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Enlargement Through Conflict

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil days, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints, and for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds; that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak." (Eph. 6:10-20).

I think it is well known to you that the Letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament corresponds to the Book of Joshua in the Old. As to the Book of Joshua, the Lord told His people, before ever they went into the land, that He had given the land to them; that every place that the sole of their foot should rest upon was already theirs by gift; that already the land was their possession, and the enemies were subdued. In Him it was already a concluded matter. Yet when they actually came into the land, they found that they had to fight for every inch of it. There was no contradiction really in that, because they were fighting in something that the Lord had already done. We have often put it this way - they were fighting *in* a victory rather than *for* a victory. It was a case of faith's possessing rather than of faith's receiving. Now there, of course, it was the matter of the inheritance and the enlargement of their possessions; and they did not come to possess any part, to extend and spread

themselves out over the land, except by meeting a challenge all the way along and overcoming that challenge.

That is exactly the position here with the Church in the heavenlies. The heavenlies in "Ephesians" corresponds to the land in the Book of Joshua - that is, the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. It is the Lord in all the fulness of His ascended life and position, and that fulness is for the Church. It is to be His fulness, but the possession by the Church of any measure of Christ, the possession of any fragment of spiritual fulness and enlargement, comes along the line of spiritual conflict. The Lord left the enemy in the land; even when He said that He had given it to His people and would subdue their enemies under them, He did not go ahead and drive the enemy out. He left them to do that. Although in the Cross the enemy is defeated and everything is secured to the Church, the Lord has left the enemy in order that the Church may come, not to a mechanical or theoretical position of fulness, but to an actual, spiritual position. The enemy therefore is the Lord's instrument of bringing the Church to its place along the line of conflict.

The inheritance, of course, has its two sides in this letter. The Lord has an inheritance in the saints; that is, the Lord's people are His inheritance. There is the other side, where the inheritance of the saints is the Lord Himself; and these two in realization - the Lord getting what He has set His heart upon having, and our coming into that to which the Lord has called us - is a matter of spiritual enlargement day by day by means of spiritual conflict.

The Need For Strength Of Spirit

What does this amount to? In a word, it is a matter of strength of spirit. Our spiritual measure is a matter of how strong we are spiritually. Therefore this section begins with, "Finally, be strong in the Lord (or, from henceforth be made powerful in the Lord) and in the strength of His might"; that is your measure, and spiritual strength is decided in spiritual conflict. If we go down easily under opposition and pressure, soon give up and fade out because things begin to get difficult, that determines just our measure of spiritual strength, our measure of Christ. From one standpoint, you have to measure Christ by His contact with the enemy. Go back to His life on the earth, and see how far the enemy was able to gain advantage, to bring Him down, and you discover that he was not able at all, at any point, in any circumstances. The Lord proved His spiritual measure against the whole force of spiritual opposition. Satan and all his kingdom is matched against the one Man - and the one Man overcomes, casts out the prince of this world, subdues his kingdom and takes his authority. The measure of Christ is seen as over against the enemy; and our spiritual measure is determined in this combat with the enemy. Simply, then, our spiritual measure is a matter of spiritual strength.

That is seen here in these two ways. As the rest of the passage shows, there are many forms in which the enemy comes to break in, to get vantage ground. We cannot here pursue all the things represented by the armour, but each of these parts of the whole armour mentioned points to some form of enemy assault. The helmet suggests a blow at the head, that is, a spiritual assault upon the mind. How far is the mind impregnable to assaults? We know the terrific assaults of the enemy upon our minds, to capture them, to dominate our thinking, our reasoning. Another time he will make a terrific assault upon our hearts - our feelings, emotions, affections, desires. The breastplate suggests this form of spiritual attack. Another time the very vitals, the loins, are assailed, as suggested by the girdle of truth. The enemy will, as we say, 'hit us below the belt' if he can. There is a suggestion here of a form of spiritual assault at a place where we shall be thoroughly wounded if we are not careful, if we have not provision made. So you go through the whole armour in each part, and you find every part signifies some form of spiritual conflict, the point at which the conflict is being concentrated at a given time. Today it will be at one point, tomorrow at another. Am I able to meet the enemy in

strength? Can I spiritually meet him in the mind? Can I spiritually meet him in the heart, where all the feelings are centred? That determines what my spiritual measure is. So, to begin with, it is strength in that sense, which is our need.

The Need For Intelligence

But then it is also a matter of intelligence. The two things which mark spiritual degree are strength and intelligence. You find that all the way through the New Testament. It is a matter of understanding as well as of being strong. There is a sense in which we may be strong, but not accomplish very much by our strength because it is not accompanied by intelligence. On the other hand, we may have a sort of intelligence and know all about things, and yet not stand up to them. These two factors must go together. So the word here is "the wiles of the devil." It is not only his fierce onslaught in strength that has to be reckoned with, but also his wiliness. He knows where to attack at a given time, and just when it is the best time to make a particular kind of assault; and very often he works up a situation that is very suitable to his purpose. He will get us moving very much in our minds, thinking, scheming, reasoning, and then he will make a terrific blow to bring us down through our minds. Sometimes he is moving altogether in the realm of our feelings, stirring these up, bringing about situations that touch our hearts very deeply. At that moment it is the emotional life that is the danger point, and then he makes a terrific onslaught upon that. He is very wily, very intelligent, very knowing.

To counter that, we need to have spiritual intelligence to see his intention and to be alive to his tactics. Spiritual intelligence is a matter of spiritual measure. How often someone has gone down under an assault of the enemy, completely knocked out; and someone else comes along and says, 'Did you not see so-and-so - how the enemy has been working up to this, and getting you in the end in a position for which he has been manoeuvring?' They reply, 'If only I had seen that, I should not have given way!' If we have intelligence to meet the wiles, we have spiritual measure. The need is not only of being strong in the sense of digging our heels in and clenching our fists, but of having *intelligent* strength. A very strong man can be, after all, thoroughly overcome by a little cleverness; beaten, not because of counter-strength, but by a wile.

Christ An Adequate Defence In Every Assault

Paul himself was an outstanding example of strength combined with intelligence. Think of his position when he was writing these very things. "I am an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:20). What a contradiction! How absurd! Paul, in that chain, in his imprisonment, had a very great deal of reason to give up, to weaken, to take the hopeless attitude; but in actual fact he was very strong. He might also have despaired of coping with the whole situation which confronted him, not only personally, but in the churches - he could have been completely defeated by the whole complex of the situation. But he is displaying a wonderful wisdom. This armour, as Paul picks it up and transfers it to the spiritual life, indicates a great deal of wisdom on his part.

Think it through, piece by piece. For the assault upon the mind - the helmet of salvation. How apt, how suited to the situation it is! The assault upon the heart - what is that? What is it that gets us down more than anything else from the enemy? It is a spirit of accusation, of condemnation, bringing home to our hearts a sense of our own wickedness and unworthiness and unprofitableness, to cause our hearts to sink in despair. Paul so wisely says, 'The remedy for that is to put on the breastplate of righteousness - but not your own righteousness. Meet the enemy with the righteousness of Another; it is the only way to meet this assault.' Go through each part, and you find it is so wise a provision, so understanding. At every point, Paul is exhibiting this wonderful

understanding, and showing his measure: for Paul could have gone down under these things as easily as any other man if he had taken another attitude. He could have argued, 'All these churches have turned against me, all these brethren have forsaken me; here I am in prison, shut up: the Lord must have something against me, there must be something very wrong with me.' If he had taken that on, it would not have been long before he would have been a prisoner in the inner dungeon of the castle of Giant Despair. But he had taken up the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness and the rest of the armour, and he showed his measure. We cannot stand as equals with him, but he does indicate for us what spiritual enlargement really means; it is being strong and wise in conflict. So spiritual degree resolves itself into a matter of spiritual strength and spiritual understanding in the time of conflict.