Teaching the Children Jehovah's Strength

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I would like to begin by personally encouraging you in the Lord and to thank you as a pastor for the work God performs through you in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Yours is a high calling and privilege. I know of no calling higher than to be used as an instrument in our Father's hand to train children in His fear and truth. In preparation for this speech I came across a quote from Martin Luther who expressed better than I the great task and privilege which is yours. Luther in a sermon on the Christian school railed against parents who cruelly attacked godly teachers and gave his opinion of the Christian school teacher.

> I will simply say briefly that a diligent and upright schoolmaster or teacher, or anyone who faithfully trains and teaches boys, can never be adequately rewarded or repaid with any amount of money, as even the heathen Aristotle says. Nevertheless, this work is as shamefully despised among us as if it amounted to nothing at all. And still we call ourselves Christians! If I would leave the preaching office and my other duties, or had to do so, there is no other office that I would rather have than that of schoolmaster or teacher of boys; for I know that next to preaching, this is the best, greatest and most useful office there is. Indeed, I scarcely know which of the two is better. For it is hard to make old dogs obedient and old rascals pious; yet that is the work at which the preacher must labor, and often in vain. Young saplings are more easily bent and trained, even though some may break in the process. It sorely has to be one of the supreme virtues on earth faithfully to train other people's children; for there are very few people, in fact almost none, who will do this for their own.

Christ, who is your strength, esteems the teaching of children of great worth in the kingdom of Heaven.

A WORTHY SUBJECT

The subject of Jehovah's strength and committing that strength to the children of God's covenant is a worthy one. The subject gets at the glorious task that is yours; you are called by God to reveal His strength to the children. You are laborers in His vineyard and through you God makes His children pillars in the everlasting kingdom of our

God and of His Christ. You are engaged in a positive work, a work of strength, of might, of building. Through you God is pleased to build His kingdom and to prepare His children as princes and princesses in that kingdom.

We lose vision of that! In our pilgrimage as teachers, as we travel through the desert of the problems involved in our daily labor, we can come to the conclusion that we are engaged in anything but the imparting of strength. All around us we see much failure and weakness in children and school. Labor in behalf of the Christian school is and always will be one of toil, sweat and tears. There are problems with the students. There is at times too much opposition. There are discouragements which make us despair. We can easily grow weary and see only weakness, not strength. It is good to be reminded that God says: "It is a work of *strength,* of *power;* of My strength and My power which silences My enemies and builds My kingdom." In reality, you, as Israel in her pilgrimage, "go forward from strength to strength, everyone until they appear in Zion before God" (Ps. 84:7). God crowns your labors and your work shall follow you to your reward of grace in heaven.

A second reason why this subject is an important one is that not only do we see weakness around us but *in* us. It has to be your confession and the confession of every faithful Christian teacher that exactly in this work God reveals to us our weakness and inadequacy. When a godly man or woman stands consciously before the tremendous and difficult calling to train up children in the fear of God's name, then a feeling of weakness consumes him. The two are inseparable! It is not without reason that God reveals to us the hesitancy and fear of a Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Jonah. So it is and must be with the Christian teacher. Who is sufficient in himself or herself to teach the heritage of God? In that sense too, it is good to be reminded that Jehovah's strength must be our strength. The subject this morning is the key to self-confidence in the proper sense. The person who will tell Jehovah's strength to the children must be one who stands in the strength of God himself, who says "I am weak, but Thou art my strength and I trust in Thee."

THE REQUIREMENTS

There are two requirements to telling our children Jehovah's strength. First, you must know that strength yourself; and second, you must have it in your heart. You cannot teach what you do not know. That simply is the rule of teaching, and the greater knowledge you have

and the more acquainted you are with a subject, the better you are able to teach. To show Jehovah's strength to the children and young people, you must know that strength yourself and how that strength is to be seen in every subject you teach. But, the knowledge we must have as educators is not only intellectual but pre-eminently spiritual. I refer to the knowledge of faith and conviction. You must yourself be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. You must be able to repeat with David in Psalm 27: "Jehovah is the strength of my life."

The relationship between knowing God's strength and teaching God's strength is brought out in Psalm 28. In verse 7 David confesses, and the Christian teacher confesses with him, "The Lord is *my* strength and my shield; my heart trusted in him, and I am helped: therefore my heart greatly rejoiced and with my song I will praise him." And then in verse 8, regarding the children whom he calls God's inheritance, he says "the Lord is *their* strength, and He is the saving strength of His anointed." The Lord is "my strength" and the "Lord is their strength." The relationship is that only when we know Jehovah's strength experientially in faith will we be able to tell Jehovah's strength to others.

A GREAT GOD

One is tempted to ask, "Where do we begin in describing God's strength? How are we ever to have a true conception of it?" There is no more awesome truth which captivates our mind, no truth which so enlarges our hearts and consoles our souls than the truth of God's strength. He is the Almighty God. His is *all* power in heaven and on earth. He is able to do whatsoever He pleases "in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand or say to Him, What doest thou?" Daniel 4:35. Dogmatically, I could tell you that God's strength refers to that adorable virtue in our God which we call omnipotence, that virtue whereby He is able to do whatsoever He pleases. "But our God is in the heavens, he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased" Psalm 115:3. The entire Bible shouts of the strength, majesty, power, and might of Jehovah. His name is strength. In the Lord is everlasting strength. He is all-mighty in the absolute sense. "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised." "The Lord is great and of great power." And we could go on and on.

This emphasis of God's strength is lacking today in Christianity and in the Christian schools, which is one reason why the faith of many is so feeble and flabby. The emphasis in the Christian schools across the land is that God is a personal God, but at the expense of His virtue of

of strength which is set aside and given lip service. Christian colleges and seminaries have small thoughts about God and when the teacher in the classroom uses the word, "God," seldom is the thought of divine strength and power. The impression is left that God is the same kind of person as we are, weak, inadequate, ineffective at times. God doesn't know things. He makes mistakes. He is to be patiently endured. This becomes most obvious in prayers. The entire tone rarely leaves the impression of God's sovereignty. God is brought down to be a person just like we are. We can argue with Him and even chastise Him.

But that is not the God of the Bible! God is personal and certainly we teach our children to pour out their heart to Him for He is a refuge for us; but God is also GREAT! He is too great for eyes to behold, the high and lofty One Who inhabits eternity! We must teach holy reverence for His supreme majesty.

HOW DO WE ARRIVE AT THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF JEHOVAH'S STRENGTH?

We must remove from our thoughts all that would limit Him. We can never escape from God. You can cut yourself off from your fellowman but you cannot hide from God. Let the inspired David teach us, "Thou hast beset me behind and before. . . . Whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven thou art there; if I make my bed in hell behold thou art there. The darkness hideth not from thee; the darkness and the light are both alike to thee" Psalm 139. Is that not awesome? Wonderful? And just as there are no limits to His presence with us, so there are no limits to His knowledge of us. Again we read in Psalm 139, "O Lord thou hast searched me and known me. . .thou understandeth my thoughts afar off. . .thou art acquainted with all my ways." God knows all that goes on in our minds. He is acquainted with all our habits, quirks, plans, aims, and desires. We can hide our hearts, our plans, our past, ourselves from men; but not from God. A God Whose presence we could avoid and Whose eyes we could evade would be a puny God. But the true God, our God is great and glorious exactly because His eye is ever upon us and He knows us. How great is our knowledge of God's strength when we understand that He is with us and knows our deepest thoughts!

To have true knowledge of God's strength the Bible also calls us to compare Him with what we think are great things. An example of that is Isaiah 40. There God, through His prophet, reasons with His people who thought that the arm of the Lord was shortened so that it could not save. God asks them, "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow

of His hand, and meted out the heavens with a span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?" Who can do that? Is anything to hard for the Lord? Consider the nations of the world. Today it is Russia and China and the United States with their nuclear arsenals which man fears. "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing." Imagine, the might of the nations to God is as the dust in the balance! God is greater than our thoughts. "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers." And still more, God calls us to look up at the stars. There is nothing more awesome for man than to stand on a clear night and gaze at the stars. That, as nothing else, gives us a feeling of our littleness and insignificance. And God says, what is that to Me? "Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who has created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of His might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth."

That is God's strength! Awesome! Unimaginable! "To whom will ye liken me or shall I be equal?" God really rebukes us with that question. "Hast thou not heard? Hast thou not known, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not neither is weary? There is no searching of His understanding."

It was Luther who said to Erasmus, "Your thoughts of God are too human." It is there that we too often go astray. Belief in God's strength means to believe that God is God, the alone Almighty One. Much more, it is to believe that, "this God is our God forever and ever."

TEACHING THIS TO THE CHILDREN

God's strength must be the steel girder which upholds all your instruction as well as all your dealings with the children. The goal of all Christian instruction must be that the children learn Jehovah's strength and put their trust in Him. How is this done?

In the first place, you must be strong in the Lord. The Lord's strength must be seen in you by the students. Psalm 78, from which the theme "Telling Jehovah's Strength to the Children" was taken, put this idea of an example on the forefront. "We will not hide them from their children, *showing* to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, His strength and His wonderful works which he has done." Jehovah's strength is not first of all something taught by words and talked about, but it is something to be *shown.* Strength can be seen,

it is visible! So Jehovah's strength in a man or woman must be shown in a godly example.

That means you are to lead a proper life with proper values. Children and young people, as you know, soon get to know you and your moral fiber. What impressions do they receive? Do your students say, "Jehovah is the strength of my teacher's life"? That consideration places us before the tremendous calling of a teacher. James writes in James 3:1 "My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation." And there are the words of Jesus, "Woe to the one who offends one of these little ones." The awesomeness of the calling of a Christian teacher is that he must say to his pupils: "Follow me! Look at me in my life and conduct and you will see Jehovah's strength." The apostle Paul takes this responsibility upon himself when he writes to Timothy in II Timothy 3, and warns him of the evil men and evil trends of his day. Paul puts before Timothy the example he must follow, "But thou hast fully known my doctrine, *manner of life.*"

In keeping with this idea, the Christian school teacher must strive to reveal a firmness, a spiritual firmness. There is nothing more frustrating to a child than a parent who wavers and is unpredictable. That parent provokes his children to wrath. So too there is nothing more frustrating to a student than a teacher who is not firm. I refer now to firmness in the truth of God's word and in all moral spiritual issues. Modern educators operate under the philosophy that education is to present options for the student. The teacher must not force any thing upon his pupils but give them options and information so that they can make an intelligent choice. That is *not* what a Christian teacher may do! Do not instill the weakness of indecision, but the strength of God's truth. Tell the student what is right and what is wrong and why, basing your instruction upon God's unwavering truth. There must be a firmness in your teaching to the truth of God's sovereignty as the love of your heart. No student is strong who wavers between two opinions on what is truth.

In a more concrete way, Jehovah's strength must be seen in the way the teacher handles his or her interpersonal relationships with the students. How do you handle sin in the classroom? Have you taught your students to cover up and make excuses for their sins by doing so yourself? Or have you taught them Jehovah's strength by revealing the Biblical principles of repentance and reconciliation when they have seen you acknowledge your sins committed against them? Have they learned the weakness of resentment by discovering that their teacher has a grudge for years against another teacher down the hall? The

simple question we face is: How are the children learning to live from our example — in Jehovah's strength or in the weakness of the flesh?

In the second place, Jehovah's strength is taught by having the Bible as the center of all instruction. In this way the instruction of the Christian teacher differs from all others. He teaches strength, Jehovah's strength! His teaching is a power in the life of his students because it is founded on the Bible. Our students will know Jehovah's strength only when they know that the Scriptures are the truth of life and that all things can be truly known only in the light of the Scriptures. When the teacher strives to convey the truth that the Bible is God's powerful, living Word and that there is no truth apart from it, then he is teaching God's strength.

This is done in two ways. First of all, it is done by the devotional role the Bible is to occupy in the school. The day should begin by the teacher reading the Bible and making a few applicatory remarks to the children or young people. This shows the children under what power the teacher and the student are to live and reminds the teacher and student that the day's work must be done in dependence upon God and His Word. In addition, the Holy Spirit will use the devotional reading of the Bible as a spiritual strengthening of both teacher and student. It sets the proper tone for the day. Secondly, the Bible is to be the light, foundation, and rule for every subject that is taught. The Bible is not a subject to be placed alongside of other subjects but it must be at the center of every subject of the curriculum so that they are taught in the light of the Word of God. This does not only mean that nothing is to be taught that is contrary to the Word of God, but it means that the truth of Scripture sets forth the truth of every subject, the real full truth of history, geography, arithmetic, and science. More, it means that the glory of God must be seen in all these subjects. Directly the teacher will apply the Scripture to what is taught. He will do that overtly, but also as the underlying principle. That is teaching Jehovah's strength, for in that way the Holy Spirit shows that God is the center of all truth, God is sovereign. To exclude the Bible from any subject is not only to teach the lie about that subject; it is to teach weakness, to teach knowledge that has no power or meaning to it. This is exactly the weakness of the public schools. They go about leaving God out and the result is that the instruction is weak, empty, and vain. Only when God's word is seen in every subject is true knowledge attained. And in that knowledge young men and women are strong.

This implies that students and parents and teachers have not been given to see Jehovah's strength when they say: "Well, the important

thing is that the pupil gets A's in Bible; but that he doesn't do as well in other subjects, that is not so serious." Such a student does not see that God's Word is the truth in every subject. He does not see God's strength. He limits God to Bible class.

It may also be stressed that the application of God's Word to every subject must be done explicitly, directly, and overtly. The Roman Catholic Church has a doctrine which they call "Implicit Faith." By this they teach that it is not necessary for an individual to know the specific doctrines of the church, but simply to believe that the church teaches them and says they are true. A member of the church does not need to know why the mass is necessary, he just has to take the church's word for it that it is necessary. The priest knows all the answers, that's good enough. That doctrine rubs off on students, who have an inborn aversion to using their minds at times, and who are willing to say, "Yes, God's word must be applied to every subject," but are at a loss to tell you how. There is no strength in such "implicit faith." There is no strength in a student who says "Yes, from God's word we understand all of history, but exactly what that means. . . I am not sure; my teacher knows, he said so." There is no strength in a student who says, "Yes, the Bible is the sole authority in our life, that's what this school is all about," but he cannot tell how the Bible is to be applied to all of life.

Teachers may also be tempted to use the doctrine of "Implicit Faith." Perhaps that happens when there is inadequate preparation or because of the rush of activities. Then we say to ourselves, "Well, somehow I know that the truth of the Scripture applies to this subject, but I haven't figured it out or searched the Bible diligently enough to be very concrete in my teaching." Then the instruction in the classroom is weak and we fail to teach Jehovah's strength. Worse is the attitude prevalent in many Christian schools that the Bible is God's Word but it is left to gather dust on the shelf while humanism is applied to the subjects. The way to show Jehovah's strength is to teach explicitly each subject in the light of the Word.

In the third place, the way to tell Jehovah's strength to the children is to exhort them to *trust* in Jehovah and *worship* him. Who is the man, woman, child, or young person who knows Jehovah's strength? They are the ones who trust and worship him. The virtues of trust and worship flow out of the true knowledge of God's greatness. When we know the Lord and see His greatness and majesty, then we will trust in Him. That is the Bible. "Jehovah is the strength of my life, *whom shall I fear?*" And we will also worship Him and praise His name. Trust

and worship are the two earmarks of the one who knows Jehovah's strength with a true spiritual knowledge. A Christian teacher who will show forth Jehovah's strength will say to his students, "Trust in Jehovah at all times, He is a refuge for us. Behold God is great, bow and worship."

Your calling is a spiritual one. God calls you to tell His children to put their trust in Him and worship Him as God alone. You are given opportunity to do that. A child's problems often become apparent at school in his conduct in the class or with his friends. And the teacher *is* involved. You cannot help but be involved, as you know better than I. The whole life of the child becomes your concern. The child or young person looks to you and often comes to you with his problems. Then God calls you to direct him to Jehovah and His unfailing strength. Counselling students is a major part of your work. You see their frustrations, worries, fears. In God's wisdom you are placed by God in those situations to tell and show the child that he must trust in God, that none of those that trust in Him shall ever be ashamed.

Call them to worship God! Exhort them to bow before His majesty and reverence Him. Exhort them to be humble. Rebuke their pride. In all things teacher and student must gaze upon God's strength revealed in the Word and then worship together. That is the goal of all Christian education. This is the prayer of the Christian teacher, "Oh may they see Thy greatness in all things, may they trust Thee as I do and may they worship Thee!"

THE POSSIBILITY

A profound belief in God's strength will make us say that this is possible only by God's grace and power, not by ourselves. In the way of dependence upon God you will find strength sufficient for your daily task. Believe that God is working through you to show His strength to the children. Believe that God is pleased to use even weak and frail men and women to accomplish an altogether glorious work, the making of His sons and daughters strong in the Lord. Although the way is filled with human weakness and failure, nevertheless God crowns your faithful labor with His blessing. What more do you want to know or have to know as teachers than that God uses you to reveal His matchless strength to His children? If one student grows up to confess, "Jehovah is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? the Lord is the STRENGTH OF MY LIFE; of whom shall I be afraid," then all your labors are not in vain.