

THE INFALLIBLE POSTURE

by Ray C. Stedman

For some time now we have been studying the great passage at the close of Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. {Eph 6:10-11 RSV}

We have looked at the struggle of life in the light of Paul's great revelation that we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world's present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness in high places. We have seen that all that happens to us in our lives as Christians which discourages us, defeats us, confuses us, or renders us indifferent to the great truth of God is part of this great struggle. It is a manifestation of this conflict in which we are engaged. As we look back upon a year that has ended, we have been aware of failure, of problems, of weakness, of obstinacy and stubbornness, of rebellion, and other things in our life of which we are not proud. These again have been manifestations of this great struggle in which we are engaged. We are looking forward now to a new year and we know it, too, will be a time of conflict, another time of struggle. What can we do about this? How can we fight back? In practical terms, what can we do about the struggle we face? This is what has engaged us in this passage.

The answer, as we have seen so far, is twofold:

First, we are to put on the armor of God. Paul says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." The clear implication is that if we do not put on the whole armor of God, we will not be able to stand. If we are doubtful about that, life itself will prove it to us. We cannot stand without this armor which, as we have seen, is figurative language for something very real. It is realizing what we are in Christ and what Christ is to us now, in very practical terms. "Put on the whole armor of God" is another way of saying what Paul says in Romans: "Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God," {cf, Rom 5:11 KJV}.

This is the glory of the Scriptures. They take the same truth and put it a dozen different ways in order that we might have various approaches to these great truths, and understand them clearly. As we obey what the apostle says, and think through the implications of our faith, we find that everything rests ultimately on that first piece of armor, which is Jesus Christ as the truth. Let us gird up our loins with the girdle of truth. All Christian faith relates to and derives from the authority of Jesus Christ. He is the truth. That is the first thing. We are to put on the whole armor of God.

Second, he tells us we are to pray. Not merely put on the armor, but also pray. Not only to think about what Christ is and the great truths he reveals, but also to talk to God about them, to lean on his help, to hold conversation with him, to engage ourselves directly and personally with the God who is our strength and our help.

Ever since Christmas I have seen several young people playing with a new toy. Frequently I have seen boys and sometimes girls with walkie-talkies, keeping in contact with a pal somewhere out of sight. This is one of the delightful things about the advancement science has brought to us, this ability to keep in constant communication with someone, if we care to. But it is nothing new. It is only what God has made available in Christ from the very beginning. We can talk to him and pray about all things.

But now we come to the third and last thing in the apostle's admonition to us in this passage. It is given to us in but one word, but a word which is repeated four different times throughout this entire passage. It is the word *stand*. Notice how it comes in here,

Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the

devil. ...Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, {Eph 6:11, 6:12-13a RSV}

Everything aims at this, that we might be able to stand.

What does it mean, "to stand"?

Well, imagine a football team defending its goal line. The defense lines up on the scrimmage line and simply stands, refusing to be moved. This is called a "goal-line stand." This is exactly what this word pictures to us. We are to refuse to move from the ground of faith we have taken, refuse to yield ground, stand.

Now why does the apostle put it this way?

Why does he not say fight? Having done all, fight! Put on the whole armor of God and advance, charge. Why does he not use some military term that speaks of moving out? We must take these words seriously, for, after all, these are not play words used lightly as children would in playing games. These are serious commands given in a very serious fight. The apostle uses the word *stand* because it is the only proper word to use. It is the only word which described the final attitude we must have to insure absolute victory.

As we look at this word more carefully, we can see that it touches on three aspects of the struggle of life:

First, the use of this word *stand* reveals to us the intensity of the struggle in which we are involved. We are told to stand because there are times when that is all we can do. The most we can possibly hope to achieve at times is that we should simply stand, unmoved. There are times in battle when a soldier can do no more than try to protect himself, and stay where he is. The intensity of the conflict becomes so furious, so fierce, there is nothing else he can do but simply hold his ground. That is what this word implies to us.

Paul has already spoken in this passage about evil days which come. Thank God, all of life does not consist of evil days, but evil days come. These are days when circumstances simply stagger us, when we face some combination of events, some disheartening tragedy or circumstance that almost knocks us off our feet and we can do nothing else but hope to stand where we are. There are times when doubts plague us. We are exposed to intellectual attacks and we find we have all we can do to assert any degree of faith at all. There are situations and circumstances into which we come when we are overwhelmed with fears and anxieties and we scarcely can keep our heads, because we are under pressure. There are times when indifference seems to sap our spiritual strength so much we lose all our vitality. It drains away our will to act, our motivation, and we seem unable to make ourselves do the simplest things to maintain faith.

This is all part of the struggle. We get disturbed when we see our growth in the Christian life apparently stopped. Our ministry or our witness seems to be impossible or ineffective. All the challenge and keenness of our spiritual life is gone. What are we to do then? Paul says we are to gird up our loins, put on the whole armor of God, pray, and having done all, stand! Putting on the armor and praying will not necessarily change the circumstances. Then what? Then stand! Stay right where you are until the attack lessens. This is the final word.

Everywhere the Word of God warns us that, as we draw nearer the time of our Lord's return, evil days will come more frequently. The Bible has always told us there will be evil days, but sometimes we read certain predictions wrong. For instance, there is a passage in First Timothy 4 that refers to the latter times. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons," {1 Tim 4:1 RSV}. We read that as though it were a prediction of the closing moments of the age. But the "latter times" means the whole of the age, from our Lord's first coming until his second. Paul is not talking about one particular time of trouble reserved for the last moment; he is talking about repetitive cycles of trouble which come again and again throughout the whole course of these latter days.

But the Word also makes clear that these cycles become fiercer in intensity and more widespread in their impact as the age draws to its close. There is a growing awareness in our day that we live in a one-world community. We no longer are separated from other peoples by great distances of thought or time. What happens on the

other side of the world today affects us tomorrow. We are very much aware of this.

Evil days were once limited geographically. In the past, persecution grew intense in various places, and economic pressures became severe in certain areas while in other areas things were fine. But now, as the age goes on, these areas of trouble become more widespread. Now they are worldwide in their impact. Surely we do not have to press this point. In America, we must realize we are living on an island of relative peace and security in the midst of an enormous sea of trouble and distress. That sea is constantly eroding away our relative security. It is an irresistibly rising tide, the lapping of whose waters we can already hear. Conditions are not getting better in our world, but worsening. Any honest person, facing world conditions, must admit this. The vaunted solutions of sincere men are not working. The approaches to these problems upon which men pin their faith -- such as education, scientific discoveries, economic improvements, better legislation -- these things are not working.

Not that they do not have their place; we are not suggesting they be discarded. They are working to some degree, but they are not solving the problem. It is getting worse, because, as we have seen all along, the issue never lies in these superficial, surface realms. It lies much deeper, in the hearts and souls of men under the domination of cruel and resistless power that dominates the world, whom Paul calls "the world rulers of this present darkness." Only the delivering strength of Jesus Christ is adequate to deal with them.

This is being confirmed to us from rather unexpected sources these days. Listen to this paragraph from a contemporary non-Christian writer:

"I remind you of what is happening in the great cities of the earth today: Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, London, Manchester, Paris, Tokyo, Hongkong, and the rest. These cities are for the most part vast pools of human misery, networks of raw human nerves exposed without benefit of illusion or hope to the new godless world wrought by industrial man. The people in these cities are lost. Some of them are so lost that they no longer even know it, and they are the real lost ones. They haunt the movies for distraction. They gamble. They depress their sensibilities with alcohol, or they seek strong sensations to dull their sense of a meaningless existence."

That is the world we are facing in 1966, and because of it, there are many who are faltering in their faith. This very week the newspapers in our area reported the resignation from the Christian ministry of a man who once was very closely associated with us here. He is giving up his ministry, and doing so, he says, because he no longer can stand it, no longer can face it. This man's ministry was once in the power and effectiveness of the Word of God, but because his faith began to fail, his ministry failed, and now he is quitting. This past year has witnessed a half-dozen outstanding Christian leaders who suffered moral collapse and have been laid on the shelf, their ministry and their testimony brought to an end. This is happening everywhere.

God is permitting this in order to separate the phony from the true. He says he will do this; the Word makes it very clear. There is a passage in Hebrews where we are definitely told that the things which can be shaken will be shaken. God is allowing these testings to reveal the genuine and to remove what can be shaken in order that what cannot be shaken might remain. Therefore, evil days come. When they come into your own personal experience you will need to remember that the Word of God to you is to put on the whole armor of God, to pray, and then stand. Perhaps you will realize that there is nothing else you can do, but that you can win if you stand.

Not long ago, I once ran across a letter from a missionary out in the jungles of New Guinea, writing to his friends at home. He caught the very spirit of our Christian faith in these words:

Man, it is great to be in the thick of the fight, to draw the old devil's heaviest guns, to have him at you with depression and discouragement, slander, disease. He doesn't waste time on the lukewarm bunch. He hits good and hard when a fellow is hitting him. You can always measure the weight of your blow by the one you get back. When you're on your back with fever and at your last ounce of strength, when some of your converts backslide, when you learn that your most promising inquirers are only fooling, when your mail gets held up, and

some don't bother to answer your letters, is that the time to put on mourning? No, sir. That's the time to pull out all the stops and shout, Hallelujah! The old fellow's getting it in the neck and hitting back. Heaven is leaning over the battlements and watching. "Will he stick with it?" And as they see Who is with us, as they see the impossibility of failure, how disgusted and sad they must be when we run away. We're going to stand.

Stand: This is the Christian word.

There is a second aspect of the struggle indicated by this word *stand*. It indicates to us the character of the battle the Christian faces. We are to stand because this is a defensive action, primarily. The proper defense will win the day. I know this is oftentimes misunderstood, for we frequently hear the proverb, "The best defense is a good offense." But if a castle is under attack from an army, the battle is not won by those in the castle venturing forth to overwhelm the army outside. The battle is won by repelling all invasion. This is a picture of our Christian life. This is a defensive battle, not offensive. We are not out to take new ground; we are to defend that which is already ours. In the Christian battle the offensive work was done over 1900 years ago at the cross and the resurrection. The Lord Jesus is the only one who has the power and strength to take the offensive in this great battle with the prince of darkness. But he has already done that. All that we possess as believers is already given to us. We do not fight for it. We do not battle to be saved, or fight to be justified, or forgiven, or accepted into the family of God. All these things are given to us. They were won by another, who, in the words of Paul in Colossians, took principalities and powers and nailed them to his cross, triumphing over them in it, and led them captive who had held the world captive.

But we are to fight to use all this, to enjoy it, to experience it fully. The enemy is trying to keep us from realizing what we have and using it to the full. This is where the battle lines are. We do not need to take new ground as Christians. We cannot. All has been accomplished; all is given to us. As Jude says, in almost the last word of the New Testament, "earnestly contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints," {cf, Jude 1:3 RSV}. We are to hold on to that which God gives us and not let any of it be lost or taken from us, as to our use of it. This is what the phrase "contend earnestly for the faith" means. It does not mean to attack everyone who does not agree with you, and brand them as a Communist! It means to hold on to what God has already given you and utilize it to the full. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong," {1 Cor 16:13 KJV}. Do not surrender an inch of ground, even though others do.

"Well," someone says, "This is so negative, so defensive. I don't like to hear talk like this. It sounds as though Christians are to cover their heads and avoid all contact with the world, and try somehow to get through life, and on to heaven uncontaminated." That, of course, is exactly the twist that the devil delights to give this word *stand*. It is defensive action, but the amazing thing is that this kind of defensive actions becomes the greatest offense the Christian can mount. The fact is, the Christian who learns to stand, to give up no segment of his faith, but to put on the armor of God and to pray and thus be immovable, is the only Christian who in any way will reflect the love of Christ in the midst of unlovely situations. He is the only one who will be able to manifest peace and certainty and poise and assurance in the midst of a very troubled and unhappy world.

Christians who learn to stand make possible some degree of rest and enjoyment for the world. We are "the salt of the earth" {Matt 5:13a}, Jesus said. Ah, but if the salt has lost its savor, what good is it? -- "good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men!" {Matt 5:13c KJV}. This is, by and large, what the world is doing with the church these days -- treading it under foot as worthless, useless. This is because we have not learned to stand. But when a Christian learns this, it is the very fact that he can stand when everyone else is falling that draws the attention of others and makes them seek his secret. I remind you again of those accurate words of Kipling, describing what manhood is:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;

This is what makes people stop, look and listen, and say, "What is it that these people have? They don't give way like we do, they don't go along with the rest of the crowd. They seem to be able to resist these compelling pressures that we so easily give in to."

If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

This is what manhood is. This is what God is after. This is what he wants to make us in Christ. But the battle is not to become this kind of a man, for this is the kind of man Christ makes us when we follow him. The battle is to show it, to reveal it, to manifest what we are and thus to refuse to believe the lies that keep us weak and make us act like an animal rather than a man. Put on the whole armor of God, all that Christ is, pray, and having done all, stand!

There is a third aspect of the struggle suggested by this word. It is the certainty of victory. If putting on the armor of God and prayer makes it possible to stand unmoved and immovable, then nothing more is required to win. After all, if a castle cannot be taken, the attacking army has nothing left to do but to withdraw. There is nothing else it can do. It is defeated, beaten. We have been talking a great deal in this series about the cleverness of Satan, his subtlety of attack, "the wiles of the devil," and the impossibility of defeating him by mere human wisdom. We have said that every saint in the record of Scripture, every believer throughout the history of time has been, at one time or another, defeated by the devil when he tried to match wits with him in his own strength. This is true. But it is also true that when any saint, any believer, even the newest and weakest, stands in the strength of Christ, puts on the whole armor of God, and, in dependence upon the presence of God in prayer, stands, the devil is always defeated.

This is because of a basic weakness, a fatal flaw, in the devil's approach. When the believer stands on the ground of faith the devil always overreaches himself, he goes too far. This is because he commits himself to extremes, and in that lies his defeat. Sooner or later the reality which is truth must become apparent. The devil can never take the ground of truth because that, of course, would defeat his own aims. He cannot defend and support God, for he is out to attack and outwit him. Because God is truth, all that the devil can do is take the ground of untruth, of extremes, distortions, wrongness. Ultimately, because God is truth (and truth is always the reflection of God) and God never changes, truth then must finally prevail. This has been the history of the world, has it not? It will be the continuing record of history from now on.

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln put it as well as it can be put in the famous quotation,

"It is possible to fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but it is impossible to fool all of the people all of the time."

Truth comes out. God is truth. Therefore, live with it long enough, stand on it long enough, and it will prevail and reveal itself. This explains what we have referred to at times as "the phenomena of fashions in evil." Anyone who has been a Christian for a considerable period of time learns that error comes in cycles, like clothing cycles. You may be out of style for awhile, but if you stay with the same style long enough, it will come back in. If you are standing on the truth of God, there will be times when it will be regarded with utter scorn by the world and laughed at and you will be made a mockery of. But if you follow these foolish people who think they must adjust to every sweeping current of the time and try to maintain what they call "intellectual respectability" at all times, you will find that as fast as you adjust, styles change and you are out of style again. But if you stand fast on what God has declared unchangeable, you will find a strange phenomenon happening: The very truths which ten years ago were looked down upon, and laughed at, and scorned by the world will suddenly come into fashion again, and will be held up as the newest discovery of the brilliant intellect of men. Then you, who have been believing it right along, are right back in style again. This is because truth never changes.

The devil ultimately must be defeated if anyone will simply stand on what God has said. We might even feel a little sorry for the devil, for it is his cruel fate continually to be defeated by the very weapons he tries to use

against God and his people. This is why it is so foolish to believe the lies of the devil.

I often think the devil is like the villain in the old Western melodramas. Remember how the plot always develops? It looks so threatening to the heroine, for the villain is always there twirling his mustache and rubbing his hands, thinking he has her in his power. But at the critical moment the hero arrives and the plot suddenly changes. The villain is beaten by his own devices and he slinks off the stage muttering, "Curses! Foiled again!" That is the devil's fate when he attacks any Christian who is willing to stand.

The cross is the great example of this. The cross looked like the supreme achievement of the devil, the supreme moment of victory when all the powers of darkness were howling with glee as they saw the Son of God beaten and wounded, rejected and despised, hanging upon a cross, naked, before all the world. It looked like the triumph of darkness.

Jesus said it was: "This is your hour," he said, "and the power of darkness," {Luke 22:53b}. But it was that very moment when the devil lost. In the cross all that the devil had risked was defeated, beaten down, and the devil and all his angels were disarmed and openly displayed as defeated by the power of Jesus Christ. This is what God does all through life. The devil sends sickness, defeat, death, darkness, pain, suffering and tragedy. It is all the work of Satan. But that is not the whole of the story. God takes those very things -- those very things! -- and uses them to strengthen us and bless us, to teach us and enlarge us and fulfill us, if we stand. This is the whole story.

Here is a quotation from a Christian man who has been an invalid all his life -- one of those lonely, obscure people who live in constant pain -- who does not know what it means to be able to use his physical body in any way except in pain and suffering. But he writes this:

Loneliness is not a thing of itself, not an evil sent to rob us of the joys of life. Loneliness, loss, pain, sorrow, these are disciplines, God's gifts to drive us to his very heart, to increase our sensitivities and understanding, to temper our spiritual lives so that they may become channels of his mercy to others and so bear fruit for his kingdom. But these disciplines must be seized upon and used, not thwarted. They must not be seen as excuses for living in the shadow of half-lives, but as messengers, however painful, to bring our souls into vital contact with the living God, that our lives may be filled to overflowing with himself in ways that may, perhaps, be impossible to those who know less of life's darkness.

This is what it means to stand.

One of these days, the Bible says, the struggle will end. It will end for all of us at the end of our lives, but it can end before that in the coming of the Lord. Someday it will be over, there is no doubt. And someday it will be written of some, as it is recorded in the book of Revelation, "They overcame him [the great dragon, the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death," {Rev 12:11}. The great issue of life is not how much money we make or how much favor we gather, how much of a name we make for ourselves. The great issue, above all, is whether it can be written of us as we come to the end, that we overcame by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony, for we loved not our lives unto death.

Prayer

These are perilous days, our Father. We are made aware of this by our newspapers, and yet how false a view of life our newspapers give us. If we look at life from that point of view we will feel that life is wonderful and glorious, has no problems, and everyone is getting along fine, or we will be utterly cast down in defeat and disappointment with no hope. But thank you, Lord, that we do not get our view of life from the newspapers, but from your living word, from the reality of it. Help us to believe it and obey it and thus to stand, undefeated and undefeatable. In Christ's name, Amen.

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