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Spiritual Warfare (1959)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

"Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears: but all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock" (1 Samuel 13:19,20).

"This charge I commit unto thee, my child Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that by them thou mayest war the good warfare" (1 Timothy 1:18).

"Fight the good fight of the faith, lay hold on the life eternal, whereunto thou wast called" (1 Timothy 6:12).

The very first of these passages informs us, if we need to be informed, that there is an enmity in the very constitution of things. There are really only two sets of people in creation and in the universe: 'the seed of Satan', whether they be men or demons, and 'the seed of Christ'; and, in the very constitution of things, there is enmity between these two. It is in the human race; we know that well. There is that within human nature that is enmity both against God and against those who are of God, or of Christ. We know that we live in a universe which is shot through and through with enmity, with hostility. It goes beyond humanity; it is in the very heavens, this warfare; it is spiritual, back of everything else.

Now, of course, that is a very big subject; we only have one fragment of it all that we want to underline at this time. But we need continually to keep this fact in mind. I think so often we are at a

discount, we are weakened, because we still have some element of surprise or wonder about it. Why all this we experience, this stress, this pressure, this antagonism, this conflict? We need to settle it completely, once and for all; that it is in the very constitution of things; and, until the constitution of things is changed, with a new heaven and a new earth, it will continue; it will always be with us. By our very first birth we are brought into a realm of conflict; it is in us; then we are brought into it in another direction by our new birth, and we begin to know something more about it than we ever did before. It is something that we have really to settle, as a fact, and it is going on to the end.

This is not a very comforting thought, I know; it may sound very depressing. But much of our defeat is because we have not really settled this matter. Let it be understood that we are going to remain in spiritual conflict right through to the end. It will always be so, and so we had better adjust to it, and recognise that it is here. We are in a warfare between two great spiritual systems headed by two great leaders. On the one side there is Satan and his vast hosts; as Paul calls them, 'hosts of wicked spirits'. On the other side, there is our Lord Jesus, and He has His hosts also. And these two are set in deadly array.

The Enemy's Strategy

We need, however, to know and recognise not only the fact, but something as to the strategy of each leader. As to Satan, his supreme strategy is *to neutralise the fighting spirit*. Take note of that! There is a little illustration of it in the passage we read from Samuel. The Philistines were always seeking to neutralise the testimony of Israel. Their strategy was just to rob Israel of all fighting weapons, take all their weapons away, so that they could not fight; they had nothing to fight with. That is the supreme strategy of the enemy - to neutralise the fighting spirit of the people of God.

The ways in which that is done are almost countless. He will paralyse by seeking to overwhelm with ostentatious demonstrations of power and influence, and to create in the Lord's people a feeling that the enemy is greater than the Lord. If the enemy cannot bring us to believe that he does not exist at all, he will do everything to make us believe that he 'extra'-exists - that is, that he is more than he really is. He puts on ostentatious demonstrations to make us succumb to the feeling that he is too great for us, the forces against us are too mighty. Of course, that is not true; but, if we allow it to get in, it can take the fight out of us, and that is what it is for.

Or again, he will neutralise the fighting spirit by introducing paralysing confusion, raising questions, getting divided minds, thus breeding mistrust, uncertainty, and doubt; and when that is in, all our security is gone. We are finished if the enemy can succeed in turning us in on ourselves and our own problems, and raising these distracting questions. The fighting spirit will soon go out.

Or again (and we are keeping in every case very close to the Scriptures, which we could cite in each connection), he will bring in some paralysing corruption, some secret, hidden sin amongst the Lord's people; something of which he can truly accuse them before the Lord. There is a great deal, of course, of that which he does, which is not right; but he knows very well that, if only he can get in something that is questionable or wrong amongst the Lord's people, the Lord cannot stand with them. The Lord is arrested in His support, cannot commit Himself, if there is any kind of questionable or corrupting element of life or conduct.

We could spend much time enumerating the ways in which the enemy seeks to destroy the fighting spirit amongst the Lord's people. But although we could not cover the whole of that ground, though

we spent much time on it, let us take note of this: If the fighting spirit has gone out of us, it means that the enemy has gained a tremendous advantage; somewhere the enemy is succeeding. The enemy dreads, more than anything else, a people who are girt to battle, who are on their feet for the fight.

The Lord's Strategy

On the other hand, there is the strategy of the Lord. Now, we usually make our appeal to the Lord to move in and fight for us, and to settle the issue; and, just as usually, we do not find that the Lord does it. The Lord cannot stand with a doubting people: a people who have been caught in any kind of unbelief, or doubt, or question. The one thing the Lord does demand is that we know where we stand, on what ground we stand, and that in our hearts there be a deep assurance, a quiet, deep, steady confidence - we have no doubt. A doubting people, a questioning people, is a paralysed people: the Lord requires that we be an assured people: that we know where we are, and we know where we are going, and we know the ground on which we stand.

The Lord demands a united people. The Lord can never stand with, and fight for, a divided people. It is the work of the enemy to divide. It is the Lord's strategy to bring about a complete oneness, a unity: His power lies in that direction, and victory lies in that direction - that we are altogether; we are as one man, of one heart, of one mind, of one will. It is essential. The Lord has spoken so much about this in the Word - to have a people who are of one heart. It is the absolute necessity to victory over the enemy.

Again, it is essential to victory that we have one single vision and purpose. 'Where there is no vision, the people disintegrate' (Prov. 29:18); where there is divided vision, there is no solid power of countering the enemy. No, we must be a people with a single vision; we must know what it is the Lord is after in our time, in this world - really what it is that is the end of God, toward which He is committed; and we must be in line with that. Oh, how important it is that we have God's vision for the time, and be under its mighty government. A people of vision means a people of distinct and definite purpose. If we do not know, if we have any uncertainty, if we are not clear, as to why we are, and for what we are, we shall be a defeated people; we shall be held up all the time. It was always like that with Israel. When they lost their vision of that for which God had called them, for which He had brought them out, they just went round in circles; they were a neutralised people. There must be an all-consuming purpose.

You remember how - and there are many illustrations of this in the Word of God - whenever the Lord's people began to settle down and take their ease, and ceased to be aggressive and positive, something always went wrong. It was so when they got into the Land, before they had completely turned out their enemies: they began to settle down. You know what followed. It was so even with David. "At the time when kings go out to battle", instead of going out to battle, he "tarried at Jerusalem"; and you know what happened (2 Sam. 11). Likewise with Solomon: it seemed as though there was no more fighting to be done; it seemed that all the nations round about were now subdued. But the enemy did not think so! Just when everything seemed to be so nice and good, it says: "And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter..." (1 Kings 3:1). How subtle! You know all that followed in Israel. It was not long after Solomon that the kingdom was divided, followed by all that long, terrible story; the tragedy of king following king in apostasy, in disaster, in death.

No, diligence, the 'fervent spirit', is a very great factor in warfare. We must not be a people without motive, without purpose, without having our lives absorbed in some object. Oh, this work of the enemy, to rob our lives of a sense of motive, of some great enough thing for which to live and work; to weaken our hands that they hang down. We shall soon be a neutralised people if it is like that. There must be a positiveness - as Paul puts it: "Always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). The person who has not his hands full enough of purpose in life is a person who is open to every kind of assault. Even in the natural realm that is true: you are far happier if you are busy than if you are doing nothing; far more victorious in life if you are doing something, getting on with something, whatever it may be. As soon as you stop and sit down (unless of course it be from fatigue), you know how things begin to crowd into the mind, and in other ways; you will soon be caught up in worries and troubles. But in the spiritual realm, this is a very important thing: "in diligence not slothful; fervent in spirit" (Rom. 12:11); a people like those of old, who 'have a mind to work' (Neh. 4:6).

The Battle for Life

Now, if you look again at the Word, you will see that all spiritual progress, all increase of spiritual measure, came to the Lord's people along the line of battle; and it is still like that. But what is the focal point of this whole contest, this whole battle? Upon what does it all turn? Just one thing: *life*. It is the battle over life. Make no mistake about it, that is the issue upon which the enemy is focusing all his attention. In all his countless schemes, of neutralising and putting out of the fight, his objective is that *life*, against which he moved at the beginning. His whole success will depend upon *death*. If he can bring death in, in any form whatever, he has succeeded; and on the other hand, the whole triumph of the Lord's people is in the one connection of *life*.

We have said that all spiritual progress is a matter of knowing Him ever more in the power of His resurrection. Every fresh step in spiritual progress comes out of a crisis, and that crisis is one in which a fresh knowledge of the power of His resurrection is the only thing for our salvation. That is a very hopeful thing. If today you and I are more conscious than ever, both personally and collectively, of the need of a new, mighty incoming of the power of His resurrection, it may be that the Lord has precipitated a crisis in order that there shall be more of that Divine life than ever. It has always been like that. Israel's coming out to be the Lord's people, with the inheritance in view, was through a crisis of death and resurrection; their moving into the Land, into the inheritance, was on another crisis of death and resurrection. All progress, all increase, is in this battle between death and life, life and death.

And so we come to this word: 'Fight... Lay hold on eternal life.' Now, we know that eternal life is a gift in response to faith in the Lord Jesus. It is a gift, but that is not the end of the story. When it has been given, it becomes the battleground for the rest of the experience of the Christian; right through to the end, that very life is the battleground of all true Christians. If it can by any means be neutralised, made inoperative, arrested, Satan will do it; that is his object. On the other hand, the Lord's object is to make us, with Paul, 'know Him, and the power of His resurrection', in ever greater fulness. If ever a man knew the power of His resurrection, it was Paul, through many, many deadly conflicts, terrible battles and deep experiences; and yet, in his last writings, right at the end of his long, full experience of knowing resurrection upon resurrection, he still says: 'That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection' (Phil. 3:10). It is as much as to say: 'I don't know all that there is to know of that yet. I know a lot, but there is much more to know of that yet.'

And to Timothy, much about the same time, Paul writes: "Lay hold on the life eternal." That is where I would put the emphasis. Do not just passively rest upon the fact that through faith in Jesus Christ you have eternal life. Remember that, from day to day, that life is to conquer; it is to be the basis of your very survival, it is to be the very means of your daily overcoming. It has to be the ground of your physical life, as well as your spiritual life: for body, you must lay hold on that life; for victory, you must lay hold on that life. Would that we knew more about this in our prayer gatherings - really laying hold for victory, laying hold for the overthrow of the enemy - this positive taking hold, in spirit, of life. This is the battle; this is the very nature of things. In all this terrible welter in which we find ourselves, we have not, on the one hand, to accept it as inevitable, things being as they are; nor, on the other hand, to have a merely passive faith that, in the end, the Lord will triumph. Between those two, there is all this in the Word of God about our being *positive*, about our *laying hold*; about our attitude - on the one side, of refusing; on the other side, of laying hold of God's end.

The Lord save our fighting spirit, and 'teach our hands to war, our fingers to fight!' (Ps. 144:1).