

The Forces we Face

by Ray C. Stedman

This passage introduces to us a subject which is so often treated as unworthy of any intelligent consideration that I feel it necessary to remind us, at the beginning of this series, that the whole Scripture has been given to us in order to enable us to face life in a realistic, practical manner. To put it another way, God is not interested in religion, but he is tremendously interested in life. You cannot read the New Testament without realizing that the Lord Jesus did not care a whit for the Sabbath regulations of his day when they were set against the need of a broken man for healing. In that, he revealed the heart of God, for certainly God is not interested in stained glass windows, organ solos, congregational hymns, or even pastoral prayers half so much as he is in producing love-filled homes, generous hearts, and brave men and women who can live right in the midst of the world and keep their heads and hearts undefiled.

I am deeply convinced that we can only understand life when we see it as the Bible sees it. That is why the Word of God was given. In the world of organized human society, with its commerce, trade, business, recreation and all the familiar makeup of life, we are continually exposed to illusions which are indistinguishably mingled with reality. We are confronted with the distorted perspectives, twisted motives, uncertain hopes, and untested programs. But when we come to the Bible we learn the truth. Here reality is set before us – the world as it really is. When we get down to the bare essentials of life, and strip off all the confusing illusion, we find it is exactly what the Bible records it to be. Here is where our perspectives are set straight, here is

where we get our value systems righted, and our dreams weighed and evaluated as to whether they are real or only make-believe.

We may not like what we read here from time to time – it is very likely that we will not – but so much the worse for us. We shall only succeed in deceiving ourselves if we reject it. It is up to us to listen to the words of Jesus and his apostles, for they are the authority which corrects us, not we the authority that corrects them. Let us stop this really silly business of trying to sit in judgment upon the insights of the Lord Jesus Christ. We Christians must continually reduce every argument we hear today to this simple consideration: “Am I to accept this person’s word, or the word of Christ? If this agrees with what he says, fine, it is truth. But if it does not then I must decide whether the challenging authority is greater or less than Jesus Christ.” As Christians we are continually confronted with choices as to whether we will accept the puny, flimsy, uncertain authority of a mere man, or the certain, solid and clear word of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In this passage the Apostle Paul is setting forth his analysis of life, especially as it relates to a Christian. This passage is so important that I propose we spend several Sundays together considering it. But today I would like to look at it only from a general, introductory viewpoint, and see what the apostle brings out about the nature of life in general, and then take a closer look at the specific character which he says a Christian life assumes.

Let us read Verses 10-13:

Finally, he 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. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. {Eph 6:10-13 RSV}

It is very clear in that passage that Paul's view of the basic characteristic of life can be put in one word: *Struggle*. Life, he says, is a conflict, a combat, a continual wrestling. This is, of course, confirmed constantly by our experience. We should all like to think of life as romantic idealism, for most of us would like to think of ourselves as living in an idealistic world where everything goes right and we can spend our days in relaxation and enjoyment, with just enough work to keep us interested. This view is frequently embodied in some of the songs we sing:

“We'll build a sweet little nest,
Somewhere in the West,
And let the rest of the world go by.”

Or, as it has been modernized,

“We'll build a nice little still,
Somewhere on the hill,
And let the rest of the world go dry.”

Now it is not wrong for us to dream these dreams. These romantic ideals are a kind of racial memory, the vestigial remains of what was once God's intent for human life and, in God's good order and time, will be once again possible to humans.

But the Apostle Paul is not dealing with that kind of life. He is coming to grips with life as it really is now, and he says life is a struggle, a conflict, a combat against opposing forces. If we attempt to draw aside, to get away from the struggle, we continually find ourselves being jarred back into reality. Some unpleasant fact intrudes itself into our beautiful world and refuses to go away.

We all know how this is. We must get back to work, our vacation is ended, or the death of a loved one intrudes itself upon us with all its ghastly emp-

teness and loneliness, or we remember some pressing decision we must make, some threat to our prosperity or health, some disappointment in another person. We are constantly drawn back out of our dreams of ease and enjoyment to face the rough, hard realities of life.

The apostle also says that this is a fluctuating struggle. We must learn to stand, he says, “in the evil day,” by which he implies that all days are not evil. There will come times which are worse than others. There are seasons in the passing of life when pressures are more intense, when problems are more insoluble, when everything seems to come upon us at once. These are what we recognize as evil days. Sometimes it is an actual day, sometimes it is a week, sometimes months. But thank God that all of life is not that way. We are not always under pressure, we are not always being confronted with overpowering circumstances which call for agonizing decisions.

The reason we are not is due to the grace of God. All of life would be an evil day, and much worse, were it not for the grace of God which continually operates to restrain the powers that are against us and to allow times of refreshment, recreation, enjoyment and blessing. The truly tragic thing about human life is that we can take these times of refreshment, blessing and glory and enjoy them without a single thought for the goodness of God which underlies them and makes them possible for us, without a word of gratefulness or thanksgiving to God that these should be. This is the note on which Paul opens the epistle to the Romans.

But, here, Paul says that these days, though they are not always the same in pressure, nevertheless constitute the general makeup of life. Life is an unending struggle, varying in intensity from time to time, but extending from the cradle to the grave. But he further goes on now to analyze and define for us the nature of this struggle.

We come now to that which is most important. For he says that the conflict is not against flesh and blood, i.e., it is not a human problem, it is not a struggle of man against man. It may be a struggle *within* man, but it is not *between* men. He assures us that it is not against flesh and blood. He puts it negatively first.

I wonder what we would answer if we were asked, “What is the thing that gives you the most difficulty in life; of what does the struggle of life

consist?" Many would feel that it is against flesh and blood. It is other human beings who bother us:

- There are, of course, the Communists. They are always causing difficulty. They can never let anything rest in this world. They are forever stirring up some kind of trouble somewhere.
- And then there are the Republicans or, if we are on the other side, the Democrats. They never let anything rest either. They are always making difficulties. In their bullheaded stubbornness and obstinacy they are continually refusing to see the light.
- There are those who oppose us in some of the newer political struggles of our day.
- And let us not forget the Internal Revenue Service. Certainly they are devils, if there ever were any.
- And the county tax department!
- And do not leave out your wife – and her family! Or your husband and his family.
- Then there are our neighbors, even our ancestors. It is our heredity which is at fault. It is because we are Scottish, or Irish, or Italian – our family has always been this way, we have always had a hot temper.

So the problem goes.

As we look at life in our superficial way we are tempted to say that our problem is other people, that we struggle against flesh and blood. But the apostle says that you cannot explain life adequately on that level. You must look further, you must look deeper than that. The problem is not against flesh and blood. Rather, there is set against the whole human race certain principalities and powers, world rulers of darkness, wicked spirits in high places. There is your problem, Paul says. Those are the enemies we are up against. And it is not just Christians who are opposed by these, but every man, everywhere. The whole race is opposed by the principalities and powers, the world rulers of

this present darkness. There is Paul's positive explanation of the struggle of life.

I hasten to say that this declaration will only be fully believed and understood by Christians. The world either distorts this to the point of ridiculousness, or it rejects it as unacceptable to the intelligent mind. This evening it is Halloween, and Halloween represents the distortion of this great doctrine which the apostle has propounded. Superstition has always taken this great revelation and has distorted it, twisted it, reduced it to a ridiculous pantheon of goblins, witches, spooks, and ghouls. Naturally that sort of thing is rejected by anyone of intelligence because they know these things do not exist.

Though Halloween represents that distorted idea, I am not speaking about the way it is today. It has become nothing more than a child's party, a time of enjoyment for children. All children like to be scared and there is nothing wrong in that. I am not taking issue with Halloween as we know it, but I am saying that in the days when people took it seriously (and in places they still do) it represented a distorted view of the doctrine the apostle has revealed. Because it has suffered this distortion it is usually rejected by those who try to think seriously about life. The difficulty is that not only is the distortion rejected but the very truth behind it.

I am very well aware of the disdain, even contempt, with which this concept of the devil and his cohorts, this kingdom of darkness, these principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places, is received in many circles. There are those who say, "Are you going to insult our intelligence by talking about a personal devil? Surely you are not going back to those medieval concepts and drag out a devil, and tell us he is the root of all our problems?"

Recently I spent an evening in Berlin discussing with four or five intelligent churchmen this whole problem. They were men who knew the Bible intimately. Though we never once opened a Bible we spent the whole evening together discussing various passages from the Bible. I never referred to a single passage, but what they were aware of it and could quote it almost verbatim. Yet they rejected the idea of a devil. They said there was no personal devil. They could not believe this. At the end of the evening they admitted that, in their rejection of the devil, they also had no answer

to the conundrums which life was continually presenting them. We had to leave it there.

I am reminded of the story Billy Graham tells when he hears this idea that there is no devil. It is a story of a boxer who was engaged in a boxing match and was being badly beaten. Battered and bruised, he leaned over the ropes and said to his trainer, "Please throw in the towel! This guy is killing me!" The trainer said, "Oh no, he's not. He's not even hitting you. He hasn't laid a glove on you!" And the boxer said, "Well then, I wish you'd watch that referee – somebody is sure hitting me!"

The questions we must ask when we are challenged with this idea that there is no devil are, "How do you explain what is going on in the world? How do you explain what is happening? How do you explain the entrenched evil in human affairs?"

Isn't it clear that we cannot understand life unless we begin here? We cannot understand history if we reject this proposition that the apostle brings out – that behind the problems of the world, behind the evil which manifests itself in mankind, there is a hierarchy of evil spirits – the devil and his angels. There is an organized kingdom of principalities and powers at various levels of authority who sit as world rulers of the present darkness, wicked spirits in high places.

The world says to the Christian:

- "Why talk about this kind of thing?"
- "Why do you not talk about something relevant?"
- "Why don't you Christians get busy and do something that will be meaningful today?"

They talk about being relevant!

- What could be more relevant than this teaching which puts its finger on the basic problem?
- What good is it to keep rushing around curing fevers, but never stopping to analyze the disease?

This is what is going on in our day. There is a serious disease at work in the human race and it is

constantly breaking out in little fevers. But if we content ourselves, as physicians, with running around from place to place giving aspirin for the fever, and never once inquiring what the disease is, and what the cure and remedy is, we have wasted our time. Talk about relevancy! This is what is relevant – to listen to this analysis of what is wrong with the world, what its disease is, and what the cure is. That is what this passage so vividly and so accurately sets before us.

The fact is that the disease is growing so desperate that even worldlings, non-Christians, are recognizing the inadequacy of their diagnosis. Listen to Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist. He says,

We stand perplexed and stupefied before the phenomena of Marxism and Bolshevism because we know nothing about man or, at any rate, have only a lopsided and distorted picture of him. If we had self-knowledge, that would not be the case. We stand face to face with the terrible question of evil and do not even know what is before us, let alone what to pit against it. And even if we did know, we still could not understand how it could happen here.

What a tremendously honest revelation of the ignorance of men in the face of life as it really is! Listen to this bewildered cry from one of the leading statesmen of his day, U Thant, former Secretary General of the United Nations:

What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find ourselves in the dark valley of discord and enmity? What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and to reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it that, for all our professed ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?

Here are the world's greatest leaders facing the dilemma of modern life, and all they can say is, "What is wrong? What is the unknown element behind this? We cannot understand this, we do not know what is going on, we cannot grasp these things. What is it that is missing?"

Talk about a relevant Scripture! This Scripture is the most relevant thing I know of today. For two thousand years it has been written down here. The Apostle Paul has given the answer to that baffled, bewildered cry for light from a modern statesman's heart. The world, Paul says, is in the grip of what he calls "world rulers of present darkness." What an amazing phrase that is! We shall look at it a little closer in subsequent messages. These world rulers of present darkness are headed by the devil, whom Scripture says is a fallen angel of malevolent power and cunning cleverness against whom Christians are called to wrestle daily. Now, that is not the claim of an isolated passage of the Bible. That is the teaching of the Bible from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation, and especially in Genesis and Revelation.

The Lord Jesus himself put his finger on the whole problem when he said to certain men of his day, "You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies," {John 8:44}. In that most amazing analysis, the Lord stripped the devil of his disguises and revealed his true character – a liar and a murderer. What the devil does is because of who he is, just as what we do is precisely due to what we are. Because he is a liar and a murderer, the devil's work is to deceive and to destroy. There you have the explanation for all that has been going on in human history throughout the whole course of the record of man.

The devil has the ear of mankind. Scripture calls him, "the god of this world," {2 Cor 4:4}. The world listens to him, to everything he says. But the devil does not tell the world the truth but a lie, a very clever, a very beautiful, a very attractive lie which makes the world drool with desire. But the end of his lie is destruction, murder, death! – death in all its forms, not only ultimately the cessation of life, but also death in its incipient forms of restlessness, boredom, frustration, meaninglessness, and emptiness. Whom the devil cannot deceive he tries to destroy, and whom he cannot destroy he attempts to deceive. There is the working of the devil.

We are going to see much more about this and it is important that we do so, for this is the struggle of life. This is the explanation for it, and the only

adequate explanation for what is going on in our day which has ever been offered. The intelligent thing is to understand it and, understanding, to come to grips with it, and thus to be able to walk in victory – as Paul says, to be able to stand in the evil day.

"Well," you say, "This is all very depressing. I would rather not think about it."

So would I, but I have discovered that you cannot get away from it that way. There is only one way to handle this struggle and that is to "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might," {Eph 6:10 KJV}. That is the way of escape. There is no other.

This is a call to intelligent combat. It is a call to us to be men, to fight the good fight, to stand fast in the faith, to be strong in the Lord right in the midst of battle, in the midst of the world.

You can hear the trumpet call in this, can't you?

We are to take this seriously and to learn what life is all about. We must learn to recognize how these dark systems work, and how they appear in life and where they are going.

More than that, we must learn the processes of overcoming them – not by flesh and blood, not by joining committees or mustering some kind of physical struggle against these forces. Paul says the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, not fleshly, they are not of the body. Our weapons are mighty, through God, unto the pulling down of strongholds and bringing into captivity every thought – there is the arena: it is the realm of thought; it is the realm of ideas – bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. That is victory!

- Do you think that is not challenging? That is the greatest challenge any ear can ever hear!
- Do you think that is not demanding? That demands more courage and manhood than any other cause which has ever been known in the world!
- Do you think that is not exciting? That is the most exciting call which has ever gone out to men anywhere!

“Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might!”

Prayer:

Our gracious Father, thank you for a truth that shatters us, startles us, wakens us, prods us, disturbs us. Thank you Lord, for a word of reality which speaks to us in the midst of our complacency and lethargy and stirs us up to see life as it really is. How

easily we would drift on in futile weakness, never raising a finger against the deterioration of life and the destruction of body and soul, were it not for this word of challenge which calls us back, wakes us up, and makes us to see. Lord, teach us how to bow in humility before this word and say to the Holy Spirit, “O Great Teacher of God, open these Scriptures, teach them to us, make them real.” In Christ’s name, Amen.

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