

“In Our Weakness”

“Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness ...”

One of my favorite Bible story is from the life of the prophet Elijah – but it’s not one of the stories that features his superhuman strength or one of his great victories. It’s the story of when Elijah is fleeing for his life in response to Jezebel’s death threat: *“So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow”* (1 Kings 19:2), referring to the priests of Baal who had died after having been defeated in a showdown with the prophet. Fearing for his life, Elijah goes a day’s journey until he finds a “solitary broom tree” in the wilderness; the prophet collapses, his energies depleted, and begs that God take his life: *“It is enough; no, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”* (19:4). The mighty prophet of God is finished; he has no more strength to go on. Elijah sees no future for himself; he is too weak to take even another step. Death appears to be his only option.

Why, you may ask, is this one of my favorite Bible stories? Quite simply, it’s because I can relate to this Elijah. The one who brings down fire from heaven, the prophet who brings the son of the widow of Zarephath back to life, the Elijah who is taken up into heaven on a “chariot of fire” – that’s not a person whose experiences are anything like mine. But a human being whose energies are depleted, who collapses in utter weakness and powerlessness – that’s someone whose experiences I have shared, because there have been many occasions in which I have known similar weakness, when the future looked bleak and I didn’t think that I could take another step. This Elijah is a person who is as human as I am.

But there’s another reason why I find this story so compelling: it doesn’t end with Elijah as a weak and defeated person. When Elijah lays down under the broom tree and falls asleep, *“suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’”* (19:5). When he looked up, Elijah sees that a *“a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water”* have been placed before him, food and drink that he did not provide for himself in that wilderness. He eats and drinks this meal, but then lays down again. But the angel is persistent: a second time the angels touching him and says, *“get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”* What Elijah has been given by the angel of the Lord is not merely food but a future, the means through which he will be strengthened to continue to journey God has set before him even when he has no strength within himself to continue. In the strength of the food that the Lord provided, Elijah went *“for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”* (19:8).

Likewise, God helps us in our weakness ...

On the day of Pentecost, we meet a group of disciples who are also too weak to continue their journey. In his appearance to his followers following his resurrection, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ commissions them to be *“my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). The apostles will be sent out to continue Jesus’ work of proclaiming the good news; but it is a task for which they do not possess the strength to accomplish in themselves, so Jesus

instructs them to *“stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”* (Luke 24:49). For ten days, the disciples wait in Jerusalem, unable to accomplish anything other than to appoint Matthias to take the place among the Twelve that had been vacated by Judas Iscariot. It is not until the day of Pentecost, the Jewish harvest festival, that these followers of Jesus received the empowerment that will be the means through which Christ’ Will for them is to be accomplished:

- *“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”* – Acts 2:1-4.

The mission of Jesus to be *“a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel”* (Luke 2:32) will be continued by his followers who have now been empowered by the Holy Spirit so that they might be *“able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”* (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness ...

The great apostle who brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and whose name appears on thirteen letters in the New Testament began his ministry when he was struck down on the road to Damascus, unable to go forward on his own. As Saul of Tarsus, he had been one who saw the followers of Jesus Christ as the enemy, as a threat to his faith, to the point where *“I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.”* (Galatians 1:13). Blinded and powerless, the man we know as Paul is visited by Ananias, one of the Christians he had sought to kill, who has been sent by the Lord Jesus *“so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”* (Acts 9:17). Through this laying on of hands, *“immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”* (9:18). Like Elijah, Paul receives strength from God in the midst of his weakness so that he might continue his journey – now as an apostle *“to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”* (9:15)

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This experience on the road to Damascus would inform Paul’s preaching and writing throughout the rest of his life. He knew that whatever he accomplished was not the result of his own strength or ability but was solely due to the Holy Spirit working through him. Paul was fully aware that all of God people are called to bear *“this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power comes from God and does not come from us.”* (2 Corinthians 4:7). Paul referred to his human condition as a *“thorn in the flesh,”* which had been given to him *“to keep me from being too elated.”* (12:7). When Paul prayed that God might remove this physical impediment, the Lord answered that it was precisely through this weakness that God’s strength will be proved in Paul’s life and ministry:

- “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” – 12:8-10.

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The weakness of those who have been called and empowered to be God’s people is on Paul’s mind when he writes his monumental letter to the Romans. Though Paul will later refer to specific segments of the Roman community as “weak” (“*We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*” – 15:1), he includes himself when he declares that “*likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness*” (8:26), stressing the commonality of the weakness of humanity that was redeemed by Christ: “*for while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*” (5:6). At the moment of our greatest weakness, when we were utterly powerless to come to God, “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*” (5:8). In our weakness, “*we are still poor creatures who are powerless before the principalities and powers if the Spirit of God does not enter our hearts and lives.*” (Eberhard Busch). We cannot by our own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him (*Small Catechism*), but through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit God helps us in our weakness so that “*I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.*” (Philippians 4:13).

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Many of us have experienced moments of weakness like those of Elijah, Paul, and the disciples of Christ. We have been so exhausted, so depleted of energy, so enervated physically, mentally, and spiritually that we don’t feel we can take another step, that all hope for the future is lost. But the good news for us is that the Holy Spirit empowers us so that we do not resign ourselves to what is but live in hope for God’s future. The Holy Spirit gives us “fresh legs” and lifts us up, strengthening and empowering us so that we might continue in the journey to accomplish God’s will for us in this time and place. “*We may not know what God has in store for us; nevertheless, the Spirit knows the mind of God and leads us toward the will of the One who made us for God’s own purposes*” (Clayton J. Schmit).

- “We fall into sin, not willfully or out of wickedness but from weakness, which God can well forgive. Therefore it is the best comfort that we have within us the testimony of the Holy Spirit, which means that when we are in need and cry to God, he will be gracious to us and will help us. For our position is now so different from what it was before, when we were in need. Now we can trust in God and know that he will not forsake us, and thus we show that we are truly Christians.” – Martin Luther, “On Many Important Matters,” 1537.

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We too can be like Elijah – but only if we realize that our strength comes from our Lord who nourishes and empowers us to continue the journey we cannot complete by ourselves. We can be like Paul – when we understand that God calls us in our weakness and that our future depends on our

turning to the Holy Spirit as the gift of God that abides with us and gives us the ability to accomplish what we cannot by ourselves. We are the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” that continues the work of the first apostles – when we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which is the *“spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD”* (Isaiah 11:2). We too can do all things in Christ which strengthen us – when we rejoice in the Lord and place all of our trust and confidence in God’s abiding, empowering presence through the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that we might *“not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6-7).

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On the day of Pentecost, the witness of the Christian Church began *“with the word of the poor fishermen, and with the despised and disdained work of God, which is called Jesus of Nazareth, nailed to a cross.”* (Luther). It has continued in every generation with human beings, in all of their weaknesses and imperfections – called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of Jesus with others. It continues in and among us – flawed, weak human beings, who come to God *“just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt”* (ELW Hymn 592), knowing that God will help us in our weakness through the power of the Holy Spirit so that *“the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Saviour Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight; through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*
Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness ... come, Holy Spirit. Amen.