

DEFENSE AGAINST DEFEAT, Part 2

by Ray C. Stedman

Discouragement, confusion, indifference -- these are the signs of the devil's working. Discouragement, with all that means in terms of depression of spirit, the playing over and over again of vain regrets, and the dark outlook on life we call the blues. Confusion, with its doubt and uncertainty, disillusionment, strife, discord, and argument. Indifference, with its cynicism, callousness, coldness, and bitterness toward one another and toward the things of God. These are the major evidences of the devil's working through the flesh, the evil channel of the inner man. To produce these things, as we have already seen, the devil approaches us through our circumstances, or feelings, and through the workings of our minds by implanting doubts and uncertainties.

The great question we are facing is, "What do you do as a Christian when these things occur to you?" How do you handle these? What do you do in your life to counteract?

I will tell you what many Christians do -- they complain!

They say, "Oh, the devil's really been after me. What a time I've been having, what a rough time I'm going through. Everything is so discouraging and there is simply nothing I can do about it." As one woman put it, "I think when God sends me tribulation, he expects me to tribulate a little bit!" There is the clear implication in this approach that God is somehow to blame. We do not say so, of course. We never say that, but we leave hanging in the air the clear suggestion that God is giving us too big a share of difficulty.

There is nothing which more surely indicates we have already succumbed to the wiles of the devil than to complain about what happens to us. This is why the Word of God invariably points out that the mark of a Christian who has learned how to be a Christian is that he rejoices in everything, gives thanks in all things.

Now, that does not mean he enjoys everything. Nor does it mean that he merely pretends to rejoice in everything. There is nothing as ghastly as the forced smile people put on and the flippant attitude they assume in the midst of difficulties because they think this is what a Christian ought to do. It is possible genuinely to rejoice through tears, and there is nothing which more surely indicates that we have failed to understand what it means to be a Christian than a whining, complaining, griping, grouching attitude toward what happens to us in life.

Do not be surprised at the devil's attack. Of course he attacks. That is his character. That is his nature. We need not be surprised that he does this. Furthermore, God lets him do it. This is the clear revelation of Scripture. He permits these attacks because, for one thing, we need them. We never would develop or grow properly if we were not attacked in this manner. Again, it is this which ultimately accomplishes God's will. The whole outworking of God's scheme could never be brought to pass were it not that God permits the devil to do his work today within the limits of God's overriding will. Let us never forget that. God allows these things to happen, and all the writers of Scripture agree on this.

Peter says, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial which you must undergo, as though some strange thing were happening to you," {cf, 1 Pet 4:12}. The Lord Jesus himself said, "In the world you shall have tribulation," {John 16:33a RSV}. That is the nature of things. "But," he adds, "be of good cheer. I have overcome the world," {John 16:33b RSV}. The Apostle Paul says, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13a}.

This is exactly the opposite of the way we frequently feel. We love to think that something most unusual is happening to us. "No one has ever gone through what we are going through. No one has had to undergo the depression of spirit that we feel." But Paul says you are so wrong. "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, ..." {cf, 1 Cor 10:13a}. So stop complaining about what happens. It is God's will for you. Let us face that. And instead of a fretful, peevish, whining attitude, let us do what the

word of God says to do when these things occur. What is that? "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil," {Eph 6:11 RSV}. There is no other way to handle it, there is no other solution to these basic human problems than this. Read it again in Ephesians 6:14-18:

Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the naming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. {Eph 6:14-18}

We have already seen that the armor described here is symbolic, figurative.

The first three pieces of this armor are symbolic of what Christ is to us, what he is prepared to be to us. If we are Christians at all, we have already put on these first three pieces, and the tense of the verb which is used here indicates that. "Having girded your loins with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace" -- is something we have already done if we are Christians at all.

If we have not done this then we are not Christians and we need to start there.

But now, having done this, when we feel discouraged, upset, defeated, depressed, anxious, fearful, confused, uncertain -- whatever the form of attack may be -- we are to remind ourselves first of all of these great truths. This is the ground upon which we stand. This is that which makes it possible to do battle at all. We are to remind ourselves that Christ is the truth. We have found him to be the key to life. He has demonstrated himself to be the ultimate revelation of reality, the way things really are. He is the key to life, the secret of life.

If someone says that this is merely an act of faith on your part, that this is simply a blind assumption, your answer ought to be, "Of course it is," because everyone begins there. Every man begins with an assumption of authority. He begins with an act of faith. All accept some principle or person as the final authority in life. It is either another religious leader, or perhaps a principle such as the scientific method, or even nothing more than "what I feel is right," but man must always start with an act of faith. The distinctive thing about Christianity is that Jesus Christ has more clearly demonstrated the right to be accepted as that authority than anyone else or any other principle in the world today. The Christian therefore bets his life, in a sense, that Jesus Christ is the real authority, the true revelation of things as they really are. He has objectively demonstrated it and subjectively confirmed it to you as a Christian. This is where you must start. Always come back to this. Christ is the truth!

Then, Christ is your righteousness. It is not your behavior, or your lack of behavior, which makes you acceptable to God.

This does not mean, of course, as we will see later on, that someone can say, "Well, if that is the case, then I'll behave as I please. It doesn't make any difference." Paul says in Romans that you cannot do this. It shows you do not understand what God has said to you at all if that is what you say. No, you cannot say that. Rather, you realize that God has accepted you, not because of what you do, or have not done, but because of what Christ is on your behalf, the work that he has done for you. You stand in his righteousness, "accepted in the Beloved," {Eph 1:6 KJV}. You have the same value in God's sight as Christ has, and, therefore, Christ is your peace.

That is the third thing. This is the confirmation of the claim that he is our righteousness. It proves that the cross really did do something, because the experience of it in our life now is that we have a sense of peace. We are not lost in a sea of relativity. We have a solid rock on which to stand, an anchor of unchanging certainty in the midst of a constantly changing, variable world. We have a place on which to stand and fight, and an adequate power with which to face every situation. That is what Jesus Christ is to anyone who knows him. That is peace. That is morale.

A word of warning: Do not try to start with peace. When you get troubled or upset, when attacks come, do not try to start with making your heart feel at peace. This is a mistake many people make; they try to conjure up some kind of feeling of peace within and succeed only in upsetting themselves more. Do not start with peace. Start with truth. Christ is the truth. Work your way back down through truth and righteousness and you will come out at peace. This is the way to begin.

Let us take a closer look at this battle. If we remind ourselves of these great truths, they ought to set our hearts at rest. But every one of us knows that, though they often set our hearts at rest, there are times when they do not. We find ourselves still depressed. We are still filled with doubts, still disturbed. Perhaps there is no good reason for us to feel this way. We may even wake up in a blue mood first thing in the morning though we went to bed very happy. There is no good reason for our depression. We do not know why this has happened. There is no explanation we can see. There is nothing wrong physically (and the physical elements of our life can have a very great bearing on our feelings) but still we feel depressed.

Well, what is happening? We are experiencing what Paul calls here "the flaming darts of the evil one." These are part of the wiles of the devil, the wiliness, the stratagems of Satan.

They come to us in various forms. Sometimes they are evil thoughts and imaginations which intrude themselves suddenly upon our thinking, oftentimes at the most incongruous times. We may be reading the Bible, we may be bowed in prayer, we may be thinking about something else quite entirely when all of a sudden some filthy, lewd thought flashes into our mind. What is this? One of the fiery darts of the evil one! We ought to recognize it as such.

Sometimes these come as doubts, and even blasphemies, sudden feelings we experience that perhaps this Christianity is nothing after all but a big hoax, some dream which men had. Perhaps we feel that it can all be explained psychologically, or that Jesus Christ is really a humbug, a victim of self-delusion. Perhaps the world is not the way we have been taught it is, and things are not the way the Bible says. You have doubtless experienced these times. All Christians have had this sudden feeling that perhaps it is all a fantasy, imagination. Again, these fiery darts may come in the form of sudden fears, anxieties, a fleeting sensation that things are all wrong. We cannot seem to shake it. Though we try to reason ourselves out of it, we cannot.

What are these feelings? Well, whatever form they may take, they are always from the same source. They are the fiery darts of the wicked one. We are the biggest fools on earth if we do not see them in that light, and deal with them as such. And, in whatever form they may come to us, they always have two characteristics.

First, they seem to arise out of our own thoughts. They seem to come right from our inner selves. We feel, "This is something I am thinking," and oftentimes it is a shocking thing. But the devil is really whispering to us. He is communicating to us. He is influencing us. Ah yes, but it does not seem like that to us. In our ignorance and innocence we blame ourselves, "How can I think a thing like this if I am a Christian? Can a Christian have such a lewd and filthy thought as this? Can I really be a Christian if I think like this. I must not be one after all." This, of course, is exactly why the devil sent his thought to you, because this is what he wants you to think. If it is a doubt (and we are always exposed to doubts, these sudden attacks upon faith, these sudden feelings that Christianity is not as sure and certain as it once seemed to us), we say to ourselves, "I must have already lost my faith or I would not think like this. What is the matter with me? How can I be a Christian and even have a thought like this?" So we try to repress the thought. We think, "There must be something wrong; we should not feel like this," and we push the thought down into our subconscious. Yes, but we know it is still there, lurking underneath, and we feel dishonest because we are not even willing to look at it. This thing takes its toll of us in physical ways as well as in mental and emotional strain and tension. We feel uncertain and confused because we are convinced that the opposite of faith is doubt. We think if we have doubts we cannot have faith and if we have faith we do not have doubts. Therefore, if we have doubts then we must not and cannot be men and women of faith. We do not see this as the lie of the devil. We think it is our own faithless thinking. This is always the first characteristic of these things. They seem to come to us out of ourselves and are identified with us in our thinking.

The second thing is that they are always an attack upon our position in Christ as the truth, our righteousness, and our peace. These things are always an insinuation of doubt about those matters -- never about anything

else. They are an attack upon those areas of faith. This is always the way of the devil. Read the Bible from beginning to end and you see it all the way through. He said to Eve in the garden, "Has God said unto thee ...? Did God say that ...?" {cf, Gen 3:1}. There is the implication of doubt. He said to Jesus, in the temptation in the wilderness, "If thou be the Son of God, then turn these stones into bread," {cf, Matt 4:3, Luke 4:3}. If! There is always the insinuation that these things are not true. This is the way he raises doubts, creates guilt, arouses fear. These are the attacks of the evil one.

What are we to do? How are we to combat these things successfully? Well, the apostle says, "Take the shield of faith with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one." Notice that he did not say the shield of belief. We have already reminded ourselves of our belief when we recall we have put on the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, and the equipment of the gospel of peace. That is our belief in what Christ is to us. But faith is more than that. This is very important to see. Faith is acting upon belief. Faith is decision, action, resolution. Faith is saying, "Yes, I believe Christ is the truth. He is my righteousness, he is my peace. Therefore this, and this, and this, must follow. Faith is working out the implications of belief. When you say "Therefore" you move from belief into faith. Faith is particularizing, if you want it put in one word. It is taking the general truth and applying it to the specific situation and saying, "If this be true, then this must follow." That is the shield of faith.

Do you do that? Have you learned how to take the shield of faith when doubts come? Do you say? ...

"Christ is the truth. He is the basic revelation of things which really are. He has demonstrated it. Therefore, I cannot accept this thought that Christianity is a hoax. I cannot believe both. I cannot believe that Christ is the truth and that this thing is true, too. I have committed myself to Christ because I have been persuaded that he has demonstrated truth fully. I stand on that ground. Therefore I must reject this insinuation."

Do you reason? ...

"Christ is the truth. Therefore I cannot believe this subtle philosophy which exalts man and makes God unnecessary in human affairs. I must reject it. Since I have found Christ true, I cannot believe this sudden feeling I have of unreality. I must regard it as what Christ says it is. It is from the devil. Jesus Christ says he is a liar from the beginning. Therefore this is a lie and I reject it."

Do you say these things?

Our problem is that we have become so accustomed to believing our feelings as though they were facts. We never examine them. We never take them and look at them and ask, "Is this true?" We simply say, "I feel this way. Therefore it must be true." This is why so many are constantly defeated -- because they accept their feelings as facts.

We are to say:

"Christ is my righteousness. I am linked with him. I am one with him. His life is my life and my life is his life. We are married. Therefore, I cannot believe this lie that these evil thoughts are my thoughts. They are not my thoughts at all. They are thoughts which come into my mind, are insinuated there by another force. It is not my thinking at all. No, it is the devil again. I do not want these thoughts. I do not like them. I reject them. I do not want them in my thinking; therefore they are not mine. They are the devil's children, and I'll spank them and send them back where they belong!"

Using the shield of faith means refusal to feel condemned or to feel guilty:

"God loves me. He says so. He says nothing will change that. Nothing will separate us. Nothing I do or fail to do will separate us! All right, then I will believe that, and therefore I cannot believe this thought that God does not love me and want me."

You see, you cannot have both. No man can serve two masters.

"Christ is the ground of my peace. Therefore it is his responsibility to take me through everything. He is the adequate One. He has come to carry me through every situation. So I cannot, I will not, believe this fear, this sudden anxiety which grips my heart. I will not believe that it is from me. It is simply sent to shake my confidence in Christ. It is an attempt to destroy my peace. But Christ is adequate for even this and therefore I refuse to change."

This is what James calls "resisting the devil," {Jas 4:7b}. This is the shield of faith. This is refusing to believe the lie that if you have doubts you cannot have faith. Because that is a lie. Doubt is always an attack on faith. The fact that you have doubts proves that you have faith. They are not opposites at all. Doubt is the proof of the reality of faith. Therefore re-examine the ground of your faith and reassert it, and remember that feelings are not necessarily at all.

And James says that, if you keep on resisting the devil, "he will flee from you," {Jas 4:7c}. Think of that! He will flee from you. You do it again and again every time the thought comes back. You resist it on that basis. You refuse to give up your position. And, sooner or later, inevitably, the doubts will clear. Your feelings will change, the attacks cease, and you will be back again in the sunshine of faith and the experience of the love and joy of God.

That is what Paul is talking about: "Take the shield of faith. It is able to quench every fiery dart of the evil one." The shield of faith is enough in itself. It is all you need. You do not really need the remainder, that is, the last two pieces of the armor. It may sound strange to say that, but it is true. You do not need any more because this is able to quench every fiery dart of the wicked one. It alone would see you through, if that were all you had.

Then why are we given more? Because we are not only to be conquerors. The Bible says we are to be "more than conquerors," {Rom 8:37}. We are not only to win, we are to win victoriously, triumphantly, abundantly. Remember that John said, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world," {1 Jn 4:4 KJV}. Paul adds, "Where sin abounds, grace does much more abound," {cf, Rom 5:20}. We are intended to do more than barely make it to heaven. We are designed to triumph, to be fearless, to be not only unconquered but unconquerable!

So there is more here: "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit." We will reserve till later examining how fully, adequately, and abundantly -- more than adequately -- this armor is designed to defend us in the midst of a very difficult and changing world. It is thus that we can be "strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," thus, that we can "stand in the evil day."

I think so often of these words of Kipling, describing the pressures of life:

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:
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:

If you can dream -- and not make dreams your master:
If you can think -- and not make thoughts your aim
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools.
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,

And stop and build 'em up with worn out tools:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings -- nor lose the common touch
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you:
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run
Yours is the earth and everything that's in it,
And which is more -- you'll be a Man, my son!

That is a very eloquent description of life. It is exactly what the Word of God is designed to prepare us for. That is what it means to be "strong in the Lord and in the power of his might."

Prayer

Our Father, with what sharpness we realize that this but describing for us the life we are living, the situation in which we find ourselves, the very circumstance in which we now are. Lord, help us to be men and women of faith, to realize that your word has brought to us the truth as it is in Jesus. Let us not fling away our confidence, nor cast away our reliance upon that unshakable word, but trust in you and show to the world that this is the only thing which can keep a man or a woman standing in the midst of pressures which defeat and ruin and blast and destroy life. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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