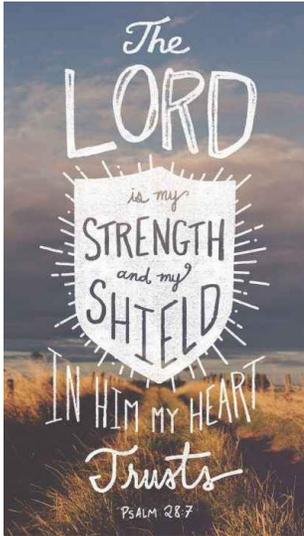


My Strength & Shield

During my college years I worked part-time for the Springfield YMCA. My job was to be the leader of a YMCA youth after-school program. It met at a church gymnasium located in a poor section of town, adjacent to the college campus. To get to the church I walked through this economically poor part of town. In addition, on my own I invited some kids from that YMCA program onto the college campus every Sunday afternoon to play sports. We played flag football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. The Sunday afternoon sports group was a mixture of kids from the nearby disadvantaged neighborhood with other youth from well-to-do communities in the outlying suburban area.



As a result of my work in the minority community I felt comfortable walking through their neighborhood. Because of my work I was reasonably well known and respected in that community. I knew that the community appreciated what I was doing and the Lord was with me. The youth from both “sides of the tracks” developed a strong bond of friendship, ignoring their differences. All this was in the late 1960’s, when our nation was in upheaval, including the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Also happening during my four years on campus were the Watts riots, Bloody Sunday (Selma, Alabama), student takeovers of college administration buildings and the Viet Nam war. These were not easy times. Through these tumultuous times I was not to be deterred as God gave me strength.

Can you image how Jesus’ disciples felt when He invited them to serve the Lord in an unsafe area? Jesus calmly said, “Let us go over to the other side.” (Mark 4:35). That sounds innocent enough but the “other side” was a dangerous area and a direct opposite of where Jesus and the disciples were at the time. Jesus had just finished preaching and teaching to the scholarly, biblically-based community of Capernaum. They were people hungry to hear the Good News. On the other side of the Sea of Galilee, however, was a pagan region called “the Decapolis.” It was a dangerous area that resisted the teaching of Jesus and murdered people because of their faith. Jesus and the disciples were not welcome there. Yet, they went.

It was a frightful trip. A sudden storm came up as Jesus and the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was sleeping in the stern of the boat, resting on a cushion. So, not only did the disciples fear for their life when they would arrive at the Decapolis, they thought they were going to drown on their journey across the Sea of Galilee. As you probably remember from the biblical account the disciples awakened Jesus, and He calmed the storm. The disciples said in amazement, “*Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!*”

This is not suggesting that you should be careless. Proverbs, the book known for its wisdom says: “*Discretion will protect you, and understanding will guard you*” (Proverbs 2:11). Use good common sense and listen for God’s guidance. There is a saying, “Trust in God, but row away from the rocks.” Be careful in what you do, but you can call on the Lord to give you strength as you serve Him. “*But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one*” (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

The Bible quotes Jesus, “*He said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”*” (Mark 4:40). Have faith that the Lord will allow you to serve Him. The Bible says: “*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*” (Isaiah 41:10).

There will be challenges along the way. I did have a car on campus my senior year. Because of the unrest of the late 1960’s there were people who disagreed with my serving the minority community and blending friendships among races. After playing sports with my mixed group on a Sunday afternoon, someone wanted to send a message to me. Later that night my car was torched in a remote parking lot on campus. A car door was pried open, gasoline poured inside and then fire was set to it. All I had left were my tires, and someone tried to steal them the next day. The tumultuous times of the 60’s were my Decapolis. Yet, the Lord gave me strength to persevere and continue my walk with Him.

The Bible says: “*Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory. We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation*” (Romans 5:2-4).

Question: What is your Decapolis and how do you overcome its challenges?

Prayer: Heavenly Father. Protect us as we strive to serve you in this crazy, dangerous world. You are our strength and shield. Help us to persevere as we encourage others in their hope for salvation. Amen.