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## Spiritual Warfare (1951)

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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"And behold, one of them that were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and smote the servant of the high priest, and struck off his ear. Then saith Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into its place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:51-52).

"And he said... But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise a wallet; and he that hath none, let him sell his cloak, and buy a sword" (Luke 22:36).

There seems to be a contradiction in those two passages - "Put up... thy sword... for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword"; "he that hath none, let him sell his cloak, and buy a sword." Whatever other explanations may be given to this seeming contradiction, I am going to ignore them and come down upon one particular point.

### **Our Warfare Spiritual Not Physical**

It is clear that the whole of the subsequent teaching of the New Testament about warfare relates to spiritual and not physical warfare. You call to mind at once passages that bear that out. "The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God" (2 Cor. 10:4). "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood" (Eph. 6:12.) (There is a change of metaphor from fighting to wrestling. 'Wrestle' is a very good word, and means to sway to and fro. Our swaying to and fro is not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers.) Moreover, we nowhere find the apostles - those to

whom these words were addressed or any others - with swords when they went out on their ministry.

So we are brought back by these passages, not to a contradiction but to this position; on the one hand "put up thy sword", because our warfare is not with flesh and blood: if you have the idea of anything in that realm, you are wrong: put away the idea, as you are commanded to put away the sword which indicates that you have that idea; and on the other hand, sell your cloak and buy a sword, that is, address yourself to active participation in spiritual warfare.

### **The Reality of Spiritual Warfare**

In the first place, there is an emphasis upon the reality of spiritual warfare. We may know all there is to know as to Bible teaching on this matter, and we may be full of information about it, but the fact remains that you and I at times, because of certain things, forget that this is exactly what is happening at a given moment. We put down our trouble to other causes. We begin to look at people or at circumstances or at our own misfortunes and disappointments: we begin to attribute it to physical conditions, and all the secondary causes are made primary; when so often the fact is that a mighty spiritual conflict is going on now and we are in it. There *are* times when the strain is due to wrong relationships and the fault is ours; it then is of no use blaming the devil for that for which we are responsible. But there are times when we cannot make any secondary cause a primary cause; we cannot say the trouble is because of this or that. There is something that we cannot get at, something behind, something that we cannot lay our hand on. It may be coming through this or that means, but it is something extra to the people or the things. I do bring this re-emphasis to you and entreat that you will seek to bear it in mind. There is a warfare in heaven, and situations are created by this, and people affected.

When, in New Testament language, we speak of heaven, do not let us think of something far away, remote, somewhere in or beyond the clouds. The New Testament makes it perfectly clear that what is meant by heavenly warfare is in the very atmosphere all around us. The devil is spoken of as "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). Now, all the air is not above the clouds. It is where we are; we are breathing it now. The heavenlies are wrapping us around all the time, and this spiritual conflict is in the very atmosphere. If you need any illustrations of that, you have only to turn to the Old Testament. "Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see" (2 Kings 6:17), and when his eyes were opened, the very near things were seen to be encompassed about by forces erstwhile and otherwise unseen. It is heavenly, but for us the better word is atmospheric. We know a little about atmospheric in spiritual conflict; but even then it is not always outward and objective, because it is spiritual. Because we have a spirit, which is the medium of connection with that which is spiritual, this thing cannot always be said to be outside of us. It seems to be right inside sometimes. We must not divide up outward and inward in that way, because flesh and blood are not barriers to spiritual conflict at all. Our bodies are not a bulwark against spiritual influences. They register them but they do not resist them. The conflict is very often inward, and so we feel this atmospheric thing right inside of us. It becomes very real, that is the point. The *reality* of this spiritual conflict is what I want to emphasize.

### **The Occasion of the Conflict - The Church's Destiny**

*(1). Conflict to Maintain Fellowship*

In passing on, let me remind you that the occasion for this conflict is the destiny of the Church. All departments and realms of truly spiritual work come into touch with these spiritual forces in opposition, and this stands to be borne out and can be verified. The nearer we get to the great, eternal conception of God as to the destiny of the Church, the Body of Christ, the nearer we get to the antagonism of the enemy, and the more pronounced it will become. We shall meet spiritual antagonism in seeking to win souls for Christ because that is the beginning of this thing, but when the full thought of God in a corporate body, the Church, is brought into view, then the full challenge of the forces of evil is registered; because it is in the Church and in relation to the Church's destiny that the whole realm of Satan is to be met and overthrown. Hence, of course, the tremendous significance of corporate life.

On the one hand, the enemy hates corporate life and will do anything to break it up, and always by the simplest means possible *whenever these will succeed*. If you are a moody person, just a mood - 'I don't feel like it' - and you very soon fall out of the corporate life. That is all the enemy needs very often with some people to put them out, and he strikes a blow at the very destiny of the Church by the moods and temperamentalism of Christians. And if on simple lines he cannot succeed, he will press to the more complex or highly developed forms, just to destroy the relatedness and fellowship of the people of God; therefore fellowship and relatedness become a battleground.

Some think fellowship is a kind of picnic, a religious festival, having a good time. Praise God for all the joy and blessedness of fellowship, but it goes far beyond that, and it is more a matter of real battle, warfare. A field of desperate conflict is the maintaining and preserving of true inward heart fellowship with all other Christians - not with just the sort that we like, but with all.

We have to think this matter out sometimes when it comes to difficulty with regard to some, and we have seriously to get before the Lord and say, 'How can I find a ground of going on with So-and-so? I have to eliminate this, ignore that, refuse to come on to certain ground with them and keep on other ground, but at all costs I must go on.' The battleground of fellowship is very real, and fellowship is truly a great factor in this spiritual conflict. Do remember it. Fight for it, stand for it and withstand for it, and, having done all, stand for it.

## *(2.) Conflict in Corporate Prayer*

And of course as a part of that there is the great corporate function of prayer. We know that this matter of spiritual warfare is carried into the realm of prayer. "With all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18). We perhaps need to be reminded from time to time that our seasons of coming together for prayer are not just to ask the Lord for a lot of things. Let me be clear here. We have, of course, to be definite with the Lord and to ask Him for things; but what things? We look at the book of Daniel, and we find that Daniel was stretched out for three whole weeks fasting and praying, giving himself to prayer. What was he asking for? He was asking for things, yes, but what things? He was asking for the fulfilment of the great purposes of God. He knew the great purposes of God in relation to God's people, for he had acquainted himself with them. He had said earlier that he "understood by the books" (Dan. 9:2). He knew the details God had given to other servants of His, and, more than that, he knew that he too was related to those purposes; they were in his own heart. It was because those purposes of God were at the time in a state of apparent suspension, because there was a contradiction to God's intention, because the people of God were not coming into those purposes and the realization of them, and because the enemies of the Lord had been given an

advantage through the unfaithfulness of the Lord's people - it was that that drew out Daniel in his praying.

And then we know there was a great warfare in heaven. We have some tremendous revelations here. During the twenty-one days of this particular season of prayer a terrific scene had been going on without his knowledge. The very principalities and powers had been so stirred and moved because of this kind of praying that they had withstood the messengers of God. A fight had been going on, and one great angel needed to come to the support of another, showing that even the greatest angelic beings are not almighty; one was not enough; there was no way for him to get through.

It is not the asking for things, it is the things that we ask for that touch heaven. When we come together for prayer, we ought to be right in line with, and in full view of, God's great revealed purposes concerning His people, and making these the burden of our hearts.

I do not underrate the importance of praying for all sorts of things, and there are times when those things may come in, but they must not occupy the ground in the place of the major things, the great purposes of God. What God needs is a people who have seen His intentions and purpose, seen the destiny of His Son and of the Church which is His Body, and are really giving themselves to pray this issue through. It will be warfare. Sometimes there is a blanket over the atmosphere; then we are tempted to give it up. But no; that is the occasion for persevering. Oh, for discerning hearts to say, "There is something happening tonight, something against us, we are not going to take this on; in the name of the Lord we set up our banners!" The Lord does need that, and He must have an instrument to serve Him in that capacity. That kind of prayer is the warfare prayer that sets the conflict going, makes us know the conflict, and calls us out to engage in it. So the occasion of the conflict is the destiny of Christ and His Body, and it touches this matter of corporate life and corporate prayer.

### **The Ground of Triumph**

Now just a word about the ground of triumph. We have an assured ground of triumph, but we must take it. I am not going into all the details of Eph. 6:10 and onward. I think the metaphors there have often got in the way of their meaning. "Wherefore take up the whole armour of God... having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness... and take the helmet of salvation," and so on - a very interesting picture; and people begin to operate in a mental way around material things. What do you do in the prayer gathering? Do you say, when you feel the battle is on, 'I do now take the helmet of salvation, I do now put on the whole armour of God'? If so, you are rather late! The Word says, "Stand... having girded... having put on...". The battle has started, and then you begin to think about finding your armour! You have to come to the prayer meeting in armour! We have to live on this ground.

#### *(a) The Reality of Truth*

And what is the ground? Dismiss the metaphor, and get right down to the spiritual reality. "Having girded your loins with truth." The ground in the first place is truth. That is to say, we must be on the ground of reality. If there is anything false about our position, anything artificial, anything unreal - and that may be in mere mental knowledge of truth, something we have been brought up in, some teaching we have received, and not heart knowledge - if we are not in the thing truly and this

position that we occupy is not utterly real, then we shall effect nothing. Of course "truth" here may also relate to freedom from error in doctrine.

*(b) Righteousness*

"Having put on the breastplate of righteousness"; the ground of righteousness. And what is it? We know by much teaching that righteousness is that which is of satisfaction to God. The whole question of righteousness is that of God's rights, what He has a right to; and what God has a right to must accord with His own nature - and God is right, righteous; He is equal. He is true. So God has to have that which satisfies Him. Justification by faith is another way of speaking of righteousness by faith, imputed righteousness. God is satisfied because of something or Someone, and that is our ground. You see, the wiles of the devil are always against that, to get us off the ground where we stand in the absolute satisfaction of God by faith. The enemy is saying, 'God is dissatisfied, God has all sorts of things against you.' What is our ground for meeting the enemy? - God's satisfaction, God's rights, secured unto Him in Jesus Christ; righteousness covering the most vital part - the breastplate of righteousness; the ground of that righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ. There may also be a reference to righteousness in our every day, practical lives. If we are unrighteous in our dealings, transactions, judgments, etc., we cannot stand against Satan.

*(c) The Good News of Peace*

"Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace". Forget the picture of the feet and the shoes. What is the thing? - peace; and it is the gospel of peace, the good news of peace. Anybody with real, Divine, good news is a menace to the kingdom of Satan. What is the enemy always trying to do? He is ever trying to make us look and feel as though we had, or were going to have, bad news. The "good news" attitude! It is only another way of speaking of joy. Feet shod with the preparation of the gospel - giving good news of peace. Go to the world with good news - and how the enemy hates it! He does not mind us going with bad news, or with a face that suggests it; but go with good news in spirit and manner! Paul and Silas went to Philippi with good news, the gospel of peace, and we know the enemy very soon rose up to try to take that off their faces and out of their voices (Acts 16:11-34). He did not succeed. Triumph over the enemy was because the 'good news' spirit was in their hearts. It is a tremendous strength against the enemy to be standing in the good of the good news, the good news of peace. He "made peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20). There is now no need for estrangement or enmity or anything like that. God is not against you. God is for you. In Christ He has shown He is for you. It is good news. You are countering something of the enemy's work when you stand on that ground.

*(d) Faith*

"Taking up the shield of faith". It is literally, "the big - or overall - shield of faith". Faith is all-embracing and relates to all the other aspects of the conflict. We all know how needful for spiritual triumph is the spirit of faith.

*(e) The Assurance of Salvation*

And "the helmet of salvation" - what is that? Well again, it is salvation, it is assurance that all is well. That covers a lot of ground. It is on the head as a helmet. It is there that all these arguments and

debates and waverings and fears and uncertainties take place. It is the strength of our salvation, the mighty strength of this salvation which is of the Lord. We have to stand under the cover of this.

*(f) The Word of God*

Finally, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God". That will mean that we know the word of God and know how to use it at the right time. You see how the Lord met the enemy in the wilderness with an apt quotation from the Word of God in which He had soaked Himself. It came not only as a quotation of Scripture but as just the right thing for the moment. Therefore "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). Do not let any of us think that we are going to triumph in the spiritual warfare if we neglect our Bibles, any more than if we neglect prayer. Neglect prayer and the Word and you will be worsted, just as you will if you neglect fellowship. These things are essential - the Word, prayer, fellowship; and all on this ground of truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation.

Well, the Lord use this, if for no further enlightenment, then at least for fresh provocation to stand and withstand. Even while we know theoretically we are in a warfare, the enemy often tries (and successfully, too) to make us to be as though we did not know, and as though it did not matter. We must be active in our knowledge of these things.