

Fil-Am Community Church
Pastor Rolly Estabillo
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Key Verse: Psalms 29

“THE GIFT OF STRENGTH”

It’s the Christmas season once again. It came so quickly, didn’t it? At this time, many people are either in a gift-giving mode or a gift-receiving mode. Which mode are you in? If you’re in the gift-giving mode, my name is Rolly.

Seriously, this season is supposed to usher in another season of joy and happiness for everyone. But, with the recent tragic events that have occurred in the last few months, isn’t it any wonder that some people’s joy is getting snuffed out? And replaced by anxiety, nervousness, stress, and all that stuff? Just a few days ago, we saw and heard in the news the mass shooting in San Bernardino. A few weeks before that, there were also the shootings and bombings in Paris. Surely, this could be one sad Christmas for the families of the victims and those who were wounded.

I’m sure these things are on our minds even if we aren’t directly affected. But this is just an example of how unpleasant events like this can affect the way we celebrate Christmas. There are other things that add stress to our lives. Like a strained relationship, job insecurity, sickness, death, and what-have-you. How do you cope in difficult situations?

This morning, I’d like to start a sermon series focusing on the gifts that God gives to us. You see, God is always on a gift-giving mode. And his arm is not short in giving us the help we need this Christmas.

The Bible tells us that God the Father gave his own son to the world, to save the world. In John 3:16, it says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

When God gave Jesus to us on Christmas Day he also gave other things as a bonus.

I remember years ago when I was a teenager, my grandma gave me a wallet on Christmas day. It's got several compartments and when I opened one of the compartments, I discovered 20 pesos in it. That was a big amount in the Philippines back then. It was a gift within a gift. But God's blessings are enormous. He doesn't only give a gift within a gift. But gifts within a gift. What other things that God gave us when he gave Jesus? There's the gift of joy, the gift of hope, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of strength and purpose and salvation. Even the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of material possessions and so on and so forth. God is a very generous giver. In fact, the Bible says in Romans 8:32, "*He who did not spare his own Son, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*"

In this series, Pastor Dave and Barry and I are going to expound on some of these gifts and what they mean to our lives. This morning, I'd like to start on something we need during this time of stress and chaos and confusion – God's gift of strength.

First let me share with you

1. WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD'S STRENGTH

1) He is a Powerful God

The theological term we use to describe God's strength is *omnipotent*. It means that anything in the universe that can be accomplished by power, God can bring about. Now, you might be thinking, "That's nothing new. I've never doubted that God is powerful and has unlimited strength. What's that got to do with me?" That's where #2 comes in:

2) He is an Empowering God

He is powerful, He is strong, but He also says, "I want to share My power

with you. I want to give you the power to deal with things that come up in your life.”

In other words, not only is God all-powerful, but He wants to grant us access to His power and strength in our times of need.

I want us to take a few moments to go through Psalm 29 to help you understand what I’m talking about here. Let me set the scene for you. David is describing a thunderstorm brewing over the Mediterranean Sea. It’s a powerful storm beginning to develop. This storm is then going to move on shore and it’s going to rumble through the desert. It is an awesome breathtaking experience to be in the midst of a desert storm. David’s using a word picture to liken God's power to a desert storm.

“The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.” – Psalm 29:4-5

Have you seen a cedar tree? It’s huge. Thick. How big are the cedars of Lebanon? They are so big they can be thirty feet wide and twelve stories tall. What David is saying is that a mere whisper from the lips of God is powerful enough to turn that huge tree into toothpick.

“He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.” – Psalm 29:6

Mount Sirion is a 9000-foot mountain. It is also known as Mount Hermon. It is located in the boundary of Syria and Lebanon. In other words, David is saying God's voice is so powerful that it can make the land and it can make the mountains quiver and swell and dance.

“The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.” – Psalm 29:7

Think how powerful lightning is – within a fraction of a second a bolt of lightning releases one hundred million volts of electricity, 13,000 million

horsepower, at a temperature five times hotter than the surface of the sun.

And David is saying that one word from the lips of God is far more powerful than all the lightning in the 1800 thunderstorms that are taking place at this very moment around the planet.

“The voice of the LORD shakes the desert; the LORD shakes the desert of Kadesh.” – Psalm 29:8

Kadesh is in the South, while Sirion is in the North. He is saying God's power flows across the entire land. There is nowhere we can go to get away from or escape the power of God. He is talking about twisting the oaks and stripping the bark off of trees. He is saying that just one utterance from God would be enough to flatten 815 million acres of the Amazon rain forest. That is how powerful God is.

What we see here is that God doesn't even have to lift a finger to do a powerful thing. He just says it and it happens. When he created the universe, what did he do? He just spoke it. “Let there be light” and there was light. “Let there be sun, moon, planets, vegetation, animals, and so on and so forth”. Our God is a powerful God!

What is our response to that? What is the natural response a human being would have in the face of this breathtakingly awesome power of God?

“...and in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’” – Psalm 29:9

In other words, we cannot help, in the face of this, but to worship God for being a powerful and a strong and a breathtaking deity. But then something amazing happens in this poem that David is writing. He has been talking about the power of God, and then we get a surprise ending as he takes a completely different turn.

“The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as King

forever. The LORD give strength to his people! The LORD bless his people with peace!” – **Psalm 29:10-11**

Not only is God powerful, but God doesn't hoard His power. He is a power sharing God and He wants to equip and empower you today.

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” – **2 Timothy 1:7**

We all need God's strength, God's power in one way or the other. He is saying, “I'm a God that's not only all powerful, but I'm a God who wants to give My power to you.” Where do you need that power the most? What part of your life, your faith, your family, needs the strength of God today? Whatever area that is, I want you to keep it in mind as I give you five steps to receive God's gift of strength:

2. WHAT WE NEED TO DO TO RECEIVE GOD'S STRENGTH

Step 1: Affirm God's power and His presence

So often when we are feeling weak it is because we have forgotten that we serve an omnipotent God. He has this amazing track record for coming through for those who are His children.

“Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered.”

– **1 Chronicles 16:11-12**

In other words, go back and remember this panoramic unfolding of history that we see in the Bible and remember how God empowered Moses and He strengthened David and how He undergirded Daniel and how He emboldened Peter. Remember God's track record with His people. The Lord told Joshua in Joshua 1:9:

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever

you go.” – **Joshua 1:9**

God can be as present and as real in your life as He was in Joshua’s life, and as He was in David’s life. He can embolden and strengthen you just as He did Gideon, just as He did Peter and Paul. Affirm God’s power and presence in your life. Accept Him as an ever present reality.

Step 2: Admit your own weakness

So often when a crisis comes, or when we are in the midst of temptation, our reaction is to try to get through it on our own. We don’t want to burden somebody else; we don’t want to take God’s time and so forth so we try to get through it on our own. But the reality is this – we cannot be filled with the power of God until we first empty ourselves from the pretense that we can get through it on our own. Then when we’re empty God can fill that vacuum with His power.

We need to admit to Him, “I can’t get through this tragedy. I cannot resist this temptation. I cannot do what you want me to do apart from Your power in my life.” So often in Scripture we see this pattern that first people must humbly admit their own weakness and after they take this step God fills them with His power. When Paul was at a time of great weakness the Lord spoke to him:

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” – **2 Corinthians 12:9**

When we hang on to our own self-reliance and self-dependence our hearts are only partially open to God. It is not until we open our arms wide to God and say, “I cannot do it without you,” that He is able to work in our lives and replace our weakness with His strength.

Step 3: Align yourself with God's will

God's power is not like some electrical outlet that we plug in and receive

power for any purpose that we want. You can run any appliance that you want through electricity but God's power does not work that way.

It depends on what it is that you want to be empowered.

Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* –

John 15:5

In other words we need to be as intimately connected with God and His purposes as a vine is to its branches. This means that when we are working in concert with God to accomplish His goals, His purposes for our life He will give us the power to accomplish great things. When we are independently pursuing our own agenda, we shouldn't expect that God is going to necessarily empower us.

We need to make sure that we're walking down the road that He wants us to walk. If we are walking down that road then God will give us the power to keep putting one foot ahead of the other. He will give us the strength to endure.

This starts the moment we realize that apart from God there is no hope for us. Our wrongdoing, our sin, has separated us from God. And unless something is done about that we are going to be separated from God in eternity forever. And none of us want that.

So we align ourselves with God's will when we first open our hearts to Jesus Christ and we say, “I am a sinner in need of grace and forgiveness.” And we receive His free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus Christ offers and we say to Him, “I want You to lead my life. Take me in the direction that You want to take me.”

Then once we've done that, as we continue to grow and mature in our faith, we become more adept, more skilled in discerning God's will for our lives. We become more adept at using the Bible to test things and to make sure they are consistent with the teachings of God. You receive guidance from the Holy Spirit

and receive wise counsel from other Christians.

And over time we develop a confidence that we are going the right way, and that we are aligned in the direction that God has for us to go. God will empower and strengthen us as we continue our journey with Him.

Step 4: Ask God for the power that you need

When we need the gift of strength, why is it that the last thing we do is ask God for it?

“You do not have, because you do not ask.” – James 4:2b

God has this power waiting for you but if you don't ask you are not going to get it. So having affirmed God's power and presence in your life, having admitted your inability to handle the matter yourself, having aligned yourself with God purposes for your life, just come right out and ask Him to supernaturally give you the strength that you need.

There were times when I asked God for his strength and I physically felt the power of God infused into my life. Maybe you've done that too. Maybe there was a time when somebody has asked you a really difficult question about Christianity and you just kind of mentally say, “God help!” and you give an answer and later you look back and say, “Where did that come from? How did I get that answer? It was brilliant. It's not me. Where did that come from?” It's God answering that panicky prayer and saying I will give you the power to answer that question.

I remember the time I was speaking to a couple who are members of the Iglesia ni Cristo in Jersey City. Iglesia ni Cristo is Church of Christ in English. Their headquarters is in the Philippines. They claim to be Christians but they teach doctrines that you don't find in the Bible. And actually, they are embroiled right now in a controversy where some members are accusing the leaders of deceit and fraud. But we're not going to dwell on their troubles.

Anyway, this couple, like other Iglesia members do not believe that Jesus was sinless when he was on earth.

They believe that Jesus is merely a man and is still a man in nature when he ascended to heaven.

They thought I believed the same way and so, the wife asked me, “If Jesus were only man and he sinned, how can he save us?” Of course I corrected her and said that Jesus did not sin and then I realized that there’s a verse in the book of Hebrews about that. But I didn’t know exactly where. I prayed silently. “Lord, don’t let me look like a fool here.” Then, I opened my Bible, it opened exactly to that verse, Heb. 4:15, *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”* Then, her husband asked, “If Jesus died a long time ago, what about us now? Can he also save us?”

Again, I thought of a verse in Hebrews about that, prayed again, and when I opened my Bible it opened exactly to that verse, Heb. 7:27, *“Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”*

One correct verse you may say, “Oh, that’s coincidence.” But two correct verses consecutively? You can say, “That’s God’s incidence.” I don’t know how God did it but he surely was there when I needed him.

Yet, there are times – you know it and I know it – when we ask God out of desperation “God, give me the strength! Give me the power!” and we don’t feel anything. Nothing! You just do not feel a thing. So what do you do then?

Step 5: Act right now out of obedience to God

You see, there is a pattern in scripture. It begins in the Old Testament and continues into the New Testament and even into our time. Even when we don’t feel

empowered by God, when we take action by obediently proceeding down the road that God wants us to walk, He will give us strength as strength is needed.

In the beginning of the New Testament, we see a man who desperately needed strength. He was facing a crossroad in his life. I'm talking about Joseph. We know his story. But at the time when it was happening to him, he thought that Mary, the girl he loved the most and who he was engaged to, was unfaithful. Mary just broke the news to him that she was pregnant. That's bad enough but I can deal with that, he must have thought. Then, she said that she was carrying the son of God. Now, that's a different matter. What happened to the girl I thought I knew? He must have wondered. Does she expect me to believe that? That was too much for any man to handle. What would Joseph do? I'm sure he struggled emotionally and mentally with this situation. But he was a good man and as the Bible says because he "*...did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly*" (Matthew 1:19b). Some of you may be thinking, I thought they were just engaged? Why divorce? Well, in Jewish culture, being engaged is a commitment to marriage. It's like being married already. The only way to break it is by divorce. Anyway, going back to Joseph, even in a very trying situation he found strength in God and God granted him the strength and wisdom to do the right thing. A lesser man would be vindictive. In fact, a woman in this situation could be stoned to death if it was broadcast. Joseph did not want that to happen and so he was planning to divorce her quietly.

But, as we know, the story did not end there. The Bible says, "*After he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'*" (Matthew 1:20-21)

How did he respond? Verse 24 says, *“When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.”*

And the rest is history. That’s the reason why we celebrate Christmas.

So, Joseph acted out of obedience to God. He did not dilly-dally, he did not argue with God, he did not ask questions, but right after waking up, he did what the Lord wanted him to do.

Now, in our own time, perhaps, you’ve heard of Brother Andrew. His real name is Andrew Pombuena. Actually, it’s Andrew Van der Bijl. He is also called “God’s Smuggler”. Brother Andrew became famous in the 1960s and the 1970s when his ministry was to smuggle Bibles into closed societies. It still is to this day. His ministry is called “Open Doors”. He is now 87.

Back then especially when the iron curtain was really strong, there were countries where you would be arrested and tortured and all kinds of horrible things would happen to you if you smuggle in Bibles or if you’re caught with Bibles in those cultures. His ministry was to get Bibles to people who desperately wanted them. He was asked, “How did that work? It must have been really scary!” He said, “Here’s how it happened. I would pray and I would sense God leading me to a particular country, a closed society. My advisors would pray too and we would come to an agreement, ‘Yes this is the country that God wants us to bring Bibles into.’ When we came to that realization I often didn’t feel great boldness, tremendous courage. I was scared stiff. I didn’t feel like God had suddenly infused me with a great ability or great power or courage. But what I would do is walk in obedience down the road toward the border of that country with the Bibles and time after time after time in the most amazing ways the door to that country would swing open and God would find a way for me to get those Bibles into that country. God gave me the strength to do it, the power to do it, the ability to do it as I needed it along the way of obedience. It’s sort of like a supermarket door. If

you're sitting in the parking lot at Ralph's and look at the door to the supermarket, you could sit there all day and wish and hope but the door is not going to open as a result of you trying to mentally make it open.

But if you begin to walk toward that door in faith, you know you're not going to bump into that door because as you approach the door there's a sensor under the mat or there's an electric eye that will see you and as you approach that door the door's going to open. Because you're walking in faith toward that door."

Brother Andrew said, "That's basically the principle that I've lived by all these years. God is waiting for us to walk forward in obedience so He can open the door for us to serve Him."

When we demonstrate faith by taking specific steps of obedience even when we don't feel empowered by God, He is willing to supernaturally empower us.

Those are the five steps to take. Keep them in mind as I'm sure you'll need them in the future. Even at present, some of you need to take these steps to receive the gift of strength from God.

God knows where you need His strength. God knows where you're at. The amazing thing about God is He looks at this room at this very instant. He doesn't see a crowd of people. He sees individual faces, individual lives.

Do you need God's strength to go through a difficult circumstance in your life? Do you need God's power just to go through day by day? Psalm 37:5 says "*Commit everything you do to the Lord, trust Him to help you do it and He will.*"

Please stand as we sing and I lead us in prayer.