

Defense against Defeat, Part 4

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now engaged in examining Paul's great exhortation to the Ephesians to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. We, as they were, are involved in the struggle and conflict which comes from contention with the principalities and powers and the wicked spirits in high places, the world rulers of this present darkness. In Verses 14-17 of the sixth chapter, the apostle focuses on the armor of God:

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}

This armor defends us under attack and makes it possible for us to stand in an evil day. How accurately the apostle describes our experience – continually facing evil days, days in which everything seems to go wrong, when trouble comes, tragedy strikes, difficulties occur, or discouragement sets in, and we wonder what is happening in the world and in our personal lives.

We have looked at the specific form in which this attack occurs. We have noted the source of it, and the ubiquity of it. It comes from every side and in every waking moment of our lives. Always it is an attempt to derail our Christian faith, to upset our lives, to destroy our morale, to defeat our hopes, and deny our claims. This conflict is experienced by men everywhere; it is not unique to Christians. But it is only the Christian who is in a place to fight back.

As Christians we are delivered by Christ from the unconscious control of Satan and are thus able to resist the attack of the devil, to fight back, and to overcome. The Christian does this by putting on the armor of God.

This passage addresses itself to us in a figurative way, but it is speaking of very realistic things which I hope we have captured in this series. We have already seen that the armor is Christ: Christ Jesus made available to us day by day. The first three pieces of this armor pictures Christ as the truth, i.e., the basic secret to life, the ground of reality; then Christ as our righteousness, the One on whose merits we stand before God and are accepted; and Christ as our peace, the source of our morale, of our inner strength, of that which gives purpose to life. All this is fulfillment of our Lord's words, "you in me," {John 14:20b}. Then the last three pieces of this armor set forth the truth of "I in you" {John 14:20c} – Christ appropriated and applied to life. We looked at the shield of faith, which involves applying general truth to specific situations, i.e., acting upon our belief. Nothing can be done without faith. God's power is made available only in faith. Then we looked at the helmet of hope, which is to use the fact of the return of Jesus Christ as a guide in evaluating the worth of movements in our own day, a guide to where history is going, what is happening, and where it will all come out.

Now we come to the last of these pieces of the armor of the Christian – "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

The first thing we must say immediately about it is that, again, **this is Christ**. Christ is our life, if we are Christians at all, but this is Christ made available to us in practical ways through the sayings of his Word. I think it is very important to

stress this. It is so easy to be Christians in general, but not in specifics. It is so very easy to have a vague sense of following Christ, but not know exactly, in specific terms, what this means. But that is why the Word of God has been given to us, for it is that which makes Christianity manageable.

Christian truth as a whole is more than we can handle. It has to be broken down into manageable pieces. This is what the Word of God does.

In writing to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God," {Col 3:16 RSV}. By this he is indicating that the authority of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Scripture are one and the same. There are many today who challenge this. There are many voices which tell us that as Christians we must follow Christ and accept the authority of Christ, but we need not accept the authority of the Bible. But Paul answers that one by calling the Scriptures "the word of Christ." You cannot separate the two.

Once I attended a meeting of ministers in Palo Alto. We were listening to a Stanford professor, who is a Christian, read a very excellent and helpful paper on "Science and the Christian Faith." After he had finished, certain questions were addressed to him by members of the group. One man said, "Sir, I can accept the Bible as a witness of certain men to what they thought of Jesus Christ. But you seem to go further. You have used the word 'inspired' on several occasions in your paper, and this seems to suggest that in your opinion the Bible is more than the views of men, that it has divine authority. Is this true?" The Christian professor made a very wise answer. He said, "My answer may sound to you very much like Sunday school propaganda, but I can only put it this way: The center of my life is Jesus Christ. I have found him to be the key to everything I desire in life. And yet I could know nothing about Christ if I did not learn it from the Bible. The Bible presents Christ, and Christ defines the Bible. How can I make a distinction?" With considerable embarrassment, the questioner threw up his hands and changed the subject.

The authority of Scripture is the authority of Jesus Christ. They are indivisible. To attempt to distinguish the two is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more important, or which leg of a

pair of pants is more necessary. We know Christ through the Bible, and we understand the Bible through the knowledge of Christ. The two cannot be separated. That is why Paul calls it "the word of Christ."

Now, in the phrase, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God," it is important to see that it is not the complete Bible which is referred to by the phrase, "**the word of God.**" Let us do a little donkey work, if you will permit me. There are two words used in Scripture for "the word of God." There is the familiar word, *logos*, which is used in the opening verse of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God," {John 1:1}. Then there is another word, used less frequently, *rhema*, which is somewhat different in meaning. *Logos* refers to the total utterance of God, the complete revelation of what God has said. *Hrema* means a specific saying of God, a passage or a verse which has special application to an immediate situation; to use a modern term, it is the Word of God used existentially, i.e., applied to experience, to our existence.

Hrema is the word used here. The "sword of the Spirit" is the saying of God applied to a specific situation. This is the great weapon placed in the hands of a believer. Perhaps all of us have had some experience with this. We have all read passages of Scripture when the words suddenly seemed to come alive, take on flesh and bones, and leap out of the page at us, or grow eyes that follow us around everywhere we go, or develop a voice that echoes in our ears until we cannot get away from it. We have had this experience:

- Perhaps in some moment of temptation or doubt, when we were assailed by what Paul calls here "the flaming darts of the evil one." But it has been answered immediately by a passage of Scripture which flashed to mind, something we had not been thinking of at all, but which supplied the needed answer.
- Or perhaps we have been asked a question, and for a moment it has caught us off guard; we did not know how to answer and were about to say, "I don't know," when suddenly we had a moment of illumination and a word of Scripture came to mind, and we saw what the answer was.

- Perhaps this experience has come while sitting in a meeting where some passage has come home to our heart with strange and powerful effect upon us. We have been greatly moved, and, in that moment, we made a deep, permanent decision.

All this is the *hrema* of God, the sayings of God which strike home like arrows to the heart. That is why this is called “the sword of the Spirit,” because it is not only originated by him as the author of the Word, but it is also recalled to mind by the Spirit and made powerful by him in our lives. It is his answer to the attack of the devil, who comes to discourage us, defeat us, lure us aside, deceive us, misguide us, or mislead us in some way – but then a word comes to mind instantly. This is the sword of the Spirit.

As a sword, it is useful both for defense and for offense. This, by the way, is the only part of the armor designed for offense. It both defends and protects us, but also pierces other hearts and destroys the lies of the devil in others besides ourselves. This is its great effect. It is the only proper defense the Christian has. He is to proclaim the truth. He does not need to defend it. He does not need to support it with long and extensive arguments. There is a place for that, but not in an encounter with those who disbelieve. He is to proclaim it, simply to declare it. As Scripture says in Hebrews 4:12:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. {Heb 4:12 RSV}

It gets below reason, and pierces the armor that has been erected against it, and comes home to the heart. Thus it has power in itself.

It is this offensive quality which explains why the Bible is so continuously under attack. For centuries the enemies of the gospel, prompted by the devil, have been seeking to destroy the Bible, if not its actual existence, as they have at certain times, they seek at least to destroy its significance. This is what we are facing in our own day. With very clever words and subtle arguments, the devil

speaks through men of prominence and intelligence to destroy the testimony of the Scriptures. This does not mean that the men themselves are necessarily hypocritical. It is not that they are being deliberately and knowingly destructive. Many of them are sincerely attempting to be what they may describe as “honest to God.” But the evidence that this is a satanic attack upon the Bible, and that their thinking has a satanic bias, is seen in the specific target of these attacks. They are always an attack upon the historic genuineness of the biblical record. By that you can tell where they originate. They are attempts to reject the supernatural character of the biblical accounts, the intrusion into our commonplace realm of space and time of that invisible realm which the Bible calls the kingdom of God. This is what they dislike, and the aim of their attacks is always to make the Bible appear incredible or unreliable, so no one will bother to read it. They desire to create such false images of the biblical records that no one will take them seriously.

These speakers and professors and doctors of theology claim to be theologians and Bible scholars, but they betray the Scriptures with the kiss of Judas and mislead millions. The main aim, of course, is to keep people from reading the Bible, from seriously and thoughtfully reading the Scriptures. For, of course, all that is needed to answer these pretentious claims is simply to read these accounts in a thoughtful and serious way.

Let me illustrate this with the Christmas story. Nothing is more basic and central to the Christian message than the story of the way the infinite God became a babe in a manger, and was welcomed with the angel’s song, a brilliant star, the coming of the shepherds and wise men. We love the simple beauty of this ancient story. This simple story transforms the world, at least outwardly, for a brief time every year, and has for twenty centuries. But now listen to the way the false prophets of our day treat this story. Here is a quotation from the well-known book by Bishop Robinson, *Honest To God*:

Suppose the whole notion of a God who visits the earth in the person of his Son is as mythical as the prince in the fairy story. Suppose there is no realm ‘out there’ from which the man from heaven arrives. Suppose the Christmas myth (the invasion of this side by the other side), as opposed to the Christmas story (the birth of the man, Jesus of Nazareth),

has to go. Are we prepared for that? Or are we to cling here to this last vestige of the mythological or metaphysical world view as the only garb in which to clothe the story with the power to touch the imagination? Cannot perhaps the supernaturalist scheme survive at least as part of the 'magic' of Christmas?

Then he goes on to say, "yes, it may survive, but it survives only as a myth," i.e., as a pretty story which indicates importance and captures the attention. Then he adds:

But we must be able to read the Nativity story without assuming that its truth depends on there being a literal interpretation of the natural by the supernatural, that Jesus can only be 'Immanuel' 'God with us' if, as it were, he comes through from another world. For as supernaturalism becomes less and less credible, to tie the action of God to such a way of thinking is to banish it for increasing numbers into the preserve of pagan myths and thereby to sever it from any real connection with history. As Christmas becomes a pretty story, naturalism is left in possession of the field as the only alternative with any claim to the allegiance of intelligent men.

Notice, there is no attempt at all (and there is none throughout the book), to disprove the supernatural claims of the biblical story – they are merely dismissed with a wave of the hand. Scorn is heaped upon them and they are regarded as unworthy of modern intelligence. The implication is clear that any who believe in this story are in a class with those who still believe in a flat earth or are like children who still believe in fairies. The reason for this, of course, is that any acceptance of this as an historical fact so grounds this story in history that its implications cannot be shaken aside. We must face it as an incontrovertible event that can only be explained by the explanation which Scripture gives: The need of men, in their lost condition, for an invasion of God in order that he might accomplish a work of redemption at great cost to himself and thus set men free.

What is the answer to these false claims? Well, simply read the Scriptural accounts. Read the Christmas story as told by Matthew and Luke. As you read the familiar tale, see how artlessly, how simply it is presented, how uncontrived the record is. There is no attempt to garnish it or to

bolster it with arguments or theological explanations. There is just the simple narrative of what happened to a couple on their way to Bethlehem, what occurred when they arrived there, and what happened in the immediate days following. When that story is set in place in the total narrative of the Bible, how fitting it is, how natural, how unforced. As G. Campbell Morgan so beautifully put it, "The song of the angels to sighing humanity is the beginning of the infinite mystery of an incarnate God. From that simple story all light is streaming, all hope is flaming, all songs are coming." Wesley captures this beautifully in his hymn:

Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's womb:
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

We need only remember that this simple, uncomplicated story was widely accepted and widely proclaimed in the first century. Along with the account of the cross and the resurrection, this story has changed the world.

No Christian in the Scripture ever denies it. No apostle, or even Jesus himself, ever questions these events, ever suggests that these did not take place exactly as recorded. And the stories were well-known in their day.

In other words, this account reflects the inherent ability of truth, simply told, to compel belief, without artificial support. As we read the account, it wins the submission of our reason, it appeals to the love of the heart, it compels the obedience of the will. To reject it, therefore, is to violate our basic humanity. This is why John declares in a letter written toward the close of the first century that this story is one of the tests of false teachers, that if someone denies the incarnation and says Jesus did not come in the flesh, he is satanically inspired and is an antichrist.

This is the purpose of these "sayings of God." They are a sword of the Spirit to defend against that which would undermine and attack ultimate authority.

Looking back in my own life, I am aware of many times when this sword of the Spirit has saved me from error and delusion of some kind or other:

- As a young Christian, I was stopped at the edge of disobedience many times when some temptation seemed so logical, so reasonable, so widely practiced that I was allured by it. I was often arrested by a word I had memorized as a young Christian and which has come to me many times since. It is in the book of Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding,” {cf, Prov 3:5}. It is so easy to think that because something looks so logical to us it must be logical. But this fails to recognize the fact that we are easily deceived. We are not the rational creatures we love to think we are. There is much illusion and delusion in our world and we are not intelligent enough to see through these phantasmata, these lies. Therefore the word comes, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart” – believing the truth as it is revealed, and “lean not to your own understanding.”
- Sometimes a sword of the Spirit has been placed in my hand, not before defeat, but right in the midst of it, or right afterward. It has thus become the means of preventing any painful recurrences. I remember when a word from James came home to me with unusual power after a very violent and nasty display of temper on my part. A verse came flashing into my mind which I had read in the letter of James, “The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God,” {Jas 1:20 RSV}. That arrested me. I thought, here I am, claiming to be interested in working the righteousness of God, and what am I doing? Losing my temper, flaring up at someone, and then thinking I am accomplishing what God has sent me to do. That verse stopped me then and has been a help ever since.
- I remember when my heart was once pierced with another word from the book of Proverbs: “Only by pride comes contention,” {cf, Prov 13:10 KJV}. When we get involved in contentions and strifes with one another it is so easy to blame the other fellow. “He started it!” One day one of my nephews and my daughter were fighting and I asked them, “Who started this?” And the boy said, “She did. She hit me back.” This is so human, is it not? Ah, but the Word says, “Only by pride comes contention.”

Where there is strife and contention there is pride at work and both parties are usually guilty of it.

- As a young Christian I recall how the powerful lure to sexual misbehavior which exists in this world was frequently dispelled in my thinking by the remembrance, the sudden flashing recollection of that word in Ephesians 5: “Let no man deceive you with empty words [and that is exactly what they try to do] that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience,” {Eph 5:6 RSV}. This arrested me when I first heard it. Later, when I came to understand more fully what the wrath of God means – that it is not a lightning bolt from heaven or an auto accident or something like that, but rather it is the certain disintegration of life, the dehumanizing, the brutalization of life which comes when one gives way to these kinds of things – it took on even more power in my life.

Several years ago there was a man who came to me every week for over a year. He was in the grip of a terrible depression of spirit, an utter desolation of mind. I have never met such a lonely, miserable outcast of a man. He shut himself away from everyone. His liberation began by repeatedly praying one single phrase of Scripture – all the Scripture he could, in faith, lay hold of. Everything else I tried to point out to him he would reject. But one phrase stuck with him and he prayed it again and again: “Not my will but thine be done.” At last, slowly, like the sun coming up, the light began to come, and you could see the change in his life. Today he is living a normal, free life, set free by the saying of God – “the sword of the Spirit which is the saying of God.”

Obviously, the greater exposure there is to Scripture, the more the Spirit can use this mighty sword in our lives. If you never read or study your Bible, you are terribly exposed to defeat and despair. You have no defense, you have nothing to put up against these forces that are at work.

Therefore, read your Bible regularly. Read all of Scripture, for each section has a special purpose. The Christian who neglects the reading of the Scriptures is in direct disobedience to the will of the Lord.

The Lord Jesus said, “It is they [the Scriptures] that bear witness to me,” (John 5:39). This is the

way you come to know Christ. There is no way apart from the Scriptures. And there is no way to come into full maturity as a Christian apart from the Scriptures.

Finally, what is the responsibility of the Christian when the Spirit places one of these sayings in your mind on some appropriate occasion? What are you to do? The apostle says, take it! Heed it! Obey it! Do not reject it or treat it lightly. Take it seriously. The Spirit of God has brought it to mind for a purpose; therefore give heed to it, obey it.

Now, one word of caution is needed here. We are also to compare Scripture with Scripture. This is a very important matter, for remember, the devil can quote Scripture as well – as he did on one occasion with the Lord. But the quotation of the Scripture by the devil is never balanced. The sword of the Spirit in the devil's hands is an uncouth weapon, out of balance, eccentric.

Remember how Jesus himself gave us a great example of this when the devil came to tempt him in the wilderness. Satan said to Jesus, "If thou be the Son of God, turn these stones into bread," {cf, Matt 4:3, Luke 4:3 KJV}. Jesus immediately met him with the sword of the Spirit. He said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone,'" {Matt 4:4, Luke 4:4}. That is, my physical life is not the highest part of my being. I do not have to sustain that, but I do have to sustain my relationship with God. That is the important thing. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," {Matt 4:4 RSV}.

Then the devil tried a new tack. He came to him and said, "Oh well, if you are going to quote Scripture, I can quote it too. There is a verse in the Psalms, you know, that says if you get yourself into a dangerous position God will send his angels to uphold you." Taking Jesus to the top of the temple, he said, "Cast yourself from this height and all the crowd around will see and know that you are the Son of God. If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down, for it is written, 'He shall give his angels charge over thee to keep thee from all harm, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone,'" {cf, Luke 4:9-11 KJV}. But Jesus knew how to handle the devil. Jesus said, "It is written again..." I urge you to take note of this: "It is written again..." It is not enough to have someone quote a verse of Scripture to you, or to have one come flashing into your mind. Compare it. It is in balance? Is it held in

relationship to other truth in the Word of God? "It is written again, you shall not tempt the Lord your God," {cf, Luke 4:12}. It is this word which delivered Jesus in that hour.

Then, you remember, the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "All this shall be yours if you fall down and worship me," {cf, Matt 4:9}. And again our Lord answered him with the sword of the Spirit: "It is written, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve,'" {cf, Matt 4:10}. Then, the account says, the devil left him. This is always what happens. He is put to rout by the sword of the Spirit. This is the sword which is placed in our hands.

This is the last piece of the Christian's armor. Here is the Christian's complete armor: You in Christ, and Christ in you – Christ, demonstrated as truth and experienced as righteousness and peace; and Christ, appropriated by faith and applied to life through the hope of salvation and the sayings of God. This is all you need. With this you can take anything life can throw at you. You do not need tranquilizers or expensive psychiatric treatments. You may need some physical therapy now and again – the Word of God has nothing against that – but you will not need all the remedies science has now made available to give us a chemical bolstering in the hour of anxiety or fear. You have the armor of God – if you are a Christian.

If you are not a Christian there is no help for you. The place to begin is to become a Christian. The Word of God has no comfort to give to those who are not Christians. It has nothing to say to support or encourage someone who is not a Christian. The only way to escape from the allurements and deceitfulness of the enemy is to become a Christian. You must be delivered by the work of Jesus Christ from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of God. Then you can put on the armor of God.

- Think it through. Become familiar with this armor.
- Learn how to use it, and then actually use it when you are under attack.
- Practice going through this when you feel yourself under attack from Satan.

- Like a soldier in battle, put it to work.

What good is armor if it rusts unused in a closet? No wonder Christians are constantly failing. Though they may have the armor of God, they do not employ it. If you feel yourself growing cold or lukewarm, you are under attack from the wiles of the devil. If you find yourself depressed or discouraged, or are bothered with doubts, fears, and anxieties, or if you feel the lure of lusts, the crush of pain, or the numbness of disappointment – what shall you do? Systematically, thoughtfully, deliberately, repeatedly, go through these steps.

Think through this armor of God.

Do not give up if no immediate change occurs. We are so brainwashed these days into wanting quick results, immediate relief, instant deliverance. But the attack may be prolonged, and there are not always quick results. This is why the apostle says, “Having done all, stand.” This is all – stand!

I want to say more about this in another message. But victory is sure if you persevere. You are

doing the right thing; now keep on doing it. Do not give up, it is only a matter of time. For the word of the promise is sure: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

And while you are waiting there is one more thing you can do. It is not in the nature of effort so much as in the character of release, relief, help in the midst of this pressure. You can pray.

We shall start there next time: “Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”

Prayer:

Our Father, what practical import there is in these matters. How helpful this word is in the midst of our pressures, our discouragements, and our tendencies to defeat. Grant to us, Lord, that we will take them seriously and apply this great armor that is given to us in Jesus Christ and thus learn how full and rich and exciting life can be as a Christian, lived in your strength. For we ask in your name, Amen.

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