

**THE
STRENGTH
OF A
MAN**

**50 DEVOTIONALS
TO HELP MEN
FIND THEIR
STRENGTH
IN GOD**

DAVID ROPER

The Strength of Man
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THE MEANING OF MAN

Most of my friends consider themselves real men. They're outdoorsmen and sportsmen. They hunt and fish. They hang their snowmobiles upside down under the snow cornices on West Mountain. They hie themselves across the deserts in 4x4s at what I consider terminal velocities. I have one friend who pulled a grizzly bear off his wife with his bare hands. I saw another ride a log down a canyon wall. He almost broke the sound barrier on the way down; he did break two ribs at the bottom. But to hear him tell it, it was the thrill of a lifetime.

Yet for all our macho, we men are uneasy about our manhood. None of us seems to know for sure what it means. We have to be told: Real men don't eat quiche. They never bunt. They don't have "meaningful dialogues." And rarely do they think about the meaning of life. Real men love John Wayne, Monday Night Football, chain saws, and Coors.

These efforts to define our manhood are funny. They spoof the affectation and humbug with which we support our sagging male egos. Avoiding quiche is a good symbol of our uncertain sexuality. But what impresses me most is that it's done, that we find it necessary to be told what it means to be a man. Our ignorance must be a measure of our confusion. Few of us understand that true manhood is not a matter of power displays and aggressiveness; it is a function of the activity of God. In the beginning it took God to make a man, and it still does.

We have a lot to learn about being men. I know I do. I doubt that many of our hunting and fishing buddies, for all their high jinks and good humor, can help us much. But there is One, the manliest

man of all, who invites us to learn from Him. He wrote the book on the subject, the manual that goes with man. I offer some thoughts on that book and what it reveals about man. I share them because I love men and I want to see them come into their own. ◇

SATISFACTION

WARM-UP: Psalm 42–43

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? (PSALM 42:2)

A friend of mine turned forty recently and immediately took leave of his senses. He left his wife of twenty years, got a perm, a Porsche, a synthetic suntan, and moved in with his twenty-two-year-old girlfriend. I have nothing against perms, tans, or sports cars, but I just wondered why he did it. Forty seems much too old to start over; I keep thinking of Nicodemus's question, "Can a man be born when he is old?" (John 3:4).

It's just the flesh, I thought at first. Nothing more than high jinks or high-handed sinning. But the way he went about it, so joylessly, resolutely, and methodically, made me think further. And then I recalled other friends who had done the same thing. What causes this forty-year itch? Maybe it's a kind of male menopause, a time in a man's life when his hormones run amok and he acts as though he's been dropped on his head from a great height. But I could think of no hard medical evidence for that conclusion. At least nothing I'd read on the subject sounded very convincing.

Another friend explained his great escape by speaking of the need for self-fulfillment and personal well-being. "I have a duty to myself," he intoned. Yet it was hard for me to believe that he had jettisoned all his old values out of some strange moral principle that he ought to deny himself nothing. Certainly he knew better than that. And anyway, he argued too loud and too long in his own defense. I wondered whom he was trying to convince.

Another left out of sheer boredom. As he put it, he had a successful business, a charming house, a smiling wife, three kids, and a seven handicap. He must have arrived. What bothered him most was the sterile sameness of it all, the feeling that there were no options left. Time like a wind had blown down the corridors of his life slamming and locking all the doors. He was trapped; there was no exit. To hear him tell it, the road was gentle and gradual, no milestones or signposts. He just woke up one morning and realized that, like Alexander the Great, he had won; nothing was left to conquer. He had everything he ever wanted, but he wanted nothing he had.

Still another got the itch when it occurred to him that he would never arrive. He always envisioned himself climbing the organizational ladder, but as he aged, a gnawing desperation set in.

As Lucy says, “Winning isn’t everything; winning *big* is!” Most of us need to win big. The problem, however, is that there seems to be a law of diminishing returns: the bigger wins give a decreasing measure of satisfaction.

The Bible says we’re cursed. The ground yields a high proportion of thorns and thistles. Our work often frustrates us and payday never delivers enough. The itch remains that cannot be scratched. It’s then that we start thinking about a way to opt out or at least to escape the pain. Turning over a new leaf doesn’t work well; we don’t achieve more the second time around. And there are, of course, only a finite number of times we can go around before we run out of time.

God offers a better way to satisfy our longings. Our unsatisfying searches reveal our need of Him. Augustine was right: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Him. We were made for God and nothing else will do. He is the only end to our search.”

God stimulates in us a profound hunger that is nothing less than the answering cry of our hearts to God’s wooing. Because He

loves us, He won't let us alone. He interrupts and interferes, hectoring us, hounding us with an infinite unrest.

We sense a divine discontent as God's love pushes, pulls, prods, and nudges us closer to Him. He goads us on almost irresistibly. As God Himself told Paul, "It is hard . . . to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14).

But some will ask, "Why can't He mind His own business and leave us alone?" He won't because we are His business. He loves us with relentless love; He will not rest until we're His.

To say we'll only have complete satisfaction in God strikes us as too simple, but the simplest answers reveal the profoundest truths. Until we find our peace in Him, we'll continue to feel alone, caught in midlife crisis and forever itching. ◇

MANHOOD

WARM-UP: Psalm 8

What is man that you are mindful of him? (PSALM 8:4)

I must confess that I'm a humanist—like David who wrote the eighth Psalm. His poem raises the best question of all: “What is man?”

What is man? Biologically, he's a mammalian vertebrate; order: primate, genus: homo; species: sapiens. His body is made up of organs, tissues, cells, and protoplasm. Chemically, he's composed mostly of water, a large quantity of carbon, and various amounts of iron, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, sulfur, lime, nitrogen, and some mineral salts. Psychologically, he has intellectual, emotional, and volitional powers and various instincts. He has on occasion dashed off a 4.2-second forty and leaped into the air a little over 7 1/2 feet.

But man has to be something more. We long for other, more complete explanations. Something in man refuses to be cribbed and confined and reaches out beyond mere scientific description. Eternity is in our hearts. We too ask, “What is man? What am I?”

Down inside us is a mystery from which comes our pursuit of excellence; our love of athletics, art, and music; our yearning to know and to be known; our deep discontent at our inability to live up to our own ideals. This is part of the “something more” that makes us truly human. That's why we want to know what it means to be a man.

We ask, as Saul Bellow did, “Is there nothing else between birth and death but what I can get out of this perversity—only a favorable balance of disorderly emotions? No freedom? Only impulses? And what about all the good I have in my heart—doesn’t it mean anything? Is it simply a joke? A false hope that makes a man feel the illusion of worth?” Is this all there is?

And what about our instincts? We know that men were meant to be courageous, selfless, loyal. Manhood is deeply rooted and is a memory written in our hearts. We know the rules. We just can’t comply. And in the end we get tired of trying to be a man. As G. K. Chesterton said, “Pessimism comes not when we get weary of doing evil but when we get weary of doing good.” No, there must be something more.

What are we? The psalmist fills in the picture. God made man the summit of creation, the highest order of created beings, only slightly less than God Himself, the most godlike creature in heaven and earth. Man is the only creature who shares God’s glory and honor. We have great dignity and worth. For all our foibles and flaws, we have vast potential for good in science and technology, in arts and letters. We have tremendous capacity to give and love, to know and to be known. No man has ever plumbed his own depths. We’re wonderful because God made us so.

The poet’s conclusion, therefore, is noteworthy: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is *your name* in all the earth!” (v. 9, italics mine). His contemplation of man’s greatness leads the poet to worship not man but the God who made him, who “crowned him with glory and honor,” and “put everything under his feet.”

And so we, along with the poet, give thanks to the One who made man—who formed the creative genius of Michelangelo, the music genius of Amadeus Mozart, the hand-eye coordination of Joe Montana. Contrary to our common belief, there are no self-made men. “It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves” (Psalm

100:3, κν). We know that it takes God to make men great, and we give thanks to Him for making us what we are. We must give credit where credit is due. ◇