

The Conflict Against the Fulfilment of the Purpose of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the conflict against the fulfilment of God's purpose and the need for believers to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22, Ephesians 4:10

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

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the spiritual conflict against the fulfillment of God's purpose, as outlined in Ephesians, where Christ's ascension aims to fill all things through the church. He highlights the reality of spiritual warfare, which is not against flesh and blood but against powerful spiritual forces that seek to undermine the church's unity and position in Christ. Sparks urges believers to recognize the nature of this conflict and to engage in 'fighting prayer' as a means of standing firm against the enemy's wiles. He stresses the importance of spiritual illumination and the need for the church to unite in prayer to reclaim its strength and purpose. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a revival of corporate prayer to combat the forces of darkness and affirm the supremacy of Christ.

Transcript

"He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10).

"He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:22,23).

"Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might... For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlies" (Ephesians 6:10,12).

The first passage sets forth the eternal intention of God that His Son should "fill all things".

The second passage indicates the instrument by which that fulness is to be ministered: "the church, which is his body".

Now, with the third of these passages, we come to the consummate conflict which rages against the purpose and against the vessel of its fulfilment.

The apostle introduces this summing up at the end of the letter in this way, with this word: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might", and it is necessary for us to remind ourselves that that word "finally" is not what we mean when we use it. When we say "Finally" we mean "Now lastly", the third point in a sermon, but that is not the meaning of the word here. It is a bigger and more comprehensive word than that. The apostle is really saying: "Well, now, in view of all that, from henceforth... with all that in view, from now onward" ... "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." The word of a great résumé by a great retrospect.

So we should regard this part of the letter, from verse ten of chapter six in this arrangement, as a gathering up of all that has preceded it. The apostle is saying: "All that I have set down becomes the occasion and the ground of a tremendous conflict. This whole thing, comprehensively, and in all its parts, is something which is challenged, withstood, fought against." You notice that he does not say to us, or to the church: "There is a big fight on." He just takes that for granted. He does not have to say that to anybody who knows anything about it! But he does say that this wrestling that we are in, this fact of conflict, is not of a mundane, temporal character at all. It is with "principalities... powers... world-rulers of this darkness... hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlies". It relates, then, in the first place, to the ultimate purpose which we have considered more or less fully in the previous two chapters, this ultimate purpose set forth in those words: "(He) ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" -- according to the eternal purpose, according to the counsel of God's Will, in accordance with the design and determination of God "that he might fill all things". And that has ever and always been the comprehensive occasion of all spiritual conflict. It is against that ultimate purpose. Anything and everything will be resorted to by this whole mighty system of antagonism to that purpose to try and defeat it, to delay it, to contradict it, to distract from it -- anything and everything to negative that purpose "That He might fill all things".

Now we must look into this more closely and see the essentials of triumph. The battle is real: it is a fact. But we are not left without enlightenment and instruction as to the essentials of triumph, and the first is to recognise fully the realm and nature of this spiritual warfare. Five times in this letter the apostle uses the phrase "heavenlies". The first is: "(He) hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies" (Ephesians 1:3), and the last shows us where our warfare is -- it is in the heavenlies (Ephesians 6:12).

Now, because of the difficulty in our minds with a word like that, it is necessary to pause and explain.

You see, this is not a geographical realm at all. This is not a literal realm. This is a spiritual realm. This is not talking about heaven. This is talking about the heavenlies, which is something different. It is reported that Mr. Kruschev recently, in his anti-God, anti-Christian mockery, said that he had told his spaceman, when he went into outer space, to have a look round everywhere to see if he could find this "paradise". When the spaceman came back he reported that he had looked everywhere for it, but could find no trace of it. Mr. Kruschev, with a sneer, said: "Of course not. It is all fiction: it is all nonsense." To say such a thing betrays him! It shows how utterly ignorant he is of the thing which is nearest to him and in which he himself lives his life. This "heavenlies" is not somewhere up there in the clouds at all. It is right here where we are. It is right down here, and it is of two orders. You don't have to go up in a plane, or anything like that, and get somewhere above this earth in order to get where the apostle means. You know quite well that this thing, this sinister thing, this evil thing, this deadly thing, this dark, paralysing thing, can come in anywhere. It can invade any place, and you can know quite well, any day, anywhere, that there is an awful system of

evil in this universe, not somewhere remote, but right down here, pressing upon your body, pressing upon your mind, and sometimes it almost seems as if it has got inside of you.

On the other hand -- blessed be God! -- it is possible for the other kind of "heavenlies" to be right here, pressing upon us -- that glorious, blessed "heavenlies" of Christ, with its joy, its peace, its rest and its relief, and you don't have to go up somewhere to find it. It is there, right there, where we are.

This "heavenlies", of whatever of the two kinds it may be, is a spiritual realm, which descends upon us and presses upon us. Sometimes it is the beautiful, heavenly realm which comes and lifts us, as it were, into itself. It is a great joy when we are together in the Lord! Sometimes the other thing, the evil, antagonistic, inimical thing, seems to be all around us, pressing right down upon us.

That is what is meant by the "heavenlies" in this letter.

I think we need a little brainwashing over this matter, don't we? When we read that word "heavenlies", we always think of heaven, and then people begin to say, "You are so heavenly! You are no earthly good! Your feet are off the earth. You are up in the clouds." Now, be careful about such nonsensical talk, because this thing is a desperately real matter. It is right down here, this "heavenlies". It is a state, it is a spiritual condition, it is a spiritual power and force, not a location. A dear sister here, many years ago, said she would never go up in an aeroplane because that would be invading the devil's realm! You see, it is imperfect understanding. You are invading the devil's realm every time you pray, every time you get down on your knees.

Well, you see, this word "heavenlies" means the reality of spiritual things, the reality of spiritual force, the reality of spiritual forces, the reality of spiritual influence, the tensions -- and how real they are! Spiritual tensions. But there is this extra feature. These forces are not just naked, abstract forces: they are very intelligent forces. They know how to time things. They know when to get you off your guard. They know your weak moments. They are very intelligent forces. That is the meaning of the "heavenlies".

Now, what is the immediate object of these antagonistic forces? It is to unseat believers from their spiritual position, which is put here: "(He hath) made us to sit with him in the heavenlies" (Ephesians 2:6). In other words, he has put us, in union with Christ, into a spiritual realm which is above -- a spiritually-above position, a position of spiritual ascendancy in Christ. The immediate object of the forces of evil is to unseat the church, and to thrust or press it down so that there is an on-drive upon the church spiritually, an on-drive upon the body of Christ, to separate it from its true position in Christ and bring it down, anyhow, but bring it down.

Well, you don't need to have that argued further. You know enough about that, and you are destined to know a great deal more if you go on. We are defining, explaining, the nature of this consummate conflict.

You will come then to the varied "wiles", as the apostle calls them here: "That ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." They are too many for any man to count, and I would be altogether out of my depth if I tried to enumerate them. But there are a few that it may be helpful to mention.

The first is to get us out of our rightful standing and position in Christ. What is that? It is the position and standing of justified ones, of those who are, in Christ, righteous, against whom no charge can be levelled. Now Paul says that definitely and distinctly in his letter to the Romans: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? ...It is Christ Jesus that died" (Romans 8:33,34). Justified and righteous ones by

faith in Jesus Christ. And the first object, or wile, of the enemy is to get us off that ground, and make us accept judgment and condemnation and accusation and come under an awful sense of death, because God has got everything against us, He is not for us any longer. This is a battle indeed! Hence the apostle says: "Put on the breastplate of righteousness" (Ephesians 6:14). Your whole vitals need to be covered in this matter, and it is indeed a matter of the vitals of the Christian life. If only the evil forces can get an entrance with accusation and condemnation, bring us under a sense of judgment and turn the truth of God into a lie, saying: "God is not for you. God is against you," they have undone us indeed. We are down! No one will ever be able to put up any fight if they have lost that ground. It is the first wile. "Wherefore... put on the breastplate of righteousness" -- His righteousness. It is ours.

I am keeping closely to this letter -- "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3). The assault upon unity is one of the devil's most strategic attacks and methods. You know that any general, in common warfare, has one law, one principle, which governs him when he faces an enemy. It is this: "Divide and conquer". If only you can split up those forces and set them apart, destroy their unity, their cohesion, the battle is yours. Divide and conquer! And doesn't this great enemy know that, the value of that! Divide... once that has begun confusion follows very soon, and we are out of touch with one another. When the army is out of touch with its supports, confusion follows. And then what comes with the confusion, or follows right on its heels? The whole of the fighting forces are turned in upon themselves with their own internal problems -- what we called in the previous chapter "corporate introspection". Occupation with your own selves and your own troubles, your own difficulties. And doesn't the enemy delight when he sees the forces of God in a state like that, divided, confused and all tied up with their own problems and difficulties! Indeed a wile of the devil! So the word is: "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit."

Another thing in this system of adversity is to make the Lord's people put secondary causes in the place of first causes. You wonder what is meant by that. It is to put certain situations and conditions down to secondary causes, to blame somebody, and say: "It is this, or that, or something else. This is why it is." And we get our eyes on people. We get our eyes on what they say and what they do. We get our eyes on events and happenings. We just become obsessed with the things that are around us -- secondary causes -- and we fail to see that right behind and through these things there is a first cause, which is "principalities... powers... world-rulers of this darkness". And mark you, this thing can be carried a long way. I don't like saying some of the things that I am going to say, but I must, with courage and faithfulness, say them.

It is possible to put down the devil's work to God! Terrible things are happening, and then we say "Oh, no, of course it is not the devil: it is the Lord. The Lord is doing something. This is the Lord. Don't attribute it to the devil." It is possible to do that.

Now, I want to pursue that, to examine that. The one point of enquiry about any situation should always be: "What is its effect?" Put that in another way: "Is this to the glory of God or to the dishonour of the Lord?" You remember that when the Lord was here and He was casting out demons, His enemies said: "By Beelzebub the prince of devils casteth he out devils" (Luke 11:15). The Lord Jesus took them up on a matter of logic, sheer, pure logic: "If Satan also is divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand?" (Luke 11:18). "A house divided against a house falleth." (Luke 11:17). Logic! The devil is not throwing himself out! Now then, pass that over. Does God cast out God? Does God bring dishonour upon Himself? Does God destroy Himself? The answer is quite clear: No! Never! God will never do anything which will bring shame, dishonour or reproach upon His own name. He is far too jealous for His name. Therefore, if

anything is having that effect, you should suspect it. You should pierce it right to its core and heart: "This thing is dishonouring to the Lord. This thing is a reproach to His name. This thing is evil. This thing is destructive of spiritual and heavenly values. Therefore it cannot be of God." We must make that enquiry always and be very faithful about it and see exactly where the thing must be attributed.

Secondary causes are a favourite method of the enemy to cover himself up, to hide himself, and make us think that it is... well, you know, difficult people, difficult things, all this and the other, and all the time it is this evil, sinister thing behind provoking these things, stimulating these things, but they are not just the beginning and the end in themselves. You will see what that will lead to in a moment.

Another thing that comes out in this letter quite clearly as one of the enemy's great masterpieces is that he keeps the Lord's people from light, from getting light. He keeps them in the dark, keeps them blind, keeps them ignorant. Now that comes out in this letter through the apostle's prayer -- and he doesn't come into the battle as he ends the letter: he is in it right from the beginning. It is because of this that he wrote the letter at all. There is a terrific battle, and so early in the letter he says: "Making mention of you in my prayers; that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know"... that you may know... and the third time... that you may know. (Ephesians 1:16-19). Oh, it is of immense consequence that you know, that you "have the eyes of your heart enlightened", that you know. Blindness, ignorance in this realm of spiritual things as to God's purpose, as to God's means of realising it, as to God's ways of accomplishing it, is a master thing in the hands of the enemy. It always has been, right from the very beginning. Elsewhere this apostle says: "the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of God, should not dawn upon them" (2 Corinthians 4:4). And this apostle's very commission was couched in these words: "To open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:18). Oh, the immense value of spiritual illumination to the Lord, to the church! And the immense value of spiritual ignorance to the devil! Be careful, therefore, about this matter, and stand: "Withstand... and, having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13) for this matter of spiritual illumination, enlightenment. I can visualise that apostle in his imprisonment not just offering a simple petition, but on his knees -- as we say -- wrestling: "God, I pray, grant Your spirit of wisdom and revelation." The importance of this thing is incalculable.

There are many other wiles, and I will mention another before I come to sum up.

It is this wearing out business. You know it occurs in the prophecies of Daniel: "He... shall wear out the saints of the Most High" (Daniel 7:25). Ah, yes, sapping life, wearing down. It is the long-term business of these forces. Whether we are always aware of it or not, whether we are always alive to it or not, whether we always take it in this way or not, here is the fact: that very often our state of exhaustion cannot be accounted for on any other ground than the action of spiritual forces.

And that can be proved. Oh, some of us know what we are talking about in this matter: physical exhaustion, mental exhaustion, spiritual exhaustion, to the point of just giving up -- going to bed, flopping into the arm-chair, and doing no more: "I just cannot. It is not in me. I have not got the strength. I have not got the energy to go to that meeting, to go into that ministry, to undertake that piece of work. I just cannot do it." Now, have you ever put that to the test and laid hold of God for resurrection life, for divine energy, and gone in faith, laying hold of the Lord? What has been the result? Oh, a mighty accession of life! Afterwards you have felt more life than at your best times naturally. It is a mighty uplift. You see, this we are talking about is a battle, and the enemy wants us just to surrender, to give up, to accept the situation.

Flop -- I cannot: "But thou", the apostle says to Timothy, "lay hold on the life eternal" (1 Timothy 6:11,12). And it is marvellous, just marvellous, what has been done by this supernatural inflow of divine life when naturally the whole thing was an impossibility.

Now, I am speaking the truth, it is a fact. This sapping, exhausting, draining work has got to be countered by a positive action of faith. We must lay hold of Him, who is our life, to get through at all.

To conclude: what is the inclusive counter of all this and the much more that is against, that constitutes this conflict, this warfare? The apostle gives it to us. When he has told us the realm and nature of the warfare: when he has told us all the points at which the enemy attacks, as represented by the different pieces of armour -- spiritual points in the life -- and said "Withstand... and, having done all... stand", he says: "Praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18). Praying! But, you notice it is fighting prayer, because it is in the realm of battle. It is prayer that relates to this whole conflict. How much the enemy has succeeded in doing mischief and harm -- robbery and spoliation by robbing the church of its fighting prayer! There is any kind of prayer but fighting prayer! Fill up all your time with all sorts of things, but don't come out in fighting prayer, corporately, against the forces of evil! They are out to smother that, rob you of that. Oh, how we have seen and watched the church going into all these troubles because it has lost its fighting power in prayer! It is true. Really putting up a collective, a corporate resistance to all these things, together getting down to it, standing and withstanding in prayer. "Whom resist" (1 Peter 5:9), says the Word. Yes, fighting prayer has got to be recovered, or all these things that we have mentioned are going to triumph: divisions, confusions, corporate introspection, misjudging situations, the sapping of life, the withholding of life. All these things are going to succeed until we reach this point to which the apostle brings the whole thing: "Praying at all seasons" -- but battling prayer, fighting prayer.

I am afraid that many, many Christians don't know what you mean when you use that language. It is a strange phraseology to many. And I know for a fact that there are a great many who dislike it and resent you speaking about it. One of the specious arguments is: "The Lord is on the throne. The Lord is Lord over all. He is sovereign. He is doing His will. Why worry? Why fight? Why take this thing on so seriously?" How specious! It is in the Bible that this warfare has got to be carried to its triumphant issue by way of prayer, and it is the church that is here in view in this letter -- the church at prayer.

Oh, the Lord bring us in a new way on to this ground of standing together in prayer against this many-sided destructive work of the principalities and powers and hosts of wicked spirits! May we recover our fighting prayer, and we will see what happens -- and that will be the glorious experience of the church to see that the absolute supremacy of the Lord Jesus is a reality, but it works through a church on its knees.

So help us, God!

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