

STRONG SOULS

by Charles Beard

Beard's exploration of spiritual strength and the qualities that characterize strong Christian souls who persevere through trials and grow in faith and character.

2 Chapters

Table of Contents

- 0. Strong Souls
- 1. STRONG SOULS.

Strong Souls

STRONG SOULS.

JOHN x.10 p. (Revised Version): "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly." Life is a gift of very unequal distribution. I am not speaking merely of length of life, though that is an important element in the case: there may be sad and quiet years which do not count: we have known existences which crept on in one dull round, from petty pleasure to petty pleasure, from monotonous occupation to monotonous occupation, never roused to storm by any noble passion, never thrilled by an electric touch of sympathy. Some lives are complete within narrow limits: in the few years which are all they have, they ripen into perfect sweetness, or expend themselves in such a flash of heroism, as would make subsequent days, were they given, mean and poor by contrast. What shall we say of that nameless engine-driver in America, who last week, measuring his own life against six hundred more, rushed through the flames and saved them? Dead of his glorious wounds, who would dare to pity him, or to think his end untimely? Life may be measured by its breadth as well as by its length: by the number of its intellectual points of contact with humanity, by the width of its sympathies, the largeness of its hopes. Still more, there is a quality of intensity in which lives differ: some live more in a week than others in a year: it is not that they are consuming themselves under stress of circumstance or in agony of passion, but that their fibre is stronger, their central flame brighter, their power of endurance larger. This inequality of gift may be a religious difficulty, but it fits in with the whole economy of Nature, who is a Mother at once bountiful and prodigal, and while careful of the type, careless of the individual life; bidding one soul but open unconscious eyes upon the world and close them again, while another moves through the slow changes of ninety years. But it is easier to understand when we remember that a just God asks account only of what He has given. Within the narrowest fate is yet room to round off the perfect sphere. Of the lily that blooms to-day and fades to-morrow, He demands only that it shall be sweet and beautiful in its season. Energy is largely, though perhaps not wholly, a physical quality. It comes of a certain superb vitality, a power of unconscious living, well-strung nerves, a quickly-working brain. I know the wonders which an eager will and a keen conscience can work, with no better instrument than a frail body, always full of languors, always accessible to pain; and I bow before them in glad reverence, as tokens of the spirit's victory over the flesh. But this, though undoubtedly from a moral point of view not inferior, is not the same thing as the easy swing of mind and body which is not only always equal to its work, but finds its keenest delight in strenuous efforts and long-drawn toils, which would hopelessly overtax weaker men. And there is an obvious connection between this kind of vitality and that which shows itself in life prolonged far beyond the usual limits. Men and women do not live the longer for sparing themselves, even were long life under such conditions worth having. I admit the wearing power of fretting anxiety, of sorrow that saps the springs of life, of labour pushed to contempt of the physical and moral conditions of existence; but honest work for an honest purpose, the full exercise of all the powers from day to day, the steady strain of faculties that were meant for strain and which rust in disuse, never hurt any one yet. But the temptations of exuberant vitality are all, if not to over-strain, yet to a certain hardness, and arrogance, and disregard of eternal law. It is not complimentary to human nature to note that perfectly healthy people, whom nothing tries and who are ignorant of pain, are seldom

tolerant, tender, sympathetic, with lives that in one important constituent of happiness are far beneath their own. Upon such the shadow of the infinite seems to fall but seldom. They succeed in so many things that they undertake, as to escape the sense of the impassable barriers that hem in all human existence. The very fact of living is so much to them, that they fail to see the meaning of the limitations, the shortcomings, the disappointments of life. They feel no abiding smart of a thorn in the flesh, and so are never forced back upon a higher strength than their own. And yet it is when a nature richly endowed with all the elements of vitality, and living from the first, living to the last, devotes itself to the highest aims and is supported by the highest helps, that we see what I will venture to call the finest triumph of grace. Or if the word triumph seem to imply a struggle, which is not always necessary, and difficulties which may never have vexed the development of a vigorous life, I will describe the result as the richest and sweetest harvest of the Spirit's husbandry. Great things can be accomplished only by great natures, and even then by the help and under the eye of God. "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly." Life is the characteristic word of the great spiritual Gospel from which my text is taken. And no word can penetrate more deeply into the secret of Christ than this does. He was the sweetest, the most persuasive of moral teachers; but ethical principles and precepts are the common possession of humanity; and that in which Christ is pre-eminent over all sages is not so much that he gives us new matter of obedience, as that he infuses into us a fresh power to obey. I fail to see that he anywhere presents to us a dogmatic theological system: I do not believe that his apostles succeed in throwing his teaching into this shape. But supposing that it were so, as so many men believe, life is still the ultimate object, the life of God in man, the life which quickens all faculties, and casts off all impurities, and rises into a higher stage of vitality from year to year. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly." "The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven and giveth life unto the world." "I am the bread of life." So, too, the author of this Gospel, speaking in his own person: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." So Paul: "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus." "Your life is hid with Christ in God." And last of all, in that antithesis so full of instruction: "The first man Adam was made a living soul, the last Adam was made a life-giving spirit." Adam's children we all are in the possession of a physical nature full of possibilities of moral good and evil: the question for us is, shall we be Christ's children too? I cannot assert that this is the only line in which we can inherit life: heroes and saints before and apart from Christ would rise up to rebuke me if I did. God's tender mercies, even of the most intimately spiritual kind, are over all His human children. But it is the line in which we naturally stand; and to stand in it I count the highest privilege of our humanity. I will lay down no conditions of salvation where I believe Christ has laid none down: I will not attempt to compare his disciples with those of other masters: I am content to know that here is a fountain of living waters, which flows for us, and at which those who drink shall never thirst again. I will not even try to define the process by which a strong, bright, master-soul pours itself into poorer and narrower spirits, for I rest joyfully in the certain knowledge that it is so. Is it not possible to forget the fact too much in discussing the rationale of the process? "In the last day, that great day of the feast," when the silver trumpets were sounding, and the priests were bearing up to the temple court the water which they had drawn from that brook Siloam which "flows fast by the oracles of God," "Jesus stood and cried, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He that believeth in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.'" There is the whole secret. All true life is contagious. Not the dull and dead, but only the living, can quicken. Fragrance makes

fragrant: sweetness imparts sweetness: strength begets strength. How many of us have learned integrity from an upright father, and breathed in the confidence of faith at a mother's knee? They gave because they had; and Christ was their fountain-head. The religious life, to some imaginations, presents itself as inclining largely to the side of the passive and the negative. It is abstinence from evil quite as much as eager realization of good. On this view, an air of cloistered sanctity hangs about it: it is full of prayers and mystic raptures: its eye is fixed within, or, if not within, only upon God. It is sweet rather than strong: more meditative than active: a faint fragrance exhales from it, but it does not forget itself to grapple with wrong, or descend upon the arena of human woes and oppressions, full of the heat of battle, or, with a careless heroism, spend itself to the last for the kingdom of God. I do not deny the reality and the sweetness of this type of goodness; but it is not the only type, and much less the type produced by the contagion of Christ upon a strong nature and an eager vitality. I have said that the abundant physical gift of life may carry with it a certain temptation to an unsympathizing self-sufficiency. It is difficult not to be proud of an untiring energy, and faculties that are always abreast of the demands made upon them, and an immunity from pain and languor which is like a double portion of strength. But what if all these things are only a larger gift to lay upon the altar of humanity? What if strength be used only to follow with swifter stride in the self-denying footsteps of Christ? What if the sense of joyous energy only fortifies the soul against disappointment, and makes light of hindrances, and enables patience to have her perfect work? We envy the strong because we think they can do more than we, and enjoy more than we -- in a word, because they live more than we. Let us envy them, if at all, because they have more than we to give to God and men, and answer with a fuller and more eager impulse to the breath of inspiration, and can throw a less infinitesimal weight into the scale of the Divine purpose. Such lives, believe me, are eminently happy. They have their full measure of sensibility, and therefore their full share of trouble too. What sorrows come to all, do not spare them; and it is the quickly throbbing heart that is the tenderest. They cannot take life with dull acquiescence, being neither keenly glad nor greatly sorry: to them, its brightness is like opening Paradise; its gloom, a very valley of the Shadow of Death. And as they emerge out of the narrowness of their personal lot, to go down into the ringing battle of the world, they encounter blows and bruises which more selfish lives are able to avoid; they lay bare their hearts to sorrows not their own, and are stricken with the disappointments of mankind. Was it not a part of the secret of Christ that his affections were so wide, his sympathies so keen, his identification with humanity so complete, that sin not his own cast a shadow upon him almost like remorse, and all his tears were for others' sorrows? So is it with his strong and eager disciples: they lay their breast against the thorn, and would not have it otherwise. And yet they are happy. If it be happiness to have life filled to the brim with occupation that never tires and always brings with it its own reward: to be conscious of the easy movement of power, the strong putting forth of faculty: to be secure against disappointment in reliance upon the righteous purposes of God, which must prevail at last: to have a sure escape from personal grief in the largeness of human sympathy and the vista of universal hope: to feel, as life wears away, no disenchantment of purpose, no stealing languor upon the will, no freezing chill upon the heart, but only a passionate desire to live to the last in the full glow of service, and an absolute completeness of self-renunciation -- then are these strong souls happy. They cannot but find life good, because everywhere in it they feel the touch of God's hand; they see the skirt of Christ's garment as he goes before them in the way. "He that believeth on me, out of him shall flow rivers of living water." The privilege of giving life is not Christ's alone, though still

his in the first instance and the greatest degree: it is shared by all who are truly one with him in spirit and in work. And I am not sure that a large part of the value to humanity of these bright and strong souls does not lie in the inspiration which goes out of them. The weaker ones are always apt to take life in too low a key. They are easily daunted: they resign themselves, as they say, to the inevitable: they have too keen a sense of evils to be overborne and difficulties to be confronted: they learn to distrust, if not to smile at, the ideal, to call acquiescence common sense, and cowardice prudence. And upon them the presence of a strong soul, with its carelessness of toil, its contempt of danger, its faith in the better things that shall be, its trust in God, its generous self-abandonment to men, passes like a breath of inspiration, bringing shame at once and strength with it. Before such an one, not only does selfishness hold its peace, and cynicism forget to be sarcastic, but a new vigour steals into the irresolute will, a fresh power of self-sacrifice takes possession of the heart. The kingdom of God no longer seems a dimly glorious dream, far off in a new strange world, but an ideal that may be realized, here, upon the ruins of innumerable failures, now, in the depths of living human hearts. It is as if God himself were somewhat nearer to us: a strong faith seems to draw Him down from heaven, to build His tabernacle among men: or if this cannot be, and we know that He is always round about us, at least the mists scatter, the clouds clear away, and we catch a glimpse of His unceasing activity, of His eternal rest. I cling to the thought that at some time or other the soul of every one of His children is in direct communication with Him; but for the most part He speaks to us by other human lips, and strong, clear, white lives are the ladder by which we climb to Him. So down the ages we trace the golden thread of the succession of Saints, Christ the first, afterwards they that are his, in turn receiving, in turn giving life, blessed and blessing -- till at last the kingdom comes. * * * * * You know of whom I have been speaking, friends and fellow-worshippers: though I have named no name, you have interpreted my meaning, you have read between my lines. And now that we are about to part, with regretful love and honour freely paid, with the oldest of those who have loved this place, -- and, in parting with her, to bid good-bye for ever to a generation of pious men and women who in their day served God and wrought righteousness, -- I have one last appeal to make. And I make it far less to the middle-aged, whose habits are fixed, whose principles chosen, and who have taken a course in life which they will not lightly abandon, than to the young, whose nature is yet plastic, and who may make of their existence what they will. I ask them, Is the life which I have tried to describe worth living? or is there any other method by which they think the highest objects of existence can be more completely attained? Is there any finer discipline for their powers than the service of God, any nobler education than the fellowship of Christ? I do not plead with them for allegiance to any particular form of Christianity, though we have a right to rejoice in the strength and sweetness of our own Saints, and I might argue that the faith which issues in such fruit of holy living cannot be without its just claim to respect. But my interest is at once deeper and wider than this: I plead for Christianity, I plead for Religion; for the awe of God, for the love of Christ, for the service of man. We are falling upon careless times, when the world is too much with us, and the love of ease seduces us, and we flit -- thinking, God help us! that it is pleasure -- from one facile excitement, from one selfish gratification, to another. We live in a sceptical age, when knowledge and faith find it hard to come to terms, and there is always an excuse for disbelieving truths which startle the soul into seriousness and make a painful demand upon the will. But whatever else is false, one thing remains true -- that the service of God is strength and peace and freedom. Christ still holds the secret of life: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and

follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." Amen.

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
 - 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net