Wait upon the Lord

Isaiah 40:31

by

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all Scriptures quoted from the NASB

But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. NASB

To put this verse into a historical perspective, God is speaking through Isaiah to the Israelites, letting them know that the captivity is over, and it is time to go home.¹ It is a 700 mile (1,126 km) walk from Babylon to Jerusalem. That’s the equivalent of walking from New York City to Atlanta, Georgia, or New York City to Chicago. Could you walk that 700 miles with no protection from the weather? Do you have the strength to do that? Imagine that you’re an Israelite in Babylon, and you’ve just been told to get ready for the 700-mile walk to Jerusalem. The average walking speed of a human is 3 to 4 miles per hour, or 1 mile every 15 to 20 minutes. At 4 miles an hour, it would take 175 hours or 7 days of non-stop walking to reach your destination. If you walked for 12 hours a day, you could do it in 2 weeks. Would you be up to it? Got a good pair of shoes?

Isaiah 40:31 is a verse of scripture that almost all of us have memorized. It is a verse that we claim, cling to, quote out loud, and if we know the tune, sing it to ourselves. But do we know what this verse means? Do we understand it? We want to renew and gain new strength. We want to mount up with wings like eagles. We want to run through this life and not get weary. We want to walk through our problems and not become faint. But how many of us genuinely know how to do these things? How many of us experience what this verse is talking about in our lives?

To me, this verse describes the type of “over-comer” talked about in the book of Revelation. The life of an over-comer is the type of Christian life that I want to live. The life of an over-comer is the type of Christian life that I want to experience. More than likely, so do you. So I have to ask myself, what's wrong? Why am I not renewing and gaining new strength? Why am I not mounting up with wings like eagles? Why am I running through life and getting weary? Why am I becoming faint when I walk through experiences and adversity? Is this passage of scripture just wishful thinking, or is it truly a promise from God?

¹ Hyun Chul Paul Kim, Reading Isaiah: a Literary and Theological Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2016) p. 185
Let me ask you a question. How many times have you looked at your own life and wondered why you were not renewing or even gaining new strength? If you're like me, you have probably wondered about that quite a few times yourself. You may not be mounting up with wings like eagles and rising above your problems. You may be running through life with its unique problems and getting extremely tired. You might find yourself walking through life's experiences and adversities with much weariness. If you fit into this category (which most of us do), you have probably questioned what was wrong. It is a valid question that deserves an answer.

Isaiah 40:31 is a verse of scripture that is talking about strength and its attributes. It mentions renewing strength and gaining new strength. It mentions the strength of an eagle's wings that lift it high above the earth. It mentions the strength necessary to run without becoming weary and the strength to walk without becoming faint. It's all about strength. Specifically, it is about attributes of strength that we are in desperate need of in our lives.

For us to renew and gain new strength, to mount up with eagle's wings, to run and not get weary, to walk and not become faint, something must first happen. We must do something first so that the strength in this verse to come to pass in our lives. So what is it that we need to do? What is the key that unlocks the strength in this verse? How do we obtain this strength that we need to live from day-to-day?

The key to unlocking this verse is the word wait. Those who wait on (upon) the Lord get all the attributes of strength listed in this verse. So if we want the strength in its various forms listed in this verse, then we must first learn how to wait on the Lord. Think of it this way: if we don't learn to wait on the Lord, we will never get the strength of the Lord. So what exactly does it mean to wait on the Lord? To answer this question, we need to know what the word wait means. To do this, we need to define this word.

The word wait used in this verse is the Hebrew word “יָאַהוֹ” (qavah). The word “qavah” has two definitions or meanings. It has both a literal and a figurative meaning. What does that mean, the Hebrew word “qavah” has both a literal and a figurative meaning? In all actuality, even words in the English language have both literal and figurative definitions. We are just so accustomed to them that we don't even realize that we use them both daily. To give us a better understanding of this concept, let's take a look at these two meanings or definitions. The literal meaning of a word is the exact, precise meaning or definition of that word. The figurative meaning of a word is metaphorical or symbolic.
Let me clarify this by using the word *dead* as an example. The literal definition of the word *dead* is “no longer living; deprived of life.” In the sentence: *The man buried in that grave is dead*; you automatically understood that it was the literal meaning of the word *dead*. When you read that sentence, your brain immediately made the connection that I was using the literal meaning of the word dead. You didn't even have to think about it. Now that you know the usage of a literal definition let's move on to the figurative. The figurative definition of the word *dead* is “lacking animation or excitement or activity.” In the sentence: *The church we attended was dead*; we automatically understand that it is the figurative meaning of the word *dead*. We understand from this sentence that the congregation lacks interest or excitement. Since I’m using the word dead, we understand that the church’s congregation is unenthusiastic or even lethargic. When you read that sentence, your brain immediately made the connection that I was using the figurative meaning of the word dead. You didn't even have to think about it. That is how we use a word with its figurative meaning. The context of the sentence is what tells us whether to use the literal or figurative meaning of a word.

Now let's take a look at the literal and figurative definitions of the Hebrew word “qavah,” which is translated as “wait” in Isaiah 40:31. The literal meaning of the word is “to bind together like a cord,” or, “the twisting or winding of a strand of cord or rope.” To bind together like a cord, what does that mean? First, let me explain what “to bind together like a cord” does not mean. It does not mean to tie a cord around a bundle of sticks to keep them together. Instead, picture in your mind the process of making a rope (cord) by twisting or weaving (binding) thin threads together to form the rope. The more strands that are twisted or woven together in a rope, the greater is its strength. Ah, there is that word strength again. Ecclesiastes 4:12 (CEV) says, “… a rope made from three strands of cord is hard to break.”

A piece of string cannot lift very much weight because it does not have very many strands in it. A piece of rope, however, can lift hundreds of pounds because it consists of many strands. When a rope lifts or pulls a load, it stretches a little while it is working. As it stretches and becomes taut, the individual strands are pulled and squeezed closer together. While this “stress” is on the rope, the individual strands work together to lift or pull the load. No one individual strand does all the work. If it did, it would snap. A rope's strength comes from all the strands working together.

The literal definition of “qavah” implies strength through numbers. The more strands in your rope, the greater is its strength. Just as a rope's strength comes from being made of many strands, so our strength comes through being united with Christ. The “rope” of our lives gains strength through numbers.
strength by being twisted or woven or bound together with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In a couple more paragraphs, I will show you some more strands that should be in your rope.

The figurative definition of the word “qavah” is “to wait, or to look for with eager expectation.”5 The figurative meaning of “qavah” conveys eager anticipation and expectation. It is the same type of waiting that children do on Christmas morning while waiting for mom and dad to get out of bed so they can open presents. All of the translations of the Bible that I have read chose to translate “qavah” figuratively and not literally.

Why did the translators use the figurative definition of “qavah” instead of the literal definition? I think it is because of the word renew. (And possibly because the figurative definition uses far fewer words than the literal translation.) The word renew means to “to pass on, to change, to renew.”6 The phrase “renew their strength” literally means to “exchange strength” or substitute strength.”7 It means giving up the old and receiving something new; it suggests the tapping of a new resource of strength, which comes from God.8 So what does the figurative definition of “qavah” (to wait) have to do with strength as listed in Isaiah 40:31? How does this tie in with our analogy of a rope? Remember that a rope's strength comes from the number of strands in the rope’s composition. A rope's strength remains constant even when it is slack. As strange as that last sentence may sound, it is the key to this verse. When a rope is slack, what is it doing? The rope is at rest or “waiting.” It “waits” for its owner to put it to use.

Who puts the rope to use? The owner. The focus of “qavah” is not on the human waiting, but on God acting, on the effectiveness of His divine word.9 When the rope is attached to a load, it draws its strength from all the other strands and goes to work. I think that is why the translators used the word “wait.” I think they could have used a better choice of words, but that's just my opinion, and you are free to disagree with me.

Translating “qavah” as “wait” is possibly due to the context of the verse. Remember, the example of the word dead? You were able to determine whether or not to use the literal or figurative definition by the context of the sentence. Isaiah 40:31 should be no different. So what exactly is the context of this verse? The context is strength. The strength of an eagle's wings, the strength to run and not get weary, the strength to walk

9 Ibid., p. 73.
not get faint. It is all about strength. The literal definition of “qavah” deals with strength, and therefore (in my opinion) should have been used.

So how exactly do we “wait” upon the Lord? The best analogy that I can think of is the one we have been using, which is that of the rope. A rope is composed of many strands, and so is our relationship with God. While waiting is not a work that makes something happen, renewal does not come through sitting still. The form of the Hebrew verbs “renew” and “mount up” implies that this waiting for God is not passive but rather active. The more “strands” that we weave into our relationship with God, the more strength He gives to us. It is an activity that we have to do. No one can do it for you.

Let’s look at some more strands that make up this rope.

• Keep your focus on God. Hebrews 12:3
• Study the Bible daily. Psalm 119:11, 2Timothy 2:15
• Pray daily. 1 Thessalonians 5:17
• Attend church regularly. Hebrews 10:25
• Learn from Christian friends. Proverbs 13:20
• Tell others about your faith in Jesus Christ. Mark 16:15

These are just a few of the strands that should be in our rope. You can probably think of quite a few more. When you twist all of these strands together, you get a rope whose strength comes from God. I would have translated Isaiah 40:31 to read like this; “They that have all aspects of their lives intertwined and bound together with the Lord, like threads of a rope, shall exchange their meager strength for the strength of the rope, they shall rise to meet challenges as if they had powerful wings like an eagle, they shall run through life and not be weary, they shall walk through problems and not faint.” (Please remember that the previous sentence is my translation; you will not find that in any version of the Bible that I know of.)

Now you know how to renew and gain new strength. Now you know how to take off and soar with wings like an eagle’s. Now you know how to run through life and not get weary. Now you know how to walk through problems and adversity without fainting. You now know that by weaving all the strands together, you “wait” upon the Lord. May you gain new strength in and from the Lord.

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10 Ibid. pg.74.
Bibliography


