

Prayer as Warfare (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of prayer as warfare, highlighting the enemy's efforts to destroy prayer-life and the need for believers to set a watch against the wiles of the devil.

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:30

Topics: "The Power of Prayer", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the spiritual warfare surrounding prayer, illustrating how the enemy seeks to prevent, interrupt, and ultimately destroy our prayer life. He draws parallels between the conflict faced by Elijah in 1 Kings 18 and the spiritual battles described in Ephesians 6, highlighting that the Church is the focal point of this conflict. Sparks urges believers to recognize the importance of corporate prayer and watchfulness against the enemy's schemes, as the health of the Church directly impacts the effectiveness of individual prayer lives. He concludes that the cross of Christ is the basis of victory in this spiritual warfare, affirming that those united with Christ in His death and resurrection stand against the defeated foe, Satan.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Kings 18:30-32, 36-38, 42-45. James 5:17-18. Ephesians 6:18.

We note that what is true of the enemy's activity along the line of prevention of prayer is also true along the line of interruption of prayer. I do not only mean that while you are praying you have interruptions, but he has a subtle way of interfering with the continuity of a prayer-life. You may triumphantly secure seasons of prayer for perhaps a week, or more, and then something is introduced which breaks into that continuity so that you lose it, and you find that after a time a tremendous battle has to be fought to recover that prayer-life. For many of us our history is that of a spasmodic prayer-life which comes in patches, a history fraught with the necessity for every now and then recovering lost ground through having a setback - the interruption of the enemy. So we have to set a watch there, and watch especially against reactions from intensive periods of prayer, slackening off and feeling that now, after that strenuous time, we can take a spiritual holiday. There is always a very great peril there, as David proved. At a time when kings went out to battle, he went up on to the housetop. Then what the enemy cannot prevent or interrupt, he will seek to destroy afterwards. That is, he will direct his attention to spoiling the prayer-life afterwards. We may have a strong time, or a series of strong times, but if he cannot directly attack our prayer-life, the enemy is always out to spoil it through another angle which does not seem immediately to be related to it, but by

which indirectly we are crippled. Our prayer-life may be very strong, good and consistent, but something happens in some other department of our life, perhaps in a relationship somewhere else, and when we come to prayer we find that that thing represents a direct blow at our prayer-life and we cannot go on until that thing has been dealt with.

We must recognize that all these things are just the enemy's efforts, and are a highly organized scheme to destroy, either directly or indirectly, our prayer-life, or to interfere with it. Thus we shall find that our prayer-life is the focal point of everything.

It is when we come really to pray, to the real business of prayer, that we shall discover exactly where we are in all the relationships of our life. The iniquity which we regard in our hearts may not have anything to do directly with our prayer-life, but it comes indirectly as a terrific blow upon us. Things which may be side-shows bear right down upon our prayer-life. The enemy is always putting up these things all round to destroy our prayer-life. We register the state of things when we come to prayer. We may not recognize for the moment what a certain thing means, whatever that thing may be. It may be an interrupted fellowship, a strained relationship, a cross-purpose, or a breach somewhere, and we may not recognize exactly what it does mean until we come to take up our strong prayer-life. Then we find that that thing has struck at the very vitals of prayer and we cannot get on. That thing is out there, and so we are held up here; and then we discover that there has been a subtle working on the circumference of our lives which strikes at the very centre. The enemy would destroy our prayer-life, would, so to speak, throw things at it from the outside to make it impossible. I think you are able to follow what I mean, for experience bears it out.

The Universality of Prayer

Now we come to widen out a little in this spiritual conflict. These passages which we have read present us with a very comprehensive position. In 1 Kings 18 the account of the battle of Elijah on Carmel is undoubtedly an Old Testament illustration of the New Testament truth, especially of Ephesians 6. These two things go together as type and antitype, as part and counterpart, and what is common to them both is that the sphere of the conflict is the heavenlies. What James says directs the whole of this matter to the heavens: the opening and closing of the heavens, the government of the heavens, the ruling of the heavens. The heavens are the main object in view here, and this conflict relates to the heavens and the heavenlies: "Our wrestling is... in the heavenlies." Elijah's conflict was in a very real way a conflict in the heavens where heavenly forces were involved. That, I think, is patent, and that is a common feature in these two portions of the Word.

This particular spiritual conflict in which you and I are found when we have come into God's full purpose and testimony in Christ is, in its ultimate issue, related to the government of the heavens. Who is going to govern in the heavens? There are the principalities, the powers, the world-rulers of this darkness and the spiritual hosts of wickedness who have assumed the place of government. They are in a usurped place, for that is not the eternal thought of God, nor is it His will. Christ is Head, and His Church as His members are, in the intention of God, called to rule in the heavens, to govern as from the heavens. It is a question of what the heavens are in this matter, whether they are to be satanic, or whether they are to be the expression of the absolute lordship of the Lord Jesus in and through the Church, which is His Body. It is the heavenlies, the ruling realities, which are involved, and it is there that our conflict is. That is the sphere of this warfare, and our prayer-life has to do with that. It is not merely to do with the incidents of our lives here on the earth. Oh, that the Lord's people would recognize the immensity of this, for so often the generality of our prayer is in the realm of merely trivial things, and a great deal of time is taken up with

telling the Lord all about the little things of our ordinary earthly life which, while they may be important to us and may count in an earthly life, do not touch the ultimate things in God's purpose.

There is such a difference between praying down there and praying against the immense forces of the universe and getting the heavenly things through. The Lord's people want to be lifted in prayer to where the mighty, heavenly, eternal and universal are affected, touched and brought through. There is a great need for us to be brought into our heavenly place in the matter of prayer, where real spiritual matters lying behind the other are touched. Very often the Lord never allows our prayers to be effective in the merely earthly details of our lives because He wants us to see that there is something behind those things which matters a great deal more. You sometimes pray for a thing to happen, a change to take place, or an event to come off, but nothing happens. The Lord seeks - after you have extended yourself as fully as you can on the matter - to show you that there is a spiritual key to that situation, and He cannot do just the earthly thing for you because that would not in any way be to your spiritual increase of intelligence, understanding, knowledge or value, and would only be doing things because you asked Him. He is trying to instruct and teach you so that you come into possession of spiritual situations.

Well, it is the heavens which are the sphere of this conflict.

The Church - the Occasion of the Conflict

What is the occasion of the conflict? What is it for? Well, from the context in both these passages, 1 Kings 18 and Ephesians 6, you see that the occasion of the conflict is the Church. The Church is the immediate object in view. In 1 Kings 18, of course, it is the people of God, and the issue of Elijah's prayer is that their hearts should be turned back. The Lord's people are in view and his prayer is for this people, so he brings them all near and involves them in this issue, and associates them with it, because it is their issue. We know that the thing which is in view right through the letter to the Ephesians is the Church which is His Body, and this is the occasion of the conflict. It is a battle in the heavenlies in relation to the Church, the Body of Christ.

There are two things to be said about that. One, that it is not merely a personal matter, but a collective, corporate matter. This conflict relates to the whole Body of Christ, and the conflict of every individual is a related conflict, relating to all the rest of the saints, so that there is that spiritual relativity which means that if one member is defeated the whole Body suffers spiritually. It may not know why, nor be conscious of its particular suffering, but, registered in the Head and the consciousness of the Head, there is a loss to the whole Body when even one member falls into defeat. The conflict is a related one; and so the enemy seeks to isolate individual members of the Body and bring such pressure upon them as to crush them down, because he knows - not just the value of an isolated member - but the relativity of every member. It is because of this that there is so much spiritual emphasis from the intelligence of the Holy Spirit upon the necessity for praying for all saints, for the fellowship prayer, the corporate prayer of the Lord's people. There is loss to Christ, the Head, if there is not that prayer for all saints.

Christ in Glory - the Object of the Conflict

The other thing to be said about this is that it is not even the Church as the Body which is the ultimate thing, although it is the immediate occasion. We must not put the Church, the Body of Christ, in the pre-eminent place. It is an occasion, but it is not the final thing. The Church, the Body of Christ, is His instrument, His vessel for His testimony. His testimony is deposited in the Body. It was so in His resurrection, and at Pentecost the testimony of His victory, the testimony of His exaltation, the testimony of

His glorification and the testimony of His universal authority in heaven and in earth was deposited in the Church. As the temple in the Old Testament was the shrine of the glory of God, so the Body of Christ in the New Testament is the shrine of His glory, His testimony and His Name, and it is ultimately to strike at that glory, that Name, and that exaltation that the enemy directs his attention to the elect vessel, the Church, the Body of Christ. And so the Church becomes the occasion of the conflict, although not the end, but the enemy gets at the Christ, at the Name and at the glory through the Body. We know that that was true in the Old Testament.

When Israel was in a state of declension the Lord's glory and honour, His Name, and His majesty were over-shadowed, beclouded, and lost to view. When Israel's spiritual life was in the ascendant, then Jehovah's testimony was maintained in full strength. In the New Testament, and in our own time in this New Testament age, the enemy's way of dishonouring the Lord is by destroying the spiritual life of the Lord's people, or by breaking up the fellowship of the saints.

So the Church, the Body, becomes the occasion of the conflict because of what it is in its divinely-appointed vocation, purpose and object. The enemy's bitter hatred and violent opposition are directed against the corporate life of the Lord's people. He will seek by any means to destroy that, to break up the fellowship of the saints, to set the Lord's people against one another, and to introduce disintegrating things - but, oh, how subtle are his ways in this!

The Strategic Value of Watchfulness

Here I do feel, dear friends, that you and I will have to do what Nehemiah did, and what the Apostle in this very portion exhorts us to do: "Set a watch"; "watching thereunto," because, as you notice in both connections, it is the wiles of the devil which are in view. They are the subtle activities of the enemy, and to set a watch against the wiles of the devil in practical outworking will, at least in one direction, mean this: that we make quite sure that the rumours which we hear and the reports that come to us are absolutely trustworthy. We must make quite sure - "prove all things". We can be divided by a rumour, and split up by a report. We can be set at variance or apart by a mere insinuation. In these days, when the atmosphere is surcharged with fear and suspicion, you have only to hint at the possibility of someone being 'unsound' and a spiritual breach of fellowship is created and a gap made. If only we set a watch and made sure, we would find that a great deal of that was unnecessary and unwarranted, and represented a great loss to the Lord Himself and to His people, for when we get really to close grips and sift these things we find there is nothing in them, or, if there is anything in them, they have an explanation and we cannot fail, in all honesty of heart, to accept that as being right. That is very often how it works out.

But, oh! to set a watch against these wiles of the devil! His methods of breaking up the corporate life of the Lord's people are beyond our power to enumerate, and that is where prayer and watching are necessary. Prayer should result in intelligence about the wiles of the enemy, and 'watching unto prayer' is watching and praying that you might discover in prayer what it is the enemy is after and how he is working.

We do not want to be obsessed with the enemy, always to have our eyes on him, but we must recognize the facts as they are, and those facts are that throughout these almost two millenniums the enemy has made it his great business unceasingly to destroy the fellowship of the people of God. Is that true? Is that history? If it is true, what does it signify? That you can never have something that really in any measure represents what is precious to the Lord, something of a spiritual character, embodying some precious element of His testimony, but what it is the object of satanic malignity and cunning which has the one

intention of splitting that thing, breaking it up, and getting schism and division there somehow, by truth or by lies. That is history, and surely it gives the whole game away, that a Church in fellowship, a Body rightly adjusted and related, moving together in the will of God, is the greatest menace to the spiritual rule of principalities and powers that there is in the universe.

So it is that to which we should work and direct our attention. Let us lay ourselves out for spiritual fellowship! That does not mean compromising with things which are contrary to the Word of God, and must not mean coming down from any spiritual position to which the Lord has, through cost, brought us. We must be where Nehemiah was when his enemies said, 'Come down and let us discuss this matter. We must confer about this.' Nehemiah said: "I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down." There must be no coming down to discuss things that are beyond the point of discussion as to spiritual necessity. But, dear friends, any spiritual position arrived at through cost and the deep in-working of the cross must be held only in relation to all the saints. It must not be held out of relation to the saints, nor must those who have it and hold it be made something apart from the rest. No! Whatever may be the difference of spiritual position so far as degree is concerned, fellowship with all saints must be striven after and maintained as far as possible, and it must be reached out for. I do want to urge that upon you more and more, as it is urged upon my own heart, because the Lord's end in giving light and truth may be defeated if the reception of it and the holding of it constitutes those who have it as being something apart from the rest of the saints. He has given it for the Body; if it is held apart, then the end for which He gave it has been missed. Lay that to heart very definitely!

So the occasion of the conflict is the Church, by reason of its heavenly calling and vocation. This is no personal thing, nor local thing: it is universal. The Body of Christ is a universal reality.

The Basis of Victory

Just a word or two with regard to the basis of victory in this conflict. The basis of victory here in 1 Kings 18 was undoubtedly the altar, and in Ephesians it is the same. Before you reach your position in the heavenlies for heavenly conflict and triumph, you have to pass through the earlier chapters of Ephesians and recognize that a death has taken place, that an altar was there, and that, having died, you have been 'quickened and raised together.' All the features of the cross, the altar, are implied at the beginning of the letter to the Ephesians, so that both in the representation and in that which is represented the basis of victory is the cross, the altar. Elijah took twelve stones, and the constitution of the altar with twelve stones immediately brings in the administrative feature in relation to the altar, for twelve is the number of administration. The altar comprised of twelve stones becomes the administrative instrument, the governmental principle, in this conflict in the hands of God. The government is in the cross, and by the cross, for by His cross He triumphed, and in His cross He stripped off principalities and powers and 'made a show of them openly.' I wonder if, in reading those fragments of 1 Kings 18 you were struck with the terms: "...according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name." What is that? Well, Israel means 'a prince with God,' so in that verse 31 we have sons of a prince with God represented in the altar, in the cross.

Symbolically that speaks to us very clearly of that basis of our coming into our Prince, our governmental position in Christ, Who is the Prince with God. He is greater than Israel, for He is the Prince with God, and we are sons in Him and partake of His princeliness. That brings us up into a place of governmental authority in Christ in the heavenlies, but it is all bound up with the altar, the cross. The cross is the basis of victory, and that is borne out again, not only by the testimony of heaven, the Word of God, but by the

testimony of hell. Satan is an unwonted, unwilling - and I sometimes wonder whether he is an unconscious - witness to the truth in this way, for it is perfectly clear that he hated the cross, and he tried in the first place to keep the Lord Jesus from it: "...this shall not be unto Thee. But He turned and said unto Peter, Get thee behind Me, Satan." This is Satan trying to keep the Lord Jesus from the cross, and then, having failed to keep Him from it, he tried to bring Him off the cross: "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." Those subtle suggestions! "...let Him now come down from the cross and we will believe Him." To be believed in by the world was what He had come for, but, no, the second method of the enemy did not succeed.

The enemy having failed along those lines, and the cross having been accomplished in spite of him, he will seek now to change and alter the preaching of the cross in order to make it of non-effect. He will get people to preach it, and in their very preaching of it make it void. That is extraordinarily subtle! It is as well to recognize how far the enemy will go. He will promote the preaching of the cross, and the cross preached by his instigation and under his influence is made non-effective. The Apostle tells us that in his first letter to the Corinthians, that the cross preached in the wisdom of men makes it of non-effect, or void. Men preaching the cross in their wisdom are simply taking the true meaning and power out of the cross. Oh, yes, you hear plenty about the way of the cross, but it is not His way of the cross. The very power of the cross is in its registration against the enemy and all his works, against sin as a principle, and against evil as a state, a nature. The power of the cross is taken out when you speak about the heroics of the cross, and about the way of the cross as, well, any man who denies himself and lays down his life for his country is in the same category as Jesus Christ, Who, after all, only laid down His life as any soldier has done. That is the cross in modernism.

Another thing which the enemy seeks to do in relation to the cross is to keep Christians in ignorance of its full meaning. It is a great day for the Lord, and a terrible day for the enemy, when a Christian breaks through into the revelation of the full meaning of Calvary. That day marks a new bit of history in the realm of conflict. You may meet a certain kind of opposition on the ground of the substitutionary work of the Lord Jesus, but, believe me, you will meet ten times more when you come on to the ground of the representative work of the Lord Jesus, and when you take up your place in identification with Christ in death, burial and resurrection in a spiritual way. Then begins a new history of conflict, of battle, and of satanic antagonism, but you have entered into a new realm and a new place, and you have new powers at your command. The enemy has lost his ground. Multitudes believe in the substitutionary work and rejoice in it, but they are still going on in the energy of the natural man, even as Christians. They do not represent a menace to the enemy in those higher ranges, but when the cross has been so accepted and planted in our lives that the natural life is set aside - "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me"- then there is a new realm of meaning to the Lord and of meaning to the enemy, and therefore a new realm of conflict. The enemy is out to keep that side of the cross from Christians, and we have said before, and it is true, that very often you meet your opposition on that line more from Christians than from any others. It is a strange thing. Immediately you go on with the Lord into all the fullness of the meaning of Calvary you find your chief difficulty is in the realm of Christians, and, as a rule, 'official' Christians. Leaders will not have it, and you find that your way is made infinitely more difficult. It is true that the enemy does hate the fullness of the cross, and he will seek by any means to destroy its value for believers, to hide its meaning from them, and if possible to get them to forsake the position and come down from it, or to persuade them not to accept it.

Well, surely that is his testimony to its value! He is a witness to its meaning. The cross, then, is the basis of victory, and the enemy knows it very well.

I am not going further than that now. We must take this, think about it and apply it, but remember this grand, conclusive thing: Satan is a defeated foe for all who are truly one with the cross of the Lord Jesus, because Calvary does represent his defeat, and, as we are planted into the death of Christ, so we stand with Him in that defeat of the enemy, in that victory of the Lord Jesus. So, however he may rage, storm, fight, afflict, press, worry, and harass, the fact remains that for those who are one with Christ in His cross, Satan is a defeated foe.

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