

Soul Strength

Psalm 138

August 27, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

I don't remember what year this was, but both of the girls were tiny. We lived in Gonzales, and we had gotten a new mattress. One of Andy's church members was picking up the old mattress and box springs, and taking them to someone who needed them. I think that was the plan, though the details are fuzzy from this distance, and from a time frame in which I was almost certainly not getting enough sleep. He arrived with his pickup and trailer, looked around, and said, "Oh, let me call someone to help load this in the trailer." I said, "Good grief, I'm right here, and I can help you." Then I added "I'm stronger than I look." I was accustomed to carrying around two kids, one on each hip, just about everywhere I went. To his great credit, he didn't even blink or raise an eyebrow. We proceeded to carry the mattress, and then the box springs, out to his trailer, load them up, tie them down, and he was on his way. When we were finished he said, "You really are stronger than you look!" I've used that line over and over since then, when I get blinks and raised eyebrows, as recently as a month ago. I'm stronger than I look.

You're stronger than you look too. I say this because I know you. And I say this because we all know that there are different kinds of strength. There's muscle strength, and people have different expectations for muscle strength based on body size, shape, age, gender, and all kinds of ideas. There's emotional strength. Sometimes this is called resilience. It's the way we manage to make our way all kinds of emotional challenges: grief, betrayal, broken relationships, caring for a loved one whose health is failing, children in trouble. We're emotionally strong the same reason my arm muscles were strong: because we've had to be. We've learned as we go, and we're stronger than we look.

And there is a spiritual strength too. It's not as easily identified or measured or even evaluated. How do we compare your spiritual strength to mine, or mine to yours? I can identify people who I think are spiritually strong, and it usually correlates with those who I think are emotionally strong, but it's different. It's a conviction that they aren't alone, that God has a plan, that there is something meaningful that will come out of a terrible experience. It's a faith that might waver but never goes away. It's a faith that is curious and asks questions and

wonders and has plenty of space for learning and growing. That's spiritual strength to me. Just my opinion.

What's gotten me to think about all this is verse three of this psalm. I don't often preach on a psalm, as you've probably noticed. I generally think they speak for themselves. But verse three intrigued me and stuck with me. As I said to David in my weekly hymn choosing text, "Well, this week is a challenge." Verse three says, "On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul."

This is a psalm of thanksgiving, an individual psalm. Verse three sums up its message well: when this person faced a challenge, which is never described, God was there, God increased the strength of their soul so they could meet and withstand the challenge.

"You increased my strength of soul" caught my eye, or my eye, or my soul maybe, and I got a little nerdy with it this week. It turns out that the whole phrase is weird. The verb "you increased" only shows up four times. And with a verb that rare, it can be hard to know how to translate it. At its most literal it might be something like "You caused me to be bold" or "You caused me to act strongly."

And then "strength of soul" is even more rare. I'm no expert, but the only time that I see those two words appearing in the same verse is one time in the book of Judges, also in a section of poetry (Judges 5:21), in a phrase that's translated "March on, my soul, with might and strength."

"Strength" is the most common part of the phrase, and it means exactly what you'd think. It's used often, and can be both literal in describing physical strength, and more figurative, in the way we use strength, like I described a minute ago.

"Soul," though, is not exactly what we think of. This is a pretty common word, and it's usually translated "soul." In Genesis, God breathes this thing into the human at creation, and so it can also be translated "breath" or maybe even "life force," if you want to get a little science fiction with it. The ancient Israelites didn't think of "soul" the way that we often do, which we got from the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greeks, and we, usually think of the soul as some part of us that is separate from our bodies, even as the realest part of us that just inhabits our bodies. By the time of the New Testament, the shift to this idea of the soul was underway, but at the time of this Psalm, and most of the Old Testament, they understood soul very differently.

In ancient Israel, in Hebrew thought, it really referred to the whole person. You don't have a soul, you are a soul. It's you, yourself, your whole self. It's not

separate from you, nor just a part of you. It is you. Your breath, what it means to be alive, your soul.¹

Told you I got a little nerdy this week. From all of that, what do we need to know? Well, that the phrase isn't entirely clear, but that it probably doesn't mean what we might have initially thought. Robert Alter, a contemporary translator, writes it like this: "You made strength to well up within me."² That captures the all encompassing nature of the Hebrew idea of soul. And I like "well up" instead of "increased my strength."

And aside from the last part of the phrase, the part that caught my eye, the part that's really important is the first part. "You increased the strength of my soul." You made strength to well up within me. You. God did it.

When we feel like we are weak, we go looking for ways to get stronger. Your arms are weak, go lift babies, or mattresses, or weights. Your emotions are weak, go to a counselor or therapy or take some medicine. Your soul is weak, pray more or read your Bible more. All of those things are good things to do, and I'm not saying we shouldn't do those things.

But that's not what the Psalmist says we do to increase the strength of our souls, or to make strength well up within us. The Psalmist says we call on God, and God increases the strength of our souls. God makes strength well up within us.

As with so much about faith, about following Jesus, it's not in our control. It's not our job. It's God's job, and we have to put our trust in God to make us stronger. We trust that God has made the right amount of strength well up within us, so that we can meet the challenges that we face. We're stronger than we look, stronger than we think, stronger than we know. Not because of us, but because of God. "On the day I called, you answered me. You increased the strength of my soul."

¹ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/nephesh-soul/>

² <https://disjectamembra2014.blogspot.com/2016/12/robert-alter-book-of-psalms.html>