

Text: Revelation 3:2

Title: "Obeying the command to strengthen the local church"

Time: 5/7/2017 am

Place: NBBC

Intro - You may have noticed that we have been getting some great tree work done around here. I had a nice conversation last Monday with the man who owns the company that is doing that work. One of the things he told me is that he is just now beginning to climb trees again. Over the Christmas holidays, Paul fell off a roof and broke his arm. He had never broken his arm before, and he shared with me how surprised he was over how difficult it has been to get his strength in it back again.

He shared that when he first got his cast off, and he noticed his coffee was about to spill, his brain would say to his arm, "catch the coffee," but the arm would not move. Slowly things have improved, but it has taken some work. He has had to lift weights, starting with just a few pounds and slowing working his way up. I think he said that he is at 12 pounds now that he can use to work his arm out. When you are scores of feet up in the air in a tree, having a strong arm that you can count on is a matter of great importance.

The local church in Sardis was a lot like that arm. Its members had been weakened to the point of having a name that they were alive, but they were really dead. We saw last week that Jesus tells His local church to awaken - to come out of their sleepy apathy - and to strengthen what remains. He does not give a lot of detail about how to strengthen what was weak. Evidently, they knew how to do that, so the Lord could simply say, "Remember how you received and heard, and keep it, and repent."

Do we remember how to obey the command to strengthen the things that remain and are about to die? That is a question that I would like for all of us to be able to give a “yes” answer to before we leave our assembly time this morning. The word translated *strengthen* comes from the root of a word that means *to stand*. So it means *to cause something to stand, to establish something, to support something so that it is stronger*.

Ill: The boys and I had a mess on our hands last Saturday because last winter a strong wind blew apart the storage tent we have in the parsonage yard. As we put it back together, we endeavored to strengthen it so that it would be able to stand. We used sandbags mostly for this purpose. We will have to see whether or not we were successful after the next strong wind that comes along.

The local church in Sardis ministered against the strong winds of paganism just like we do here in New Boston today. Jesus tells them to strengthen the things that remain but are about to die. If we let nature take its course, our church will die. That is true for every local church. We all need to know how to obey the command to strengthen the local church. As I have looked at that command in the New Testament, I want to emphasize three things this morning.

I. Strengthen the local church by strengthening your own heart (James 5:7-11).

Ill: Like Job, Joseph is one of those Old Testament examples James says we should learn from. I read in my devotions this past week about Joseph’s naming of his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. It is interesting how each occasion was a time of heart-strengthening for this servant of the Lord. Manasseh means *forgetfulness*, and Joseph named his son that with

a desire to forget the difficulty of his past experiences. Paul tells us to forget the things that are behind and reach for those that are before as we press on to do God's calling in our lives (Phil. 3:13-14). Joseph strengthened his heart with that truth. We need to too. Then Ephraim means *fruitfulness*, and Joseph named him that in recognition of the way in which God had made him fruitful in the land of his affliction (Gen. 41:51-52).

Appl: James encourages brothers in the Lord to strengthen their own hearts in this passage. Local churches are the people in the local churches, not the buildings. We say that a lot, and we know that it is true, but what that means is that if our local church is going to be strengthened, that strengthening must begin in each of our hearts before the Lord.

We never really stay home from church. When we stay home on a Sunday morning or do something other than assemble for worship, we make our local church the local church that does that. We do not stay home from church, we become the church that stays home. We need to determine to have strong hearts if we are to strengthen our church, because the church is made up of what God is doing in each of our hearts. I think this context tells us two important keys to strengthening our own hearts.

1. We strengthen our hearts when we recognize our need for patience.

Appl: The command to strengthen our hearts is surrounded by eight instances of synonyms that mean *patience*. Have you experienced the heart-strengthening truth that God wants you to have patience?

Ill: I was overwhelmed by this truth while walking in the pit a few weeks back. I was thinking about Isaiah 40, which promises that they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. I began singing that song, and as if sent by the Lord two hawks appeared and just kept circling me while I was walking and singing that song. My heart was strengthened to remember the need to wait on the Lord.

Ill: Then I went to the ACCC meeting a couple of weeks ago and it happened again. My good friend Pastor David Mook spoke on Gal. 6:9. There the Lord promises that in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. We must not be weary in well-doing. We must be patient with the seed we sow.

Appl: Those were heart-strengthening times for me, and I think they were that because it is always a relief to realize that it does not take a lot of skill and know-how to be patient or to wait or to not be weary. You do not have to be the hare to do that; you can be the tortoise. We must strengthen our heart by recognizing our need for patience.

2. We strengthen our hearts when we remember that Christ is coming again (v. 8b).

Ill: John Fryth was a younger co-laborer of the English reformer, William Tyndale, who like his colleague was a great biblical scholar and used of the Lord to do important translation work of the Scriptures into the English language. He was captured prior to Tyndale, and eventually executed for his faith.

Tyndale wrote letters to Fryth while he was in prison, which we still have today. He wanted to strengthen his friend's heart in those dire circumstances. He does so by reminding him that Christ is coming again: "Rejoice and be

glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subject all things unto Him.

“Dearly beloved, be of good courage, and comfort your soul with the hope of this high reward, and bear the image of Christ in your mortal body, that it may at His coming be made like to His, immortal: and follow the example of all your other dear brethren, which chose to suffer in hope of a better resurrection.”

Appl: All over the world today, believers face what they have always faced, what John Fryth and later Tyndale after him faced. These dear brethren are our example too. They strengthened their hearts with the truth of the hope of a high reward and a better resurrection at the coming of Christ. That must be our comfort and strength too. Do you know how to strengthen your heart in the hope of the Lord?

Transition: So strengthen the local church by strengthening your own hearts. The strength of NBBC will begin there.

II. Strengthen the local church by strengthening one another (Luke 22:32).

Ill: Paul could not climb trees, but a whole lot of trees have come down over the past few weeks. That happened because Paul has some who work with him. To quote him, he said, “Yeah, the boys did a good job.”

Appl: In this passage in Luke, Jesus says to Peter, “strengthen your brothers.” He does not tell Peter to do that because He knows that Peter was the greatest disciple who would never deny Him. He tells Peter that directly after

predicting that Peter would deny Him. But He also knew that after those denials, Peter would be converted. He would be changed. He would become the humbled and restored Peter of John 21. Peter learned to strengthen his brothers well through these experiences (2 Pet. 1:12-15).

Paul longed to see the Roman believers in order to be able to have a chance to strengthen them (Rom. 1:11), and there were time when he would send Timothy to do the job (1 Thess. 3:2). It is interesting that in each of these passages, it is the God-called pastoral leader that seems to have a special role in strengthening believers. We must not be content to distance ourselves from the ministry of the Word of God from our pastor if we expect to be strengthened in the Lord. But ultimately, we need every Christ-given gift employed to be a strong local church. We all need Paul's longing to minister strength to one another in this way.

Is one of your life purposes to strengthen your brothers and sisters at New Boston Baptist Church?

III. Strengthen the local church by prayer (2 Thess. 3:3).

Ill: I was encouraged on Wednesday of this past week from Luke 18 that men ought always to pray and not to faint. Jesus told a parable there about a widow's importunity before an unjust judge. As I have been reading through the Gospels, I have been impressed again with how often our Savior prioritized prayer in His ministry.

Appl: If He needed to prioritize prayer to be strong, how much more must we? This verse in Thessalonians confidently claims a promise of strength in answer to prayer (see 2:16-3:5). We find a number of prayers for the strengthening of believers throughout the New Testament:

Rom. 16:25-27: "Now to him that is of power *to stablish* you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: to God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen."

Eph. 3:14-16: "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, *to be strengthened* with might by his Spirit in the inner man;"

1 Thess. 3:11-13: "Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: To the end he *may stablish* your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints."

1 Pet. 5:10-11: "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, *stablish*, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

Will our church be strong because we pray prayers like that for one another?

Conclusion: Jesus said to the church at Sardis, "strengthen the things that remain and are about to die." We mentioned last week that here in New England we have many monuments to that kind of church-death. What remains of New Boston Baptist Church this morning will die just as assuredly as any other ministry has died in the past, unless we

determine to strengthen what remains. We begin by strengthening our own hearts with patience and hope. We add to that a commitment to use our gifts to strengthen one another as we assemble together. And we complete the job by praying that each of us would be strengthened. Now that we know how to obey the command to strengthen our local church, may we be faithful in the task as Christ desires.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*