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SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IN THE EYES OF JESUS

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How does God choose who will be spiritually strong? Today, we look at how Elizabeth's baby came to be born John, who would later become John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. John the Baptist was an amazing guy, who preached in the scrubby, mountainous wilderness. He prepared the way for people to receive the message of Jesus, and he baptized people in the Jordan River. He challenged the more powerful people to not hoard their clothing and food, but to share with others, to not cheat people out of their money but deal honestly, and to not take advantage of others. Mark 1:3 "*Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.*" He was aware one was coming after him who would baptize in fire and Spirit (Mark 1:7-8). Jesus didn't start his ministry (Mark 1:14) until John was arrested.

You may know that he wore camel's hair clothes and ate locusts, (Talk about "Want not to wear—how about what not to *eat*?!) but do you remember what Jesus said about him? In Matthew 11:11 Jesus told his disciples, "*I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*"

What was it about John? (Was it his wardrobe?) What was his spiritual strength in the eyes of Jesus? What was his spiritual strength that let him be used by God like that? Let's look at his birth...

Luke 1:57—66, 80 *57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son... 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. 80 And the child grew and **became strong in spirit**; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."*

Zechariah. Elizabeth. Mary. Now, John. Was God just arbitrary on who He chose? The Bible says, "*God is looking for people to use.*" And if you'll just get useable, God will wear you out. You have not really lived until you experience being used by God to bless somebody else.

Some of you are saying, "God could never use me. I'm not spiritually strong." My message this morning is in just a couple of words: You're wrong. Dead wrong! Not only can God use you, but He wants to use you. He's waiting. He's eager to use you in ways you have not even imagined.

This morning, I want us to look at John—why Jesus said "*There is no one greater than John the Baptizer.*" God chose John above all the other people to be the voice in the wilderness crying "*Make the way straight for the Messiah.*"

Jesus chose John's strength in spite of John's weaknesses and fears. John trusted God, even though he had no guarantee of safety or fame or wealth. All John had to look to were the Hebrew prophets when he was called by God to prepare the way for the Christ. But in spite of fears of criticism, hardship, inadequacy, John was strong in Jesus' eyes.

The same weakness and fear will keep you from being used by God. What's the antidote? There are three

things. God gives spiritual strength to people.

1. **People who desire to do His will.**
2. **People who decide to pay the cost. There's always a cost in following Christ in His plan for your life.**
3. **People who dare to trust His promise.**

If you'll build these three things in your life, you'll find God using you in ways you can't even imagine.

1. GOD GIVES STRENGTH TO PEOPLE WHO DESIRE TO DO HIS WILL.

You've got to want to do His will, more than anything else. You've got to say, "I want God's plan for my life." God has a custom plan for you, but it's not automatic. God made you for a purpose but you could miss that purpose. You must chose to cooperate with God's purpose for your life or you'll miss it. You could waste your life and blow your life, squander your life and not make it count. It's not automatic. Growing old doesn't grant you spiritual strength. Spiritual strength comes to people who desire to do His will. Who say, "God, I really want You first in my life and I want to be what You made me to be."

Two attitudes you and I need to be spiritually strong in Jesus' eyes: Passion & Humility. John was passionate about God. Circumstances didn't stop him. The sins and lack of caring people had toward each other got him fired up! He called people the change! He spoke out against the immorality of Herod's family, even though it could cost him his life.

He was also humble. As much recognition as he was getting, he still pointed people to the One who would come after him, whose sandals he was not fit to tie. When his disciples were quarrelling because Jesus's popularity was growing, John said John3:28-30 "*You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'* 29 *I'm like the "best man," happy for the groom that the wedding is finished and the marriage can get off to a good start. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.* 30 *He must become greater; I must become less. It's time for him to move into the center, while I slip off to the sidelines.*"

What do I desire to do most? What do you desire most in life? To get married? To be financially independent, to make a million? To retire? You had better have a greater purpose in your life than any of those or you're going to miss the boat. They're fine, they're good—but they're not the purpose of life.

2. GOD GIVES STRENGTH TO PEOPLE WHO DECIDE TO PAY THE COST

There is always a cost in following God's plan for your life. If you were to say to God, "In 2006, I give You more of me. This next year I want to be closer to You. I want to be more in Your will, in Your plan, in Your center." It's going to cost you. You're going to have to give up some stuff. There will always be a cost, there will always be risks and it will always require faith and you're going to have to step out and do some things in the unknown that you're scared to do. Stepping out in faith.

The first thing John sacrificed was his reputation. John decided that he desired God's will most of all. John decided to take the chance, to risk, to pay the cost.

The point is: If you get serious about God's plan for your life -- "God, I'm going to do whatever You want me to do with my life" -- there are going to be people who'll misunderstand you and there will be people who misjudge you and there will be people who criticize you. You are going to be different. Count on it. If you really want God's plan for your life there will be some people around you who are unhappy by that and will criticize that. Count on it. John sacrificed his reputation.

It cost him his comfort. God's purpose for my life includes some problems. God's plan for my life includes problems. They're not accidental. They're part of the plan. And that's part of the cost. There's always a cost.

Jesus is very up front about the cost. Jesus said, "*No one can be my disciple who doesn't carry his or her own cross. But don't begin until you count the cost.*" Luke 14:27 He's saying don't commit until you really consider it.

Can you imagine John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth saying "We're antiques and we're supposed to raise a child who is holy and great in the Lord. How in the world are we going to do that? Dobson wasn't around then.

Paul says in Philippians 3:7 "*All these things that I once thought very worthwhile now I've thrown them all away so that I can put my trust and hope in Christ alone.*" Paul understood that there were costs. He also understood that the benefits were worth it. He said, All those things I used to think were so cool, so important, so valuable to my life, they are cheap plastic thrills. They don't matter anymore. I've dumped it all just so I can be in the center of God's plan for my life and I can be what He made me to be."

What am I willing to give up in order to be used by God? You will have to give up some stuff. God may ask you to give up some habits. He may ask you to give up some relationships, some friendships that are pulling you down instead of building you up. He may ask you to set aside your dreams, your ambitions, your goals, your plans, your finances for what He made you to be. Are you willing to do that?

Step one, desire God's will for your life more than anything else. Step two, decide to pay the cost. That's why God strengthened John.

3. GOD GIVES STRENGTH TO PEOPLE WHO DARE TO TRUST HIS PROMISES

They are people of faith, because it does take risk, it takes courage to be used by God. Courage doesn't mean you're not afraid. Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is moving ahead in spite of your fear. It's facing your fear. Another word for courage is faith. John was a man of deep faith. He didn't have all the answers but he did know who did and he trusted Him. John was a man who was not afraid of the supernatural. He wasn't afraid of miracles.

You say, "Why doesn't God ever do miracles in my life?" Because you're afraid He will. You're afraid of miracles. You're afraid of the supernatural. You're afraid, "If God does something supernatural in my life, I might lose control" and that's a scary thought. You play it safe spiritually. When was the last time you really, really sought God on something? You set aside time to seek His strength.

I want to suggest that to you. When you come upon situations where you think you're in over your head. You're following God's will but it's scary. Don't worry—worship. Don't panic—pray and praise. Anytime you're afraid—anytime I'm afraid—it means I've forgotten the promise of God. Any time I'm weak, I must fully lean on God, or I fall into my own traps. It's only when you act out of your weakness that you have any hope of giving God the credit! That's when God's power will come through—when your strength is gone! Jesus said, "*What is impossible with men is possible with God.*"

God makes people strong who desire His will, who decide to pay the cost for His will and who dare to trust Him.

I don't know how to say it any clearer, but I stand up here week after week looking out on you and I've gotten to know many of you. God's done some amazing things in your lives and in mine in the last 2 ½ years. Many of you have enormous spiritual potential, you just don't see it. I can see it. God can see it. God has gifted you and talented you and given you health and freedom, a sharp mind, an education and talents and abilities. He doesn't mean for you to just use them on yourself. One day you and I will stand before God and He will say, "What did you do with what I gave you?"

Are you willing to be used by God? Are you willing to be spiritually strong for Him? To say "God, anytime, anywhere, any place, use me. Whatever it means. If it means putting my agenda, my goals, my dreams, my plans all on a line—go ahead. I cannot stand another day without being in Your will completely."

I can't go on another day without saying, Jesus Christ, own me completely and make me what You made me to be in the first place, strong in you. I'm willing to give up whatever it takes to give up to be the person I was designed to be in the first place, and I will be strong—IN YOU." Does that scare you? The secret of overcoming the fear of the unknown is by focusing on what you do know. What do we know? We know

God loves you, God says you matter to Him, God has your best interest at heart. He cares about you and He knows what will make you happy more than you do. He will give you the strength you need. I don't have any problems trusting a God I know is like that.

It's Christmas time. Let me ask you a very personal question. What are you going to give Jesus for Christmas? It is His birthday. You've bought gifts for everybody else but normally you buy a gift for the birthday boy. What can I give God? He's got everything? What do you give the person who's got everything? Jesus has everything.

No, He doesn't. He doesn't have all of you unless you give it to Him. My suggestion is that this Christmas as your Christmas gift to Jesus Christ, you say, "God, here I am. All of me -- the good, the bad and the ugly. Take it, break it and make it. You form it and You do whatever You want to with it. I am Yours in '06."

Prayer: Are you tired of playing wimpy with God? Say, "I've got to sell out. I can't hold back anything any more. I want to be what God made me to be all along." Pray this prayer, "Dear Jesus Christ, I desire to do Your will. More than anything else that's what I want in my life. I desire to do Your will. Lord, today I am deciding to pay the cost. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, whatever You ask me to give up I am not satisfied with second best. I want to be what You designed me to be. I want to be used by You. I want to feel Your presence in my life. Lord, I dare to trust Your promises. What seems impossible to me is not impossible with You. Help me to become a person of faith and trust You more each day and to expect You to work in my life. Amen."