

*God offers us God's presence and strength throughout our lives,
but it comes in three very different forms.*

What Do You Expect?

Isaiah 40: 1-2, 28-31

From time to time, every pastor needs to preach pastoral care sermons. The following example, "What Do You Expect?" was inspired by a sermon that I heard John Claypool preach many years ago, and I want to fully credit him for his insights. For further study on this theme, see John's book, *"Tracks of a Fellow Struggler."* Although the book is most likely out of print, you can probably find copies online.

Not long ago, I came across the quote that is printed in your bulletin, "Great expectations often yield profound disappointments." There's a lot of truth in that quote. For example, a young couple, madly in love, decides to get married. They have expectations of romantic bliss and living happily ever after. But after six months of living together, and learning each other's flaws, and a few fights and disagreements, it's not all they expected. Or think about a married couple who dream of having a baby. They fix up the nursery and dream of all those wonderful happy moments of parental joy. Finally, the baby is born and they bring it home. But after a couple of months of colic, and sleepless nights, and a thousand dirty diapers, this parenting experience is not all they expected. Or consider the woman who grows tired of her old job and dreams of a new job that is exciting and fulfilling. Finally, she gets her dream job. But, after a few short weeks she discovers that her new job, like her old job, also has plenty of problems and difficult co-workers. In each of these cases, the problem was not getting married, or having a baby, or getting a new job—the problem was having unrealistic expectations about those events. Many of life's disappoints are caused by unrealistic expectations.

The same thing is true in religion. People often have expectations of what religion and faith will do for them, and if those expectations are not met, they become disillusioned with their faith. Let's take one example—the experience of grief. Many people believe that their faith will buffer them from the worst pain of grief. This was the expectation of C. S. Lewis, the brilliant professor and writer. Lewis married late in life to a woman who had cancer. She

went into remission for a short while which brought them great joy, but she relapsed and died after just a few years of marriage. C. S. Lewis wrote about his grief experience in a little book called *A Grief Observed*. In that book Lewis shared that, at least initially, he was profoundly disappointed in his religion. He expected his grief to be fairly easy. After all, he was a dedicated Christian who had the hope of heaven and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. But his grief was horrible. For months he felt extreme disillusionment and great despair. However, as Lewis worked through his grief, he came to realize that the problem was not his faith, but his false expectations of faith. He came to realize that human beings deeply grieve the death of a loved one, regardless of how much they love Jesus and believe in heaven. But his original expectation that God would buffer him from that grief brought him huge disappointment.

Lots of people have similar experiences. They believe they are safely in the hands of God, they expect God to take care of them, and then a crisis comes. Maybe cancer, or divorce, or the death of a spouse or child, or a lost job. And then they become profoundly disappointed in God. The problem, however, is not God, but their false expectations of God. The Christian faith does not promise that God will protect us from all harm and evil. That's a myth. So what can we expect from God? Especially when the chips are down and when crisis comes? Does our faith make any difference in those circumstances? The Biblical answer is yes, that our faith does make a difference. We see that clearly in today's text. In this passage, Isaiah promises that God's people can expect spiritual strength from God. As Isaiah said, "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." But Isaiah goes on to say that spiritual strength comes to us in three very different ways. Deceased author and pastor John Claypool, whose insights gave inspiration to today's sermon, gives a name to these three forms of God's strength. John calls them ecstasy, energy, and endurance. Let's take a look at each of them. You can follow along in your listening guide. ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon).***

Ecstasy: The text begins by saying, "they shall mount up with wings like eagles," what John Claypool calls "ecstasy." These are moments of exuberance and celebration, what we often call "mountaintop experiences"—times of celebration and soaring. These are profound experiences such as the birth of a child. I'll never forget the joy I experienced when our son Jonathan was born. It was almost as good as the feeling I had when he left for college! Isaiah is telling us that sometimes God gives us extraordinary experiences of strength and joy, times when we feel like we can soar like an eagle, times of ecstasy. But these are rare—they are

few and far between. Soaring like an eagle is wonderful, but it is certainly not the only form of God's presence and strength. If so, we would become disillusioned when crisis comes, or when we face the ordinary chores of daily life. God does give us times in life to mount up with wings and soar, but thankfully that's not the only way we can experience God's strength.

Energy: The second form of God's strength can be found in the words of the text, "they shall run and not be weary." This is what Claypool calls the gift of "energy"—energy for activism. This is God's strength to rise to the challenge at hand, to tackle the tasks of life. This is the strength to do our work, to carry out our responsibilities, to carry out the tasks of everyday life. Thank God for the strength to run and not be weary. This is where we spend most of our lives. Yet even this is sometimes not enough. There are times in life when energy for activism is inadequate, like when we sit by the bedside of a dying loved one. Sometimes we cannot attack a problem with active energy because it won't change anything. Sometimes there is no solution in active running. When there is no room to fly, and there is no place to run, fortunately, there is another dimension of God's strength.

Endurance: The third form of God's strength can be found in the closing words of today's text, "they shall walk and not faint." This is what John Claypool calls the gift of "endurance." This is God's strength to keep on keeping on. When there is no occasion to soar, and no place to run, all we can do is trudge along step by step and not faint. This gift of endurance, to walk and not faint, is the kind of strength we need when we are helpless. When our children are seriously ill, when our spouse dies, when we are on the brink of financial disaster, when our marriage fails, when the diagnosis is bad, when we feel alone and depressed and frightened. In these times of despair, God is still there, struggling with us, giving us the ability to walk and not faint. This is a profound gift from God, the gift to simply hold on.

This is the strength that John Claypool experienced during the illness and death of his daughter who had leukemia. About a year after her death a friend asked John, "Has God really helped you in this time of trouble?" The man looked John in the eye and said, "Give it to me straight. I'm not asking you this as a preacher. I am asking you as an honest human being. Was anybody or anything down there at the bottom? When the chips were really down, does this thing we call God really make any difference?" John looked at his friend and told him that God did give him help. But he added—it was a very specific kind of help. At that point John

quoted Isaiah 40 and explained about the three different kinds of strength: ecstasy, energy, and endurance. Then John said to his friend, “I can report honestly that the strength to walk and not faint was given. No ecstasy. No great energy. Just the gift of endurance. That was all that met me in the depths of darkness. I did not soar with wings, or run a step. But by the grace of God somehow I stayed on my feet. I did not blow up in bitterness, neither did I give up in hopeless despair. I was given the gift to stand and hold on, to “walk and not faint.” And it was enough.”

So what kind of strength can we expect from God? Sometimes he gives us the gift of ecstasy—times to mount up with wings as eagles, times of soaring and celebration and joy. We all have a few of those experiences over a lifetime. Most of the time, however, God gives us the gift of energy—energy for activism, to run and not be weary, the strength to carry out our daily responsibilities. But sometimes the only form of God’s presence and strength that is appropriate for our circumstances is the gift of endurance. When we cannot soar, and we cannot run, God gives us the strength to walk and not faint. And it is enough.

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LISTENING GUIDE

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