

***“Christmas Unwrapped—The Gift of Strength”***

**[VIDEO OPENER]** I don't know that I've ever done this before, but I want to dedicate this series of messages to a friend of mine who has become completely disenchanted with Christmas. I don't know when it happened in his life, probably gradually. But it happened. He dislikes the season. Don't get me wrong, he is not a grinch. He's a great man. He's solid in his faith. He's a true servant in the church. He's incredibly generous. He just hates Christmastime. He's so nice that he doesn't want to taint anyone else's view so he keeps real quiet it. In fact, I've had to pry it out of him why he doesn't like it. Maybe you can relate to him. He doesn't like the sappy music, the relentless social engagements, the overdone decorations, the commercialization, the expense, the lack of real meaning. I think that especially he dislikes the entitlement mindset that's so pervasive. Kids and adults thinking that they're entitled to get lots of expensive stuff. Not in a spirit of receiving the Christ child, not in a spirit of giving and receiving. Just raw sense of, "I've been getting gifts my whole life at Christmas time, and I expect more and better this year."

So I'm dedicating this series to my friend and to all of you out there who share his sentiments. My prayer for my friend and all of us is that we would be truly surprised and delighted with the real gifts of Christmas. And with that in mind my goal is to help all of us unwrap some of the real gifts that God wants to give you and give me. Gifts that Jesus made reality. Gifts that we need to know about so that we're ready to receive them and open them up. Christmas unwrapped.

I brought this out last Christmas Eve. It's a tin of popcorn that was given to me in 1991. I never opened it. Never unsealed it. I found it in the attic in with a whole bunch of other Christmas stuff. Somebody, I don't even know who now, took the time to give me a wonderful gift, and I got too busy, too distracted, to open it and enjoy it. This is a metaphor for some of the great gifts that God wants to give you and me that we don't take the time to unwrap, savor, enjoy, and be nourished by.

This series is about some of the amazing gifts God gives, but we have to cooperate and do some unwrapping of those gifts. And today we're going to talk about God's gift of strength for us. In one way or another we all need God's gift of strength. If you don't think you need the strength of God, you have not been Christmas shopping at the mall. You need God's strength. As we talk about the strength of God there are two very important things we have to understand about the power of God.

The first thing we need to understand is **[SLIDE...] He is a powerful God.** The Bible uses the word omnipotent. It means all powerful. It means anything in the universe that can be accomplished by power, God can accomplish. That's very important to remember.

But the second point is just as important to remember. **[SLIDE...] He is an empowering God.** In other words, he is powerful, he is strong, but he also says, "I want to share my power with you. I want to give you power to deal with things that come up in your life." In Psalm 29 it says, **[SLIDE...] "The Lord gives strength to His people. The Lord blesses His people with peace" (Psalm 29:11).**

God is a power-sharing God. He wants to equip and empower you and the result is that we can find peace when we're panicking. And we can find endurance when we're empty. We can find courage when we're cowardly. Where do we need that power the most? I think there are three areas of life that I feel like I need the strength of God.

First, **[SLIDE...] We need God's power to avoid doing what we know we shouldn't do.** Face any temptations lately? How about the bumper sticker that says, "Lead me not into temptation...I'm perfectly capable of finding it on my own." Temptations are those ethical or moral shortcuts that will inevitably lead us to a dead end in our life. Should you shade the truth on your resume? Should I give in to the temptation to be unfaithful to my spouse? Should you rent that X-rated movie? Should you take credit for your assistant's ideas? Should you report that side income to the IRS? Should you go way out on an already shaky financial limb to buy that expensive car that you want? You deserve some fun.

A lot of times in life we know what we shouldn't do. The problem is we lack the power to not do it. Yet the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 10:13 **[SLIDE...] "God can give us strength to avoid doing what we know we shouldn't do" (1 Corinthians 10:13).** The question is how does he do it? How do I find that strength

when the temptation is drawing me like a magnet and I can't say no? We're going to get to the how in just a minute.

But not only do we need God's power to help us avoid doing what we know we shouldn't do but...**[SLIDE...]** **So we can do what we know we should do.** We're all on this spiritual journey. We're learning about God. We're learning what the Bible teaches. We hear about how God wants us to live and it makes sense. And we find that it really is the best way to live. But if you're like me you go, "I can't do that on my own!" I hear teaching from the Bible that says we're supposed to serve others. My natural inclination is to serve myself first! We hear teaching that says we need to be generous to those that are needy. My natural inclination is to cling to the possessions that I have. The Bible says we're to be patient but I'm going down the highway and somebody ahead of me is talking on his cell phone and going fifteen miles under the speed limit it's pretty hard for me not to be impatient. The Bible says we're to forgive those that harm us. But this is southwest Missouri; we don't get mad, we get even! Fight back! How do we get the strength, God's power, to do what we know we should? We'll talk about that in a minute.

Because a third reason we need God's strength is this: **[SLIDE...]** **We need God's strength to get us through what we can't get through on our own.** Let me give you an example. One of the hardest things I've ever had to do was go to the hospital and be with a young couple whose newborn had just died. I got the call and went to the hospital. Little Sarah had been born that morning and was doing just fine when suddenly everything went wrong. Something happened and she just couldn't survive. Within a matter of hours, she had died. For that young couple, nine months of expectation, preparation, anticipation at meeting their baby daughter ended in the most tragic and heart-breaking way. I walked into the hospital room as Sarah's mother held her and stroked her head. I held her too. She was beautiful. We prayed. We cried. And we had her funeral two days later. I imagined what it would be like as a father to be holding my own newborn daughter full of life one minute, and that life gone the next. What would that be like?

The sobering truth of life is this. You are going to face a tragedy like that some day. Sooner or later there is going to be something in your life that is going to hurt so bad that the sound that comes out of you is just going to be a wail. That is the truth. It may not be the death of a child. It may be a mom or dad who you thought had years left, only to have a stroke or Alzheimer's that takes them slowly. It might be a best friend. I don't know what it's going to be but Jesus said it. In John 16:33 He said, **[SLIDE...]** **"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV).** But in that very same verse Jesus said, "You're going to need two things in the midst of that pain. You're going to need peace and you're going to need courage and I can give those things to you. Through my power, through my strength I will give you the peace and the courage that you need."

If you were to look that young couple in the eye today they would tell you that that time was the deepest, darkest valley of their lives. But they would also say, "Apart from the strength that God gave us, apart from the power that God flowed into our lives, we would never have made it to the other side. Not in one piece."

Someday we are all going to need that power when tragedy strikes. God became one of us. Jesus was God with skin on. He came and entered into our world to show us a new way and give us gifts, the gift of strength to get us through the tragedies of life. A big question is, "How do I get it?" How will I access this strength when the pain comes?

The truth is we all need God's power if we're going to consistently grow in godly character and virtue. This is one of the most amazing gifts of Christmas, but we've got to unwrap it. Again the question is how do we do it? How do we get that power? That's what I want to spend the rest of this talk discussing – specifically how it is we access this power of God when we're lured by temptation, when we want to grow in virtue, when tragedy strikes. How do we do it? Three steps that come right out of the Bible that help me time after time when I have felt powerless and needed the strength of God.

The first step is: **[SLIDE...] 1. Admit that you need God.** So often when a crisis comes, when we're in the midst of temptation our reaction is to try to get through it on our own. To muscle through on our own power. But the reality is that we are strongest when we admit our weakness. Why? Because that's when we admit that we need God. So we get honest with God, "I cannot get through this tragedy. I cannot resist the temptation. I cannot do what the Bible tells me to do apart from your power in my life."

God said this to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9 **[SLIDE...]** **"My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness."** Then Paul says, **"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power and strength may rest on me."** When we admit our helplessness, then we really open our hearts to God's strength.

The next step in tapping in to God's strength and power is to **[SLIDE...] 2. Ask God for the power that you need.** The Bible says in James 4:2 **[SLIDE...]** **"You do not have because you do not ask God" (James 4:2).** He has this power waiting for you but if you don't ask you're not going to get it. Here's how it happens for me. When I face a situation where I'm afraid, like when there's a death in a family of somebody in the church. Sometimes I'm really afraid as I go to be with that family that I won't know what to say, or that I won't be able to bring some comfort to them.

Or in situations where I have to confront someone, a church member, or a staff member, and I feel inadequate to face the inevitable disappointment they will have. Or I'm about to stand up and talk in front of you and I know it will be a hard word, a difficult message for me to say or for you to hear. Or someone has come to me and told me their life story and how painful it has been, or they're looking for insight into a problem in their marriage, or with their kids and I'm not sure what I can offer. I go to God and ask, "God, I need your strength right now." Sometimes I've done that and I can physically feel the power of God infused into my life. Don't be afraid to ask, but at the same time remember that God will not give you strength to do something that that goes against his plan, his will, so make sure that what you're asking for is godly.

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. That's the truth! So what do you do then? The third step may be the most important step of all. **[SLIDE...] 3. Act right now out of obedience to God.**

There is a pattern in scripture. It begins in the Old Testament and continues into the New Testament. It is this: Even when we don't feel empowered; don't feel the strength of God, when we nevertheless take action by obediently proceeding down the road that God wants us to walk, he will give us strength as strength is needed.

We see this throughout the Christmas story. Simple, humble, young Mary is given strength to bear the son of God. She knows she doesn't have it within herself to do what God asked her to do. But she is obedient, and with God's strength she is able to do it. And not only was she able to give birth to Jesus, God in human form, but she had the strength to be there for him throughout his life, and then his brutal death, and his resurrection.

Then there's Joseph. He needed God's strength to deal with the reality that his wife-to-be was pregnant and he wasn't the father. It didn't make sense. Joseph wanted to bail out, but God gave him the strength to stick with it and be a father-figure to Jesus. He was obedient even when all the facts didn't add up. He acted out of obedience.

When we walk down the road of obedience, even when we don't feel empowered, even when we don't feel strengthened what we're doing is demonstrating faith. Faith is not just believing in something. Faith is belief plus behavior, belief plus actions. Somebody once said if you were to take a picture of faith it would come out blurred. Because it would be moving as you took the picture.

Is there an area in your life where you've gone through those first two steps, but you don't feel a power. You still feel afraid. You still feel timid. I would say take action. If you are overwhelmed by a personal tragedy that is ripping your heart out like it did that couple whose newborn daughter died, take action. Call the church and say, "Connect me with your Stephen Ministry, to someone to be Jesus to me and help me walk through

this thing.” Or call and get some information on how you can be enfolded into a group to help walk you through this tragedy. You have to take the action.

If temptation has its claws in you; if you’re involved with things you know you should not be, even if you still feel weak take steps of action in obedience to God. Go home and go to that secret stash of X-rated videos and put them in the garbage. If you’re living with somebody and you’re not married, and you don’t feel strong enough to do what the Bible says you need to do which is to get out of that live-in relationship, go home and take action. Pack your suitcase and move out. God will give you strength as strength is needed. It’s aligned for what he wants in your life.

If you have character shortcomings that keep rearing their ugly head preventing you from being a man of virtue or a woman of character, take action. Call a Christian friend and say, “I’m struggling in this one area. I don’t seem to be growing in being more servant-like in being more selfless toward others. I don’t seem to be growing that much in honesty. In little things I tend to just shade the truth. Would you help me? Would you hold me accountable? Would you let me talk to you about this and be with me and be God’s instrument to help me get through this?” God will honor that and give you strength as strength is needed. 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 three steps to take. They all begin with the letter A to make them easy for you to remember. And finally remember this: Jesus wasn’t born just to give us an excuse to overindulge, to go into debt buying gifts for people who don’t need one more thing. He was born to give us some very real, very important gifts. Gifts we wouldn’t even know about if he hadn’t been born. And one of those gifts is strength. God’s given it to you, make sure you unwrap it. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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