

FULL FAITH PART 4
STRONG SOULS



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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Strong Souls

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Full Faith Part 4
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Strong Souls

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Welcome to *Strong Souls*

Welcome to *Strong Souls*, an introduction to the inner life of full faith in which we consider the composition and care of our souls as the primary focus of Christian growth. *Strong Souls* is Part 4 of a 10-part series entitled, *Full Faith*, and is one of our *ReVision* series of studies in Kingdom living.

Christian life is realized from the inside-out, from within our souls, where the Spirit of God works with the Word of God to transform us heart, mind, and conscience into the image of Jesus Christ. The better we understand our souls, and how each component contributes to full faith, the more we can expect to increase in faith and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior.

By understanding the soul, and taking steps to nurture and guard it daily, we can grow strong in our souls, and can increase in full faith and live fruitful Kingdom lives for Jesus Christ.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time. Read through the study and reflect on the questions provided. Be sure to do the *Next steps* assignment each day, as this will help you put your learning into practice. Use the questions at the end of the study to reflect on what you have learned.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your understanding of the Christian faith, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God, and life in His Kingdom.

If you have not already, we invite you to subscribe to *ReVision* so that you can receive it daily on your computer, tablet, or smart phone. Visit our website, www.ailbe.org, where you can subscribe to *ReVision* and our other newsletters.

Our prayer is that this study will enlarge your vision of Christ and His Kingdom, and encourage you to greater faith, boldness, and consistency in living for Him.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Secret of Success

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14.21, 22

A right-side up world

The book of Acts recounts the incredible story of how the Christian movement grew from a small sect in a distant outpost of the Roman world to become a network of hundreds of churches involving multiplied thousands of believers with an impact that, as even unbelievers noted, was turning the Roman world upside-down (Acts 17.1-9).

The world had never seen anything like it. Suddenly, within a single generation, in towns and cities from Jerusalem to Athens to Rome, men and women of Jewish faith, pagan faith, and no faith at all were uniting together as one, confessing Jesus Christ to be their Savior and King, loving and caring for one another, and making an impact for good on their neighbors, their culture, and Roman society in every aspect of life. Full faith was coming to full bloom all over the Roman world, as the Word of the Lord increased and spread in every place. Believers created a new community – the Church – where worship was a joy, learning became a way of life, caring and sharing were everywhere the norm, goodness and kindness were extended to all, and the Good News of the Kingdom was everybody's business and message.

As we work our way through the book of Acts we see this movement growing, gaining momentum, taking firm root, bearing astonishing fruit in courage and love, multiplying and expanding into new communities and regions – and all this in the face of implacable and at times violent opposition and resistance.

Which might raise the question in some of our minds: How did they *do* that?

Well, I think I know the answer. The early Christians were a people on steroids.

Spiritual stimulants

Our text says this clearly – at least, in the Greek. The phrase, “strengthening the souls”, is, in the Greek of the New Testament, *episterizontes*. You hear that – *-sterizontes*? These days we might translate this, “giving steroids.” The Apostle Paul and the others were “giving steroids” to those first believers! No wonder they had such strength and perseverance. No wonder they had such assurance of salvation, and bore the fruit and evidence of full faith in every area of life.

Of course, Paul and the others were not giving physical or bodily stimulants to the first Christians. Our word literally means, “to strengthen above normal.” Which is why “steroids” are called what they are. The Apostles were giving these people a measure of strength beyond what they'd ever known before – strength to worship, share, witness, edify, grow, love, and endure, the likes of which these folks had never known before.

They weren't being “doped” to live for Christ. And they obviously weren't being *duped*. They knew that what they had come to believe was true and life-changing. They longed to realize the expectations Jesus held out for them. They could not and did not deny that Jesus had transformed their lives and made them part of something bigger than their own interests, bigger even than the Roman Empire, bigger than time itself and the entire course of human history.

They had become citizens of the Kingdom of God, and they were experiencing the transforming power of

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that reality in all the mundane, everyday details of their lives, all their relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The result was a new way of life that filled them with hope, joy, and peace, and led them to practice righteousness and goodness, and to bear witness to their neighbors at every opportunity and by every means.

Paul was “giving them steroids” all right, but these were *spiritual* stimulants, not physical or bodily ones, and they had powerful effect in strengthening the souls of those first believers.

The primacy of the soul

The most important part of our text is the phrase, “strengthening the souls of the believers”. Consider: Paul and his companions, and all the Apostles, wanted to make sure their message would take, the people would grow to realize full faith in the Lord, the communities they had started would stick, and the movement of the Gospel and Kingdom would spread and increase. So what did they do? They didn’t encourage these believers to build permanent facilities, hire more staff, increase their giving, or add some new and proven programs for “discipleship.”

All they did was “strengthen the souls of the believers.” And that’s all it took.

The Christian movement grows from the inside-out, from the depths of the transformed soul into the daily words and works that fill up the time of our lives. We can try to become more confident and consistent in our Christian lives by all manner of outward correctives or adjustments. But real change – change that lasts and generates increasing power – begins within, in the soul of each believer. If we want to turn our world upside down, we won’t need more mega-churches, the latest slick (and expensive) training programs, bigger budgets, or better staff. We cannot grow the Church from the outside-in.

We’ll need believers with strong souls – you and I and all our Christian friends – and pastors and teachers who are committed to giving spiritual steroids to those entrusted to their care.

For reflection

1. What does it mean for you to grow stronger in your soul?
2. How does growing stronger in our souls affect the way we live each day?
3. How confident are you that you are growing consistently stronger in your soul? Explain.

Next steps: How can we know when we are growing stronger in our souls? Talk with a church leader or pastor about this question.

2 Soul First

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls... 2 Corinthians 12.15

No cushy calling

The Apostle Paul was only one of the many remarkable men and women used of God to establish and grow the Christian movement in that first generation. As we see in the book of Acts, Paul was almost continually on the move, pausing only on a couple of occasions for extended stays in one place or another. He preached, evangelized, taught, counseled, and trained leaders for the emerging churches. In the process he endured no small amount of hardship – deprivation, harassment, persecution, stoning, imprisonment, and, ultimately, death at the hand of the Romans.

Clearly, this was no cushy calling. Why would Paul spend so much time, invest all his best energy, and become so thoroughly and completely spent? He tells us: For the *souls* of those the Lord had called into His churches.

The focus of Paul's efforts was at all times on strengthening the souls of those entrusted to his care. He commended the pastor Philemon because he was able to refresh the souls of those he served (Philemon 7). He wrote to Timothy, a young pastor, to remind him that love, which is the hallmark of every true follower of Jesus Christ, rises from the soul – from sound thinking, a clean heart, and a good conscience (1 Tim. 1.5). Jesus had come to show and declare the love of God to the world, and He instructed His followers that it would be such love that would mark them off as His disciples (Jn. 13.35). To be able to love like Jesus, in the face of all kinds of adversity, one has to be strengthened in his soul – heart, mind, and conscience.

Full faith in Jesus begins in the soul and is sustained in the soul.

So it was to this end – the strengthening of the souls of believers – that Paul spent and was spent in his ministry.

Shaped from within

The plain teaching of Scripture is that human beings are shaped from within, by the condition and disposition of their minds, hearts, and consciences. These three components overlap, interact, and cohere to form the soul, from which full faith in Christ grows with power.

With the mind we perceive the world, and ourselves in it. We think, analyze, compare, assess, associate, plan, and envision the life of Kingdom and glory to which God has called us (1 Thess. 2.12).

The heart provides the emotional energy and staying power to help us carry our thoughts through to action.

And the conscience guards and guides the mind and heart by the Word of God, to clarify our thoughts and purify our affections.

Each of these components – heart, mind, and conscience – is a spiritual entity. Each has its own function, but all of them work together, interacting and overlapping, to shape us into the people we are. The Spirit of God, Who dwells in the souls of those who believe in Jesus, is at work within us, making us willing and able to do that which is pleasing to God – exceeding abundantly beyond all we've ever dared to ask or think, as if we were on spiritual steroids (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20). The way He does this is by informing our minds with the Word and will of God, cleansing and renewing our hearts, and firming up our consciences according to the will of God.

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The soul is of such importance in the life of faith that the Lord has built into the structure of His churches an office dedicated to watching over the wellbeing of the soul of every believer (Heb. 13.17). We'll have more to say about this later in this study.

The self-watch

The Christian movement grows and flourishes on the strength of the souls of individual believers. If we are strong in our souls, the faith of Christ spreads, expands, transforms, renews, and restores to uprightness everything it touches. We need to have the same emphasis as the Apostles when it comes to our own faith and the Christian movement of our day. If we continue to spend and be spent primarily on externals such as buildings, budgets, programs, and the like, we'll fail in our calling and mission. The Apostles spent and were spent on behalf of the souls of God's people. We must do the same, beginning with our own souls.

If asked, could you effectively and accurately assess the state of your soul? Ascertain its strengths and needs? Determine a course for its improvement? Know how to guard it against the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil? The Scriptures consistently call us to keep a close watch over our souls. Consider Solomon's advice in Proverbs 4.20-27. He urges his son to exercise vigilance with respect to his thoughts (vv. 20-22), his heart (v. 23), and the decisions of his will (vv. 25-27), as well as over his words and ways.

Most of us, I suspect, only have the vaguest of ideas concerning the nature and nurture of our souls. Can we expect to know the kind of conviction, courage, caring, and confession as those first believers if we do not give ourselves to spend and be spent for the strengthening of our souls?

For reflection

1. What's the difference between the heart, the mind, and the conscience?
2. How do the Word and Spirit of God work to strengthen our souls?
3. What's involved in keeping a close watch over the state of your soul?

Next steps: What does it mean to "spend and be spent" for the soul of another person? Ask a church leader or pastor.

3 Rightly Focused

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14.21, 22

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Matthew 6.33

The right framework

Like the Lord Jesus Himself, the Apostle Paul understood that the salvation of the Lord, while it begins in the human soul, is much larger than the soul, even than all the souls of all those God will save by grace through faith throughout the course of human history.

Salvation and full faith begin and unfold from within, in the human soul. The stronger our souls become, the more of the Lord's great salvation we will be able to experience.

But the soul is only the *most immediate* context in which the salvation and Kingdom of the Lord begin to be known on earth as in heaven. The Kingdom of God is the larger, historical and even meta-historical reality within and toward which our salvation unfolds. We are saved *into* the Kingdom of God, and we are saved *for the sake of* the Kingdom of God. What has been planted and is growing in our souls is the seed of the Kingdom. As that seed is strengthened within us it grows and bears fruit unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit – the character, condition, and consequence of the coming of God's Kingdom (Rom. 14.17, 18).

Thus our souls can only be truly strengthened, as the Apostle Paul rightly understood, and we can only make progress toward full faith, when they are continuously focused on and fitted for seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God.

Why is this so?

Called to the Kingdom

In the first place this is so because we who believe in Jesus Christ have been called to the Kingdom of God, and to His glory (1 Thess. 2.12). The Lord Jesus is giving His Kingdom to us, so that we might find our true place, and the proper unfolding of our salvation, within that glorious realm (Dan. 7.18-27). All believers are citizens and ambassadors of the Kingdom of God; thus, the Spirit of God within us is working to strengthen us for this calling, so that we might enjoy and contribute to the righteousness, peace, and joy that He is establishing, on earth as it is in heaven, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is why Jesus made so much of the Kingdom during His earthly ministry. In parable after parable Jesus sought to cast a vision and whet our appetite for the coming Kingdom of God. He told us that God was eager to give the Kingdom to us, and made it clear that this involved the gift of the Holy Spirit and His powerful working in our lives (Acts 1.1-8).

So it's no wonder that Jesus, in order to focus our hopes and aspirations, and to give direction to our experience of His salvation, commanded us to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

The Kingdom of God is the natural habitat of all who are striving to realize full faith. Our souls flourish in, toward, and for the Kingdom of God. When we direct our minds, hearts, and consciences to the fuller realization of the Kingdom of God, the Spirit of God at work within us strengthens our souls for Kingdom progress, precisely as we see in the book of Acts.

The Kingdom and the soul

Seeking the Kingdom has profound effects on the redeemed soul. It expands our minds, broadens and clarifies our thinking, and gives shape to all our visions and plans. As we study and contemplate the Kingdom of God, we learn to think like the Lord Jesus Himself, Who even now rules at the Father's right hand for the progress of His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The Kingdom affects our emotions as well – what we desire, hope for, aspire to, and long to achieve. As we understand the vast scope of the Spirit's power – how He works to transform us increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18) – and the beauty, goodness, truth, majesty, and greatness of our King and His Kingdom, all our deepest longings and greatest delights take on a new aspect. We begin to love what Jesus loves, and the effect of this is to see the increase of His powerful, glorious rule welling-up within our souls and flowing, like rivers of living water, through us into our world (Jn. 7.37-39).

And this focusing on and desiring the Kingdom alters and adjusts all our priorities and values, so that we will what God the Father wills in every situation (Phil. 2.13).

Thus we need to give ourselves to improving our vision of the Kingdom of God, and of its coming in and through our lives. The more clearly and consistently we are able to *see* the Kingdom, the more earnestly we will seek it, unto the strengthening of our souls and progress of the Gospel.

For reflection

1. What is your understanding of the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to seek the Kingdom?
2. Meditate on Romans 14.17, 18. How can we know when we're making progress in the Kingdom?
3. Each local church is a sign and outpost of the Kingdom of God. Explain:

Next steps: How do our heart, mind, and conscience work together to make seeking the Kingdom our top priority in all things? What can hinder this work? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions.

4 Forewarned

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14.21, 22

"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 16.33

No easy road

These days it's easy to get the impression that being a Christian should be just one blessing after another. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, in this country at least, we have become accustomed to life getting better and better. For the most part, we live safely and securely in comfortable homes. We enjoy abundant food and other material benefits. We have churches, friends, work, and ample time for a variety of diversions. Life is good, and so we tend to expect that life in Jesus Christ will only get better.

Then, second, we are often subjected to teaching from Christian leaders encouraging us to believe that God actually wants us to enjoy all the best of life without the hassles and worries that drive other folks to distraction. Our sins have been forgiven, so we don't need to live in guilt or shame; and our Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills, so we can go to Him for whatever we need or want.

Now that's painting with a broad brush, to be sure. Nevertheless, "tribulation" is not something with which our generation of Kingdom-seekers is all that familiar. But the plain teaching of both Jesus and Paul is that tribulation comes with the turf when you're seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. We will not realize full faith in Jesus Christ without a struggle. And the book of Acts, in which we see the Kingdom advancing with such power and scope, bears ample witness to the truth of this.

Evidence of tribulation

Consider the situation of the first Christians. They were hounded and harassed by local religious leaders. At times that harassment turned violent, making it necessary for people to flee their homes and occupations in order to find safety in other places. Some Christians lost their lives and others were imprisoned for what they believed.

As if that weren't enough, false teachers appeared in many of the early Christian communities, making unjust demands on the believers, pitting church members against one another, and sowing a good bit of confusion, trouble, and uncertainty into the congregations of the Lord.

And then there were the tribulations that believers shared in common with their unsaved neighbors: poverty, drought, famine, military occupation, taxation, sickness, broken relationships, deprivation, loss of loved ones, and death. Add to these the daily temptations that confronted them, and it's easy enough to see that the first Christians were no strangers to tribulation.

They had been told to expect it, and they were not disappointed.

Nevertheless, tribulation in all its forms did not hinder the progress of the Gospel. Indeed, the first Christians seemed to *grow stronger in their souls* through the various tribulations that beset them, and this is in no small part so because the Apostles, like the Lord Jesus, forewarned them of tribulation and prepared them to overcome

in the midst of it.

Tribulation and the soul

Tribulation can have one of two effects on our souls. First, it can cause our souls to fall into despair. Mind, heart, and conscience can sink under the weight of tribulation. Dreams and visions evaporate; doubt, discouragement and disappointment undermine hope and joy; pragmatic self-preservation replaces holding fast to the will of the Lord. As our souls bend under the weight of tribulation, the progress of the Kingdom goes on the back burner, and we collapse into ourselves, looking only for some light at the end of the tunnel, rather than to live as the light of the world.

But if we understand that tribulation is inevitable, that God intends to use trials of all sorts to strengthen our souls, and if we prepare well and know how to deal with tribulation when it comes, then we can experience the overcoming power of our Lord Jesus, expanding within our souls and causing His Kingdom to go forward through and in spite of tribulations, however harsh they may be.

Full faith is the fruit of struggle, and often struggle through tribulation. Are you ready for tribulation? Do you know how to deal with temptation? To find joy in the midst of trials? To give thanks when sickness descends or deprivation and loss threaten to overwhelm? Strong souls don't fear tribulation; they persevere through it, because they expect it and are prepared to deal with it.

For reflection

1. Why is it necessary for Christians to endure tribulations of various kinds?
2. How should we endure tribulation so that we grow through it rather than be crushed by it?
3. How can Christians encourage and assist one another in growing through tribulation (Heb. 10.24)?

Next steps: How do your Christian friends deal with the various kinds of tribulations they face each day? Ask a few of them.

5 Get Ready to Continue

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Acts 14.21, 22

"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." John 17:3

Saved and being saved

The first Christians were under no illusion concerning what it means to be saved. They knew they had received the gift of eternal life, but they also understood that this involved more than forgiveness of sin and having a place in heaven beyond this life. They were assured of their salvation, and they worked hard to bring forth the evidence of full faith as they pursued the Kingdom expectations held out to them by the Lord.

Jesus proclaimed forgiveness and eternal life within the framework of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom would come in the present, He explained, as the Spirit of God began to do His powerful transforming work in the souls of those who believe, beginning with repentance. And, like a growing seed or spreading leaven, that Kingdom expands and increases as believers make it their first and overarching priority in life, and as they are strengthened in their souls.

Thus Paul, by encouraging the believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch "to continue in the faith", was reminding them to take up, day by day, those disciplines by which we seek and make progress toward full faith in the Kingdom and salvation of the Lord.

Christians are saved by grace through faith; but they are also *being* saved, increasingly, as they continue in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. What does this involve?

Disciplines of grace

The life of faith begins in our souls, where, with heart, mind, and conscience, we establish, embrace, and seek a vision of the Kingdom of God, coming in and through us, day by day. But merely having such a vision does not mean we will realize what we desire and value above all else. For that to be the case, for us to increase in the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Kingdom, we will need to get hold of our time and invest it with the disciplines that make Kingdom progress a daily reality.

Paul doubtless urged the believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to "make the most" of their time for the Kingdom of God (Eph. 5.15-17). The difference between those who, strengthened in their souls, make progress in the Kingdom of God is not in the amount of time available. We all have the same amount of time each day. The difference is not in the *amount* of time but in the *use* we make of our time. Moses taught us to pray that God would give us wisdom in the way we plan and use our time (Ps. 90.12). Time is like the talents in Jesus' parable: God gives it to us, one moment at a time, and He expects us to invest it for His Kingdom and glory (Matt. 25.14-30).

The place to begin in achieving a more disciplined life for the Kingdom of God is in those disciplines that have most direct bearing on the strengthening of our souls. We continue in the Kingdom as we devote ourselves to prayer, worship and singing, reading and studying God's Word, fasting, and so forth. No Christian can expect to continue in the Kingdom without these disciplines in place, nurturing mind, heart, and conscience toward a fuller realization of the Kingdom of God. When Paul encouraged those believers to continue in the Kingdom of God, he surely meant they should all be careful and responsible in making good use of these disciplines of grace.

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Daily disciplines

But beyond these disciplines that shape and nurture our inner lives are the daily disciplines to which we devote our outward lives. We all fill up the time of our lives with things to do – family, work, leisure, and so forth. Each of these – and all the activities of our lives – involves investments of energy and the consumption of time. In that respect all these activities are forms of *work*. We employ our bodies in words and deeds in order to accomplish or achieve something within the time of our lives. The work we've been given to do in this life is greater than the job at which we work, and all the work of our lives requires discipline.

Further, the goal of *all* our work must be to advance the Kingdom of God and make known the glory of the Lord (Matt. 6.33; 1 Cor. 10.31; Hab. 2.14). After all, if we're saturating and strengthening our souls – mind, heart, and conscience – for the Kingdom and glory of God, to which we have been called (1 Thess. 2.12), it only makes sense that this is what we should expect to see coming out in our lives. Why would we invest our souls with such a focus if this were not what we hoped to realize in our everyday lives?

Thus all the work we've been given to do – making a marriage, raising a family, keeping a home, fulfilling a job, serving in the church, even enjoying our avocations – must be pursued and undertaken in a way that allows our strong souls to bring to greater visibility that Kingdom reality which is fomenting and growing, invisibly, within us day by day.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Ephesians 5.15-17. What does it mean to “make the most” of the time God gives us?
2. How can we make sure that our time is not being lost to the powers of wickedness?
3. In the Kingdom, the work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work. Explain:

Next steps: Meditate on Psalm 90.12, 16, 17. How might you apply these verses to planning the use of your time each day? Share your thoughts about this with a Christian friend.

6 Soul Watchers

And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14.21-23

Unordered churches?

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals that "elders" played a prominent role in the churches of that time.

Paul made a point to ordain elders to oversee every church he started, as we see in our text and other places. He explained to Timothy that serving as an elder was a high and noble calling, and that only those who were qualified should be appointed to that office (1 Tim. 3.1-7). Elders are called "overseers" and "shepherds" in their relationship to the congregations of the Lord (1 Pet. 5.1-3). Believers in the New Testament were expected to "submit" to the elders of their churches, who were appointed to serve them in their Kingdom-and-glory callings from the Lord (1 Cor. 15.15, 16; 1 Thess. 5.12, 13). Elders were charged with the responsibility of watching over the flocks of the Lord (Acts 20.28), of preserving sound doctrine and right practice in the churches (Acts 15.1-6; Titus 1), and, in particular, of keeping watch over the souls of God's people (2 Cor. 12.15; Heb. 13.17).

The work of elders in the churches of the New Testament carried over from their work among the communities of Israel. There the elders served as judges and teachers of the people, instructing them in the ways of the Lord and leading their communities in the practice of justice and *shalom*. The elders appointed to serve the churches of the New Testament were called to be shepherds, leading the Lord's flocks into fuller realization of His Kingdom and promises. In fact, so vital were elders to the churches of the New Testament that Paul insisted that any church that didn't have elders was somehow not "in order" (Titus 1.3).

So, do you have an elder watching over your soul, to strengthen you for your calling in the Kingdom of God?

Where have all the elders gone?

In the Church today we seem not to believe in elders. The New Testament believes in them, but we don't, at least, not in the way the New Testament envisions their service. Many – perhaps even most – churches do not have elders, and those that do, organize their elders as a kind of board of directors, overseeing departments and programs and committees and the like. I defy anyone to discover such an arrangement in the New Testament.

Meanwhile, no one is watching over the souls of God's people, strengthening them with Kingdom vision, courage, and discipline, leading and defending and nurturing them like elders did in the New Testament. Discipleship – growing stronger in our souls – is these days a matter of individual preference and pace. Church leaders provide opportunities and encourage church members to "get involved," but if they choose not to, hey, what can you do?

What's going on here? Have we just decided that we don't need elders? That elders watching over our souls is an *optional* matter, or that we're free to define the work of elders according to our own ideas rather than those of the Scriptures? And if no one's watching over our souls, to strengthen them for full faith life in the Kingdom, then that would perhaps explain why there is so little *evidence* of the Kingdom – book-of-Acts-Kingdom evidence – in the lives of believers and churches in our time.

Warning to church leaders

This is a serious matter. Paul appointed elders to continue his work of strengthening the souls of God's people. The result was progress in the Kingdom of God such as we have not witnessed in our lifetimes. We appoint elders, when we bother to appoint them at all, to make sure our committees and programs are working as we think they should, not to watch over the souls of every member of the Body of Christ. The result, year after year, is that the Church is ceding more ground – spiritually, morally, socially, and culturally – to the kingdom of darkness.

Jesus condemned the religious leaders of His day who did not enter the Kingdom of God and, by their failure to enter it, barred the way for others to do so (Matt. 23.13). The Lord condemned elders and church leaders who did not watch over their flocks, allowing His sheep to stray into sin and trouble, and failing to lead them into the green meadows of the Lord (Ezek. 34.1-10).

Strengthening the souls of God's people is the work of the Lord, which He has entrusted into our care. Doing that work is the most important thing we can do in this life. If we expect God to bless our efforts at strengthening the souls of His people, then we must take up that work in *His way*, each believer taking responsibility to press on toward full faith, and each church appointing elders to watch over the souls of every one of the followers of Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. Why do churches today not organize their ministries along the lines indicated in the New Testament?
2. Does your church have elders? If not, why not? If so, what do your elders do?
3. The work of elders is directly related to strengthening the souls of God's people for full faith life in the Kingdom. Can we expect the Lord to bless us in this way if we refuse to follow the example of the apostles and the teaching of the New Testament? Explain.

Next steps: If your church has elders, see what you can find out about what they do. If your church does not have elders, see if you can find out why not.

7 Lead the Way through Worship

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14.23

Disciplines of self-denial

I think we can assume that what we see Paul doing in these churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch is pretty much what he did everywhere: point people to the Kingdom, warn them to get ready for tribulation, ground them in Kingdom disciplines, and appoint elders to watch over their souls. So I think we can assume that his parting act of committing all this to the Lord was also important in helping the followers of Christ grow strong in their souls.

We note here the mention of three matters: prayer, fasting, and some act of committal. Each of these would have been specific, overt actions, done in, for, and with the community of God's people, and done probably as a way of showing these congregations what they needed to do over and over again.

In other words, Paul led them in worship in the ways he expected them to continue worshiping for the strengthening of their souls.

And it's important to note that each of these specific acts is an act of self-denial. Strong souls begin and end in self-denial, in public acts of abject, utter, and entire dependence upon the Lord of glory, rather than on ourselves.

Strong souls require self-denying worship.

When worship fails

What is the goal of worship? What are we trying to accomplish when we come together as a community on the Lord's Day and offer Him our worship? Looking at the state of worship in churches today suggests a variety of answers to that question.

Some churches seem to think that the purpose of worship is to preserve a peculiar kind of status quo. Worship always goes so long, sings these kinds of songs, follows this order and not that, and involves the same leaders, week after week. We like our worship the way it is, and we see no need of changing anything.

Other churches would seem to be at the opposite end of the spectrum. They only want what is new and different – new songs, new forms of worship, new environments, new people leading, new forms of spontaneity in worship, and so forth. The purpose of worship in such churches appears to be to accommodate whatever is new, “exciting,” or “relevant.”

Many churches treat worship as an activity people engage in to feel good about or at least within themselves. The challenge to worship leaders in such a setting is to figure out what will make the people “enjoy” worship so that they'll go away with a good feeling and want to come back next week. Above all, we don't want anything in worship that might offend someone or make anybody feel bad.

The danger in each of these approaches to worship is that they lose sight of the proper focus of worship, which is God, not us. Worship is not about what *we* want or what *we* like or what *makes us* feel good or better or whatever. Worship should focus on the *worthiness* – the “worth-ship” – of God. Any church that structures and conducts worship for the sake of the worshipers has lost sight of the purpose of worship as such, and cannot expect that its worship will strengthen the souls of those who participate. They might indeed “enjoy”

Strong Souls

such worship, or feel better for having gone through the experience, but they will not be strengthened for the Kingdom, and will make little progress toward full faith in Christ.

Worship is for God

The purpose of worship is to engage with God, using elements and forms, prescribed by Him, that bring us into His presence so that we commune with and participate in Him. Such elements and forms will have to accomplish several things if we are to realize the purpose of worship unto the strengthening of our souls.

First, they will need to be the elements and forms God prescribes. Do we really think we can come before the Lord doing whatever seems right to us in whatever ways make us feel OK? Are we insane? Would you attend a meeting at the White House on those terms? Why do we think we can do worship without doing it in the ways and with the elements and forms God teaches us in His Word?

Second, in our worship we *empty ourselves* before the Lord, giving ourselves to Him from the inside-out. Worship is not a matter merely of what we do with our bodies, although it certainly includes that. We want our *minds* to focus on God in His greatness, goodness, majesty, holiness, and might. We want our *hearts* to pour out expressions of admiration, love, and conviction toward Him. We employ the elements and forms of worship to *renew our commitment* to God and to firm up our consciences in His presence.

Thus, when we *empty ourselves* and *focus our souls* entirely on the Lord, worship becomes a setting where the strengthening of our souls takes on a corporate dimension, precisely as Paul intended.

We cannot grow in full faith without strong souls, and we will not realize strong souls without following the example of the apostles and the teaching of Scripture. Focus on Christ and His Kingdom, persevere through the struggle to grow, and take up the spiritual, relational, and communal disciplines that conduce to the strengthening of your soul. Thus you may hope to realize the Lord's expectations for full faith in Him.

For reflection

1. What is the purpose of worship? How does the worship in your church strive to accomplish that purpose?
2. What's the difference between worship that is self-denying and worship that is self-seeking?
3. Meditate on Psalm 50. Why did God reject the worship of His people in this psalm?

Next steps: Does your church teach about worship, or does it have a statement explaining its practice of worship? See what you can find out. Talk with a church leader or pastor about the purpose of worship and how your church tries to realize that.

Strong Souls

For reflection or discussion

1. What would be some primary differences between a strong soul and one that was weak and shriveling?
2. What does Paul mean by saying that we enter the Kingdom of God through tribulation? How should we expect to experience this?
3. What are spiritual disciplines? Why are they important? What other kinds of disciplines should fill up the time God allots to us each day?
4. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your daily walk with and work for the Lord?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.

