthened by Jehovah commanding them to be strong, do fight; and you may find sometimes a gracious influence in your soul which is the effect of this commanding of strength, which sets you afresh at this work of fighting. "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life." There is plenty to fight against. The Apostle said "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against spiritual wickedness in high places." And what a laborious work this is, this fighting against spiritual wickedness, against inward sins, against the corruptions of our nature, against the temptations of the devil! It is a great work and all the saints are engaged in it when they are healthy in their souls, and when the building is going on. We shall never have done with enemies here. You may find peace, and may the Lord grant it <sup>to</sup> each of us in a good measure in the Lord Jesus Christ, as He promises; yet in the world tribulation, enemies, persecution, affliction, either inward or outward. To fight against these enemies is a great part of the work of God in the soul.

Another part of this work is submission. You need to be strengthened more to stand still, perhaps, than to move in some particular things. The work of faith is to wait for the Lord, as well as to wait upon Him. It is said: "Blessed are all they that wait for Him." This is the work of faith. It is more wearisome to wait for the Lord, to stand still in some particular things, when to move would bring comfort to your flesh, it may be, and the smiles of men upon you, which are palatable to your flesh. It is much more difficult, and it is the work of faith most assuredly, for a person to stand still and wait for God.

And it is our highest wisdom and the Lord's greatest mercy to keep us at this work; for as sure as we move, as sure as we go before the Lord, as sure as we turn aside from His gracious leadings when He leads us by the way, and think we can get on quicker, so surely we shall get a blot to ourselves, darkness to ourselves, and dishonour the Lord. "Be strong and work".

Now the Lord gives a most blessed and gracious reason for this. He always gives an adequate reason for His commands, though sometimes He may command you to do a thing upon bare faith. And we ought always, and should if we had the faith, to obey Him by faith and not by sight. Yet there is to faith an unseen, glorious, full, deep, adequate reason why we should be strong and work; and it is this: "For I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts." You might say, "Well, I think I could profess the Lord's Name, I think I could assuage this sin, I think I could resist the frown of this person, if I had more experience." That is not the way the Lord deals with His people, He does not say, "Now you can have so much of the world until I have given you all you want." No, He calls His people out; and they are called, not out of the depth of the world into the lap, as it were, of spiritual luxury, but called out of the world into the wilderness. The Lord brings this up in one case, an evil case in which the church was, and He says: "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." If the Lord deals with you, you will find that through good report and evil report, through water and fire, and into the desert and the wilderness, you will follow Him, when He draws you and shows you the importance of your soul and the necessity of an interest in Him. This is the reason. It is good to have a sweet, solid, powerful, clear experience; but that is not the reason of strength, in the first instance, nor the reason of working. No: this is it, the highest and deepest and most blessed reason: "For I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts." If God is with us, if God is for us, what matters from whom we are detached? What matters who is against us? "I am with you - on your side, present with you, upholding you, supplying you, to give you new life, to revive you, to defend you, to guide you - I am with

you". O this is the thing! It is the glory of every person to whom it is said, and of whom it is true that he needs it; he knows it is his glory - the presence of the Lord with him.

"For I am with you". This seems to indicate that to these Jews there was some apprehension as to whether the Lord was with them. They were in trouble now and fear. So it needs for the Lord to testify of His presence. The Lord never leaves His people: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee". We have deserved that He should cast us away, times without number. We have sinned so basely that indeed it is a wonder that we have any hope left in His mercy, and we should not have, but that it is infinite and everlasting and unchangeable. But then we need the Lord should testify of His presence: "For I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts." And how is He with His people? Here He says: "According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth among you." He dwells in His people by His good Spirit. And if the Lord makes this out to you who are crying out now in your fear and trouble, "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Lord, the dew from heaven I do not feel. My soul is barren, and I fear that my religion is dead. Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me". I say, if He makes this out to you, that His Spirit is with you and in you, what a strengthening that will be! How it will help you afresh to address yourself to the journey. How it will help you to look again to the Lord and plead His promise, and to hope in His mercy, and to look out for good days to come, to have the Spirit, the Spirit of God's Son, with you! Why, if you have the Holy Spirit with you, it matters not really what your needs, what your ignorance, what your distance from God now as to your experience; it matters not what your case is really if the Spirit is with you. Then you have in you the spring of life. The Lord Jesus speaks thus of His Holy Spirit: "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." And it is according to the word that He covenants with His people. Now He promised His presence to Israel when He brought them out of Egypt. And when He brought you out of Egypt, did He not promise you something like that? Did you not go forth? Did you not find yourself greatly withstood? Did you not need a promise then?

And was it not in effect that He would go with you, that He would help you, keep you, and be your God? Did you not at that time lean on Him alone and see in Him a sufficiency to bring you right through? According to that word, says the Lord, "I am with you. According to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt." When He covenants with His people, it is this: He is their God manifestly, they are His people experimentally. That is the covenant. The covenant of grace is between the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost. This is the effect of the covenant, that He takes a person up and in some manner of dealing, if not in some word distinctly, makes that person know that he is the Lord's: "Thou art Mine". The least mercy is really that promise, that truth, though it does not bring the satisfaction of it. If the Lord has given you life, if He has done with you what you professed just now in that hymn - passed by you in your blood and said unto you "Live"; then He has taken you for His own. That life is from His blessed Spirit and will never die.

Now there are times when this truth needs to be renewed and confirmed in the soul. How many times some of us have feared lest we were utterly devoid of the Holy Ghost! When you feel nothing of religion, when you read the Scriptures and find nothing, when you can find no access in prayer; when sin seems to prevail against you, as the Psalmist said, "Iniquities prevail against me;" when temptations have such a hold that you are without strength against them; then how high your fears run lest there is no Holy Spirit in your religion. But the Lord knows more than we know, and He can instruct us into things which can be for our comfort, into truths that we could hardly believe. And if He tells you that His Spirit is in you, you will feel Him, you will feel the quickening of the Spirit and find that you will begin again to cry to the Lord, you will begin again to grieve over sin, to long for the Lord Jesus Christ. Yea, the Spirit in a person is the life of all his religion. And too, what a mercy of mercies this is, when it is true in a collective sense that the religion of a people is a religion of the Holy Ghost! That a cause has the light and glorious presence of the Holy Ghost with it! What a mercy that is! "So My Spirit remaineth among you."

Then the Lord makes this the reason why those who now fear before Him because of considering their ways, should not fear "Fear ye not." That omnipotent word upon this basis, brought by the Holy Ghost into your heart, will effect wonders. You may have now in your souls fears innumerable that you cannot compass; alarming, dismaying fears, fears of your hypocrisy, of your corruptions, fears lest your experience is not right, lest the devil has you, lest you will be left to fall outwardly, fears of circumstances and things confronting you, fears about death and the Judgment day. All these things may be pressing you down, tormenting you; but I say, upon this basis of the Lord's gracious presence and its continuance among you, when the Lord says, "Fear ye not", they will be gone; and there will be no other reason for their going and for the hope that is lively in you, than this, that the Lord is with you. His presence is salvation and He can save a person in a moment in this way. "Then they cried unto the Lord" - when they were at their wit's end, "and He saved them out of their distresses", made the storm a calm in a moment. This is the work of God; and if any of us have, or have had, any experience of this, may He help us to bless Him for His goodness. If any are in a condition to need this, may He graciously bring it to us, and cause us to know the strengthening and the deliverance from fear, and then we shall find, I believe, created in our hearts the praises of His Name. He creates the fruit of the lips by blessing the soul. May the Lord forgive what has been amiss, and bless His truth.

AMEN.