

Mark 8: 34-38 and Psalm 71: 1-21; “Until I Declare Your Strength”, Sermon # 68 in the series – “Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on July 31st, 2016, in the Morning Worship Service.

We have now come to the last sermon in our overview of the life of Christian Discipleship. I hope that you have come to understand this life in a better way; understanding the joys and delights of being a Christian. For spiritual joys and delights there are, for the one who seeks for them in Christ Himself. Our verse in Mark 8, verse 35 is saying that when a person has found Jesus, they are deliberately choosing to lose their earthly, worldly, selfish and sinful life in order to find the things that are true, and lasting, and eternal. There’s a real joy, a lasting joy, and the ability to rejoice forevermore, when you keep coming to Jesus for grace. It is my great desire that each of you would know this great grace and peace when it comes your time to die. This is what I want to impress upon each disciple here today; the truth of the sufficiency of Christ to carry you over the river Jordan in the time of your dying, so that you will by His grace triumph. So the question that we want to ask this morning is this: How can we declare God’s strength to people around us, when it comes our time to die? For the prayer of the Psalmist is, “Do not forsake me, (that is; do not let me physically die) until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come.” To triumph in death is to be able to declare God’s strength. There are 4 questions that I would like to give you from this passage, which you should prayerfully remember so that you will know His strength when it comes your time to die. The 1st is – Will you not remember that Christ is your strong refuge? (Verses 1-3) 2nd – Will you not remember that that God is the One who has upheld you all of your days? (Verses 4-6) 3rd – Will you not remember that God is the One whom you should hope in continually? (Verses 7-18) And 4th – Will you not remember that God is the One who will raise you from the dead. (Verses 19-21)

1st – Will you not remember that the Lord is your strong refuge to which you may continually resort?

In verse 3 it says in the NKJV – “Be my strong refuge, to which I may resort continually; You have given the commandment to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress.” In the NASV ‘77 it says, “Be Thou to me a rock of habitation, to which I may continually come.” “Thou hast given commandment to save me, for Thou art my rock and my fortress.” I believe that it was David who wrote this Psalm, and David, if you will remember, was no stranger to fleeing from those unrighteous men who would try to kill him. I am thinking now, of Saul’s pursuit of David, taking large numbers of men with him, chasing David around the countryside, trying to kill him, to prevent him from ever becoming king in his place. But the issue here was far more than David’s becoming king. David was one of God’s Elect, and God had commanded his eternal salvation. And because He had commanded his eternal salvation, he also had decreed that He would deliver David from all the attempts to kill him, which would thus prevent His purposes from being fulfilled toward David. He ordained the very rocks that David would hide in. David found these places to hide, by searching, and perhaps even by praying. He would hide in the rocks, in the strongholds of Engedi, and other places like that. These rocks became to him, a habitation; a place that he lived in, during the time of his trial.

But David had a greater stronghold and a greater fortress than the physical rocks. Here he is confessing that God was his rock and his fortress. And he is praying that God Himself would be the rock of habitation to which he could continually come, during this difficult time where he thought that he was going to die. David needed a strong refuge to which he could flee, but not just to protect his body. It was the strength of his soul, the strength of his faith, to continue to face these difficulties; that was also at stake. The Lord had graciously delivered David from

being captured and killed a number of times before Chapter 27 of 1 Samuel. And God had even delivered Saul into his hands several times; one time while he was in a cave. But David was wise and godly, and so even when Saul was delivered into his hands, he would not stretch out his hand against the Lord's anointed. He understood authority, and how to submit to earthly authority. And even more, he was submissive to God's authority. But he had become tired of running after years of doing this. And so, we find him saying in 1st Samuel 27: 1: "Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul." "There is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines; and Saul will despair of finding me."

Now, what was this except unbelief on the part of David? Yes, he was tired; he was weary, but God had preserved him before; God had protected him numerous times and had been his stronghold, his fortress, his refuge, and his Rock before. Why could he not believe that God would continue to be his refuge to him again? It was because he was not praying at the time when he said that. It says in Luke 18, verse 1, that "men ought always to pray and not to faint", but sometimes, still, we faint. God overruled his time among the Philistines for his good, but he also gently led him back to the place where he would pray and trust. But here in Psalm 71 we find David taking up prayer as a weapon and as a shield for his soul. Verse 2 – "Deliver me in Your righteousness, and cause me to escape; incline Your ear to me, and save me." "Be my strong refuge, to which I may resort continually." Do you pray this way when you feel weak and tempted? Do you pray that God would deliver you in His righteousness and not your own? Have you made Him your strong refuge? Do you pray to be delivered from your own unbelief and your fears in the time when they come upon you? If you do not learn to do it now, then how shall you do it in the time to come, when it comes your time to die?

Death is the king of terrors to the one who has never learned to pray. But the one who has learned to pray can confidently use the language of Psalm 46. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." "Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling." "There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High." "God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, just at the break of dawn." That person can look death in the face and know that, "there is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God." Have you come to this confidence, dear believer, that God is your strong refuge, so that you shall not be moved when God stretches out His hand and beckons you to come; so that you will not fear? Will you have made God the rock of your habitation, to which you continually come? This happens by your cultivating your faith in Christ. A person makes God their refuge when they trust in Him to help them to understand how they should think, and how they should act, in the various situations in their life. Instructions are given in the Word of God, but He leads His people along the path of life to the place where they will meet eternity and behold the face of their Savior. Are you ready for this? "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble." (Psalm 119: 165)

Now 2nd – Will you not remember that God is the One who has upheld you all of your days. (Verses 4-6)

Verse 4 says, "Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man." "For You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth." "By You I have been upheld from birth; You are He who took me out of my mother's womb." "My praise shall be continually of You." This really is a significant truth for us to consider in relation to our dying. It is good to state it very clearly to ourselves; that God is the One who upholds us, even from our birth. If God brought you into this world, and He did, then He can bring you out of it and into His presence. It is He who formed and fashioned us in our mother's womb to be a unique creation among men. It is He who brought us forth from the

womb at the time that He designed. He knows the time to bring us into the world, and He will know the time to take us out. It may not at all be our time; which is why it is good to prepare ourselves now for it. Notice, further, that David does not take this precious truth for granted, but that at the end of verse 6 he states that as a result of realizing the greatness of God's watch-care over his life, that he says, "My praise shall continually be of You". Let me ask you, dear believer, whether this is true of you? Is your praise continually of God? Or do you complain over the way that the Lord has cared for you soul and body. You don't find David complaining about the way that the Lord had led him, and watched over him. You do find Him casting his burdens on the Lord. But for the most part you find him repeatedly praising His great God. The reason for his being able to do this is given in verse 5. "For You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth." For the New Covenant believer, Jesus Christ is their hope and their trust.

Now this is a very blessed thing, when a person will trust in God from their youth. If you have been trusting in the Lord from your youth, you will be much more ready to die when you get old, if you get to live that long. Indeed if you are trusting in Him when you are young, you will be much more ready to die, if the Lord decides to take you when you are young. It is faith in God which entrusts the soul to Him for safe-keeping. When I was little I was taught to pray this prayer. "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep." "If I should die before I wake; I pray the Lord my soul to take." This is not a silly prayer. I often thought of the last phrase and wondered if it was possible that I might not live through the night. How many children of generations past did not live to see their tenth birthday? How many children died because there were no antibiotics before 1930? John Owen, the great theologian of puritan times had 11 children by one woman and of those 11 all died in their youth except for a daughter. Jonathan and Sarah Edwards lost their daughter Jerusha when she was just 18. A person does not have to be old in order to be prepared to die.

Listen to these words concerning David Brainerd and Jerusha, both of whom died in younger years. David Brainerd was a great missionary to the Indians and had worn himself out in the work. When he fell prey to sickness and disease, he came to live with the Edwards family. He was only 29 years old. In the Memoirs of Edwards it says this. "Here (at their home) his health continued gradually to decline, until early in October it was obvious that he would not long survive. "On the morning of the Lord's day, Oct. 4," says Mr. Edwards, "as my daughter Jerusha, who chiefly attended him, came into the room, he looked on her very pleasantly, and said, 'Dear Jerusha, are you willing to part with me?— I am quite willing to part with you: I am willing to part with all my friends: though if I thought I should not see you and be happy with you in another world, I could not bear to part with you. But we shall spend a happy eternity together.'" He died on Friday, Oct. 9, 1747, and on the Monday following, Mr. Edwards preached the sermon at his funeral, from 2Co. 5: 8. entitled, "True Saints when absent from the Body are present with the Lord."

In the ensuing February, Jerusha, the second daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Edwards, was removed by death. Her father, in a note to the Memoirs of Brainerd, thus alludes to this distressing event. "Since this, it has pleased a holy and sovereign God, to take away this my dear child by death, on the 14th of February, next following, after a short illness of five days, in the 18th year of her age." "She was a person of much the same spirit with Brainerd." "She had constantly taken care of and attended him in his sickness, for nineteen weeks before his death; devoting herself to it with great delight, because she looked on him as an eminent servant of Jesus Christ." "In this time, he had much conversation with her on the things of religion; and, in his dying state, often expressed to us, her parents, his great satisfaction concerning her true piety, and his confidence that he should meet her in heaven, and his high opinion of her not only as a real Christian, but as a very eminent saint: one whose soul was uncommonly fed and

entertained with things which pertain to the most spiritual, experimental, and distinguishing parts of religion: and one, who, by the temper of her mind, was fitted to deny herself for God, and to do good, beyond any young woman whatsoever whom he knew. She had manifested a heart uncommonly devoted to God in the course of her life, many years before her death; and said on her death-bed, that she had not seen one minute, for several years, wherein she desired to live one minute longer, for the sake of any other good in life, but doing good, living to God, and doing what might be for his glory.”

Truly, this is a remarkable statement, but it shows us that this 18 year old was wise, and she thought often of what her life meant before God, and what a glorious thing it would be to die and be with Christ. If God is the One who has upheld you, not only physically but also spiritually from your youth, then you need not be afraid to die. And also, then, if He then gives you length of life and many days, He will also be the One who will uphold you to finish your course, however long and difficult it might be. And this leads us to our 3rd question.

3rd – Will you not remember to hope in God continually? (Verses 7-16)

Verse 14 of Psalm 71 says, “But I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more.” “My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and Your salvation all the day, for I do not know their limits.” “I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only.” “O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works.” “Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come.” The way to approach death and to glorify God in your death, or in all of your greatest difficulties is to hope in God continually and to praise Him more and more for the gift of Christ. Don’t see anything that you do for Him, including your dying, as coming from yourself and your strength. See it as coming from Christ. The beauty here, is that you do not yet know or understand the limits of this great salvation which you have been given in Christ. You do not yet understand the greatness of God’s power toward you in Christ. His power is perfected in your weakness, but it is out of your weakness, and in your weakness, that His powerful grace makes you strong.

God is perfectly able to give the strength and grace to declare His strength to this coming generation, even when you are growing old; even when you are dying. Paul says in Ephesians 1: 15: “Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according the working of His mighty power. Which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead” You see: It is by faith that you will go on to face your difficulties, your trials, and even death itself, in the strength of the Lord God. You declare to God, and to yourself, and to people around you, God’s wondrous works. You boast in Him and His righteousness and what He has done. You declare the beauty and glory of Christ and His strength in dying for you. You declare God’s wisdom and power and justice in His giving you such a Savior; One who was and is, perfect pure and holy. For the New Testament believer, it is the righteousness of Christ that they are trusting in. It is certainly none of his own.

There are some wonderful verses in Psalm 92 which I think that we can apply here. Verse 12 says this: “The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” “Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God.” “They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the Lord is upright.” The NAS says, “They shall be full of sap and very green, to declare that the Lord is

upright.” The ESV says, “They are ever full of sap and green, to declare that He is upright.” “He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him.” And so it will be for you, dear one, if you will trust in the Lord in the time when it comes for you to die. Thomas Scott was a great Bible Commentator and a highly useful Christian during his life. He had some prolonged struggles both spiritually and physically when he came to die. I haven’t time to relate them all now, but I did want to read to you, a little of his experience as he drew near to death. There were many things which he had suffered bodily before this excerpt and he thought that he had come through the worst. (This is taken from Archibald Alexander’s *Thoughts on Religious Experience*.) “Waking after a short sleep, in great calmness, he said, ‘This is heaven begun; I have done with darkness forever—forever.’” “Satan is vanquished.” “Nothing now remains but salvation with eternal glory—eternal glory.” “But the conflict was not yet over, for another paroxysm (a time of feeling sharp pain) came on with great violence; his sufferings were extreme, and confusion and gloom prevailed.” “He cried earnestly to God, and said, ‘All my calm and comfort are gone; nothing remains of them but a faint recollection.’” (After a few moments he said,) “Well, after all, God is greater than Satan.” “Is not Christ all sufficient?” “Can he not save to the uttermost?” “Has he not promised to save?” “Lord, deliver me!” “Suffer not Satan to prevail.” “Pity, pity, Lord, pity me!”

“But during all his severe sufferings of mind and body not a word of repining or murmuring ever escaped his lips.” “He said, with reference to his dying in this gloom, ‘I cannot help it.’” “Thou art righteous!” And then he repeated those affecting lines of Watt’s paraphrase of the fifty-first Psalm: “And if my soul were sent to hell, Thy righteous law approves it well.” “Yet save a trembling sinner, Lord, whose hope, still hovering round thy word, would light on some sweet promise there, some sure support against despair.” “To his wife he said, ‘God be your Father and your husband.’” “I trust all mine will be kind to you.” “You have been a great blessing to me.” “We shall, I trust, meet in heaven.” “I have less doubt of you than of myself.” “A message was received from Rev. D. Wilson, his highly-esteemed friend, expressing among other things the great benefit he had been to the Church.” “Now this,” said he, “is doing me harm.” “God be merciful to me a sinner is the only ground on which I can rest.” “If I am saved, God shall have all the glory.” “Having talked too much, he was again distressed, but having obtained some rest, he awoke in the night and said to his youngest son, who sat up with him, ‘What is the world and the glory of it?’” “I would not change my hope, lean and meager as it is, for all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them were I sure of living a thousand years longer to enjoy them.” You see, this my friends, is the way to die; trusting in the righteousness and power of God through Jesus Christ to save you; hoping in God continually to have an abundant entrance given to you into God’s heavenly kingdom.

4th – Will you not remember that God is the One who will raise you from the dead?

(Verses 19-21)

“Also, Your righteousness, O God, is very high, You who have done great things; O God, who is like You?” “You who have shown me great and severe troubles, shall revive me again, and bring me up again from the depths of the earth.” “You shall increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side.” We would do well to remember in closing this sermon, that the righteousness of God is very high; it is very great. Our God does what is right in relation to whatever He ordains, and whatever He permits in our lives. David says here that God had shown him great and severe trials. Was this wrong? No, it was all being made to work for his good. God, who in love, chastens all of his dear people in order that they might share in His holiness; also knows how to restore their souls. Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” “He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.” “He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” “Yea, though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me.”

In the final analysis, for every believer, He makes them lie down in the green pastures of His Word and in all their good experience of it. He leads you in the paths of righteousness; for His name’s sake. He would have you to be holy, and to learn to practice righteousness. In doing so, when you come to die, then you are willing to take it as He would bring it to you, in order that you might glorify His name, and His grace be magnified through your death. His rod of chastening and His staff of correction; these will comfort you. He who has shown you great and severe troubles, shall again revive you. If He does revive you, and you come back from sickness, back from the brink of death as He is able to do, it will mean a testimony will be given from your lips, as to what He has done for your soul. That testimony will be of Christ and His grace. It will be a testimony of God’s mercy in letting you have a few more days of His working, in your heart. If you do die, you will die in the faith that He will bring you up from the depths of the earth someday in the resurrection of the dead. In both cases, He shall increase your greatness and comfort you on every side.

I think it will be profitable for us to close this sermon by my reading to you the dying words of Jeremiah Evarts, the Corresponding Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He was a great advocate for the Indians not being removed from their own lands; the lands which had been granted to them through treaties. He was a truly great man and a great laborer for the extension of the Lord’s kingdom. On the 10th of May, 1831, he lay dying of tuberculosis at the age of 49. When told in answer to his inquiry, that death seemed to be near, he said: “The will of the Lord be done.” “Attend now to what I say, as to the words of a dying man.” “Then naming the several members of his family and other relatives, he added: “To all my relations and friends, grace, mercy, and peace in the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom alone they and I can hope to be saved.” “And I wish in these dying words to recognize the great Redeemer as the Savior from sin and hell; able and willing to save all that come unto God by him.” “To Him I commend my spirit, as to an all-sufficient Savior.” “He is the great champion and conqueror of death and hell.” “And I recognize the great Spirit of God as the renovator of God’s Elect; and herein, if I gather strength, I wish to recognize and acknowledge the Church of God, containing all who have truly dedicated themselves to Him in a true and everlasting covenant.” “And here permit me, a poor unworthy worm of the dust, to give thanks to many of the children of God, from whom I have received confidence, kindness, and favor, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.” “And one more duty; if in any respect I have offended the children of God, I ask their forgiveness.” “If I have grieved them by impatience or any other way, I ask their forgiveness.”

“During the day, he had seasons of pain and very laborious breathing.” “About 9 o’clock in the evening, expecting that his time was come, he requested to laid in a position suitable for the occasion.” “But in about a quarter of an hour he had a return of violent pain, and when nearly exhausted he said, ‘Dear Jesus.’ “It was added, ‘While on his breast I lean my head, and breathe my life out sweetly there.’ “Immediately he burst forth with expressions of rapture which cannot be described: ‘Praise Him, praise Him, praise Him in way which you know not of.’ “Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful glory.” “We cannot understand—we cannot comprehend—wonderful glory—I will praise Him, I will praise Him— wonderful – glory – Jesus reigns.” He continued to breathe, free from any paroxysm of pain, until a quarter before eleven o’clock, when he fell asleep in Jesus.” May we learn from this, my brethren, that our God, and our Jesus are well worthy of our greatest praise. When it is our confidence that God shall indeed help us to cross over the river of death in victory, we shall truly be able to say: “O death where is your victory?” “O grave where is your sting?”

