

Strength and Beauty

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“This is the test of your manhood: How much is there left in you after you have lost everything outside of yourself?” Orison Swett Marden

He stood before us tall, erect and strong-featured, the clear skin stretched tightly over his face bearing the telltale `blue' marks of coal burns. His eyes were dark and intense, his powerful shoulders supporting his upraised arms in praise to God.

Evan was a coalminer who was every inch a man's man. No-one could call him weak. This was why other strong men respected him; he could cut and move as much coal as the strongest of them. But at the same time his character was gentle and warm-he loved God and his fellow-man. Young men, myself included, aspired to know, love and worship God as he did. His mixture of strength and warmth attracted us.

The psalmist introduces us to a similar strange yet wonderful combination in describing his sense of the divine presence while in worship: `Splendour and majesty are before me, strength and beauty are in his sanctuary' (Psalm 96:6 NASB).

Splendour and majesty we can understand-with their tone of regal splendour they seem fitted for each other. But strength and beauty seem such strange twins. Strength is firm, set, determined, unmoved and unbending, whereas beauty suggests itself to be gentle, yielding, soft, exquisite, tender.

The psalmist discovered in worship that these two seeming opposites are perfectly woven together in the nature of God. In the gospels we again see them equally balanced in the life of Christ. The strength of resolve and conviction undergirded his zeal in driving out the money changers from the temple: `In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables' (John 2:14-15). Yet how tenderly he shared eternal life with the outcast woman at the well in Samaria!

Again, we see his strength in his unyielding and determined embrace of the final week of his earthly ministry, culminating in the cross at Calvary. And in the very midst of his sufferings the tenderness of his heart is expressed in his words from the cross, `Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

Down the years, artists have attempted to capture on canvas the image of strength and beauty which the gospels have painted of Christ, but none has been able to achieve it.

But we can see it. How blessed we are to gaze on him, to love him, to bathe in the glory of his presence within ourselves. Here in worship we discover the strength to resist any thoughts of quitting. We are spiritually refreshed and equipped with a new determination to overthrow the powers of darkness and drive out demons as we advance the kingdom of God.

The psalmist, enthralled by the beauty of God's person, longed to be forever lost in the wonder of it all:

'One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple' (Psalm 27:4).

While strength and beauty may be physical characteristics, I am using the terms here in a different way. I am referring to the inner resolve in times of adversity and the inner beauty of a person's character.

Some years ago, while engaged in a neighbourhood visitation programme, I knocked on the door of a small terrace house, to have the door opened by the sweetest old lady you could ever wish to meet. Her hair was snow-white, her skin clear. There were wrinkles around her smiling eyes.

My friend and I explained that we were holding evangelistic meetings nearby and were visiting the area to share the love of Christ with people.

She smiled warmly saying, 'Wonderful. Would you like a cup of tea?'

We were most pleased, because that had certainly not been the usual greeting that day. We went inside and sat in her neat sitting-room. The kettle was already simmering on the kitchen stove, and within a few minutes we were talking happily, eating a biscuit and drinking our tea.

'I'm a Christian already, you know,' she said. 'That's why I'm so thrilled you've come to the village to share the Lord. I've prayed for a long time that someone would come and hold meetings in this village.'

Looking at her I said, 'Well, tell us your story', for it was clear to me that the richness of her life had a story of grace to tell.

For a few moments she sat quietly with the faraway look of one searching her memory. Then she told us how she and her husband had both found Christ and started bringing up their children in the Christian way. Then the coming of the last war had changed her life dramatically: in one week she had received three telegrams from the War Office informing her that first her husband, and then each of her two sons, had been killed in action. In one terrible week her whole family had been snatched from her.

I sat stunned, quieted by her story, and found myself saying, 'In one week you lost everyone?'

'Oh no, not everyone,' she replied. 'Jesus was still with me and still is. I've never felt alone. I don't understand why it all happened, but then I leave that with God. I thank him for his presence and love that is always with me.'

When we left her little home that afternoon I felt humbled by the strength and beauty we had seen and touched in this woman.

For millions of people it is a cold, hard and often painful journey through life. But for those who have become lovers of God in worship there is in God's love a healing balm for every grief, a strengthening hand for all who are weak and a grace sufficient to enable us to go forward victoriously in life, turning every intended stumbling-block into a stepping-stone to new and higher ground.

On another occasion, one Sunday morning, I remember the feeling of momentary shame that came on me. I was standing alongside Graham in the worship service. He was a businessman with a deep, open love for God, though his life had been marked by tragedy. His brother had committed suicide at a time of deep depression, while his aged mother had been bedridden for years. Single-handed, Graham had struggled on, maintaining the family business and caring for his mother without ever complaining at his lot in life.

That week I had been grumbling at having to work overtime to cover for a sick colleague when there were other things I had so much wanted to do. And now the person I found myself standing alongside in the morning service was Graham. His inner strength and beautiful worship melted me. I realised there and then that worship must fill the life before it can cross the lips.

***Quietly I bowed my head and whispered, 'Lord, forgive me.'
People often ask what place of worship we attend, or what
is our form of worship. Yet these are not the real issues. Much
more important is our attitude of heart and mind as we worship.***

The Word teaches that we are created in the image and likeness of God. That's why the more like him we become, the more of his own strength and beauty we reflect and the more in keeping with our eternal heritage and destiny we feel.