

ADVICE WHEN ATTACKED

by Ray C. Stedman

We are drawing near the close of our study in Paul's great exhortation found in Chapter 6 of Ephesians, beginning with these words in Verse 10:

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}

Though we have developed this in some detail in these studies, we have been following a very simple, basic approach:

We looked first at the struggle, the conflict against what Paul calls, "the world rulers of this present darkness" {Eph 6:12 RSV}, as suggesting to us the only adequate explanation of what is going on in our world today, and has been for many centuries. We saw that this struggle is synonymous with life as we know it. It describes what is happening right where you are in the midst of the world, with evil rampant around you and seemingly everybody and everything doing all they can to discourage you, drag you down, and defeat you. As Paul put it, in a vivid description of his own experience, "fightings within and fears without," {cf, 2 Cor 7:5}.

Second, we tried to spend some time with what the apostle says should be our response to this struggle, described in the phrase, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil," {cf, Eph 6:13}. This is a tremendously practical section describing how Jesus Christ (who is himself the armor that is provided for us) can meet our moral and spiritual need. We learned here what to do when doubts assail us, fears dismay us, false teaching deludes us, or coldness prevails in our lives. Now we must go a step further and explore the second thing the apostle says the Christian should do when he is facing conflict with the wiles, the stratagems, the devious suggestiveness of the devil.

The first defense, he says, is to put on the armor of God. We have looked at that {cf, Eph 6:14-17}. The second defense is to pray. Two steps: put on the armor of God, and pray.

That brings us to Verses 18-20 of Chapter 6:

Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. {Eph 6:18-20 RSV}

There is a very strong and powerful relationship between putting on the armor of God and praying. These two things belong together; in fact, one grows out of the other. It is not enough to put on the armor of God; you must also pray. It is not enough to pray; you must also have put on the armor of God. It is impossible to divide these two.

As we have been attempting to see, putting on the armor of God is not something merely figurative, it is an actual thing you do. It is remembering what Christ is to you, and thinking through the implications of it in terms of your present struggle and experience. Putting on the armor is essentially something that is done in the realm of your thought life. We have been trying to make that clear. It is an adjustment of the attitude of your heart to reality, to things as they really are. It is thinking through the implications of the fact which revelation discloses. This is always the necessary thing to do in trying to face life.

Our problem with life is that we do not see it as it is. We are so deluded by it, we suffer from such strange

illusions. It looks to us to be quite different than it is and this is why we desperately need and must have the revelation of the facts of Scripture. Life is what God has declared it to be. When we face it on that basis, we discover the revelation is right, it is accurate, it does describe what is happening. And more, it tells us why things happen and what lies behind them. All this is part of putting on this armor, appropriating Christ to your life in terms of your present situation. It is all done in the realm of the thought life.

What do you do when you put on the breastplate of righteousness? You think of Christ and what his righteousness means to you as imparted to you. What do you do when you take up the sword of the Spirit? You give heed, as we saw, to those flashes of Scripture, those portions of the Word of God that come to your mind that have immediate application to the situation you are facing. But again, this all is done in the realm of the thought life. At first it takes time to work all this through. This is something we have to learn how to do. As we learn how to do it, the process becomes much more rapid. Almost instantaneously we can think through this line of approach to the problems we are facing. This is what Paul calls, in the second letter to the Corinthians, "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ," {2 Cor 10:5 KJV}.

I stress that this is done in the realm of the thought life because this is very important, for it is dangerous to think and not to do. It is a violation of our basic humanity merely to think and not have that thought result at last in some activity. This is where many Christians go astray. They are content to think about doctrinal matters, think through these great facts revealed about the gospel and about life, but never make a practical application in any way. As I have suggested, this is very dangerous because we human beings are made both to think and to do, and it must be in that order. We receive information first, we assimilate it, correlate it, and think it through. This is the first thing. And then we act upon that which we have both thought and felt. Our emotions and our mind, working upon our will, bring us at last to activity. This is the normal and proper procedure for human living.

All our doing must and will grow out of thinking. Sometimes we speak of "thoughtless" actions. We say of someone that "he acted thoughtlessly." Actually this is impossible. You cannot act thoughtlessly. What we really mean is that someone has acted with very superficial, shallow thinking. But it is actually impossible ever to act without having first thought. Yet it is possible to think without ever acting. That is what the apostle is bringing us to here. To think without doing is inevitably frustrating. It is like cooking and never eating. You can imagine how frustrating that would be. It is like writing letters that you never mail. Your friends may be glad of that, but it is very frustrating to you! So the complement to putting on the armor of God, the activity which results from it, is to pray.

First to think through and then to pray.

Notice the order of this. This is extremely important. The apostle does not reverse this and say, first pray and then put on the armor of God. This is what we try to do, and this is why our prayer life is so feeble, so impotent. There is great practical help here if we follow carefully the designated order of Scripture. I think most Christians, if they were honest, would confess that they are dissatisfied with their prayer life. They feel it is inadequate and perhaps infrequent. All of us at times struggle to improve ourselves. Sometimes we struggle to improve the quality as well as the quantity of our prayer lives. Sometimes we adopt schedules we attempt to maintain, or long lists of names and projects and places we try to remember in prayer, or we attempt to discipline ourselves in some way to a greater ministry in this realm. In other words, we begin with the doing, but when we do this we are starting at the wrong place. We are violating our basic human nature in doing it this way. The place to start is not with the doing, but with the thinking.

This is always the place to start in motivating human life, and this is what the apostle suggests. Prayer follows putting on the armor of God. It is a natural, normal outgrowth. Now, I am not suggesting that there is no place for Christian discipline; there is. I am not suggesting that we will not need to take our wills and put them to a task and follow through. There is this need. But the place where discipline should come in is not, first, in prayer, but in doing what is involved in "putting on the armor of God." First, think through the implications of our faith, and then prayer will follow naturally much more easily. When it comes in that order it will be thoughtful prayer, prayer which has meaning and significance. It will be relevant prayer.

This is the problem with much of our praying now, is it not? It is so shallow, so superficial, on a level with

that jingle you have all heard of the man who prayed, "Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more." Sometimes our prayers are only a cut above the simple childhood prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." What is needed? Prayer should be an outgrowth of thoughtfulness about the implications of faith. This adds depth, meaning, and significance to it. Prayer should be pointed and purposeful.

Now, basically, what is prayer?

We are talking about this great theme as the apostle has brought it to our attention, but what, basically, is prayer?

It is a mere superstition as some people think -- a mumbling, a talking to yourself under the deluded dream that you are addressing a deity?

Or is it a form of black magic by which some heavenly genie is expected to manipulate life to our desire, a kind of ecclesiastical Aladdin's lamp that we rub and things are supposed to happen? I am afraid many have that concept of prayer.

Or is it, as certain groups tell us, self-communion, a psychological form of talking to yourself in which you discover depths in your being that were there all the time, but you did not realize it until you prayed?

All of these ideas of prayer are quite dissimilar to what is mentioned in Scripture. Paul here recognizes two categories of prayer, which he calls (1) all prayer, and (2) supplication.

1. "All prayer" is the widest classification; "supplication" is the specific request that is made in prayer. If you take the whole range of Bible teaching on this great subject of prayer you will find that underlying all the biblical presentation is the idea that prayer is conversation with God. This is all it is. Prayer is simply conversing with God.

As we understand the position of a Christian, a believer, he is in the family of God. Therefore, prayer is family talk. It is friendly, intimate, frank, unrestricted talking with God, and it is into this close and intimate relationship that every individual is brought by faith in Jesus Christ. By faith in Christ we pass out of the realm of being strangers to God and aliens to the family of God and into the intimate family circle of the children of God. It is easy to talk within a family circle, but think what harm is done to that intimacy if people refuse to talk. Prayer, basically then, is simply carrying on a conversation with God.

2. But supplication is asking some specific request. James says, "You have not because you ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2 KJV}. In our conversation with God it is perfectly proper to ask, because we are children and he is a father. What the apostle is saying is, "After you have put on the armor of God, after you have thought through the implications of your faith in the ways which have been suggested previously, then talk to God about it. Tell him the whole thing. Tell him your reactions, tell him how you feel, describe your relationship to life around you and your reactions to them, and ask him for what you need.

Prayer is often considered to be so high and holy that it has to be carried on in some artificial language or tone of voice. You hear this so frequently from pulpits. Pastors adopt what has well been called a "stained glass voice," and pray in some artificial manner as though God were far off in some distant corner of the universe.

Prayer is a simple conversation with the Father. It is what the apostle describes so beautifully in the Epistle to the Philippians.

Having no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication [there it is again] with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. {Phil 4:6-7 RSV}

This is a wonderful study in prayer. Paul is saying there are three simple principles involved in prayer:

1. First, worry about nothing. Be anxious for nothing. Christian friends, do you hear what that says? Worry about nothing! This is one of the major problems in Christian living today. Worry is one of the major reasons why Christians are oftentimes a stumbling block to non-Christians. And, conversely, it is also one of the major areas in which Christians can be a glowing testimony and witness to non-Christians. It depends upon whether you worry or do not worry -- one or the other. Christians are continually exhorted in Scripture to worry about nothing. Now that does not mean not to have proper interest and concern about things. It is not stoicism that is advocated here. But we are not to be anxious, fretful, worried. Yet this is so often the attitude of our lives.

Someone said, "I'm so loaded up with worries that if anything happened to me this week it would be two weeks before I could get around to worrying about it!"

Sometimes we make an artificial attempt to cure our worrying by will power. As another has put it:

I've joined the new 'Don't Worry Club'
And now I hold my breath;
I'm so scared I'm going to worry
That I'm worried half to death.

But the admonition is, "Worry about nothing." This is only possible when you have put on the armor of God. Do not attempt it on any other basis. Worry comes from fear, and the only thing that will dissolve fear is facts. Therefore, to put on the armor of God is to face the facts just as they are -- not as they appear to be in the illusive picture that the world gives us, but squarely as they are. Therefore you are to worry about nothing.

2. What is the second principle? Pray about everything. Everything!

Someone says, "You mean God is interested in little things as well as big things?" Is there anything that is big to God? They are all little things to him. Of course he is interested in them; he says so! The hairs on our head are numbered by him. Jesus was at great pains to show us that God is infinitely involved in the most minute details of our life -- concerned about everything. Therefore pray about everything. Talk it over, tell him about things.

3. And what is the result? You will be kept through anything. This is the third principle: "The peace of God which passes all understanding [which no one can explain, which is there despite the circumstances, and which certainly does not arise out of a change of circumstances -- which is simply inexplicable] will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Do you know anything more relevant in this troubled, anxious, fretful, weary, disturbed world?

Prayer reveals three facts:

When we pray we recognize, first, the existence of an invisible kingdom. We would never pray at all if we did not have some awareness that someone is listening, that there is behind the realm of visibility an invisible kingdom. It is not far off in space somewhere; it is right here. It surrounds us on every side. We are constantly in touch with it, though we do not always recognize it. It lies behind the facade of life, and all through the Scriptures are exhortations to take heed of this, reckon with it, deal with it, acknowledge that it exists.

The second fact prayer reveals is that we Christians have confidence that the kingdom of God is highly significant, that it affects our lives directly, that the visible things which are happening in our world are a direct result of something happening in the realm of invisibility. Therefore, if you want to change the visibilities, you must start with the invisibilities.

Third, and perhaps the fact most hotly contested by the devil and his forces, is that our prayers play a direct

and essential part in bringing God's invisible power to bear on visible life. In other words, God answers prayer. Prayer is purposeful and powerful. It is not pitiful and pathetic pleading with only a rare chance that it might be answered. No, it is powerful. God answers! Prayer is an essential link in the working of God in the world today. Without it he does not often work; with it he certainly does. These three facts are all revealed in the matter of prayer.

But now we must immediately add that God answers prayer according to his promises. This is so necessary to say today, for there is a very vague and undefined but widespread concept that God answers any kind of prayer, that no matter what you want or how you ask for it, he commits himself to give it. This, of course, results frequently in disappointments and gives rise to the widespread belief that prayer is ineffectual. The truth is, God answers every prayer which is based upon a promise.

Prayer does not start with us; it starts with God. God must say he will do something before we are free to ask him to do it. This is the point.

This is how it works with a father and his children. No parent commits himself to give his children everything they want, anything they ask for. He makes it clear to them that he will do certain things and not do other things. In the realm of those limits, the father commits himself to answer his children's requests. So it is with God. God has given promises and they form the only proper basis for supplication.

This is what Paul means by his reminder that we are to pray at all times in the Spirit. In the Spirit! Here again is a great area of misunderstanding about prayer. Many take this phrase, "in the Spirit," as though it were descriptive of the emotions we should have when we pray. They think it is necessary to be greatly moved before prayer can be effectual, that we must pray with deep earnestness of words. Now, this is possible at times, but it is not essential or necessary to the effectiveness of prayer. And it is certainly not what is meant by this phrase, "in the Spirit."

To judge by the expression of many, one would perhaps feel that this phrase means to pray with a loud voice. But it does not mean that. It has no relationship to the emotions that we feel in prayer. Praying in the Spirit is not descriptive of some kind of religious hydrophobia.

Well, what is it then? It means to pray according to the promises which the Spirit has given, and the character of God which the Spirit has made known. This is praying in the Spirit. God has never promised to answer just any prayer, but he does promise to answer prayer in a way that he has carefully outlined for us. He does so invariably and without partiality. He is no respecter of persons in this matter of prayer. In the realm of our personal needs (those needs which call forth most of our prayers), the need for wisdom, perhaps, or power, or patience, or grace, or strength -- in this realm God's promise, specifically and definitely, is to answer immediately. He always immediately answers this type of prayer.

I do not have time to go into this, for it is a vast subject, and there is much more which could be said about it from other portions of Scripture. But I want to emphasize now that the apostle is saying we must take this matter of prayer seriously and learn what God has promised. In other words, master this subject as you would master any other subject you give yourself to. You scientists have mastered various areas in the realm of science. You teachers have learned to master the art of teaching. You artisans have mastered your trade; you have worked at it, you have given time to it. Now learn to master the art of praying. For though prayer is the simplest thing in the world -- a word of conversation with God -- it also can become the very deepest and most profound thing in the world. When you grow in your prayer life you will discover that God is very serious about prayer, and that, through it, he makes his omnipotence and omniscience available to us in terms of specific promises.

When you learn to pray on this basis you will discover that exciting and otherwise unexpected things are constantly happening, that there is a quiet but mighty power at work upon which you can rely. And as you learn to pray in this way you find there is put at your disposal a tremendous weapon, a mighty power to influence your own life and the lives of others. The illustrations of this are far too numerous for me to dwell on, but they are unmistakable to those who experience them. Especially is this true in the realm of withstanding the attack of the enemy. I want to say more about this in the last message of this series.

One final point: This matter of praying applies to others besides ourselves.

We are not alone in this battle, this conflict with doubt, dismay, fear, confusion, and uncertainty. No, there are others around us who are weaker and younger in Christ than we are, and still others who are stronger than we, and we all are fighting this battle together. We cannot put on the armor of God for another person, but we can pray for that other person. We can call in reinforcements when we find him engaged in a struggle greater than he can handle for the moment, or perhaps for which he is not fully equipped, or if he has not yet learned how to handle his armor adequately. We are to be aware of other people's problems and pray for them, to open their eyes to danger and to help them realize how much is available to them in the armor God has given them, and to obtain specific help and strength for a specific trial.

Notice how Paul asks this for himself in this very passage. "Pray for me, that utterance may be give me in opening my mouth to proclaim the mystery of the gospel." This mighty apostle has a deep sense of his need for prayer. He says, "Pray that God may grant me boldness that I will be so confident of the truth of which I speak that no fear of man will ever dissuade me or turn me aside."

You find another notable example of the apostle's desire for prayer in the fifteenth chapter of Romans, in the last verses {cf, Rom 15:30-33}, where he asks the Christians to pray for three things specifically:

1. Physical safety when he visits Jerusalem;
2. A sensitive, tactful spirit when he speaks to the Christians there; and
3. An ultimate opportunity to visit the city of Rome.

Three specific requests -- and the record of Scripture is that each of them was answered exactly as Paul had asked.

I read through the prayers of Paul, and I find that he deals with many matters in his prayers. But, primarily, and repeatedly, one request comes out again and again: He prays for other Christians, that their spiritual understanding might be enlightened. He asks that the eyes of their mind, their intelligence, might be opened, unveiled. This repetition in the apostle's prayers indicates the importance of understanding intelligently what life is about, what is true and what is false, what is real and what is phony. It also illustrates the power of the devil to blind and confuse, and to make things look one way when they are quite another. So the repeated prayer of the apostle is, "Lord, ... that their eyes may be opened, that their understanding may be enlightened, that their intelligence may be clarified, that they may see things as they are."

The prayer of another person can change the whole atmosphere of one person's life, oftentimes overnight. One Christmas Eve my family and I were in the Sierra Nevada at Twain Harte. When the sun went down the landscape around was sere and dry and barren. Brown leaves were swirling down from the trees; it was a typically bleak winter landscape. But when we awoke the next morning, it was to a wonderland of beauty. Every harsh line was softened, every blot was covered. Five inches of snow had fallen during the night, and -- imperceptibly, quietly, softly, without noise -- the whole landscape was marvelously transformed. We awoke to a fairyland of beauty and delight. I have seen this same thing happen in the life of an individual whose attitude toward God and reality was hard, stubborn. He was determined to have his own way. By virtue of prayer, secretly performed in a closet, that person's heart was softened, melted, mellowed and changed. His total outlook was different overnight.

Now it does not always happen overnight, Sometimes it takes much longer. Time is a factor which God alone controls, and he never suggests a time limit in his instructions about prayer. But he constantly calls us to this ministry of prayer, both for ourselves and for one another. When we learn to pray as God teaches us to pray, we release in our own lives and in the lives of others the immense, the enormous resources of God to strengthen the spirit and give inner stability and power to meet the pressures and problems of life.

I shall close with two passages on prayer.

In Second Timothy 2, Verses 24-26, the apostle says to his son in the faith:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. [Prayer is not specifically mentioned here but is certainly implied in these next words.] God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth [there is the opening of the mind] and that they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. {2 Tim 2:24-26 RSV}

And from the letter of James:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. {Jas 5:19-20 RSV}

Prayer

Our Father, we know so little about these great realities -- especially this mighty ministry of prayer. We pray that you will teach us to pray. Forgive us for the way oftentimes we have looked at prayer as though it were unimportant, insignificant, optional. Help us to take it seriously. Help us to realize that you have made this our point of contact with you. We would pray, then, as the disciples prayed: "Lord, teach us to pray." In your name, Amen.

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