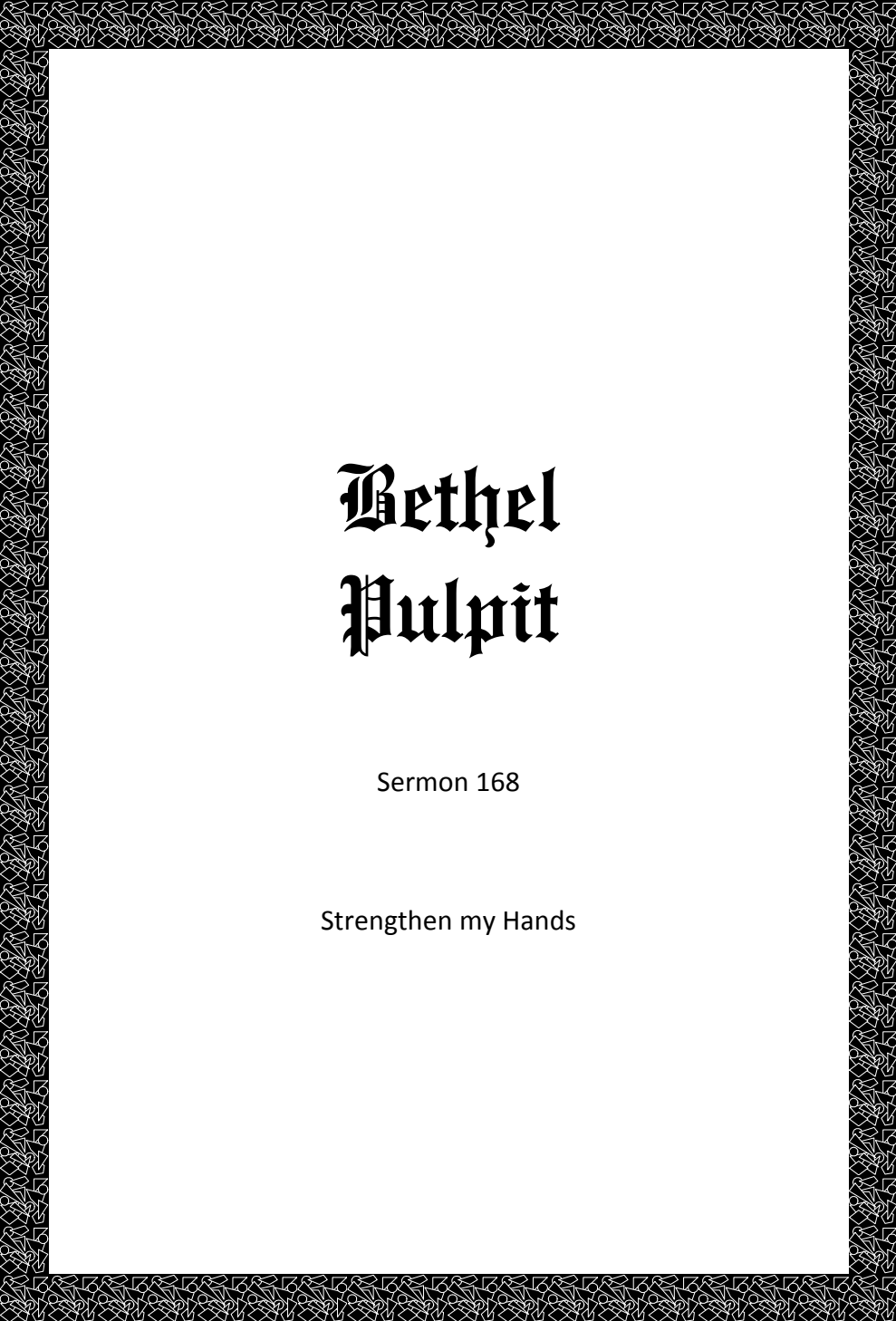




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 168

Strengthen my Hands

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 28th March, 1999**

Text: *"Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands" (Nehemiah 6. 9).*

Nehemiah was one of the strongest men in the whole of the Word of God. He was strong in so many ways. He was strong naturally. He was strong spiritually. But he painfully needed to pray this prayer that the Lord would strengthen him; and I think you will find this of all the saints in Scripture. Those who were the strongest felt the weakest, and they continually had to pray for this divine strength, and their strength was made perfect in weakness. If Nehemiah needed to pray this prayer, I am sure that many of us need to pray it – that constant sense of weakness, that constant sense of need, that constant sense of needing divine strength. I do not think I am mistaken, am I? I am sure there are quite a lot of you here this morning and you feel this prayer suits you well, that the Lord in love and mercy will strengthen your hands.

Let me first of all just try to set this word in its context and to speak of the background. Nehemiah's days were similar to ours. You see, the walls of Jerusalem were broken down. The whole city was in ruins, and it had been for over ninety years. As Nehemiah himself said, "Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste, and the gates thereof are burned with fire." Now you do not need me to explain the relevance of that today. O the distress we are in! Think of all these terrible happenings that are taking place in Yugoslavia. Think of all that is taking place in England at present, the wickedness, the spiritual decline. We wonder what we shall hear next. "Ye see the distress that we are in," and especially as it concerns us, the church of God in general, *our* churches. "Ye see the distress that we are in." The walls of Jerusalem are broken down. The breaches in Jerusalem's walls, the church of God, the divisions, the departures, the declension, the turning away from the truth. "Ye see the distress that we are in."

Now God put it into the heart of this godly man earnestly to seek that the walls of Jerusalem might be rebuilt. Of course, we have that beautiful prayer in the Psalms: "Do good in Thy good pleasure unto Zion: build

Thou the walls of Jerusalem.” I think people generally, in the world as well as in the churches, know what we mean by “building Jerusalem’s walls.” It has almost become a figure of speech, part of the Christian vocabulary. It comes in popular hymns, building “Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land”; the church like a city in ruins and the need to be repaired, to be rebuilt. And God put it into the heart of this one man, Nehemiah. He was a great man, an eminent man. He was the king’s cupbearer. He was living in wealth a thousand miles away. One day he heard of the desolations of Jerusalem. It filled his heart with grief. O beloved friends, are your hearts ever filled with grief when you think of the desolations of Zion, the broken-down walls of Jerusalem?

Now what could one man do, and what did he need to do? He might have thought, “A thousand miles away?” Really, the question is the opposite: what can one man *not* do – not in his own strength, but if the Lord puts it in your heart – if you have a gracious exercise, if you are burdened in prayer? We do need to be delivered from fleshly, wrong exercises. The whole point with Nehemiah: it was not some scheme; it was not something *he* was going to do. The Lord put it in his heart, and you find he mentions this right through the book. “According to the good hand of my God upon me.” He prayed. The Lord opened the way. He gained favour in the king’s sight. The king gave him a safe passage. The king granted him supplies. Really, the Book of Nehemiah contains one of the greatest miracles in Scripture. What do I mean? Well we think of the crossing of the Red Sea and things like that as great miracles. But the city of Jerusalem had been in desolation, in ruins, for over ninety years. Yet in fifty-two days (and they did not work on the Sabbath), the city was completely rebuilt. “According to the good hand of my God upon me.”

So there is encouragement for you and me in our deep grief, our sorrow, our concern about the state of our churches; still to pray on, to wrestle with the Lord. Because did you notice what we read? “The great and terrible God” (Neh. 1. 5). He can do anything. He can do everything. The most impossible thing with Him is easy. And if it be His holy, sovereign will, once again He can rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and once again He can revive His work, and once again build us up, and once again turn our captivity, and once again glorify His name. So you have this wonderful account, this miracle, taking place, “according to the good hand of my God upon me,” as the Lord heard and answered prayer.

Now coming to this beautiful little verse I have read, “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” I think one thing that stands out in the Book of Nehemiah is these beautiful little prayers. We have a few of them. All the time that Nehemiah is planning, building, working, he is praying. Perhaps you sometimes wonder what that word means, “Pray without ceasing.” Well, you have it with Nehemiah. He is praying all the time. Whatever is happening, trouble, problems, working, weary, he is praying. O but these beautiful little prayers! One of them is this: “Remember me, O my God, for good.” The whole of this remarkable book ends with that prayer, “Remember me, O my God, for good.” Our hymnwriter puts it very beautifully like this: “I cannot hope but in Thy blood; remember me, O Lord, for good.” Tell me, are there some of you here and that prayer suits you well, “Remember me”? “Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O visit me with Thy salvation.”

And another of these beautiful prayers: “Think upon me, my God.” O that is a wonderful thing, when perhaps we are weak and unwell and in trouble and we cannot think properly, we cannot think clearly: “Think upon me, my God.” You know, the psalmist proved it once. He had gone right back, down to rock-bottom, “*Yet* the Lord thinketh upon me.” “I am poor and needy; *yet* the Lord thinketh upon me.” It is a wonderful thing to have the sweet realisation that the Lord is thinking upon us. When I was received into church membership many years ago, we sang a little hymn at the Lord’s table. I do not know whether I have ever heard it sung since, but it says this: “‘Midst all His vast concerns, He could not me forget.” The wonder of it, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “Yet the Lord thinketh upon me.” “‘Midst all His vast concerns, He could not me forget.”

But you notice something else. He had these terrible enemies, Tobiah, Sanballat, Geshem. He says, “Lord, think upon them also.” If you are troubled with people, you hardly know what to pray, do you? You do not wish them any harm. Think upon them, Lord. Think upon Sanballat; think upon Tobiah; think upon Geshem.

And then this beautiful little prayer here: “Strengthen my hands.” Well, perhaps you have had to pray for divine strength already today. Now I think you will notice one thing. There is a sudden danger, a sudden

calamity, and a worldly person swears, or lets out an oath, or blasphemes. With a child of God, something comes suddenly – Peter begins to sink: “Lord, save me.” These little prayers are pressed out of you. “Lord, help me.” I wonder if any of you have had to say it this morning.

Now there are three things resting on my spirit this morning. The first is, all those things that weakened Nehemiah and that weaken you and that weaken me and make us say, “Lord, strengthen me.” And then the second thing, the beautiful prayer itself, the many different ways and times we have to pray, “Lord, strengthen me.” And then third, some of the wonderful ways in which the Lord does strengthen His people.

Well then, “O God, strengthen my hands.” Now why did Nehemiah pray that prayer? He tells us: “They all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” He had all these people and things and circumstances which were weakening his hands. It is so today. “The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and there is much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.” These enemies, Tobiah, Sanballat, Geshem, they are still plaguing the church of God today. They have not left us. They are still being a nuisance to the church. You may have them: people, things, circumstances, troubles, sorrows. Of course, beloved friends, behind all this it was Satan. It was not just Tobiah, Sanballat; it was Satan. Now Satan can never destroy you but Satan can weaken you. His temptations will weaken you. When he harasses you, it will weaken you. When you sin, when you fall, that will weaken you. O you will find things in your life, your circumstances, your relationships, things in your family, your business, your health, your troubles, and you say, “All my little strength is gone; sink I must without supply.” You feel your hands are weakened. Sin, Satan, the world, all these things that are happening.

I think there are a few things in which you will sympathise with Nehemiah. One was this: it was not just one day; it kept on and on and on and on. It is these things you are in, these problems, perplexities, difficulties, trials, and they are unremittent. They keep going on day after day. That will weaken you. Another thing is this: the different ways. If the enemies could not get him that way, they would try this, and if they could not with this, they would try something else. You have all kinds of

things, physical, spiritual, and “the strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed.”

One thing was a special trial. A prophet asked to see him and said God had told him something (Neh. 6. 10-13). It was a complete deception. You may have a word in your heart and it tries you. It never came from God. Or a person comes and says God has clearly told him something, and it is very hard for you to contradict. The prophet said to Nehemiah that God had told him something, but the Lord had never told him this. Then, his enemies tried to kill him, and then tried to be friends with him. There were so many among the people of God who were friendly with Sanballat, related to him, making excuses for him, taking his side. Well, not to dwell on this first point any longer. “They all made us afraid, saying, Their hands shall be weakened.” “The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed.” You do not need a sermon this morning on this if you are brought to this point: you feel weak and helpless, and perhaps you feel you are just unable to carry on.

Well then, a second thing: this prayer. It is divine help he wants, divine strength, more than human, more than his own. It is an urgent prayer. It is a simple prayer. It is real prayer. And it was answered, most blessedly answered. Does it suit any of you this morning? “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” You have a pilgrimage to walk out. There is not any short cut. We are journeying through the wilderness. Our hands are often weak. “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” Some of you have made an open profession. Like dear old Mr. Arthur Pearce used to say, “How can I live till I die?” How can I endure to the end? “O God, strengthen my hands.” Some of you are perhaps burdened about openly professing the Lord’s name. I hope you are. Some of you should be. “This do in remembrance of Me.” O how can I stand? How can I endure? How can I continue? What if I turn back? What if I make shipwreck of it? “Leaning on all-sufficient grace.” Lord, as I venture forward, strengthen now my hands.

There is the pathway of prayer. O don’t our hands hang down so often in prayer, so weak? O Lord, strengthen my hands in prayer. Enable me really to pray. Teach me to pray. Strengthen my hands in prayer. Answer my prayers. And then there are the sorrows and afflictions and illnesses and troubles, and you are weak. “O God, strengthen my hands.”

It touches gospel preachers. It touches Sabbath school teachers. “Strengthen my hands.” You are ready to give up, ready to turn back. But what about things in your home? How can you manage your home? Sometimes you wonder how you can carry on. A mother with little children. “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” You are weak. It is too hard for you. You have your problems, your perplexities. There are relationships. You are seeking God’s will. There are so many, many, many things. And you know it yourself this morning, those of you who feel how weak you are. “O God, strengthen my hands.”

Well just to hurry to this third thing. We have tried to think of the background, the circumstances of Nehemiah, and how suitable all this is to you and me today. And then the first thing, we need to pray this prayer because of these things that weaken us; then second, the prayer, and its suits so many different circumstances. But now the third thing. How does the Lord in love and mercy strengthen the hands of His people? This is one of those wonderful, gracious works He performs. Well of course, it is all in Christ. It is all in this wonderful fulness that dwells in Christ. “For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fulness dwell.” There is a fulness of love and mercy and grace. But there is a fulness of divine, almighty strength, and it is treasured up in Christ for His people. I believe in eternity past, in the covenant of grace, Almighty God saw all the strength that His people would ever need, and He treasured up all that fulness of strength in His beloved Son, and He saw all those of you here this morning who need your hands strengthening. He saw all the strength that you need, and from eternity He treasured it up in Christ, and it is there this morning, and it is yours, and you shall have it when you need it. If you need it tomorrow, you will not get it today. If you need it next week, you will not have it tomorrow. “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.” It is yours, and when you need it, the Lord in love and mercy will strengthen your hands. And in His strength you will be strong. “Strong in that strength that God bestows through His beloved Son.”

“O God, strengthen my hands.” How does He do it? Sometimes by dropping a sweet promise in your heart. Here you are, weak, helpless. Your poor hands are hanging down. You cannot pray. You cannot do anything. You cannot carry on. The Lord comes and strengthens your hands, and it is a promise something like this: “Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God.” This is it: “I will strengthen

thee” – God is going to do it – “I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness.” “Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” like this. Drop some sweet promise in my heart.

Now another way that God will strengthen your hands is through the gospel ministry. Has the Lord ever used the preaching of the gospel to strengthen your hands? We have it very beautifully in Isaiah 35. This is the gospel ministry: “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; He will come and save you.” Now that is the gospel ministry.

“Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” How did the Lord strengthen Moses’ hands? You say, “Moses? Surely his hands did not need strengthening. Was there ever such a strong man as Moses?” Well, He sent him Aaron and Hur to hold up his hands so that they were strong until the going down of the sun. That is how God strengthened Moses’ hands. Bless God for the Aarons and the Hurs, and may you seek grace that *you* might be an Aaron and a Hur.

“Therefore, O God, strengthen my hands.” How did God strengthen Elijah’s hands? He was a strong man. He had just triumphed over the king, the priests of Baal, yet the next day his poor, weak, feeble hands are hanging down. He is running away from a woman. He is falling down under a juniper tree and longing to die. How did the Lord strengthen his hands? He sent an angel from heaven. Rather than that you should sink and perish, the Lord will send you an angel from heaven. “Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.”

Then we think of David. You say, “David? Did he need his hands strengthening?” David almost sank in black despair, and Jonathan, we are told, the king’s son, came down to David in the wood, “and strengthened his hand in God.” Perhaps it is a dark wood with you and you cannot see the end of it, and it is a very gloomy wood and it is a very lonely wood. But the Lord sends a messenger. O to be a Jonathan to come and strengthen the believer’s hands in God! But especially when it is the King’s beloved Son who comes Himself personally. He knows your little strength is gone. He knows your weakness, your fear. He knows you wonder about next week and the coming days, and He knows just where

you are in that dark, gloomy wood, and the King's Son comes. Has the King's Son ever visited you? The King's Son comes and strengthens your hands in God.

O beloved friends, these are the things we need. We know those things that weaken us, and we know this prayer, and the Lord's most loving ability to strengthen our hands. But perhaps one word is especially sweet: "The arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." Joseph's hands were weak. My hands are weak. Your hands are weak. The hands of the mighty God of Jacob are not weak. But for Joseph, everything was going wrong. He had this word from the Lord, this revelation, but everything is going the opposite. His brothers had ill-treated him. He had been deceived by Potiphar's wife. He had been thrown into prison. The butler had forgotten him. "All my little strength is gone; sink I must without supply." "The arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." So things were not *really* going wrong. God had not forgotten. He was still on the throne. He was still almighty. The end was better than the beginning. All things were working together for good. May you and I prove it this morning, that when we are weak, we are strong. We do not want to be like King Uzziah: "He was marvellously helped, till he was strong." May it rather be this, and may you feel it: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." May the arms of your hands be made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob. Then you can go on.

"The ground feels firm and good;
And, lest we should mistake the way,
He lines it out with blood."

You can face tomorrow. You can go on. You can face Tobiah and Sanballat and Geshem. You can face all this rubbish round Jerusalem's walls.

Well, this was Nehemiah's prayer, and it was graciously answered: divine strength. And this is your prayer and my prayer, and may it likewise be answered. "Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands."