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Prayer and Conflict

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Kings 18:40-46; 19:1-2.

"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 day, and having done all, to stand. Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" Eph. 6:10-13,18.

It is first of all necessary for us to recognise the sphere of conflict and that is quite clearly in relation to the heavens. In the story of Elijah from which we have read, we know that it was very closely, definitely connected with the heavens that this thing took place. The heavens were very much in view. By prayer the heavens had been locked, and by prayer, later the heavens were opened, but during the period of the locking of the heavens this great issue was determined as to who was going to rule and who, as in the heavens, was going to govern - whether it was to be Baal occupying the place of ascendancy, supremacy, as the ruling force from above in the government of the lives of the Lord's people, or whether it was to be the Lord Himself in that place. It was a question of who was going to occupy the heavens, the place of sovereignty, the place of supremacy, and that battle was fought out and for the time being the Lord suspended the beneficent operations of His continual rule until this people had come to this position.

The issue was settled - "The Lord, He is God" and then the casting down of Baal from his high place, the turning out of the heavenly places of the forces of evil and the establishment, so far as the hearts of the Lord's people were concerned, of the Lord in His rightful place in the heavens.

You come over to the letter to the Ephesians and you know you are in that realm at once. You come into the realm of the heavens and we are told that our conflict is in the heavens and the conflict of the people of God, that is the church, the Body of Christ with which this letter subsequently deals, their conflict is in relation to the forces of the heavens. Their whole business is to take the ascendancy in the heavens over the principalities and powers and world-rulers of this darkness, and establish the absolute sovereignty of the Lord in the heavenly places. It is in the heavenlies, not amongst men, not against flesh and blood, but up there.

The sphere of the conflict is the sphere of the spiritual and it is there, as we so well know, as a matter of information, that the battle rages. And some of us know it not as a matter of information, but as a matter of experience, that this thing goes on back of all that is seen and all that we can grasp by our senses. There is in the unseen a terrific conflict. It is important for us to remind ourselves of this, that however well acquainted we are with it as a theory, teaching, or truth, that the real sphere of this conflict is back of everything in the unseen, in the spiritual, and to grasp that with any real spiritual intelligence is to give us the key to almost everything that happens. And there is one thing that the Lord's children need today very specially and that is to be always alive and awake to the fact that what they are meeting is not to be accounted for on merely human ground and not to be put down to the mere circumstances which are around and seen, but that what we are meeting is to be accounted for on different ground.

Having stated that the sphere is there, the next thing is explanatory of that to a fuller measure.

What is the Occasion of the Conflict?

The sphere of the conflict is in the heavenlies; what is the occasion? The occasion of the conflict is clearly the church. Come into Ephesians and you are coming into a great battle of and for the church, the Body of Christ, and then there in that connection that we know evil in its most deadly form.

If we are occupied with what is merely personal, for instance, or what is merely earthly or local here on the earth, we shall not meet that conflict in the same way. Take Elijah. Elijah had a deep experience of trial over temporary needs when the brook dried up and he was passing through this time of famine and drought. Elijah's faith was tested and tried and no doubt the trial of faith was a very real one to him but there was no element of supernatural evil in it. Faith being tried is always a very real thing, but it was a personal thing between him and the Lord. It was personal and he got through on that alright, but notice when he came through into this thing of taking up the whole case of the corporate people of God, he touched another realm and the sequel of the beginning of verse 19 finds Elijah not now able to stand up to the situation as when it was a purely personal thing.

He could go through triumphantly on a level of temporal matters; he proved the Lord there. A lot of you have proved the Lord, that the Lord supplies your needs, but you have to stand in another realm where you take up the whole business of the church of God and destroying the power of the principalities and powers over the people of God; that is another realm. Elijah found his supreme test there. It is there he meets something that he has not met before and it says that when he saw

that, he ran for his life. That is another realm altogether and indeed, the occasion of the real conflict is the church.

Now, that is making a statement which you can follow up in the Word. You know all the way through this is so. In Revelation this is that. The dragon is overcome because of the blood of the Lamb. This is not a matter of individual relationship to the Lord now, this is a corporate and relative thing where the company of God's elect is concerned. That people have first of all to be extricated from the authority of darkness and to take the place which the principalities and powers occupy in the heavenlies and to depose the spiritual counterpart of Baal and occupy the heavens; to rule there in Christ Jesus. It's another business altogether and that brings you into a realm where things are very difficult.

If you are simply on the lesser level, the lower level of doing something, some nice little bit of work for the Lord here on the earth and it is personal, at any rate it is local, it is not universal, it does not touch the whole range of the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus and you will not meet the same conflict, you will have a happier time. There is not all that stifling, deadening that we meet in the other thing. Alright, but you have got out of the realm of conflict into less than what God has called you to. Get into that which is something relative to the whole Body of Christ, the testimony of Jesus Christ in that Body which is to be universal and absolute and you come into a state of conditions calculated to bewilder the most wily amongst men. You come into the wiles of the devil.

The armour which the apostle sets forth is a key to those wiles. Loins girt about with truth. You meet the wiles of the devil; lies wrapped up. You have got to stand girt with the girdle, which is a symbol of strength and action, stand girt actively in and by truth. Unless you have that girdle of truth, the wiles of the devil in all kinds of suggestions, insinuations, misrepresentations and rumours and all these things will be carried about. So every piece of armour is to meet a certain kind of wile of the devil. Now you come into that realm - a point I want to emphasise.

It would be possible for all of us to get out of conflict if we would accept something less, if we would let go that which we believe the Lord has shown us and brought us into in relation to the Body of Christ as an instrument for the display of the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus universally. We must stand in that by faith now, and literally and actually later, that He shall govern through the heavens through His church universally in the ages to come. The present battle is in relation to that and the explanation is the adversary knows that the church, the Body of Christ, is destined, predestined to be the instrument of Jesus Christ in absolute sovereignty to cast him out of the heavens. When that man child is caught up to the throne, then satan is cast down. The two things work together. He knows that is in view, so against this Testimony to the whole Body, this vocation of the church, against the realisation of this, against all that it implies, the enemy directs his full attention. And you do not meet in other realms what you meet in that realm.

How are we going to get through? Our experiences are mutual - we come to a prayer meeting bent on a good time and just expecting a good time, that the Lord is going to be with us and I have not been there very long before there has been on me a terrible blanket, deadening, darkness - prayer! Everything has been agitated and prayer has gone out of you. What is the matter? Well, this is not the Lord; it is the devil. You recognise, beloved, that you have met something in the heavens and your attitude and mine must be in virtue of the precious blood.

The Word is here: stand and withstand in that realm and it is not until the Lord's people come in on the mighty power of the blood when these atmospheres are about, all these things charged with the atmosphere of hell, and take up the precious blood and recognise that their conflict is in the heavens, and there is victory in prayer. We cannot explain why someone has prayed a dreary prayer - this is behind that and we have to rise up in the power of that blood and meet it.

The whole point is just this: we are not to take circumstances as they appear as the argument, that we are to recognise that in relation to the universal purpose of the Lord we have come into a realm of extraordinary experiences spiritually, never to be explained on human ground. And the essential thing is that we should recognise that the Blood of the Lord Jesus is sufficient to meet that and we are to come in on that and we will get through. It is not just having a nice prayer meeting. This is a bloody battle with the forces of hell. Until we come to the time of prayer with that in view, reckoning on that, we may have a nice time but it will not get anything done. The call is not in the energy of the flesh, but in the virtue of the precious blood and to rise up when we encounter these things and say, "NO".

Notice then what these two passages bring together. Elijah went up to Carmel and put his head between his knees. James says, "he prayed again and the heavens were opened." What a lot is bound up with that "he prayed again." He said to his servant, "go and look towards the sea", Paul says "praying, watching". "Go again seven times." Elijah is praying, he is saying: "Lord, that altar, that cross has settled this whole matter, has secured this end, I stand on it; now the power of evil is to be broken and the full sovereignty of the Lord is to come in." He is standing there on that in this desperate prayer. He sends his servant to look. Nothing. "Elijah, it is no use, it is not working." Elijah says, "Lord, that blood is sufficient, I stand on it. You must come in, I stand for it." No, there is nothing. So again - "Lord, I hold on." Seven times. The perfection of persistence. Six times is no use, there is nothing and Elijah stops and says it does not work? NO, seven times and at last the man comes back and says there is a cloud. That is alright, "Go and tell Ahab" - faith lays hold on the small thing and believes that before long that small thing will be a mighty thing, that conflict in the heavens in prayer to get through to that realisation that the altar had secured. It secured the sovereignty of God in Israel. It secured the overthrow of the false gods and Elijah had to fight out on the ground of that Blood with all perseverance; seven times he hangs on and takes no notice of there being no sign.

Paul says our wrestling is up there by prayer, perseverance and watching thereunto - he says it is for the people of God. Not merely personal; this is a thing which is related to the whole Body. We are fighting a battle for the Body of Christ and the church has to come into the heavenlies to rule.

We have got to understand where we are or we shall be out, somehow the wiles of the devil will get us out unless we recognise the real nature of the thing that we are in. And one of the greatest temptations to some of the Lord's people who are in the conflict and who meet this terrific thing is that they see other of the Lord's people not in that realm, having an easy time; they never meet all this sort of thing. And they are so full of the love of the Lord - you can have that, nice little companies of the Lord's people living in the realm of love - but immediately you begin to bring in the practical outworking of Calvary, you find that that love was not so much the love of God as of people here on the earth. Conflict comes in and you find that there were personal interests there. They were never recognised until you got larger issues - the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus and the power of the blood - and you will find in any companies of the Lord's people how much flesh there is. It

comes out. The enemy begins to stir up and make impossible the establishment of the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus.

One has found it necessary to make this extra word of explanation in days of intense conflict in order that we should recognise where we are and what it is; that we should not be put out of a back door and turned aside but recognise that that Cross, that Blood is mighty, is sufficient, has accomplished the thing, but we have to stand, withstand, and having done all to stand, to remain victors on the field.

May the Lord through His word stir our hearts again and put some of the real iron of the Spirit into us to save us from our tremblings, our falterings, and wobblings.