

# THE PRIMACY OF THE SOUL

STRONG SOULS (1)



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*The Primacy of the Soul*

The Primacy of the Soul  
Strong Souls (1)  
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*The Primacy of the Soul*

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Welcome to *The Primacy of the Soul*

We begin a study aimed at helping us to understand the nature and functions of the soul, so that we may learn to strengthen our souls in serving the Lord.

The soul is the starting point for improving our walk with and work for the Lord. All that we are begins from within us, where our heart, mind, and conscience work together to make us the people we are. If we ignore our soul, or fail to understand its operations, we will be subject to whatever winds of doctrine might fill the sails of our soul at any time.

We want to have strong souls, like the souls of those first believers in the book of Acts. This series will help us to realize more of the presence, promise, and power of God's Kingdom as they did, so that we may turn our world rightside-up for Jesus.

We begin our series by considering why the soul is so very important.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, 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 the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

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 rightside-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).

We might rather say that the Christians, against all odds, in the face of stiff opposition and persecution, and without any of the conveniences of travel or communication that we know today, turned their world rightside-up for Jesus Christ.

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 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. They 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 extended to all, and the Good News of the Kingdom was everybody's business and message.

The world had never seen anything like it. And we are the heirs of this powerful, world-changing movement.

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 should raise the question: 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 word “strengthening” in the phrase, “strengthening the souls”, is, in the Greek of the New Testament, ἐπιστηρίζοντες – *episterizontes*. Say that word again. Did you hear that - *-sterizontes*? As in “steroids”? 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!

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 trials such as these folks had never known before.

The first Christians 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 could not and did not deny that

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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 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, led them to practice righteousness and goodness, and emboldened them 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 effects in strengthening the souls of those first believers.

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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 communities they had started would stick, and the movement of the Gospel and Kingdom would grow. 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. Strong souls made for courageous and loving lives, and this is how the first Christians turned their world rightside-up for Jesus.

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 rightside-up, 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, souls strong on the spiritual steroids of grace and truth, souls that are growing and stretching out into the likeness of Jesus Christ, and directing the bodies they inhabit to restore their world for Jesus.

#### *For reflection*

1. Why must we begin in the soul if we want to change the world?
2. What is the soul? How would you explain the nature and function of the soul to an unbelieving friend?
3. What resources – spiritual “steroids” – has the Lord given us for strengthening our souls?

*Next steps – Preparation: Spend some time in prayer asking the Lord to show you the true condition of your soul. Where do you need to see growth and transformation?*

## 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 (though this last is beyond the scope of Acts).

Clearly, this was no cushy calling. Why would Paul devote so much time, invest all his best energy, and become so thoroughly and completely spent? What was he so urgent about, so single-minded in pursuit of, and so determined to accomplish through his many and arduous labors?

He tells us: He was zealous for the *souls* of those the Lord had called into His churches.

The focus of Paul's efforts was on strengthening the souls of those entrusted to his care. He commended his friend Philemon because he was able to refresh the souls of those he served (Philem. 1.7). He wrote to Timothy 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 must be strengthened in the soul – heart, mind, and conscience.

Paul understood this, and he made it the focus of his ministry. It was to this end – strengthening the souls of believers – that Paul spent and was being spent in his teaching, disciple-making, evangelizing, preaching, and all his other pastoral duties.

### *Shaped from within*

The consistent teaching of Scripture is that human beings are shaped from within, by the condition and disposition of their minds, hearts, and consciences. Certainly, outside influences and opportunities play a role in making us the disciples and witnesses Jesus calls us to be; but lasting transformation begins within, where we are being changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ in our heart, mind, and conscience.

The soul consists of three interacting, overlapping, mutually-supportive spiritual components: the mind, the heart, and the conscience. 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 affective staying power to help us carry our thoughts through to action (Prov. 4.23). And the conscience guards and guides the mind and heart by the Word and Law of God, to clarify our thoughts, purify our affections, and engage our wills for Kingdom living (Rom. 2.14, 15).

Each of these components – heart, mind, and conscience – is a spiritual entity. Each has its own function, but they all work together, interacting and overlapping, to shape us into the people we are. The Spirit of God, Who dwells in the soul of everyone who believes in Jesus, is at work within us, giving us the mind of Christ, nurturing a heart of love for God and neighbors, firming up our commitment to God and His Law, and making us willing and able to do that which is pleasing to the Father – exceeding abundantly beyond all we've ever dared to ask or think. His power works in us as if we were on spiritual steroids, strengthening our soul

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and transforming us into the likeness of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

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. For now, though, let us be clear: They who are called to shepherd the flock of the Lord must pursue one overarching and primary concern – to spend and be spent in strengthening the souls of those who believe in Jesus.

### *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. If we are weak in our souls, faith languishes, worship droops, the work of making disciples falters, or is substituted for by lesser commitments, and the mission of the church falls on hard times.

We need to have the same emphasis as the apostles when it comes to our own faith, ministries, churches, 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.

But we must know this work, what it requires of us, and how we can monitor our progress in it. How well do we understand the state and needs of our soul? Are we able to 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. Paul urged Timothy to keep a close watch over his soul and life (1 Tim. 4.16), and he instructed all of us to be very circumspect about the conduct of our lives (Eph. 5.15-21).

But can we even take up the discipline of watching over our soul if we do not understand the soul or its workings?

Most of us, I suspect, have only the vaguest of ideas concerning the nature of the soul and the best ways of nurturing it for Kingdom living. We cannot expect to know the kind of conviction, courage, caring, and confession as those first believers unless we give ourselves to spend and be spent for the strengthening of our own souls and the souls of our fellow disciples.

### *For reflection*

1. How would you explain the nature and function of the soul to a new believer?
2. Why do we say that lasting change comes from the inside-out of our lives?
3. What does it mean to spend and be spent for the soul of a fellow believer?

*Next steps – Preparation: Spend some time in prayer, asking the Lord to reveal to you as much as possible about the state of your soul at this time.*



### 3 Rightly Focused

*“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”* Acts 14.22

*“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 begins and unfolds 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 growth and progress of the Kingdom must begin in the soul so that it may come to expression through a strong soul into every area of life.

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).

And as we grow in the Kingdom, the Kingdom increases through us, advancing along many fronts as it brings heaven to earth throughout our spheres of influence.

Thus our souls can only be truly strengthened, as the apostle Paul rightly understood, when they are continuously focused on and being 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 Kingdom of God is our home country, to which we have been conveyed by our heavenly Father through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ (Col. 1.13). The Lord Jesus gives 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 works to strengthen us for this calling, beginning in our soul, 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.

If in the Name of Jesus we are seeking anything other than His Kingdom, we have not understood our calling as we should.

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

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powerful working in our lives (Acts 1.1-8). So it's no wonder that Jesus, 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 the redeemed soul. Our souls are meant to flourish in, toward, and for the Kingdom of God. When we direct our mind, heart, and conscience to the fuller realization of the Kingdom of God, the Spirit of God at work within us strengthens our soul for Kingdom progress, precisely as we see in the book of Acts.

The Kingdom of God is thus the backdrop, framework, game plan, and objective of the life of discipleship. All who profess faith in Jesus, and those whose ministry is to spend and be spent for people's souls, must ever work to sharpen their vision of and gain the skills necessary for realizing the Kingdom, coming on earth as it is in heaven.

#### *The Kingdom and the soul*

Seeking the Kingdom has profound effects on the redeemed soul. It expands and illuminates the *mind*, unifies and clarifies 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, Whose mind we have (1 Cor. 2.16) and Who even now rules at the Father's right hand for the progress of His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Ps. 110).

The Kingdom affects the *heart* as well – our affections, 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 submit to His instruction in God's Law and all His Word (Ezek. 36.26, 27), we begin to realize more of the beauty, goodness, truth, majesty, and greatness of our King and His Kingdom; and all our deepest longings and greatest delights take on a new aspect and vigor. We love what Jesus loves, and the effect of this is to see the increase of His powerful, glorious rule welling-up within our soul 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, adjusts, and fortifies the conscience – all our priorities and values – so that we will what God the Father wills in every situation (Phil. 2.13).

Our souls will only be strengthened when the Kingdom of God is our aim. We must through many struggles and trials gain fuller possession and greater experience of that heavenly realm. As we give ourselves to improving our vision of the Kingdom of God, and as we work for its coming in and through our lives, we will *see* more of the Kingdom, and we will *seek* it more earnestly, unto the strengthening of our souls and progress of the Gospel.

#### *For reflection*

1. What does it mean for you to be called to the Kingdom and glory of God?
2. Why do we say that the Kingdom of God is the believer's native land?
3. How can we grow in our vision and experience of the Kingdom of God? Why does growing this way strengthen our soul?

*Next steps - Preparation: On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, how would you rate the clarity of your Kingdom vision at this time? How much does the vision of the Kingdom frame your thinking, direct your affections, and establish your priorities? Review your assessment before the Lord in prayer.*

## 4 Forewarned

*“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.”* Acts 14.22

*“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 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. Not in this country, at least.

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. Without strong souls – minds set on the things that are above, hearts devoted entirely to the Lord, consciences steeped in God’s Word and Kingdom – we won’t be able to enter more deeply into the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The disciples of Jesus Christ must expect tribulation and prepare their souls to endure through it. 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 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 those early disciples, 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

through it.

No amount of trial or tribulation can thwart the faith of those whose souls are forewarned and strengthened to endure whatever comes their way.

*Tribulation and the soul*

Tribulation can have one of two effects on our soul. First, it can cause our soul 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.

Tribulation, like the storm-tossed sea that caused Peter to panic, can cause us to take our eyes off Jesus and become distracted from the very source of all our strength as disciples.

But tribulation doesn't have to sink us. 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 soul and causing His Kingdom to go forward through and despite tribulations, however harsh they may be.

Set your mind on Christ, exalted in glory. Love Him and desire His Presence above all things. Make no compromises that cause you to drift from the anchor of God's Word. In short, be strong in your soul in the face of tribulation, and you will grow to become more like Jesus through it.

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. What would be some examples of the kind of trials and tribulations we as Christians should expect to endure? How do our daily trials serve to fit us for any larger trials that might arise?
2. How would you counsel a new believer to prepare each day for the trials or tribulations that might come?
3. How can believers help one another to grow through, rather than be sunk by, our trials and tribulations?

*Next steps – Preparation: Jesus said, "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof" (Matt. 6.34). How should you prepare for each day's trials and tribulations? How should you engage them when they arise?*

## 5 Get Ready to Continue

*“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 meant to be saved. They knew they had received the gift of eternal life, but they also understood that this involved more than the forgiveness of sin and having a place in heaven beyond this life.

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, strengthening them for the ongoing struggle of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. And, like a growing seed or spreading leaven, the Kingdom expands and increases as believers make it their first and overarching priority in life, and as they are strengthened in their souls. The Kingdom – the glorious rule of King Jesus unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit – takes root in the soul, where the Spirit works with transforming power to change us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. From within each believer, the Kingdom then overflows in the Spirit in words and deeds which confirm the inward work of the Spirit and bear witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord (Jn. 7.37-39; Heb. 11.1; Acts 1.8).

Thus Paul, by encouraging the believers in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch “to continue in the faith” (Acts 14.22), was reminding them and us to take up, day by day, those disciplines by which we seek and make progress in the Kingdom and salvation of the Lord, and to pursue, with increasing vigor and consistency, the Kingdom and glory to which God has called us (1 Thess. 2.12).

Our salvation unfolds in three interlocked and overlapping phases. When we believe in Jesus, by the inward work of the Spirit, our sins are forgiven and we are justified and saved, once and for all time. This is the work of *justification* which God accomplishes in those He is pleased to save. But then, having received the gift of salvation (Eph. 2.8, 9), believers continue to “work out” their salvation for the strengthening of their soul and the good works that herald and advance the Kingdom of God (Eph. 2.10; Phil. 2.12, 13). This is the work of *sanctification*, in which God continues the work He has begun in us, and will continue until He brings us to Himself in glory – the work of *glorification*. Christians are saved by grace through faith; but we are also *being* saved, increasingly, as we *continue* in the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

What does this involve?

### *Disciplines of grace*

The life of faith begins in the soul, where, with heart, mind, and conscience, we establish, embrace, and seek a vision of Christ and His Kingdom, increasing in and through us, day by day. But merely having such a vision does not mean we will realize what we desire and value it 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 redeem the time God allots us 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 good use of the time of their lives for seeking and advancing the Kingdom of God (Eph. 5.15-17). The difference between those who are being strengthened in their souls and 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 time. Moses taught us to pray that God would give us wisdom in the way we plan and use our time, so that we might know the work He has appointed to us and do it for His glory (Ps. 90.12, 16, 17). Time is like the talents in Jesus’ parable: God gives it to us, 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 soul. We continue in the Kingdom as we devote ourselves to prayer, worship and singing, reading and studying God's Word, meditation, 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 faith, he surely meant they should all be careful and responsible in making good use of these disciplines of grace.

What is the state of these disciplines in your life? Are you making the best use of all these means of grace, for strengthening your soul in Kingdom vision, values, and virtues?

#### *Daily disciplines*

But beyond these disciplines that shape and nurture our inner lives are the daily disciplines by which we conduct our outward lives. We all fill up the time of our lives with things to do – family, work, church, 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*. Work is simply energy and attention invested toward some desired objective. If we truly desire the Kingdom and glory of God, all the moments of our lives, in whatever we may be doing, will be devoted – at the direction of the soul – to seeking and advancing the end toward which God has saved us and the work He has appointed for us. We employ our bodies in words and deeds 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 our work requires discipline. And all fruitful discipline begins in the soul.

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, it only makes sense that this is what we should expect to see coming out in our lives. Why would we invest our soul 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. This is an ongoing, daily process which involves every aspect of our lives. So when it comes to strengthening your soul for working out your salvation, get ready to continue.

#### *For reflection*

1. What do we mean by "disciplines" in the life of faith? Why are they important/
2. The work we've been given to do is greater than the job at which we work. Explain.
3. What are the three stages or phases of our salvation? Why are they all part of the same salvation?

*Next steps – Preparation: What does "make the best use of the time" mean for you each day? How do you prepare for the day? Keep a close watch on how you use your time. Review the use of your time to improve it.*

## 6 Soul Watchers

*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*

*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Hebrews 13.17*

*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), preserving sound doctrine and right practice in the churches (Acts 15.1-6; Titus 1), and, in particular, 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 were 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 to that extent not “in order” (Titus 1.3).

God is determined that those who believe in Jesus should be strong in their souls. And to that end, He established the office of elder to watch over, nurture, edify, and strengthen the followers of Christ within the very depths of their being.

*Where have all the elders gone?*

In the Church today we seem not to believe in elders. At least, not as shepherds and watchers over the souls of God’s people. The New Testament believes in them, but we don’t. 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. No such role for elders can be found 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 – which grows out of strong 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, well, 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 is watching over our souls, to strengthen them for the Kingdom, then that

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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.

It's not necessary, necessarily, to call our shepherds elders. Pastors, church board members, teachers of all kinds, small group leaders – all these who function in roles which the Scriptures assign to elders must take up the task of watching over the souls of God's people. Disciples are not made, churches do not grow, and the Kingdom does not advance through programs, committees, and events. God intends by the strengthening of the souls of His people to bring His divine economy to glorious fruition on earth as it is in heaven. Our part is to understand the workings of God's plan and embrace them wholeheartedly according to His Word.

And that would seem to require that we revisit the work of elders in our churches.

*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, and that budgets and facilities and staff are all rightly employed. However, we do not expect them 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* and appoint elders to watch over the souls of every one of the followers of Jesus Christ.

That supreme objective – strong souls – will not be possible without effective shepherding elders to watch over and nurture us.

*For reflection*

1. Why do we need someone other than ourselves to watch over our soul? Who is watching over your soul?
2. Why do you think it has come about that we require elders to do everything *but* watch over our souls?
3. Do you think you would benefit from having someone with the qualifications of a New Testament elder watching over your soul? Explain.

*Next steps Preparation: Pray for the elders of your church, or for those who function in that role. Pray that God will give them a strong desire and loving skills to shepherd the flock entrusted to their care.*



## 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: strengthening the souls of people by pointing them to the Kingdom, warning them to get ready for tribulation, grounding them in Kingdom disciplines, and leading them to appoint and submit to shepherds 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, liturgical 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 worshipping for the strengthening of their souls.

And it's important to note that each of these specific acts involved 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 or advance 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. The way we worship identifies the kind of church we are, and we're not interested in changing it.

Other churches would seem to be at the opposite end of the spectrum from these. 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 and “exciting” or “relevant”. Such churches are typically adamant about preserving their worship against any reversion to older “traditional” styles.

Many churches seem to think that worship is 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. Speak to their needs. Play to their likes. Downplay their failings and foibles. Don't burden their souls; buffer them.

Worship will fail in its goal of strengthening our souls if it takes any of these people-and-preferences

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approaches. The danger in each of these 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, and cannot expect that its worship will strengthen the souls of those who participate. They might indeed “enjoy” such worship, or feel better for having gone through the experience, but they will not be strengthened for the Kingdom.

### *Worship is for God*

The purpose of worship is to engage with God using elements and forms as can bring us into His Presence, so that we commune with and participate in Him. Worship is not a matter of styles or preference or traditions. Worship looks to God, speaking in His Word, to reveal the elements and forms He has designed to bring us into His Presence in worship. Such elements and forms will have to accomplish several things if we are to realize the purpose of worship and strengthen our souls.

First, our worship will need to employ 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 with your boss 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? Why do we think that worship is only worthwhile as it satisfies *our* pleasure, rather than *God's*?

Second, in our worship we *empty ourselves* before the Lord, confessing and repenting of our sins, and 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.

In worship we stretch out in our souls toward God, so that God can fill and stretch our souls with more of Himself. And He will only receive our worship and strengthen our souls in it as we worship on His terms. Prayer, fasting, singing, offerings, hearing the Word, committing ourselves to the Lord – these are the elements God is seeking in worship.

Thus, when we *empty ourselves* and *focus our soul* entirely on the Lord, worship becomes a setting where the strengthening of our souls takes on a corporate dimension, precisely as Paul intended. Whatever we do to strengthen the souls of believers – heart, mind, and conscience – the end of that strengthening will be worship.

### *For reflection*

1. How can we know whether our worship is pleasing to God?
2. Worship is not so much a matter of style as of forms, of fun as of focus, of filling ourselves as emptying ourselves. Explain.
3. How can you bring more worship of God into your daily walk with and work for Him?

*Next steps – Preparation: Review your understanding of and practice of worship. What can you do to improve your worship of the Lord? Commit your conclusions to Him in prayer.*

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*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Why do we say that the life of following Jesus begins in the soul? How would you explain the soul and its function to a child?
2. What is the role of the heart in the soul? The mind? The conscience?
3. What is the work of elders? How can believers practice this work with one another?
4. Why do we say that strong souls lead to right worship?
5. What's the most important lesson you have learned from this part of our study of "Strong Souls"? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.