

LiveSTRONG

INTRODUCTION

- A. The ant is an absolutely amazing creature.
 - 1. Worker ants can live up to three years while their queens are known to survive twenty-nine years.
 - 2. Some queens are so heavy with eggs, laying up to a thousand a day underground, that they are fed their entire lives by worker ants & never see the light of day.
 - 3. The worker ants can carry loads up to fifty times their own body weight.
- B. At many times in life, we desperately wish that we could lift fifty times our own body weight, for we have so many burdens to bear.
 - 1. We may – like so many of you have over the past few months – lose someone we value more than life itself.
 - 2. We may – as I did just over a week ago – receive news from a doctor that is far less than encouraging.
 - 3. We may – as so many in this nation have over the past couple of years – learn that we no longer have a job.
- C. How do we handle the obstacles that so often come our way?
 - 1. I can't speak for anyone else, but over the past 18 months of struggle, I have found the ability to "**LiveSTRONG.**"
 - 2. This morning, I wish to share with you what I have learned over the agonizing months of my illness.
 - 3. Understand that this morning's sermon is really difficult for me.
 - a. I don't wish at all to hold myself up as a model, for I am so far from perfect.
 - b. It's very difficult for me to talk about myself as publicly as I wish to do this morning. Yet, I believe it's important that I do so.
 - 1) The story of my health struggles is not a story about me or my family; it is rather a story about God & the ability to "**LiveSTRONG.**"
 - 2) I am acutely aware that I am not the only member of this congregation that has struggled over the past few months.
 - a) Suffering is a part of the human experience.
 - b) Therefore, I wish to share what I have learned in hopes of strengthening & encouraging others who struggle.
- D. Where have I found the strength I have so desperately needed?

STRONG PRAYER

- A. Prayer is the most powerful force known to man.
 - 1. Prayer is so powerful, for it is the power that moves the One who moves the world!
 - 2. Repeatedly, the Scriptures testify to the power of prayer.
 - a. King Hezekiah became ill & God sent Isaiah to tell the king that he would die & not recover. Isaiah then leaves the king's bedroom.
 - 1) Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, wept & prayed.
 - 2) Before Isaiah can even leave the palace, God tells him to go back & tell the king that God has changed his mind & he will recover (2 Ki 20:1-11).
 - b. "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (Jn 14:13-14).
 - c. "Whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his

commandments and do what pleases him” (1 Jn 3:22).

- B. I have prayed more in the past few months than I have ever prayed before in my life & for that, I am so very grateful.
- C. Someone would invariably pipe up & say, “Justin, God hasn’t healed you. So, how can you find such prayer to be strong?”
 - 1. Such a question presupposes that prayer is nothing more than a child’s sitting on Santa’s lap with a Christmas wish list. A child goes to Santa with the expectation that every wish, every desire will be granted.
 - 2. While we do bring our petitions before the Father in prayer, prayer is primarily the means by which we draw near to God.
 - a. “For me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge” (Ps 73:28).
 - b. “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (Js 4:8).
 - c. In times of struggle, we are going to pray.
 - 1) Through our prayers to God, we will draw closer to him.
 - 2) I have drawn closer to God over the past several months & that is a tremendous blessing!

STRONG PURPOSE

- A. We understand that suffering has a purpose.
 - 1. I do not mean that God intentionally causes us to suffer.
 - 2. However, the Scriptures teach that suffering serves some very important purposes.
 - a. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4).
 - 1) Through our suffering, we are able to help others who are suffering.
 - a) I know that many of you who have lost loved ones recently have found great comfort from others who have lost loved ones.
 - b) I know that I have found great solace in talking to others who have walked the same journey I’m walking.
 - 2) When we suffer, we can take what we learn from that struggle to help others through this journey of life.
 - b. Struggles help move us closer to heaven.
 - 1) “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:28-29).
 - a) Some have been taken aback by this passage; they cannot understand how God can turn any true struggle into something good.
 - b) I’m convinced that’s because the passage is taken out of context.
 - i. Paul doesn’t say that all things that happen to us are good, nor does he say, as we’ve often interpreted this text, that every cloud has a silver lining.
 - ii. The “for” at verse 29 tells us why all things work together for good – that we might be conformed to the image of his Son.
 - i) Paul declares that all things work together for good in order that we might be conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

- ii) In other words, our struggles are opportunities to become like the Master.
 - iii. Our Master himself grew through his struggles.
 - i) “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8).
 - ii) Jesus learned obedience through his suffering; if he learned through suffering, how can we expect that we have nothing to learn through suffering???
 - 2) “You rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:6-7).
 - a) Trials are a testing of our faith.
 - b) It’s one thing to talk the talk like I have for so many years, & it’s quite another thing to put your action where your mouth is.
 - c) Acting in faith & acting on faith serves the very useful purpose of allowing our faith to grow legs, to move that faith from something purely intellectual to something we believe & practice with every fiber of our being.
- B. Without an occasional hurricane, the world’s weather would be even worse.
1. Fierce tropical storms play a vital part in maintaining the heat balance between the tropics & polar regions.
 2. The tropics & subtropics receive more heat from the sun than they lose; enough to prevent cooling of the poles & to cause scorching of the regions around the equator.
 3. Hurricanes keep that balance just as the struggles of life keep us balanced.

STRONG PEOPLE

- A. God has given to his people a wonderful family to help bear the burdens of this life.
1. “Through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13).
 2. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).
 3. “All of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Pet 3:8).
 4. “This commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 Jn 4:21).
- B. My brethren have been a constant source of strength & encouragement to me.
1. The calls, cards, & small gestures of love and support have meant so much.
 2. Several of you have volunteered to keep the boys or have kept them while Tammy & I were in Morgantown or at a local doctor.
- C. That’s a much different reaction that I get elsewhere.
1. The boys like to go to Ryan’s Buffet & I’ll take them once a month or so.
 - a. When we go, Tammy gets my plate & brings it to me.
 - b. I can go myself, but people are pushing & shoving so much that it’s hard for me to stand there. If I’m taking too long, people don’t mind a bit to come & bump me out of the way.
 2. It terrifies me to walk into Wal-Mart.
 - a. The drivers in the parking lot are so impatient & don’t care if I get across or not as long as they get a good parking spot.
 - b. In the store, I’m often jostled quite severely by impatient folks.

- D. But, among the people of God, I have found a different attitude altogether.
 - 1. I have found the church to be what the church is intended to be – a place that cares, a place that helps, a place that prays.
 - 2. It is wonderful to be among people who demonstrate the love God has shown them.
 - a. The love & support this congregation has shown me & my family has been overwhelming at times.
 - b. But, even among other congregations I have found so much love & support.
 - 1) There are many congregations that remember me in prayer.
 - 2) I've visited three or four other congregations since I began having these difficulties.
 - a) In each of those congregations, I have found caring people – whether they were careful not to bump into me in a crowded hallway or showing me where the elevator was before I even asked or simply taking the time to stop & ask why someone my age was using a cane. When someone would ask why I was using a cane, they would always say something like, “I don't want to be nosey, but I just care.”
 - b) I once remarked to Tammy that it was always obvious when we were among Christians & when we weren't.
- E. What great strength & love can be found among the people of God to help in our darkest hours.

STRONG PERSISTENCE

- A. There are times in life that we just have to keep going.
 - 1. We may not feel like going forward; we may feel like giving up.
 - 2. But, we dare not give up.
- B. Scripture urges us to be a persistent people.
 - 1. “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14).
 - 2. “We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor 4:16).
 - 3. “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal 6:9).
- C. On October 2, 1996, at age 25, Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with stage-three testicular cancer.
 - 1. At this point, Armstrong was already coughing up blood & the cancer had spread to his abdomen, lungs, & brain.
 - 2. Immediate surgery & chemotherapy were necessary, but Armstrong still had less than a 40% chance of survival.
 - a. But, after surgery, Armstrong went to the Indiana University Indianapolis where he was treated by an oncologist pioneering treatment in testicular cancer.
 - b. Armstrong beat the odds & beat the cancer, but his truly unique contribution was his refusal to give up.
 - 1) Before his cancer diagnosis, Armstrong was a major professional cyclist. He had even won a few stages of the Tour de France.
 - 2) Yet, Armstrong never gave up and staged a dramatic comeback, winning 7 straight Tours de France.
- D. If we are to overcome, we cannot give up.

STRONG PERMANENCE

- A. In dealing with the struggles of this life, we can never forget that our struggles are temporary.
 - 1. If my condition lasts the rest of my life, which now seems quite likely,

- that is only a small part of my existence.
2. I have a far better life awaiting me in the presence of God!
 - a. “We know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked” (2 Cor 5:1-3).
 - b. “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:3-4).
- B. As William Dean Howells & Mark Twain were coming out of church one morning, it started to rain heavily.
1. Howells asked Twain, “Do you think it will stop?”
 2. Twain answered, “It always has.”
- C. There is our hope!
1. God never promised that this life would be a bed of roses.
 2. But, this life shall not last forever. A better home where sickness & trouble can never invade is coming!

CONCLUSION

- A. Obviously, there would be no point to “***LiveSTRONG***” were it not for our loving God.
1. Prayer would have no power were it not for him.
 2. Suffering could not have any purpose were it not for his governance of the world.
 3. The church would not be were it not for the God whose Son built his church.
 4. Why keep going if there is no God?
 5. It is God who has promised that this life is temporary but the next life is permanent.
- B. Our hope rests firmly in God!
1. Notice what Paul says about his struggles: “We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again” (2 Cor 1:8-10).
 2. A ship was caught in a great storm at sea.
 - a. The passengers were terrified, thinking that there was no hope for survival.
 - b. Then one of the passengers went up on the bridge.
 - 1) He regained his peace & calm, for he saw the captain.
 - 2) His face was beaten by the wind & rain, but his hands firmly held the helm. Holding the ship on course, he had a smile on his face.
- C. Our Captain holds this ship we call life on its course even over the choppiest of seas.
1. What need have we to fear?
 2. Is the Lord God your captain this day?