

I Thought That I Was Strong, Lord
Joseph Denham Smith's Collection, 1860

I thought that I was strong, Lord,
And did not need Thine arm:
Though troubles thronged around me,
My heart felt no alarm.

I thought I nothing needed,
Riches, nor dress, nor sight;
And on I walked in darkness,
And still I thought it light.

But Thou hast broke the spell, Lord,
And waked me from my dream;
The light has burst upon me
With bright unerring beam.

I know Thy blood has cleansed me,
I know that I'm forgiven;
And all the roughest pathways
Will surely end in heaven.

I know that I am Thine, Lord,
And none can pluck away
The feeblest sheep that ever yet
Did make Thine arm its stay.

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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: I've Got This!

Kevin T. Bauder

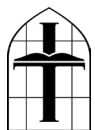
Is self-reliance a virtue or a vice? The Bible includes passages that appear to answer this question with a *yes*. It also includes passages that appear to answer it with a *no*.

In favor of self-reliance, the book of Proverbs counsels industry as a way of avoiding poverty (Prov 6:6-11). Hard work leads to wealth, while sloth leads to shame and poverty (Prov 10:4-5). A lazy person craves but has nothing, while the diligent person is full (Prov 13:4). An undisciplined life leads to poverty and shame (Prov 13:18). Work produces gain, while empty talk leads to poverty (Prov 14:23). Idle people can expect to go hungry (Prov 19:15). A person who quits working too early will have nothing when he ought to have plenty (Prov 20:4). Those who spend foolishly will come to poverty (Prov 23:20-21), as will those who neglect their opportunities (Prov 24:30-34).

The New Testament teaches much the same. People are supposed to support themselves, and those who do not work are not to be fed (2 Thess 3:10-12). Indeed, the person who does not provide for his own household has denied the faith and is worse than an infidel (1 Tim 5:8).

The emphasis of these and similar passages seems clear. Under normal circumstances God wants people to take responsibility for their own well-being. He wants them to work hard, to live orderly lives, to plan ahead, to exercise discipline and thrift, and to use good times to prepare for bad. Scripture actually forbids Christians to provide a safety net for people who refuse to become self-reliant in this sense. Their safety net is to learn order and industry.

On the other hand, the Bible also recognizes that the power to gain wealth comes from God (Deu 9:18). Consequently, those who want full barns and overflowing vats must begin by trusting God and acknowledging Him rather than leaning on their own understanding (Prov 3:5-10). Because they trust God, they are able to show generosity (Prov 3:27-28). To show generosity to the poor is to lend to the Lord, who will repay (Prov 19:17). Such generous people will receive more than they give (Prov 11:24-25). This is the very point that Jesus expands in the New Testament: those who seek



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first the kingdom of God and His righteousness will receive all the material things they need, so they do not need to concern themselves with the future (Matt 6:33-34).

Such people are not so much self-reliant as they are fully God-reliant. These two perspectives (self-reliance and God-reliance), while paradoxical, do not really contradict each other. People who truly rely upon God will do what God commands in terms of industry, thrift, order, and discipline. In other words, the truly God-reliant person will seek to become self-reliant, while fully recognizing complete dependence upon God. Consequently, even a converted thief will labor so that he can have something to give to those in need (Eph 4:28).

All abilities, privileges, and giftedness come from God. So does all prosperity. While we are enjoying God's good gifts, however, we find it difficult to remember how much we rely upon Him. Indeed, we have never yet realized just how absolutely dependent upon Him we are. So He must teach us, a bit at a time.

It is not that we *need* to depend upon God. We actually *do depend* upon God moment by moment, for absolutely everything, whether we realize it or not. To remind us of this truth, God may choose to deprive us (either temporarily or permanently) of some gift that we have previously enjoyed. Alternatively, He may place us in some position in which we cannot function without a gift that we do not possess.

We experience such challenges as afflictions or trials. We feel that we are being deprived of something upon which we have come to depend or that we are being pushed to do something beyond our capability. And we are! But that is just the point. God is teaching us that we actually do rely upon Him and that He can work in us and through us despite our deficiencies.

Even the apostle Paul passed through this sort of experience. God called him into a difficult public ministry. Paul would eventually travel thousands of miles over land and sea. He would stand before the leading intellectuals of his day. He would defend himself and his message before kings. Yet God also gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh," and "messenger of Satan," resulting in an unspecified physical debilitation (2 Cor 12:7). In other words, God gave Paul an affliction that worked against the very mission that God had called him to perform.

Paul begged the Lord on three different occasions for this affliction to be removed (2 Cor 12:8), but God did not take the trouble away. Instead, the Lord told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul's response was that he would glory in his infirmities so that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

The point is not that Paul needed Christ's power when he was weak. The point is that Paul needed Christ's power all the time. The "thorn in the flesh" did not create Paul's need; it only highlighted the need. The grace that Paul needed during weakness was exactly the grace that Paul needed all the time.

While we enjoy God's gifts we sometimes feel that we are adequate to face whatever comes our way. We forget that even those gifts are manifestations of God's grace, and that we need His grace all the time. There is never a time when we should simply think, "I've got this." When we do, when we feel self-reliant, God in His goodness sends us suffering, affliction, pain, and trial so that we may learn to rely upon His grace and strength. He wants us to rely on Him, not only during the affliction, but all the time. Like Paul, we should learn to find pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses. God permits these in our lives for Christ's sake, because when we are weak, He is shown to be strong.

Should we try to be self-reliant? The answer to this question is *yes* in the sense that we should not expect other people to take responsibility for us. Even in this sense, however, our self-reliance needs to be grounded in a constant God-reliance. The Lord will put us in situations where we simply do not know what to do. We will have nowhere else to turn. All of our gifts, privileges, and prosperity will fall short. We will find ourselves crying out to God, "I can't do this. I can't bear this." We will feel as if we are plunging into a free fall.

In those moments God is teaching us that He's got this. In fact, always and under every circumstance He is the one who has it. We always depend on Him. These occasions of suffering simply remind us of that truth.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
