

IN HIS MIGHTY POWER

Spiritual Warfare

with a look at Ephesians 6:10-18

Dedicated to the hard-pressed Christian

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Introduction

There is a big struggle going on. It is not a political, economic or even religious struggle. It is not a man versus man struggle. Yet it permeates ... it seeps into ... every aspect of life. It is a struggle against unseen spiritual powers. *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,”* writes the apostle Paul, *“but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*

(Ephesians 6:12) Not that the average man in the street knows what is really happening! He turns on the television news or picks up a newspaper and what does he see? He sees injustice, famine, ethnic cleansing and other kinds of misery and mayhem. What he is not told about, however, is the **cause** of all this. He does not get to hear about the demonic powers, directed by Satan, who are steering the events behind the headlines. All he gets to see are the symptoms of the spiritual cancer that is eating away at this world from the inside out.

Back in his day, Paul could say, *“We are not unaware of [Satan's] schemes.”* (2 Corinthians 2:11) But I don't think we can say that today. The average person is ignorant of what is really going on, and I believe even Christians are not as aware as they should be. Day after day, Satan, also known as the devil, is trying to undo God's work. Those the devil cannot deceive, he will try to destroy; those he cannot destroy, he will try to deceive. The world is a spiritual battleground and the battle is for the heart, mind and soul of man. Referring to this invisible but very real war, A W Tozer wrote of a past generation who understood that there were clearly two forces. Sin, the devil and hell were one. God, righteousness and heaven were the other. He went on to say that in those days, whether Christian soldiers were charging into enemy guns or dreaming of war's end and the Father's welcome home, they never forgot what kind of world they lived in [*“This World: Playground or Battleground?”* p4 (OM Publishing, 1996)] And let's not forget what kind of world it still is, even though the devil

and ungodly men have tried to blur the picture of right and wrong.

As believers in Christ, we are at odds with the false values and twisted beliefs of the non-Christian, un-Christian and anti-Christian world around us. We just don't fit in and we are not meant to. *“Do not love the world or anything in the world,”* God's Word tells us. *“if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world.”* (1 John 2:15-16)

The Bible is very clear. The worldling, the person who has no time for the things of God, is at home in the world. The Christian is not. We are strangers and pilgrims. We're “just a-passin' through,” as the old spiritual song puts it. Nevertheless we are here for the time being and we are here for a purpose. With the Holy Spirit living in us, we are to be salt and light. Light in the darkness, supporting what is good, and salt as a preserving influence, speaking out against evil.

That is where we come up against the powers of darkness, and that is why we need a battle plan. A plan for victory in life's spiritual combat. But, at the same time, let's keep things in perspective with a warning from the pen of C S Lewis. He wrote: *“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They*

themselves are equally pleased by both errors.” [“*The Screwtape Letters*” p9 (Fount Paperbacks, 1977)] In today's church it is obvious that both these errors exist. On the one hand, some Christians would rather forget that there is a war going on. War is not a nice thing to think about, let alone get involved in! Yet we cannot stay neutral. While the whole world is being oppressed by the powers of darkness, it is only the true believer who struggles against them. While every person on this earth is a victim of these invisible forces, it is only the Christian who can have victory over them. We must answer the call of Christ. *“If anyone would come after me,”* Jesus said, *“he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24) On the other hand, there are believers who have an unhealthy fascination with the subject of demons. And in their obsession they are inclined to take a little fact and add a whole lot of fiction to it. That is something that does the cause of Christ no good at all. So what we are going to do is take the sensible, realistic route. We are going to stick to what the Bible says and make sure we understand it.

Malcolm Ryan

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Chapter one: Know your enemy

It has to be said that what we usually refer to as “the real world” is nothing of the sort! In fact, the world as presented in news bulletins and so-called entertainment, as seen in social upheaval and political infighting is a facade. This may come as a bit of a shock to some of us. After all,

we have become used to seeing things in a certain way. We have become used to thinking that the reason for all the trouble in society has to do with other people, whereas the apostle Paul says, "*our struggle is not against flesh and blood.*" At the heart of the problem is the one who directs the forces of evil, yet just try telling most people that the devil is real! Try telling them that they are being constantly deceived and manipulated by 'rulers, authorities and powers'. Why, it is an insult to their intelligence; it is an idea that belongs back in the Dark Ages! But if there is no devil, how do we explain all the wickedness in the world? How do we explain the many attempts throughout history to destroy God's chosen nation, Israel? How do we explain the ongoing persecution of the church in various places? The devil is real, all right!

Telling it plainly, the Lord Jesus said to certain men, "*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*" (John 8:44) The devil whispers in the world's ear. He makes out that he is telling the truth, but there is no truth in him. What is more, he knows that most people would prefer to believe an attractive lie rather than the unvarnished truth. As Bible teacher John MacArthur has pointed out, one of the things Satan is rather successful at is selling tickets to heaven. It is just that, seeing as he is a liar, they do not get you there! Sad to say, people get involved in false religion; they chase

after the devil's lies. But what they find at the end of the road are the flames of hell. Again, the devil whispers in the world's ear. He tells it to apply a sticking plaster, when what is really needed is major surgery and because people are blind to the actual problem, their attempts at putting things right do not work. The world; that is to say, human society that prefers to go along with Satan rather than obey God, will more often than not try to solve its problems in one of three ways: law, education or a better environment. Have you noticed how often these things are reported on in the media? Yet all three keep failing.

Bringing in new laws will restrict us more, but they will not change man's basic nature. Education will cram our heads with knowledge, while our hearts stay empty. As for a better environment, very nice! But as with anything that is meant to be 'better' in this world, it is not long before people get fed up with it and want something else. Now do not misunderstand me! Laws, education and improved living conditions are part of a just, compassionate society. Yet none of them has the power to *transform* the inner human being and none of them can overcome the spoiling tactics of our greatest enemy. In the devil's stranglehold, men and women remain utterly helpless, and history just keeps repeating itself with one failure after another. As C S Lewis put it, "*No clever arrangement of bad eggs will make a good omelette!*" Having said that, the Christian has no reason to be fearful because the Bible says, "*The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.*" (1 John 4:4) In these studies we are going to be

challenged to be bold, to be passionate about our faith and to remember that Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord, even though Satan is defiantly trying to rule the world.

In Daniel 10 we get a rare glimpse of what is going on behind the scenes. Cyrus, the king of Persia, had ended the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites and had given them permission to return home. Some had done just that. Nevertheless Daniel was concerned about the low spiritual condition of his people and wondered what would become of them. So for several weeks he fasted and prayed. But he was not getting an answer. Finally, an angelic being, perhaps Gabriel, came and touched him, saying, *“Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia.”* (v12-13) It was not that God did not care about Daniel's prayers; it was just that his answer had been delayed. His messenger, helped by archangel Michael, had been in conflict with an evil angelic power and what we have here is an area of reality that most people are totally unaware of. Unseen by the human eye, a great conflict is raging behind world events.

But although Satan has a lot of power, he is not all-powerful like God. He is brilliantly clever, but he does not know everything like God. And there is something else.

Satan cannot be everywhere at once like God can, so he has to make up for these shortcomings as best he can. How does he do this? Firstly, he uses cunning and deception. Ignorance of his motives and his movements is his most effective weapon. This is why he uses various disguises and the thing that most characterises Satan is that he moves with subtlety. In Genesis 3 he comes, in the form of a serpent, to Eve. Seemingly full of concern, he craftily begins to cast doubt on both God's Word and his character. *“Did God really say that? Huh! Well, you don't want to listen to him.”* That's how the devil reacted to being told what God had said. In his convincing manner, he claimed that if they took no notice of God and did what he said instead, Adam and Eve would become like God. As a result of that subtle encounter, sin made its devastating entrance. Secondly, the devil organises his spiritual empire with military precision. Set against us are the vast array of rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world and the forces of evil in the realm of the invisible and it goes without saying that the devil's army of fallen angels, often referred to as demons, is made to be as destructive as possible. Looking back to the miracles of the Lord Jesus, many of these were directed against demons which had caused all sorts of ailments in their human victims. Jesus, you will recall, cast a whole legion of demons out of one sufferer (Mark 5:1-20) and when you think that in the Roman army a legion was an infantry unit made up of 6,000 men, that is a lot of demons!

The army of Satan is engaged in an unholy crusade to get

people to call evil things good and good things evil. To this end, we keep hearing that more tolerance is needed. But how much further can tolerance of sin be stretched? Over-tolerance, as it has become, has already made society soft, flabby and without conviction. Then have you noticed how this devil-influenced world can be very **intolerant** when it comes to a true Christian witness? Here is where Satan changes his tactics and *“prowls around like a roaring lion.”* (1 Peter 5:8) In the book of Acts we find him bringing about the persecution of the early Christians. There we can read Stephen's finely worded reply to the Sanhedrin's accusations. As he rightly said, the members of this ruling body were like their fathers, obstinate and always resisting the Holy Spirit. The fathers had persecuted the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ; now the sons had betrayed and murdered him. (Acts 7:51-52) Whereas these men had tried to put Stephen on the defensive, his answer had been more than they had bargained for! It made them furious and they gnashed their teeth at him. Then in an act of mob violence, he was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. Still today Christians face persecution. In some places you can still lose your life for being a faithful witness. But then someone might ask, “Why should people who stand for truth, friendship and all that is good give rise to feelings of hatred?” The answer to this is that by being outspoken for righteousness, Christians often seem to pose a threat to national identities and majority religions. By standing up for the weak and oppressed, Christians are not liked by some of the people in power. When Christians behave like

Christians, when we are seen to really trust and obey our Lord, the world stands condemned. Human society with its false values, immorality, paganism, atheism and other deceptive **isms** demands that we conform. When we refuse, the world is not pleased. This often results in persecution.

Chapter two: No ordinary strength

Writing to Christians, John made this startling contrast: *“We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”* (1 John 5:19) The apostle did not mince his words. He was pointing out that there are only two kinds of people: Children of God and those controlled by Satan. In fact, under the devil's control, *“evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived,”* Paul told Timothy, the young teacher and evangelist. (2 Timothy 3:13) And he was so right! The world is full of scheming. Wherever you go, people are trying to take advantage of one another. That is the satanic system that exists today. Evil men are out to trick other people, and they are even trying to infiltrate the church with false teaching. The funny thing is, though, they end up believing their own lies! Our sovereign Lord sees to that. And he does it to show he will not be mocked. (Cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:11; Galatians 6:7) As an antidote to false teaching, the apostle Paul reminded Timothy to *“continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it.”* Timothy had a godly heritage. From childhood he had been taught Bible truth ... and that is what

made him *“wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”* (2 Timothy 3:14-15)

The Bible tells us about sin, its consequences and the way of salvation. Yet as the apostle also pointed out, *“the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* (2 Corinthians 4:4) What a clever job Satan has done! The *“god of this age”* as he is also called, has blinded millions of minds concerning the good news of Jesus. Through the false religions of the world, Satan is saying, *“You can make it by your own efforts.”* He is telling people to ignore God; that if they **do** this or **do** that they will get to heaven. He is saying, *“Don't believe what the Bible says. Don't believe that Christ shed his blood to redeem you. You don't want to be bothered with the gospel.”* But there is no other way! Jesus said, *“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.”* The truth is we are to *“turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”* (John 10:9; Acts 20:21)

Faith under fire

When we come to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith, our biggest problem, the problem of sin, is dealt with. At that time and for some time afterwards there is the great joy of knowing forgiveness. There is the sheer relief of having found peace with God. (John 14:27; Romans 8:6) Yet as time passes something happens. Other problems, unknown in the days before conversion, make themselves felt. Doubts may come, then feelings of guilt and the

conviction of sin as never before. Not only that, we will also have to put up with a certain amount of opposition from friends and even family, people who will not always take kindly to what we believe. Should this surprise us? No! After all, Jesus told his disciples, *“In this world you will have trouble.”* (John 16:33) And Paul warned the churches, *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Acts 14:22) The gospel separates the believer from the unbeliever. As Jesus himself said, *“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”* (Matthew 10:34) A sword divides; it speaks of conflict and although the ultimate end of the gospel is peace with God, relationships with those who do not believe can become tense. The world system is evil, man's fallen nature is sinful and God's offer of peace is actually offensive to many people. This brings friction into the closest of relationships, so that sometimes *“a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”* (v35-36)

Having become Christians, we find ourselves in God's army. As to how we fare in the inevitable troubles and hardships of spiritual combat depends on how we are equipped. In Ephesians 6 Paul writes: *“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore*

put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” (v10-18)

The true Christian (as described in the first half of Ephesians) who lives the faithful life (as set out in the second half) has to “*put on the full armour of God*”. Yes, all of it! We are involved a spiritual war of universal proportions in which God and his truth are set against Satan and his lies. It is the conflict of the ages, where the kingdom of God clashes with the dominion of darkness.

Immeasurably more

So where do we get the strength to survive? In Ephesians 1, verse 19, Paul writes of God's “*incomparably great power for us who believe.*” And he goes on to explain that it is “*like the working of [God's] mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms*”. (Ephesians 1:19-20) No ordinary strength or power,

therefore, but the very power that broke the chains of death on the first Easter morning and dealt a crippling blow to the forces of hell, the very power that lifted Christ back to glory so that he could take his seat at God's right hand. It is this power that is given to every believer at the time of salvation and it is always available to us. “*You will receive power ... and you will be my witnesses,*” said Jesus before he was taken up to heaven. (Acts 1:8) Later Paul would write of “*him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us*”. (Ephesians 3:20) How we need God's power so that we do not give up, for although the devil is defeated and doomed, he still puts up a tremendous fight. And in order to overcome his wrecking attempts, we have to remember that we are in Christ. (Galatians 2:20) In Philippians 4:13 Paul writes, “*I can do everything.*” Well, if he had just left it at that we would be asking, “Hey, Paul, aren't you going a bit far in saying you can do everything?” But he did not only say that. He said, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Ah, now we get it! There are **two**, not one. “*I*” says the apostle, “*can do everything.*” He is able to do all things, yet only “*through him who gives me strength*”. That is his secret. Christ is strengthening Paul. The Lord Jesus is giving him the power. Make no mistake, though, Paul **is** doing all things. He has not handed it over, and then sat back in an easy chair. Rather he knows what it is to be in need, he knows what it is to have plenty. That is because he is involved. (Philippians 4:12) So it is not that the Lord Jesus does it all for Paul, but he strengthens him for what is to be done.

God supplies the armour and he also supplies the strength in our daily battle against Satan.

Chapter three: The first rebellion

‘Satan’ is the Hebrew name and ‘devil’ the Greek name for the one who represents all that is evil and opposed to God. So how did he become God's archenemy? He was once Lucifer, the chief angel, and he sparkled with created beauty. That is, until the day he rebelled against his Creator. Up until that moment, no one had opposed God's sovereign rule, but then this archangel let his perfection get the better of him. We can read about this in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel: *“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you.”* (Ezekiel 28:12-15) Lucifer had been corrupted by his own perfection, and pride was his downfall. The prophet Isaiah gives some of the details: *“How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of*

God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High. But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.” (Isaiah 14:12-15) See also 1 Timothy 3, verse 6.

Did you notice how many times Lucifer said, *“I will”*? He was not content with being the number one angel, he wanted God out of the way so that he could have heaven and earth for himself. As for God's response to this archangel's sin, he cast him down to earth to be eventually destroyed. That was when this *“morning star”* and *“son of the dawn”* became known as Satan, *“the accuser”*. And when Satan fell, he did not fall alone. Using symbolic language, Revelation 12:4 tells us that he *“swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth”*. In verse 9 these stars are shown to be fallen angels. That is to say, a third of the angelic host joined the devil's rebellion and became demons.

Accusations

Now here is something else we have to understand. Although Satan has been thrown out of heaven, he still has access to it. This is made clear in the opening chapters of Job. (see Job 1:6;2:1) And, living up to his name, Satan spends his time there bringing accusations against believers. What a cheek! He does all he can to tempt us to do wrong so that he can go and accuse us before the throne of God. But he does not get away with it! For as the

apostle John tells us, *“we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”* (1 John 2:1) God does not want his children to sin, of course. His standard is perfection, and this is what we are to aim for. To the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus said, *“Go now and leave your life of sin”*. (John 8:11) By the same token, God remembers that we are but dust and we often fail. So when the devil takes on the role of prosecutor, the Lord Jesus draws alongside us as our advocate. How wonderful this is! *“We have one who speaks to the Father.”* God is still our Father even when we sin. Jesus can point to his finished work on the cross and say, *“Charge it to my account.”* It is not often that a defence attorney pays for his client's wrongdoing but this is what Christ has done. He has paid for our sins with his precious blood and what he has done is all we need for salvation. Then, secure in Christ, the believer can look forward to the day when Satan will be barred from heaven forever; the day when a loud voice in heaven will declare, *“The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.”* (Revelation 12:10)

Conquering faith

At present we are up against a cunning and formidable enemy. And we need faith that God can and will see us through. What kind of faith is that? The kind it took to conquer Jericho! Following the death of Moses, the Lord commanded Joshua to get ready to cross the Jordan River. He was to lead the Israelites into the land that had been

promised to them. For this task, Joshua would have to *“be strong and courageous”*. (Joshua 1:6,7,9,18) *“No-one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life,”* the Lord told him. *“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.”* (v5) Joshua's confidence came from knowing that God was with him and would never desert him and when the children of Israel came to their first big challenge in the Promised Land, it was their faith in God's presence and power that gave them success. As Hebrews 11:30 tells us, *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.”* ‘Faith’ is an important word.

The Bible makes it clear that not only are we saved by faith, we are to live by faith. *“My righteous one will live by faith,”* Hebrews 10:38 declares and God is pleased when we value his promises and keep believing in him because that is what the life of faith is all about, as seen in the conquest of Jericho. The walls of Jericho seemed so solid, so unbreakable! They were 30 to 50 feet thick and nearly 100 feet high. Formidable. But the Lord said to Joshua, *“See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands.”* (Joshua 6:2) And that was when the people's faith became even stronger! God was going to take that city and he was going to let them take part in the conquest. All they had to do was trust and obey, then the walls would collapse and the city would be theirs. So what actually caused those walls to fall down? Was it because the Israelites marched around them each day? No. Was it due to the vibrations from their shouting at the end of the seven days? Even though

they must have made a big, resounding noise, it was not that, either. It was God's mighty power that did it. And still today, remember, our victory is not in our own abilities and resources. It is in the Lord. "*Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power,*" Ephesians 6:10 says. Because, you see, the best Christian soldiers are the ones who realise their own weakness; so they rely solely on him. (1 Corinthians 1:27)

Chapter four: When the battle begins

In Christ, God has come into enemy-occupied territory. The ministry of the Lord Jesus began with a hard-fought battle between himself and Satan. It lasted 40 days. (Luke 4:2) Later, as Jesus' ministry drew to a close, "*his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground,*" as the devil lay siege in the garden of Gethsemane. (Luke 22:44) And today, as a soldier of the cross, the Christian can also count on opposition and conflict. Now you may say, "I thought that when I became a Christian, the devil wouldn't be able to get at me. I thought that life would get easier, not that I would be thrust deep into conflict!" Well, if that is what you have been thinking, you have got it wrong. When you asked the Lord Jesus to save you and make you his, that is when the battle began! So, fellow soldier, we had better start putting on the Armour of God, hadn't we, from verse 14 of Ephesians 6?

By the first century, Rome was well established as a great world power, with its army controlling the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. Bearing in mind the familiar attire of a

Roman soldier, the apostle Paul now shows how the Christian should prepare for battle. To begin with, a soldier in the Roman army always wore a tunic; an outer garment which served as his main item of clothing. This was usually made of a large piece of material with holes cut out for the head and arms. But since most combat was hand-to-hand, a loose tunic could get in the way. So a belt was used to secure it and get the soldier ready for action. Likewise we must have a belt. "*Stand firm then,*" Paul instructs, "*with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.*" (v 14) When it is understood and when it is believed, truth gets us ready for action. And just as the Roman's belt gave him confidence, the belt we put on expresses our confidence in God's truth, as found in the Bible.

Now let me ask you, do you have total confidence in the Bible? Or do you sway a bit when others question its truthfulness? Do you become a little unsteady when they will not accept what it says about the miraculous? A lot of people refuse to believe that "*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" (Genesis 1:1) They prefer to listen to the foolish theories of men, while also dismissing the accounts of Adam's fall, the great flood in Noah's day, the Israelites' miraculous passage through the Red Sea and the supplying of manna in the wilderness. Then as for the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, his miracles, atoning sacrifice, bodily resurrection and ascension, they just do not want to know! But, my friend, you can trust what the Bible says. As we open its pages, let us "*remember the former*

things, those of long ago,” which include all the past history of fulfilled prophecies and the remarkable ways in which God has looked after his people. *“I am God, and there is no other,”* he declares, *“I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.”* (Isaiah 46:9-10) Whatever our reliable, unchanging God has said will always come to pass. Speaking of that, in Jesus’ day it seemed that people were always looking for a sign or miracle. In effect they were saying, “Do something spectacular and we will believe you.” But despite all the miracles he performed, they still would not open their hearts to him. And what about when Jesus turned the traders out of the temple! He was asked, *“What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”* He answered, *“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”* They thought he was talking about Herod’s temple, so they said, *“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?”* But the temple Jesus had spoken of was his body. And *“after he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.”* (John 2:18-22) *“They believed the Scripture”* that is to say, they believed the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah’s resurrection. *“God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?”* (Numbers 23:19)

Called to be faithful

Praying to the Father in heaven for the disciples, Jesus said, *“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”* (John 17:17) Not that we will always be liked when we take a stand for the truth. But then, we are not called to be popular; we are called to be faithful. When Martin Luther was falsely accused of heresy and condemned for declaring that men are saved by faith alone in Christ alone, he said: *“My conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.”* And everyone who is faithful to God and his Word cannot do otherwise. We are to stand firm for the truth, whatever the cost. As Paul told Timothy, *“Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”* (2 Timothy 2:3) Paul himself never forgot that he belonged to the suffering Saviour. This meant that because a servant is not above his master, he did not expect any better treatment than the Master had received. (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

What about the opposite of truth? That is where Satan comes on the scene! He is the original liar. His supreme desire is to be worshipped, preferably openly or at least by deception. This is why his demonic deceivers are behind all the world’s false beliefs and he is not only trying to take over the true church, but run it out of existence. The church can be a dangerous place. After all, where was the most dangerous place in Jerusalem on the night the Lord Jesus was arrested? I’ll tell you where it was not. It was not with the Pharisees; it was not with the local criminals. So where was it? It was in the Upper Room! That is

where the devil was that night as he entered into Judas Iscariot, who was going to betray the Lord. (John 13:27) That is where the front line was, and in today's church the battle carries on. As for tactics, one of Satan's greatest assets are people who prefer the truth to be watered down and who may even claim that all faiths lead to God. In many churches, as a result, there are wolves in sheep's clothing; deceivers who will tell of a wide gate and an easy way. (see Matthew 7:15) In the book of Isaiah, God says, "*Ignorant are those ... who pray to gods that cannot save Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.*" (Isaiah 45:20, 22) Then in First Timothy we are reminded that "*there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*" (1 Timothy 2:5)

"How do we stay with the truth?" someone asks. First, with a good grounding in Christian basics, we can become people who know the difference between truth and error. This involves exercising discernment. "*Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*" (Ephesians 4:14) Second, in a world system built by men there is no room for God. Whether it is in art, culture, education, science and even religion, the name of Christ is not welcome, except as an empty formality. From this it might seem that the only way we can attract the world is by being like the world. But that would be a mistake! The church is distinctly different, and it is no use trying to win

the lost to Christ by merely trying to win their favour. We have a compassionate message to declare; yet it is also an uncompromising message. This leads us to the third point. Do we have love that is tough enough to tell it like it is? The Lord Jesus said, "*I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6) That was very dogmatic of him, wasn't it? At school you were taught that $2+2=4$, and I expect that your teacher was very dogmatic about that! Just as well! Just as well you were not taught that $2+2=$ anything you like. Otherwise you would be in mess! Just as well Jesus said what he said. Otherwise you would be on your way to a Christless eternity. So let us not play games. Let's show our love for the unsaved by telling them about sin and hell, the cross and repentance.

Chapter five: Retreat is not an option

"*Take your stand ... stand your ground,*" Paul writes. After all, as Winston Churchill once pointed out, "*Wars are not won by evacuation.*" So having buckled the belt of truth around your waist, the next thing is to put "*the breastplate of righteousness in place*". (Ephesians 6:14) The most common type of breastplate worn by the Roman soldier was a metal chest plate which covered him from the base of the neck to the top of the thighs, so that it protected the heart and other vital parts of the body. Needless to say, without a breastplate, no soldier would have lasted long in battle. And in spiritual warfare, we will not last long if our hearts are not protected. Our enemy Satan is always attacking the heart because it is associated with our

feelings, emotions and desires. Have you noticed, for instance, how we can be hungry for the things of God one day, whereas the next day we find worldly pleasures more attractive? Now that is more than temperament, it is temptation! But what kind of righteousness do we go into battle with? Our own? We dare not do that! As Isaiah said, *“All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”* (64:6) So if we try to protect ourselves with our own righteousness, we will be miserably defeated. What we need is a righteousness that is from God, the righteousness of Christ. This is what we are clothed with at the moment of salvation.

Now if anyone could have got to heaven by his own righteousness, the apostle Paul could! From the tribe of Benjamin, he was a Hebrew of Hebrews. As for learning, he was a Pharisee who was thoroughly trained in the law of the fathers. *“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ,”* Paul wrote. *“What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”* (Philippians 3:7-9) From the time we are saved, whenever God sees us he sees the righteousness of Christ. That is because *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Then in order to win the daily battle against Satan, we must live a holy life; not in our own power but in the enabling power of Christ. In the letter to the Ephesians, we read of God's grand purpose in bringing *“all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”*. (1:10) When we come to Christ in faith, his death for our sake and his glorious resurrection set us free to live a new, victorious life. But this is not without opposition. Under the devil's direction, there are powerful spiritual forces at work, the very ones who used to influence the way we behaved when we were dead in our transgressions and sins. And these forces are not exactly pleased that God, who is rich in mercy, has seen fit to show his great love for us and make us alive with Christ. So here is what we have to do: *“Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness ... and do not give the devil a foothold.”* (Ephesians 4:24, 27) In fact do not give the devil an inch! He will never be satisfied; he will always want more.

We are talking here about a righteousness that works in everyday life. So it is practical and, as someone has said, when a man is clothed in practical righteousness, he is safe and secure. For although words are no defence against accusation, a good life is. That is why Paul wrote to the church at Colosse, *“We pray ... that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work ... being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us*

into the kingdom of the Son he loves.” (Colossians 1:10-13, edited) Paul himself was very keen to live a holy life. He wrote, *“Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 3: 13-14) You know, that is just about the most straightforward plan for life you will ever find! Paul is talking about being a runner in a race, and the runner has to concentrate on a single objective. He has to press on towards the goal in order to win the prize. A champion runner was once asked the secret of his many successes. He replied that victory came out of the ability to forget. This seemed a strange answer, so the interviewer asked him to explain. “Well,” said the athlete, “for me to win, I must forget every previous victory, and run as if I’d never won a race before. Then I must forget all previous losses, and run with the expectation that I can win and cannot lose.” By saying this, he endorsed Paul’s thoughts on how to win a race.

Paul had previously aspired to great learning and high morals. In wanting to be a great leader within the framework of Judaism, he had thought he was reaching out for something good. But blind to the person and work of Christ, he was missing the best. Then he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and became the Lord’s chosen instrument to carry his name *“before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel”*. (Acts 9:15) To do that, Paul realised it was necessary to forget his failures. He knew that the sins and regrets of the past would rob him

of the energy needed to cope with up and coming demands. He also knew that the Lord Jesus had mercy enough to deal with anything in his past that required forgiveness. As a result, he was able to preach the gospel day in and day out, setting up churches wherever he went. In the Christian life he was a champion runner, forgetting what was behind and straining towards what was ahead. If we are to be champion runners, it is important that having confessed our sins and asked the Lord’s forgiveness, we regard them as “water under the bridge”. Gone and forgotten. See Micah 7:18-19 and Jeremiah 31:34. Then it is also helpful to forget the successes of the past. Otherwise we are likely to just sit there boasting about all our achievements. Let us forget them and press on towards the goal. The goal is likeness to Christ.

Chapter six: A firm footing

One of the reasons for Julius Caesar’s success as a general was that he had his men wear military shoes that enabled them to walk a long way in quite a short time. Because of this, his enemies were frequently caught off-guard, being unable to set-up their defences in time. And not only did these special shoes help the Roman soldier walk faster, they also gave him a firm footing. The historian Josephus described them as *“shoes thickly studded with sharp nails,”* which meant that the soldier did not slide all over the place! Likewise we can stand firm if our feet are *“fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace”*. (Ephesians 6:15) It is a big confidence-booster to know that *“since we have been justified through faith, we*

have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ". (Romans 5:1) After all, we would scarcely have any confidence if we were anxious about our relationship with God. Yet because we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone, because the matter of our sin and guilt has been settled at the cross, we have real peace. It is a peace that helps get us ready for war. A peace in the heart that makes us fit to fight. And that is not a contradiction! Knowing that our cause is just and that we are well equipped, we have peace. Through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ is with us and in the heat of battle, he is still our peace. He is the believer's serenity and courage.

Against the odds

With our feet fitted with the gospel of peace not only are we on God's side, but he is on ours and that makes all the difference in our struggle against the enemy. Gideon, for one, found this to be true. In his day, nomadic tribes began to push into Israel. The Midianites were one of these tribes and were giving God's people a hard time. Many of the people, in fact, had taken to the hills and were living in caves and dens. With their fast camels, the Midianites were terrible raiders and laid waste everything they could not carry off. What it needed was for someone to lead the resistance! And Gideon, much to his own surprise was God's choice. But having put together an army of 32,000 men, Gideon was told that this was too many, and in the end only 300 Israelites were left to fight the enemy. The Lord said to Gideon, *"With the three hundred men ... I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands."* (Judges

7:7) And here is how. Each man was given a trumpet and a clay jar with a torch in it, and during the night they surrounded the enemy's camp. At Gideon's signal, they blew the trumpets, smashed the jars and held up the torches, shouting, *"A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"* What a shock the sleeping Midianites got! So much so that in panic and confusion they picked up their swords and began to slay each other.

Why had Gideon been willing to fight an entire army with just 300 men? He knew that God was on his side. And with our feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, you and I can stand firm even when the odds are stacked against us. "Ah, but you don't know me," you might say. "I'm not a strong person." Well, you are not alone! When the Lord first appeared to Gideon, this man was threshing wheat in a winepress, so the Midianites would not see him. (Judges 6:11) That is hardly the behaviour of a strong man, is it! He was not "have-a-go Gideon" then! But God had not made a mistake in choosing him. And do you want to know something? The reason most people do not get used by God is because they are too strong! They are so capable, so talented, that they are virtually self-sufficient. And they are likely to boast about it. So God uses the weak things; he always has. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, *"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things*

of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are, so that no-one may boast before him." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29) That is why God used a small group of men to sort out a big bunch of louts! And whenever God does anything, he chooses the weakest people in order to make it plain for all to see that what is being done is in his mighty power. Then he gets all the glory, and that is the way it should be.

Chapter seven: Missiles approaching!

In our day-to-day dealings it is easy to forget something. It is easy to forget that, as Ephesians 6:12 says, "*our struggle is not against flesh and blood.*" So often in this fallen world, what we see and hear about is the lying, cheating and hurting that goes on between people. But what we do not get to see is the real enemy, Satan. He is the one behind it all, he is the one who unleashes evil spirits to incite greed, hate and fear, and uses unbelievers like pawns on a chessboard. The struggle we face involves human beings, it is fought within them and around them yet beyond "*flesh and blood*" is the one who lurks in the shadows. Not that this clears sinful men and women of their responsibility. Sin is sin, and we will all have to give an account of ourselves on the Day of Judgment. (Matthew 12:36; Romans 14:12) So, as Christians, let us consider what we can and cannot do. We cannot stay silent about the evils around us; it might be taken as tacit approval. By the same token, our job is not to get into personal feuds. That is a waste of time and drains the emotions. What are

we to do, then? We are to concentrate on the issues and the "source" of the problem.

We cannot ignore the victims of evil, so we should get behind trustworthy Christian efforts to bring help and hope to those in need. "*The ditches and gutters that litter this world are ugly places, filled with human tragedy,*" wrote Franklin Graham, reporting on the relief work of the charity Samaritan's Purse in war-torn countries. He continued, "*They are arenas clouded by dark spiritual warfare, evil powers that seem to lurk at every turn. We have to slip into spiritual armour as we serve the King of kings and Lord of lords.*" We cannot have victory without God's armour. So let us check out some more. Let us take up the shield of faith that is used to put out all the flaming arrows of the evil one. (Ephesians 6:16) Satan's flaming arrows, if you like, are the equivalent of today's cruise missiles, and they can be compared to the arrows or darts used in first century warfare which were dipped in pitch and set on fire. As protection against them, the believer's shield of faith is like the very large shield that protected the Roman soldier. To make it fireproof, his shield was made of a solid piece of wood with a covering of either leather or metal. When this had been soaked in water it could deflect or extinguish the enemy's flaming arrows.

As for tactics, the soldiers carrying these door-sized shields would form the front line. They would stand side by side, sometimes in a line that stretched a mile or more. Then behind this impressive defence were the Roman's own

archers, who, as the army advanced, could fire their arrows in comparative safety. And what we have here is a picture of our faith in Christ; a faith that protects us from the flaming arrows of the enemy. But we are not to get smug about it! In his attacks, the devil will often use other people, and in the Lord's strength we can cope with that. We can take the criticisms about our faith that others may hurl at us, and even put up with persecution. We have to accept that that is the way it is in this Christ-rejecting world. More difficult to come to terms with, though, are direct satanic attacks. Attacks, that is, on the mind and conscience. The flaming arrows of days gone by were meant to do two things. First, to pierce their target. Second, to burn it. They were therefore doubly dangerous and, when we think about it, so are the fierce assaults of Satan. His target is the very soul of the believer and if we were not protected by the shield of faith, we would soon perish. So what kind of arrows does our enemy use?

One of them is surely the arrow of temptation. Dipped in the devil's pitch and set on fire, temptations one after the other are hurled at us. Temptations that try to lure God's children into immorality and covetousness, to coax us into pride and envy, and to incite us to hate and anger. If it is bad, the devil is urging us to do it! And of course he has legions of demons under orders to weaken our wills and corrupt our souls. C.S. Lewis wrote about this in his book 'The Screwtape Letters'. Among his humorous yet very relevant observations, Lewis explained how evil spirits try to corrupt normal, healthy pleasures. Although these are

God's invention, it is the work of the devil to promote them in ways or degrees which God never intended. And when Satan is successful, it results in "*an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure*". How, then, do we extinguish the flames of temptation? Take up the shield of faith.

Then another familiar arrow is that of doubt. "Maybe the world isn't the way I've been told it is. Maybe the Bible has it all wrong." Have you had thoughts like that? Have you sometimes felt fearful and anxious, wondering if it really is okay to trust God? Well, these are classic fiery arrow attacks. Satan wants us to live defeated lives, so he attacks us with doubt; he makes out that we cannot trust God to keep his promises. And when we are assailed by Satan's lies, we need the shield of faith. Faith that God will do what he has said. Faith that will move us forward in his will. Faith that is as simple as Abraham's. Abraham was a pioneer of faith. The Lord had said to him, "*Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.*" (Genesis 12:1) In response, Abram did not just sit there muttering, "I really must do that someday." He did it! And the Lord promised, "*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*" (v2) So here was Abram at 75 years of age, and he was moving away from the familiar culture of Ur to go to a place he did not know; a place that turned out to be Canaan. Abram trusted God. To do that was not easy then, nearly 4,000 years ago and it still is not easy.

Nevertheless walking in the will of God is possible, with simple faith. As someone has written:

*“Trust him when dark days assail you,
trust him when your faith is small.
Trust him when simply trusting
is the hardest thing of all.”*

That is the lesson I need to learn so very much in my life. How about you? Simply trusting. What does it mean? It means an end to the striving that says you will do it your way. It means wanting to be the person God wants you to be. And above all, it means obeying him. Then let me ask you a question. As part of his work here on earth, could it be that God is about to lead you into a new adventure? In the quietness of prayer, in the unfolding of circumstances and in his written Word, God can make known both his plans and his promises. And as you agree to go forward with him in such an adventure, there will be the constant yet gentle urging of the Holy Spirit letting you know you are doing the right thing. The life of Abraham clearly shows faith in action. With someone like him in mind, the psalmist wrote: *“Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”* (Psalm 37:3-4) In other words, as we are inspired by the life of God within us, our lives take on a simplicity and a purity that makes the purposes of God our own.

When Abram arrived at his destination, the Lord said to

him, *“Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.”* (Genesis 13:14-16) That was a tremendous promise and God kept it. Faith, pure and simple will direct us to God and his wonderful promises, not only for this life, but for all eternity. So although we can read of Old Testament heroes *“who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised,”* we also find that *“others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.”* (Hebrews 11:33, 35) These are the two faces of faith. One shows believers who were given the power to overcome impossible odds. The other shows believers who went through intense suffering. Then rather than renounce their faith, they preferred to die and be raised again to heavenly glory. May we see the road ahead just as clearly. God's claim on a life does not come as a sugarcoated pill. The road of faith will often be steep and hazardous. Yet the one who has called us will walk with us all the way.

Chapter eight: ‘My sheep’

As an old Chinese proverb states, “The longest journey begins with a single step.” Well, my fellow Christian, we took that first step when we got saved; saved from the penalty of sin. That was the day we passed from death to life. Right now, there is the reality of the Saviour through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit making us more

like himself. And how we look forward to that day when Christ will return and his good work in us will be complete! When Paul says, *“Take the helmet of salvation,”* (Ephesians 6:17), he's majoring on that sure and certain hope. As the apostle John writes in his first letter, *“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”* (1 John 3:2)

Now the purpose of a helmet is obvious! It protects the head. A blow to the head could be fatal, so a soldier would never go into battle without head protection. The Roman soldier's helmet, for example, was made either of metal or of leather with metal plates. In particular, he needed it as defence against the broadsword. A two-handed piece of equipment, three or four feet in length, this was often carried by men on horseback, who would swing it at the heads of opposing soldiers. Talk about lethal! In the spiritual battle, Satan also aims for the head. That is where we do our thinking, where we sort things out, where we gain understanding and, in an attempt to do some serious damage, the devil takes a hefty swipe at us with his broadsword. What is this broadsword? It is one of discouragement. Satan will do anything to discourage the believer, and he can make life really miserable if he can get you to doubt your own salvation. So let us understand this: once you have been saved, you will always be saved. The eternal security of the believer is a glorious fact. Once you truly repent and believe, you can never be lost. What Jesus

has said proves it. *“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.”* (John 10:27-29)

Notice the Lord Jesus says, *“My sheep”*. That brings back memories of when our twins had just started school. Little lambs they were! And going to meet them when lessons were over, I would be standing there with the other parents as all the ‘little lambs’ came out. I would see one of my little lambs, then the other. Sometimes I had to call out if they had not already spotted me. And just as I had recognised them, so they would hear my voice. *“My sheep listen to my voice,”* the Lord says, while earlier in the gospel of John he declares, *“Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life”* (5:24) then isn't it good to be known by the Lord! *“I know them, and they follow me,”* he says. I am so glad he knows me, understands me and still loves me. Because I have to admit, I can be pretty stupid sometimes and obstinate. So like a sheep! Ask any shepherd and he will tell you that those woolly things you see in fields and on hills can be really stupid. It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep! But like the Good Shepherd that he is, Jesus cares for us as we learn to follow him. *“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish,”* he continues. Now if you ever find yourself doubting that the believer is secure in the Lord forever, ask yourself this question: How long is

eternal? Jesus did not say, "I give them five years," did he? He did not say, "I give them 50 years." He said, "*I give them eternal life.*" Then he brings this home by adding, "*They shall never perish.*" "So does this mean I can sin and it will not make any difference?" you might ask. I say, "Do you want to sin?" "Of course not," you reply. "I'm a Christian." Well, that's it. The Christian does not want to sin. He wants to follow his Lord in obedience. He wants to please God in all he does. Granted, he is not perfect; not on this side of eternity and when he does sin, it saddens God. It also makes the Christian very unhappy too. Nothing makes him more miserable, quite frankly, than when he has failed his Lord. But he still belongs to God's family; he always will. So once he has told God about the wrong he has done, admitting that it is sin, there is forgiveness. And joy returns.

Want some more assurance? "*No-one can snatch them out of my hand,*" Jesus says. How definite he is! No-one. Not Satan, not false teachers, not unkind people. No-one can do it. As a child of God, you are safe in the arms of Jesus. And here is the clincher. "*My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*" Tell me, what could be clearer than that? The Father and the Son are not in the business of losing sheep. 99 out of 100 will not do. So we are to take God at his word and be like the believer of times past who did just that! The devil was going to and fro across the earth, trying to tempt members of Christ's flock. To one place after another he went, but he was not having any

success. As night fell, he entered the home of a dying believer. The shadow of death was on the man's face, and those around him were waiting for the end. "*I will cast a dart of doubt concerning Jesus into the Christian's mind,*" said the evil one. But just then, from the man's lips came the words, "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" He went on reciting Psalm 23 to its conclusion, "*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*" In a moment he had left for heaven's glory, and Satan was disappointed yet again. When Christ says, "My sheep," the believer can say, "My Shepherd."

Then something else Satan does to discourage us is to point to the increasing lawlessness in the world, trying to have us believe that the wicked are getting the upper hand. This can really get us down until we read Psalm 73. In this psalm, Asaph, a man of God has become very discouraged. His faith has almost gone because he has been looking at unbelievers and has actually begun to envy them. "*My feet had almost slipped,*" he writes, "*I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*" (v2-3) He then goes on to describe how they seem to have everything so easy, despite their wilful sinning: "*From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.*" (v7) So is he wasting his time trying to live for God? "*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure,*" he muses, "*in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.*" (v13) I think you will agree, this man is in a bad way. He has almost reached the conclusion that wickedness pays! And here is

the reason. He writes, “*When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.*” (v16) Ah, the devil has been having a go! But then it is as though the end of the tunnel is reached and there is light again. Because just after he says “*it was oppressive to me,*” he immediately adds “*till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*” (v17) As soon as this man takes his problem into the presence of God, as soon as he considers the Lord’s ways and his purposes, he sees things in the right perspective. He realises that there is a day of reckoning to come, when these godless ones will be swept away (v19). Then Asaph voices this assurance: “*Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will take me into glory.*” (v23-24) What a wonderful assurance!

We have a God who will guide us safely past all the slippery places on life's journey. We will not lose our foothold. And at the end of the road he will swing open the gates of heaven and welcome us home. As God’s servant Corrie ten Boom was so fond of saying, “*The best is yet to be!*” Meanwhile, it is God’s will that we should live in the triumphs of the Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again and sits in power and glory at God’s right hand.

Chapter nine: Sharper than sharp

In Ephesians 6:13 we read about standing our ground when the day of evil comes and after we have done everything, still we should be standing firm. And while it is true to say that some days are more evil than others, every day since

the fall of Adam has been an evil day. What is more, every day till the devil and his forces are thrown into the bottomless pit will also be an evil day. So, having done all that we should and still standing firm, watch out! It is so easy to relax our spiritual guard and take off the armour that has protected us. Then the enemy sneaks up. Wham! That is why John gives this warning: “*Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully.*” (2 John 1:8) Paul, for one, was concerned about this. His fear was that after he had faithfully preached to others, he might do something that would disqualify him. (1 Corinthians 9:27) He knew that he could not lose his salvation. What bothered him, though, was the thought of no longer being useful in God’s service, of even losing his reward. This should concern us, too. Let us face it, there were those who in the past seemed to be serving well, maybe leading Bible studies, teaching Sunday school or ministering to the sick. But now they are nowhere to be seen. They took off the armour and relaxed a bit too much!

Indestructible

Being aware of our Christian duty (a duty that is also our delight!), let us now take hold of “*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*”. And whereas other items are for our defence, this one strikes back! What a weapon it is! It is a sword that we can compare to the one carried by Roman foot soldiers. It was 6 to 18 inches (15 – 45cm) long; this was their principle weapon in hand-to-hand combat. Having stood our ground, we can use “the word

of God”, the Bible, to drive out the enemy. As Scottish pastor Thomas Guthrie said, *“The Bible is an armoury of heavenly weapons, a laboratory of infallible medicines, a mine of exhaustless wealth. It is the guidebook for every road, a chart for every sea, a medicine for every malady, and a balm for every wound.”* Then he warned, *“Rob us of our Bible and our sky has lost its sun.”* To rob us of our Bible is something God's enemies have often tried to do. Through the centuries, this book has survived everything from barbaric vandalism to civilised scholarship. And is it not strange how people choose to look everywhere else for the answers to life! They are asking, “Where did we come from, why are we here and where are we going?” And they are latching on to all sorts of godless theories. Yet the source of all truth - truth about God and man, life and death, right and wrong - is all together in one book: God's special Word, the Bible. Living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it is the only book that matters. (Hebrews 4:12) For the believer, it is an unfailing source of faith and spiritual strength.

The wilderness encounter is a prime example of what the ‘sharper than sharp’ word can do. Satan had come armed with three big temptations, and on each occasion the Lord Jesus carefully used the sword of the Spirit. Three times he quoted from the Bible: *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ... ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ... ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”* (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10) In order to use God's Word with skill

we have to master its great truths and, better still, let them master us! As we do this, we will find that there is always a specific truth that will counter anything the devil has to say. Paul wrote to Timothy, *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”* (2 Timothy 2:15) That goes for us too! And here is where we require the help of the Spirit of God.

There are many books on many subjects that you and I may never understand. But the Bible is not one of them. All we have to do is ask the Lord to open our eyes that we may see wonderful things in his Word, and the Holy Spirit will help us. John Calvin said, *“For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.”* As believers, it is not the spirit of the world we have received but the Spirit who is from God. That is how we can understand, and that is the difference between the believer and the unbeliever. (1 Corinthians 2:12) Just as the clouds in the sky can block out the sun, so the devil tries to block out the good news of salvation. While God seeks to shine into the hearts of men, Satan places a cloud over the minds of unbelievers to keep the light of the gospel from shining on them. Maybe it is a cloud of pride or rebellion or self-righteousness. Anything to hinder the bright and sure hope of the gospel from getting through. Yet when we are born again, the Holy Spirit who comes to live in us shows us the beauty and significance of God's Word. We see spiritual

truths that the unsaved cannot see; truths that we could not see before our conversion! It is like the story of the woman who asked the painter Joseph Turner, “Why do you put such extravagant colours into your pictures? I never see anything like them in nature.” Turner replied, “Don’t you wish you did, Madam?” He saw them, even if she did not. But let us not leave it at that!

We are in the battle to bring people out of darkness and into light. We are to preach Christ crucified, risen and coming again. We are to warn of judgment and explain the way of salvation. Sadly, many will reject what we say. But God is sovereign and his Spirit will be working in the hearts of others. He will give them a seeing eye and a hearing ear. He will give them a longing for righteousness. And they will turn willingly to Christ, whose blood purifies from every sin. What an encouragement to preach the gospel! The Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners he personally calls through the Word. For wherever the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, the Spirit of God is at work.

Chapter ten: Make or break

Fighting the good fight. It is done with prayer, preaching, witnessing and godly living. This means we obey the principles set out in the Bible and tell others that there is an alternative to the hopelessness that they are in. And as a really big part of our warfare, we talk often with the Lord.

“Christian, seek not yet repose,

*cast thy dreams of ease away;
thou art in the midst of foes;
watch and pray.”*

That is what Charlotte Elliott wrote in a hymn that brings out the importance of prayer. So why is our prayer life so cold and difficult at times? We are “*in the midst of foes,*” and the last thing the enemy wants is for us to communicate with our Commander-in-Chief! All the more reason to take the advice of another hymn-writer: “*Put on the gospel armour, each piece put on with prayer.*” Like the very air we breathe, prayer is meant to fill our lives. “*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests,*” writes Paul in Ephesians 6:18. To “*pray in the Spirit*” is to be in tune with the Holy Spirit, to join our desires with his. But if our passion for God's glory has been dulled in any way, we will be out of tune with his Spirit. I cannot pray in the Spirit if I have a grudge against my brother. I cannot pray in the Spirit if I am seeking my own glory or my own comfort. As James puts it, “*When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives.*” (James 4:3) We are talking here about living right in order to pray right. We are talking about wanting God to do whatever is going to magnify Christ in our lives and make him more precious to our souls. This means I can pray in the Spirit only when I am walking under God's approving smile. I can pray in the Spirit only when God is being honoured in my life and I am praising him from my heart. No grudges, no selfishness. Just making God supreme in everything. Then think on this. Nowhere does

our relationship with God come to light more clearly than in our attitude to prayer because we are going to pray to the degree that we believe he hears and cares.

“All-prayer”

And it does not matter where we are or what situation we are in, we can always talk to God. We can *“pray ... on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”* So when we are tempted to do wrong, we ask the Lord to help us to resist. When something good happens, we thank him for it. When we see evil, we pray that the Lord will intervene and use us as lights in the darkness. When we meet someone who doesn't know Christ as their Saviour, we pray that God will draw that person to himself through our faithful witness. This is the “all-prayer” strategy, as John Bunyan called it and it is the make or break of victorious warfare. God is the sovereign Lord of history; he is the gracious Father who hears the appeals of his children. And understand this: believing prayer is action of the most powerful kind because it actually moves the hand that moves the world! What, then, are the basic requirements for our prayers to be effective?

Firstly, they have to be according to God's will. Secondly, they have to be for his glory. And thirdly, because our holy God will not use an unclean vessel, we must be living in a way that is pleasing to him. Then let us also understand that when he answers, it is in keeping with his character. In other words, what God **is** determines what he **does**. He is all wise and all knowing, so his answer will

always be the right one. He is truth, so we can trust him to keep his promises. He is all-powerful and, since he ultimately controls all things, he can never fail us. He is love; he is full of compassion. He therefore responds to our needs with mercy and grace. He is eternal; he sees everything at a glance. He takes into account all the variables, answering when the time and circumstances are right. And so, for our good and his glory, he answers in one of three ways: yes, no or wait. Sometimes his answer is an immediate “yes,” as in the case of a man with leprosy who begged Jesus, *“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”* Reaching out and touching him, Jesus responded, *“I am willing.”* (Luke 5:12-13) At other times God says a definite “no.” Elijah was a mighty man of prayer. God answered all his prayers in the affirmative, except one; the one in which the prophet asked to die. The day before had been a great day. On Mount Carmel, Elijah had stood alone as the champion of the Almighty. Strong, defiant, triumphant, he had defeated the prophets of the false god Baal. The next day was different. At the threat of King Ahab's evil wife Jezebel, he fled. Overcome, it seems, by nerves and in the midst of depression, Elijah prayed that he might die. (1 Kings 19:4) How merciful of God not to take him at his word. How merciful that he does not always take us at our word! Still other times God asks us to “wait”. Moses, as he led the people out of slavery, cried out to God. And at the very moment when defeat seemed inevitable, the sea was divided. (Exodus 14:15-16, 21-22) Hannah prayed for a son and in God's good time Samuel was born. (1 Samuel 1) The early

church prayed earnestly for Peter, and at just the right time the angel delivered him from prison. (Acts 12:5, 7-10) God hears. He answers.

And so concluding our study of God's armour, Paul instructs, *"Be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."* (v18b) How true it is that the bond of fellowship which unites us is never stronger than when we are deep in prayer for one another; when we are asking that our brothers and sisters in Christ be given strength from on high to win the daily battle against Satan. To understand this better, let us consider what we could call "the buddy system" of the Roman army. With all those big shields they carried, they made an almost solid wall of defence. But when a man did go down in battle, the shield of his buddy friend would come up to protect. In this way the Romans were victorious. And the same principle applies to the army of God. The closer we stand together, the less vulnerable we will be. And when the enemy's flaming arrows come in, we can rescue one another with believing, unceasing prayer. It is clear then, prayer is essential as we put the armour on. It enables us to skilfully wield the sword of the Spirit. And it goes on building where the devil would destroy.

Conclusion: Where we stand

Look at human life. You will see much that is attractive and seemingly harmless. But scratch the surface! Then you will find out that the world has little or no interest in anything that is dear to God's heart. And even when it slips

on its religious outfit, nothing much changes. It is still opposed to what God's Word, the Bible, says. Yet we can take heart. God is building his church. He is producing love-filled homes, generous hearts and brave men and women who are living godly lives in the midst of a sin-ridden world. And though we may be hard-pressed on every side, our cause is never in doubt. Though the battle rages all around, the end is absolutely certain. And here is some more encouragement. In looking at the Armour of God, have you noticed how many times Paul tells us to "stand"? No less than four times. *"Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then."* That is what we have to do. Put on the full armour of God, and stand. That is **all** we have to do! Because twenty centuries ago the offensive work was accomplished at the cross and in the resurrection.

The Lord Jesus has already won the battle and taken the ground. He *"disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."* (Colossians 2:15) His death, burial and resurrection were a great victory over Satan and the hordes of hell. And now there is nothing to fear if we are in Christ, but everything to hope for as we wait for his return. My fellow Christian, we are on the winning side. Praise the Lord! To be sure, there is a day yet to come when all things will return to the way they were designed to be. A

day “*when (Christ) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power*”. (1 Corinthians 15:24) At that time the prophecy of Revelation 20, verse 10, will be fulfilled. The prophecy which speaks of the devil being “*thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown*”. And while they are “*tormented day and night for ever and ever,*” we will know the sinless glory of the new heavens and new earth. (Revelation 21-22)

Hold on

In the meantime, we can tell others about the Lord Jesus and pray that revival will sweep across our world. We can help people in need and encourage someone through a difficult time. We can pray for leaders who uphold moral values and we can ask God to lead the nations into paths of peace and prosperity. In Christ we have the victory. We simply need to hold on to what God has given us and “*contend for the faith that was once entrusted to the saints*”. (Jude 3) It is all a matter of knowing just where we stand!

Some years ago a British naval frigate was out at sea when the radar operator reported to the first officer on the bridge, “Sir, we've picked up a vessel that's heading straight for us.” At this, the officer ordered, “Send a message to the other vessel telling him to alter his course by 15 degrees.” A few moments later, “Sir, he's telling us to alter our course by 15 degrees.” Well, this annoyed the first officer. “Get back to him and say that he is to alter his course by 15

degrees now.” A few moments later, “He's still telling us to alter our course, sir.” “Tell him,” said the officer, “Mister, this is a British naval frigate. You will alter your course by 15 degrees immediately.” A few moments later, “Sir, here's his reply: ‘Alter your course by 15 degrees. I am a lighthouse!’”

Just like that firmly established lighthouse, God's people must not compromise Christian truth and knowing that the future is as bright as the promises of God, we can stand firm with confidence. For as Martin Luther remarked, when it seemed the whole world had turned against him, “*One with God is a majority!*”

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