

# How to be Strengthened in God as a Church Planter

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Do you remember where you were on September 11, 2001 when you heard about the terrorists' attack on America? Chances are you will never forget that moment. Things like that have a way of indelibly imprinting themselves on our memories.

A similar experience occurred in the eleventh century B.C. It was their "9-11." You can read about it in 1 Samuel 30:1-6.

*<sup>1</sup> Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire; <sup>2</sup> and they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing anyone, and carried them off and went their way. <sup>3</sup> When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. <sup>4</sup> Then David and the people who were with him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep. <sup>5</sup> Now David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. <sup>6</sup> Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*

We're talking "total devastation." Notice the progression:

- Ziklag is destroyed – v. 1
- Hostages are taken – v. 2
- The city is burned with fire – v. 3
- There is emotional disillusionment – v. 4
- There is a sense of personal tragedy – v. 5
- Leadership is rejected – v. 6

But in the midst of that horrible report is one statement that shouts out hope. It's the last phrase of verse six: "*But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*" As I read those words, my curiosity piqued. What did it mean to "*strengthen oneself in the Lord*" – and how did David do that?

I quickly realized that at this time during his life David was writing many of the Psalms. The words that became inspired Scripture came out of his life experience. Trial and tragedy drove him to the Word of God – and to the God of the Word. David had not yet ascended to the throne – but I believe his response to these events marked the greatness of David that was to come.

In his commentary on these verses, Tom Constable writes, "*This chapter reveals many qualities that marked David as an outstanding leader. As Saul continued to decline, God perfected the characteristics of leadership in David that prepared him for the throne. The Amalekites' capture of Ziklag at first looked as if tragedy had struck, but later it proved to be a great blessing. In this respect this event resembled David's whole career. As a result of this victory, the people of Judah came to regard David as the obvious successor to Saul's throne.*"<sup>1</sup>

I believe there are six specific principles from David's life and writings that tell us how we can "strengthen ourselves in the Lord" today.

## **1. Encouragement from friends**

Life is too hard. The ministry presents incredible challenges. Stay in the ministry long enough and you will experience your personal "9-11." The challenges are immense. We can't do it ourselves. That's where God provides the encouragement from dear friends that can support us.

1 Samuel 23:16 says, "*And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God.*" David's dear friend, Jonathan was there for him during the tough times.

Paul had his Barnabas, whose name meant "son of encouragement," who was there for him. I've been fortunate enough to have several of my own. There have been many times in my life where I've been discouraged and ready to quit. At other times I've been confused and clouded in my thinking. But God has always brought along an encourager to lift me up.

Don't cut yourself off from others. In fact, take the time *now* to begin building life-long friendships in the Lord that will sustain you in times of trouble. They will be there for you – and you will be there for them . . . and that is the beauty of ministry. (See 2 Corinthians 1 for a further development of this principle.)

## **2. The Character of God**

David wrote in Psalm 18:2, "*The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*"

For David, God was not an abstract idea but a personal comforter. Look at the words he uses to describe what God was to him: *my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, the one in whom I take refuge, my shield, my horn*. He was the one in whom David sought refuge, his defense, his power, and his protection. Because God had proved to be such a reliable Savior, David regarded Him worthy of his praise.

I believe the greatest occupational hazard in ministry is that we can go to the Word of God for a message to preach – but never internalize it ourselves. We can talk so much *about* God that we fail to talk *with* God in prayer. We obsess with facts about God but we fail to fellowship with Him. David never did that. He knew his priorities: God first, everything else a distant second.

Of course I have a good reason why I allow serving to eclipse seeking: I'm busy! There are so many demands on my time and schedule. For years the word "no" was simply not in my vocabulary. I can relate with Martha (Luke 10:38-42) when she complained to the Lord about all she was doing. But I also need to hear those words of gentle rebuke from the Lord Jesus: choose the good part.

Knowing God is a life-long process. Keep it your highest priority. Protect your times alone with God. Learn to say "no."

### **3. The Dependence of Faith**

David wrote in Psalm 27:14, "*Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord.*"

The word *wait* presents an incredible word picture. It's the idea of trusting or stretching, of wrapping yourself around the cords of God's strength so that in the process of waiting, you are strengthened yourself.

Waiting . . . that sounds too convicting. Maybe I should move on to the next point!

But before I do, let me mention that it is in the times of waiting where we learn the most. We learn that we are dependent on Him. Not just a little dependent. We learn that "*apart from Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

How does God teach us to be dependent on Him? We are all familiar with the New Testament principle, "*when I am weak, I am strong*" from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. But do we remember its context? The situation was that Paul was desirous of greater impact in his ministry and God gave him a "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from boasting in the greatness of the revelations he had received. God created a need in Paul's life . . . just like He creates opportunities of need in our lives . . . so that we, like Paul, will learn to trust Him.

### **4. A Choice of Attitude**

We usually don't think of "complaining" and "praising" going together. Yet my Bible gives Psalm 31 the title "*A Psalm of Complaint and of Praise.*" The reason these could go together is that David made a choice of attitude – a choice that in the midst of complaining, when his enemies had assailed him from every side, he would choose to praise God.

Life often comes down to a choice. You cannot control the past. You cannot dictate your circumstances. But you can – and you must – choose your attitude of how you will respond to those events. David said in verse 24, "*Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in the Lord.*" He chose to have a positive attitude.

I once saw a book that was entitled *14,000 Things to Be Happy About*. It contained a lot of interesting facts. But none of those will make us laugh or bring joy unless we make a choice.

Some of you have been beaten down to the point of despair in your life. But the tragedy is that we focus on the what is broken rather than "*taking courage and hoping in the Lord.*" And our attitudes have grown into a bitterness, sorrow, self-pity and blame. The result has been a tragic souring of the attitude.

Chuck Swindoll had some great words on this subject:

*The longer I live the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearances, skill, or giftedness. It will make or break a company, cause a church to soar or sink, be the difference in a happy home or a home of horror.*

*The remarkable thing is that we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the past . . . we cannot change the fact that people will act a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can affect is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.*

And so it is with you. And so it is with me.

## **5. Specific Prayer**

One of our problems in prayer is that we pray too generally: heal the sick, feed the poor, raise the dead, etc. God calls us to pray specifically. And specific prayer is always based on the character of God. Notice how David combines those two in Psalm 71:4-5.

*<sup>4</sup> Rescue me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the grasp of the wrongdoer and worthless man, for you are my hope. <sup>5</sup> O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth.*

One principle of prayer that has stuck with me since I was a very young Christian is "*Pray generally, receive generally; pray specifically, receive specifically.*" Makes sense, doesn't it? James 4 tells us that we do not have specific answers to prayer because we have not prayed specifically.

Those of us in ministry leadership positions must model this for those we lead. For me this means putting some real thought into my prayer before I verbalize it to the Lord. I have to ask, "*What do I really want God to do in this situation?*" It also means that I must search the Scripture to see what the will of God is. The more I know the Word, the more effectively I will be able to ask "*according to His will.*"

## **6. Personal Growth**

I'm constantly amazed at how many Christians are stuck in infancy. They may have trusted Christ thirty years ago, but they only have one year's experience with Christ repeated thirty times. They simply haven't grown.

"*By this time you ought to be teachers,*" Paul told the Corinthians. John categorized his audience into children, young men, and fathers in the faith (1 John 2:12-14). But how many mature leaders do we have in our churches today?

Part of our challenge as pastors and leaders is to model and reproduce maturity as we make disciples. Throughout the Psalms, David asks the Lord to "*teach me ... lead me ...*" (see Psalm 25:4-5; 27:11 as examples). Like a muscle, faith grows with exercise. As leaders we need to keep learning, applying and modeling the truths of the Word of God.

Modern developments in the care for the human heart have made great strides in recent years. Everything from the monitoring of cholesterol levels to by-pass operations has increased life-expectancy and quality. But far more important is the care and strengthening of our inner life, the heart that Paul prays for in Ephesians 1:18-19.

*<sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might.*

How strong is your heart?

<sup>1</sup>Tom Constable. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (1 Samuel)*. Galaxie Software.