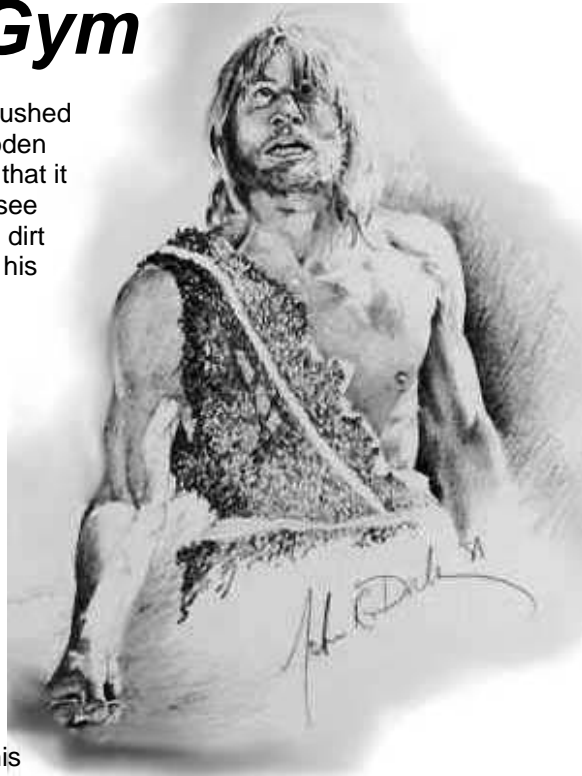


God's Gym

The sweat stung his sightless eyes as he pushed against the heavy wooden beam. It didn't matter that it was dark; he couldn't see anyway. Rubbing the dirt and perspiration from his brow, he avoided the puncture wounds, still sore and oozing, that had blinded him.

The crack of a whip stung his back and a harsh guttural voice yelled something like, "Grind harder, you miserable ox!" The words hurt more than the whip. They were launched from hell and their taunting insinuations were a constant reminder of his condition and his failures before God.

Pushing harder on the wooden lever that moved the huge grinding stone around and around, he thought of his father and mother – how he'd treated them so poorly and now it was too late to change that. He thought of the many stories of childhood that honored the deeds of past heroes – Moses, Joshua, Gideon and others. They used to inspire him; now, they only tormented him as he pondered a life that might have been different... different if only he wasn't so...



He sobbed as he toiled. Again, the whip cracked. He stumbled and fell into the manure below. It had lost its power to nauseate him, but it too reminded him of failure – his cavalier attitude toward God's commands. His mind flooded with accusations, 'Unclean! Unholy! Unfaithful!'

His arms were so weak, he could hardly lift himself back up; but the guard provided the proper stimulation once again.

And as his tormentor laughed, he also heard the laughter of women – women who had suffered because of him, women also who had baited

his lust and left him or teased and manipulated him – and he'd deserved it all and much worse. His passionate sin nature and lack of self control stood in stark contrast to the power of God's Spirit that had, in the past, given him such strength of purpose.

But, he'd taken God's grace for granted. In fact, he hadn't even realized it when the Holy Spirit had withdrawn. It was such a shock when calamity befell him. Never before, had such pain, such grief, such sorrow overwhelmed his heart – and where was God? Where was the One Who never failed?

Perhaps, the Lord was so disgusted with his life that He'd abandoned him. That's exactly what he deserved. That's what he would do himself if he were in God's place. Perhaps, God was never there... no, he knew better than that. He'd been through too much to believe that lie – but maybe...

Questions and doubts bounced off each other and danced in his weary mind like playful foxes but they burned the fields of faith and trust that once stood in his heart. Now, the fruit of his life looked rotten. For as long as he could remember, he'd been called by the Lord yet callous to the Lord. He'd failed in every way – how could God ever use him again, how could God ever love him. He'd treated the Lord like ... but...

'How could God do this?! Or let this happen?... whatever!

What good could come of this defeat? What light could ever shine in this darkness? What ...'

Suddenly, he heard something or thought he did. Was it the chirping of sparrow? Or the cooing of a dove? A light breeze kissed his head.

Immediately, a distant guard's voice echoed in the dark prison, "Bring him to the party!"

Doors swung open, his chains were loosened temporarily. They pushed him through dank corridors and up slippery stairways – finally emerging into a din of laughter and mockery.

His feet were chained again and he felt spit hit his cheek. In contrast to the silence of the prison, the noise here was deafening. Thousands scorned him, remarking how pitiful and scrawny he appeared. His stumbling prompted even more riotous laughter and scorn. They boasted of the superiority of their power, their god.

'I'm so weak, Lord. I'm such a miserable display of your power, your truth.' He could go no lower. His self-confidence was nonexistent; his prayer was feeble; his strength, a distant and fading memory.

He slumped against the cold stone pillar and a lock of sweaty hair fell in his face. But then, in the deepest depths of despair – he heard or sensed the Voice he'd once known. It was a voice in his heart that was unlike any earthly sound for as it spoke gently to him he was

supernaturally revived within. His doubts and self-pity unexplainably vanished and new faith – ever so small – emerged. The light of hope flickered again.

He struggled to his feet. Somehow, he realized that his life, all the tragedy, all the failures, all of it was no surprise to the Lord, but rather, He was using it to His glory – but how? He didn't know, but nevertheless, he 'knew' in his heart.

"Yes," the beautiful voice musically echoed inwardly, "I love you and I am with you!" (Hebrews 13:5)

Wonderfully, supernaturally, faith erupted and came alive in him. He somehow knew that he was more in tune with the Spirit of God than ever. Strangely, his attention was riveted not upon his deplorable circumstance but upon a coming heavenly kingdom, and it consumed him like a fire without the burning. All he desired was to be with his Love, his Maker and to use his every last breath, every last ounce of his life's strength to glorify Him.

His weakness seemed irrelevant. All that mattered was pleasing his Lord. But how? What could he possibly do that would matter, that would make a difference? The joy of a great and eager anticipation overwhelmed him. He knew he would soon worship his Lord, his Love in person – somehow, he just knew it.

Some rotten food hit him in the face, but now, he laughed. He even sang! The lad who was next to him ducked behind the other pillar to hide. He said to the boy, "Are these the pillars of the house? Place my hands upon them."

With his arms outstretched, he suddenly seemed to see a picture in his mind's eye of another with outstretched arms... upon a wooden cross... and it brought tears to his eyes and a holy anger to his heart.

He cried out, "O Lord, God. Remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once...!"

A sudden rush of incredible power and strength filled him and he pushed the pillars apart. The mirth and mockery of the place soon turned to screams of terror as the huge house imploded – the demonic powers were destroyed, the enemies of God's people buried in lifeless rubble.

Suddenly, he could see! And what a sight!! Vistas of Paradise surrounded him and tender, mighty arms held him. A familiar voice more beautiful than the sweetest song said, "Well done!"

In Hebrews 11, the 'hall of faith', we find a powerful truth which is absolutely counter-intuitive to the carnal mind. In describing the deeds of the great men and women of faith, the Holy Spirit inserts the characteristic "out of weakness were made strong."

Clearly, this applies to Samson, one of the judges or heroes of Israel, but just as clearly, its truth is universal in God's economy. Paul

the Apostle wrote, "...when I am weak, then I am strong." (2Cor 12:10)

Now, when we consider Samson, we naturally think of his physical strength but fundamentally, this principle speaks to our faith in God. Faith in what He accomplished on Calvary and faith that makes it more than theological – but rather personal. As Samson spread his arms to topple the pillars of the house of Dagon, so Jesus spread His arms on the cross and toppled the pillars of sin and death in the house of Satan. (See Romans 8:2). And like Samson, He chose to lay down His life in the process.

It's one thing to acknowledge the wonderful truth of this intellectually and quite another to hold it close and personal when circumstances crush or weaken your heart. But, that's the very time when the purest strength is born. When you finally know how utterly weak and helpless you are on your own, you're ready for the resurrection of power, the power of His might. Even prophetically, it's when the power and self-confidence of the Jewish people is broken, that they will be saved (see Dan 12:7).

Now, this strength comes as the 'world' fades in your heart into what C. S. Lewis called the Shadowlands, and your attachment to Christ and your heavenly home emerges as the uncontested foci of your life. If

you're discovering this shocking but hallowed fact – your own weakness – and find yourself rehearsing failures and what-could-have-beens; if you ever hit the humiliation that always precedes humility or feel utterly defeated, take heart. It comes to all who truly love God. David said, "Someday, I shall surely die at the hand of Saul." (1Sam 27:1) Elijah moaned, "I alone am left in Israel..." (1Kings 19:10) Jacob cried, "If I am bereaved, I am bereaved..." (Genesis 43:14) Peter wept bitterly about his denial of Christ. (Mat 26:75) All of these came at times of great weakness. Towards the end of his earthly life, Paul admitted, "I am the chief of sinners." (1Tim 1:15).

You see, it's just this simple – man's end is God's beginning.

I know I'm weak in some areas – maybe you do too. However, it is the weak who count on God and as a consequence, will overcome. God will do what only God can do – when you turn to Him, He'll turn your frailty into strength, your despair into hope and your sorrow into joy. Go to prayer again...and again. Go to His Word again... and again!

Remember, if you know Christ as your Lord and Savior, you're just passing through this world. No matter what you're dealing with now, I guarantee, you will one day consider it unworthy to compare to the goodness God has shown you. Friend, He really does love you with relentless affection.