

Defense against Defeat, Part 1

by Ray C. Stedman

In this present series we are trying to understand life, both in the larger scene of the world and its ways, and in the immediate situation in which we find ourselves. We have already seen that it is a struggle. The passage we are looking at in Ephesians points out that life is a conflict. And our experience confirms this. We do not like it, perhaps, but we cannot deny it. When we ask ourselves, "Why is life a struggle?" the Apostle Paul says that it is not what we usually imagine to be the problem – it is not flesh and blood, it is not other people. We are so inclined to blame someone else. But Paul says it is not against flesh and blood, rather, we are struggling against the principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, the wicked spirits which are in heavenly or high places. Phillips translates that last phrase, "spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil."

In previous messages we tried to see what is meant by the phrase, "the wiles of the devil," how the devil works in his craftiness, in his wiliness, trapping us, snaring us with subterfuges and stratagems. That survey was very hurried and incomplete. It would take many messages to cover the approaches the devil can use in influencing our lives. But perhaps we saw enough to make us realize something of our weakness and inadequacy, in our own strength and wisdom, to overcome the stratagems of the devil.

Further, we saw that we were under attack from the devil through the channels of the world and the flesh. The world is human society influenced by satanic philosophies and reflecting satanic ideas. The flesh is that inner compulsion toward self-centeredness which is a heritage of Adam's fall. Because the flesh is intensely personal and inescapably present, we tried to concentrate upon this. We saw that, by means of the flesh, the devil

attacks us through the channels of our mind, our emotions, and our activities. These constitute our makeup as men, as human beings. We learned that the devil aims to create imbalance, over-emphasis, eccentricity, inflating some aspect of life to outrageous proportions.

His goal is always to produce discouragement, confusion, or indifference. Wherever we find ourselves victims of a state of confusion and uncertainty, or discouragement and defeat, or an indifferent, callous attitude toward life or others, we have already succumbed to the wiles of the devil.

Are you discouraged? Are you confused, uncertain, not knowing what is the truth, what is right, what is the answer? Are you indifferent, letting life go by, living each moment with cynicism, indifferent to what the outcome may be? If so, then you have already become a victim of the wiles of the devil. If these conditions continue, the end inevitably will be barrenness, futility, a wasted life, ruin. That is what the devil aims for.

Jesus said the devil is a liar and a murderer whose aim is to destroy, to wreck, to distort and pervert human life. But, as we have already seen, this need not be. The very passage we are studying describes God's adequate defense against the wiles of the devil. We are urged and encouraged to use it. "Be strong in the Lord," the apostle says, "and in the strength of his might," {Eph 6:10 RSV}. It is possible to stand; it is possible to overcome. This word is very encouraging to us. But that alone is not enough. That tells us there is an answer but it does not tell us exactly what it is. Our question always is, "How do you do this?" How, exactly, do you become, "strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might?" The answer is, "Put on the whole armor of God," {Eph 6:11a RSV}. That is where we must begin today. Paul says,

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 flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. {Eph 6:14-17 RSV}

You can see this is highly figurative language. These are not entities in themselves, but are symbols of something real. In order to understand them we must look behind the figures to the reality. We have a clue to the significance of this armor in what I have already pointed out. The armor is the way to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. The armor is nothing more than a symbolic description of the Lord himself. The armor is Christ, and what he is prepared to be, and to do, in and to each one of us. When Paul speaks of these various pieces, he is speaking of Christ and how we are to regard him, how we are to lay hold of him as our defense against the stratagems of the devil. It is not merely Christ available to us, but Christ actually appropriated.

In Romans 13, Paul clearly declares this concept: “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof,” {Rom 13:14 KJV}. Also, writing to his son in the faith, the apostle says to Timothy, “You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus,” {cf, 2 Tim 2:1}. That is where our armor lies. Christ is our defense. Therefore, we need to study this armor in order to learn how to lay hold of Christ in a practical way. General truth, I have discovered (and I am sure you have too), does not help us very much.

It is easy to speak in empty generalities about Christian living. Sometimes we pick a phrase out of Scripture and employ it almost as an incantation, some kind of magic defense, going about repeating certain words. But that is not the way the Bible suggests. That is the way the cults treat the Bible. It is easy for us to say glibly to some Christian who is struggling through a difficult time, “Christ is the answer!” Well, yes, Christ is the answer – but how is he the answer? That is what we need to know, and this is what this armor describes. Jesus Christ is the answer as a specific defense against specific things.

Before we look at the armor more precisely, there are two things we need to note which are brought out in this text:

1. First, there are two general divisions or classifications of the pieces of this armor, indicated by the tenses of the verbs which are used. The first division, covering the first three pieces, is something we have already done in the past if we are Christians:

- “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.”

These all refer to something already done if we are Christians at all.

The second division includes those things which are to be put on or taken up at the present moment:

- “taking the shield of faith;”
- “take the helmet of salvation;”
- “and the sword of the Spirit.”

There are, first, the things we have already put on once and need never put on again. But we must be sure they are there and remind ourselves of what they mean. Second, there are aspects of Christ which we take up again and again whenever we feel under attack.

2. The second thing to note about this armor is that the order in which these pieces are given to us is very important. Learn to pay careful attention to the order in which Scripture puts things. The order of the listing of these items is very, very important. You cannot reverse them or mix them up. The reason many Christians fail properly to exercise the sword of the Spirit is because they have never first girded up the loins with truth. You cannot do it in reverse order. Scripture is very exact in this, so as we go through, let us note carefully the order.

Now we want to take quickly the first three of these which constitute the first division of this armor:

“Having girded your loins with truth” – that is always the place to start whenever you are under attack. Whenever you feel discouraged, defeated, uncertain, confused, downcast, depressed, or indifferent, this is the place to start: “Gird up your loins with truth.” The officers in the Roman army wore short skirts, very much like Scottish kilts. Over them they had a cloak or tunic which was secured at the waist with a girdle. When they were about to enter battle they would tuck the tunic up under the girdle so as to leave their legs free and unimpeded for the fight. Girding the loins was always a symbol of readiness to fight. That is why this is first. You cannot do battle until you first gird up the loins with truth.

When you are threatened by discouragement, coldness, and similar moods, how do you fight back? Well, you remember that, when you became a Christian, you girded up your loins with truth. What does that mean precisely? It means to remind yourself that, in coming to Jesus Christ, you found the truth behind all things, you found him who is in himself the truth, the key to life, the secret of the universe, final reality! You find the truth used in that sense in this very letter. In Chapter 4, Verse 20, the apostle says to these Ephesians,

You did not so learn Christ! [i.e., in uncleanness and licentiousness, etc.] – **assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.** {Eph 4:20-21 RSV}

He is the truth, he is reality, he is the key to life. “In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” {cf, Col 2:3}.

“Well,” someone says, “how do you know that? How do you know you are not performing an act of blind faith without any supporting evidence at all? You say you believe in Jesus, but you have accepted him as the authority without any evidence to support it. That’s blind faith.” But that is not what a Christian does. Christian faith is not blind faith. When we believe Christ is the truth, we believe it because he demonstrated he was the truth. We need to put it on that basis.

How did he demonstrate that he was the truth?

- First, by what he said. Read the things he said. Incomparable things! He gave the clearest in-

sights into what human life was about ever given in the hearing of men. Even his enemies say so. No one ever saw so clearly as he, no one ever probed so deeply or put his finger so precisely upon the elements which make up human life and thinking. In what he said you can see he spoke the truth. “No one ever spake like this man,” {cf, John 7:46}

- But not only that, he demonstrated the truth by what he did. This New Testament record is an amazing account of mighty deeds and historic events. Miracles? Yes, there are evidences of the intrusion of the spiritual kingdom – that invisible realm of reality – into the visible realm. He capped it all, of course, by showing that he had solved the one problem which is insoluble to every other man – the problem of death. He rose from the dead! Who else has ever done anything like that? What other philosopher, what other thinker, what other man who has ever challenged men has ever done anything like that – solved that basic problem of life? That is why I know Jesus Christ is the truth, because he solved the problem of death.

This, by the way, is why the enemies of the Scriptures fight so fiercely to destroy the historicity of these events, if they can. They want us to think it does not matter whether these things were historically true. Of course they are historically true, and of course it greatly matters, for these events demonstrate that Jesus was the truth.

- But it is not only by what he said and what he did, but further, by what he is. Bring this into the present. What has he been to you? What has he been to others? Look back at your own Christian life and its beginnings. Did he deliver you? Has he set you free? Has he broken any chains in your life? Has he been your friend? Has he brought you back into balance and harmony? It has been pointed out that through the centuries men have been calling on others for help. You may lack courage and call on a great contemporary hero to help you, but nothing happens. You may lack wisdom and call on one of the great philosophers of the day. Or, lacking eloquence, you may cry, “Shakespeare, help me!” But no help comes. Yet for twenty centuries men and women in

desperate plight have been calling out, “Lord Jesus Christ, help me” – and help is given! Deliverance comes! That is how we know he is the truth.

Remember that all conflicting systems and philosophies must be tested at all points, not just at one. Many philosophies can do something. Ah, yes, many systems which basically are wrong still can help in a limited area. They can help somewhere, they can accomplish some good. But, my Christian friends, we must learn that this is never the mark of truth. Because something does some good is no mark of truth. Truth is a complete entity. Truth is reality, the way things really are. Therefore it is the explanation of *all* things. You know you have found the truth when you find something which is wide enough and deep enough and high enough to encompass all things. That is what Jesus Christ does.

- Further, ultimate reality never changes. Here is another mark. Truth never needs updating, never needs to be modernized. If something was true ten thousand years ago, it is still true today. If it is true today, it was true a hundred thousand years ago. Truth does not need updating.

I delight in the story of the man to come to his old friend, a music teacher, and said to him in that flippant way we moderns use, “What’s the good news today?” The old man never said a word. He walked across the room, picked up a hammer and struck a tuning fork. As the note sounded out through the room, he said, “That is ‘A.’ It is ‘A’ today, it was ‘A’ five thousand years ago, and it will be ‘A’ ten thousand years from now. The soprano upstairs sings off-key, the tenor across the hall flats his high notes, and the piano downstairs is out of tune.” He struck the note again, and said, “That is ‘A,’ my friend, and that’s the good news for today!”

That is what Jesus Christ is – unchanging. He is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,” {cf, Heb 13:8}. That is how you know you have truth. Remember that when you feel defeated, when you are under attack, when doubts come flooding into your mind. Remember that you have girded up your loins with truth; you have found him who is the solid rock:

On Christ the solid rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

Now look at the second piece of armor, **the breastplate of righteousness**. Have you put that on? “Having put on the breastplate of righteousness” – what does that mean? Well, that is Christ as the ground of your righteous standing before God, your acceptance before him. If you have that on you can rest secure that your heart, your emotions, are securely guarded and adequately protected against attack. This is perhaps the most frequent ground of attack against Christian faith. Christians, by one means or another, through one circumstance or another, often feel they lack assurance. They feel unworthy of God. They feel they are a failure in the Christian life and that God, therefore, is certain to reject them, that he is no longer interested in them. They are so aware of their failures and shortcomings. Growth has been so slow. The first joy of faith has faded, and they feel God is angry with them or that he is distant, far off somewhere. There is a constant sense of guilt. Their conscience is always stabbing them, making them unhappy, miserable. They feel God blames them. This is simply a satanic attack, a means of opposing and destroying what God intends to do.

How do you answer an attack like this? You are to remember that you have put on the breastplate of righteousness. In other words, you do not stand on your own merits. You never did. You never had anything worthwhile in yourself to offer to God. You gave all that up when you came to Christ. You quit trying to be good enough to please God. You came on his merits. You came on the ground of his imputed righteousness – that which he gives to you. You began your Christian life like that and there is no change now. You are still on that basis.

This is why Paul begins his great eighth chapter to the Romans with the words, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” {Rom 8:1 RSV}. No condemnation! You are believing a lie when you believe that God is angry with you and that he rejects you. Remember, you stand on Christ’s merits, “accepted in the Beloved,” {Eph 1:6 KJV}. Further on in that chapter he asks, “Who can accuse us?” {cf, Rom 8:33}. It is God who justifies. Christ, who died for us, is the only one who has the right to accuse

us, and he loves us. Therefore there is no separation. “Who can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?” {cf, Rom 8:35a}. Who can do this?

Now this does not mean that God puts his hand on the things we know are wrong in our lives and says, “Oh, well, these things do not matter. Don’t worry about these.” Of course not. But it means he sees them, and he says, “Oh, yes, but he hasn’t learned yet all that I intend to teach him.” And he deals with us as a father, in love and patient discipline – as a father, not as a judge.

See how the Apostle Paul himself used this breastplate of righteousness when he was under pressure to be discouraged and defeated. Have you ever thought of the struggles he personally had in this realm? Here was a man who was small of stature, unimpressive, in his personal appearance. In fact, there is very good evidence to indicate that he was even repulsive to many. He had a disfiguring physical ailment which made him unpleasant to look at. The last thing he had was what is called a commanding presence. His background was anti-Christian and he could never get away from that completely. He had been the most hostile, brutal persecutor of the church they had known. He must constantly have run across families with loved ones whom he had put to death. He was often reminded by many people that he was not one of the original twelve apostles, that his calling was suspect, that perhaps he really was not an apostle at all. Writing to the Corinthians about these very matters, he says of himself in Chapter 15, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God,” {1 Cor 15:9 RSV}.

What a ground for discouragement! How easy it would have been for him to my to himself, “What’s the use? Here I am working my head off, working my fingers to the bone, making tents and trying to preach the gospel to these people, and look at the blessing God has brought them, but they don’t care. They hurl recriminations back into my face. Why try anymore?” But that is not what he does. The very next verse says, “By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain,” {1 Cor 15:10a RSV}. There he is using the breastplate of righteousness. I don’t care, he says, what I have been, I don’t defend what I am. I simply say to you, by the grace of God, I am what I am. What I am is what Christ has made me. I’m not standing on my righteousness, I’m standing

on his, I am accepted by grace, and my personal situation does not make any difference at all. So his heart was kept from discouragement. He could say, “Sure, all these things are true, but that does not change the fact that I am Christ’s man, and I have his power. He is in me and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” {cf, Phil 4:13}. Thus he reminded himself that when he became a Christian he had put on the breastplate of righteousness and he never allowed himself to be discouraged, for he did not look to himself for anything at all. He looked to Christ.

Then this third piece of armor – **“Having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace.”** Shoes are absolutely essential to fighting. Imagine a soldier clad in armor from head to foot but with no shoes on, a barefoot soldier. Imagine how quickly the rough ground would tear his feet and bruise them. Soon, despite the fact that he had all the equipment he needed otherwise, he would be out of combat. His feet would render him unfit to fight. But with a stout pair of shoes he would be ready and equipped, able to fight. That is what this phrase means. *Equipment* here is really the word “readiness” in Greek: “Your feet shod with the readiness produced by the good news of peace.” It is peace in the heart that makes you able to fight.

What does this mean? Well, again it is Christ, but Christ our peace this time – our source of calm, euphoria, i.e., a sense of well-being. Notice the relation of one piece to another and the importance of the order that I stressed earlier. The first piece tells us that Christ is the truth, the ultimate secret of reality. We have come home, we have touched the key to life of Jesus Christ. That is something for the mind to understand and grasp and believe. And then what? Well, we know him then. We stand on his merits. We put on the breastplate of his righteousness. We come on the basis of what he has done and not what we do. And what is the result of that? Our hearts are at peace! Paul says, “Being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” {Rom 5:1 KJV}. Calmness, courage! To use a modern term, and, I think, the most accurate, we have good “morale.” Our morale is high. We are ready for anything. No ground can be too rough for Christ – and we have Christ. Therefore we have good morale.

Do you remember the dark days in England when they were going through the blitz, and bombs

were raining down all the time? The situation was really desperate. Then Winston Churchill would come on the radio and speak to the English people when their hearts were filled with defeat and discouragement. At times they would be almost ready to quit. But that one man's voice would ring out and the nation would take heart again, and their morale would be strong. That is what Christ does. He is able to speak peace to our hearts.

A lady said to me this morning, "Oh, if I could convey to you something of the inner healing, the peace which has come into my heart through a recent experience. Oh, the joy of this thing – even though it was a time of agony and anguish!"

This is the place to start. It is not a battle against people at all, is it? It is an inner fight, a battle in the realm of the thought life, in the realm of our attitudes. It is a battle in the realm of your outlook upon the situation in which you find yourself. This is the place to start. Gird up your loins with truth. Remember that in Jesus Christ you have a demonstration which no man can equal anywhere in the world. Here is the key to life, the One who is worth listening to. Believe him, Christian people, believe him!

If you are Christians at all, if you have accepted Christ as the One who has the explanation for life, then believe what he says. Act on it. That is the girdle of truth.

The breastplate of righteousness protects the emotions. You do not need to be discouraged. Of course you have failed – I fail, we all fail – but that is what we are here to learn to overcome. The One who has come understands all this. He knows we are going to fail, and he knows we are going to struggle. He knows it will be an up-and-down ex-

perience, and a time of battles – and we will lose some of them. But he says, "I have taken care of all that. You do not have to stand on your merits. You stand on mine. Do not be discouraged, do not be defeated, we will win through. I know what I am doing, I know how to lead you, I know what circumstances to bring you into and I will bring you through."

The third requisite is to have the feet shod with the preparation, the readiness, of a sense of peace. The place to start is to remember who you are, what you are, and above all else, whom you have. Be strong in his strength and for his sake. Remember you belong to Christ's family. The Scripture says he is not ashamed to call us brothers. God is not ashamed to be called our God. Be strong for his sake. Let us get away from this subjectiveness all the time – "What is going to happen to me, and how do I feel?" – remembering that God has vested his honor in us. Learn to talk to yourself and answer back to what you say.

Thus you will discover that if you put on these three things, the battle is almost won right there. You will have little difficulty overcoming evil if you start right there.

Prayer:

Our Father, make these words clear, plain, practical, and helpful to us. May they meet us right where we are and help us right in the conflict in which we are engaged. May our hearts be lifted up by the consciousness that the One who is in us is adequate for all things. In Christ's name, Amen.

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