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## Striving in Prayer

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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### **A Conference Message**

*Reading: Phil. 1:29-30; Col. 1:28-2:2; 4:12.*

There is much more in the Word of the same nature that could be added to these passages, but these are sufficient, I think, to indicate something we need to lay to heart. I always feel that one of the great factors in our own spiritual enlargement is a real active concern for others; not in the sense that we look after another's vineyard and neglect our own, become "busy-bodies" as the Apostle would term it, occupied with everybody's business except our own, but that there is a right and proper and fruitful concern for others. What the Scriptures that we have read bring before us is that God's great revelation of purpose in the Church is not going to be realized without some tremendous and terrific conflict. There have to be those who throw themselves into that conflict for that end.

### **The Importance Of Taking The Initiative**

So here the Apostle says, "What great conflict I had for you and for them of Laodicea," and for many others. "Striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily." "Epaphras... a servant of Christ Jesus... always striving for you in his prayers." It is the laying to heart of this matter about God's desire for His people in such a way as to draw us into tremendous spiritual conflict over it. Now, we are meeting the conflict perhaps, without seeking it directly, but it is a very true thing that

very often the advantage is with those who take the initiative. Do you not recognize that when the enemy takes the initiative in the matter of spiritual assault, we usually find ourselves at a disadvantage. When it comes from his side, we turn in upon ourselves, we begin to ask questions. We find ourselves sometimes almost paralyzed by the pressure, the tenseness and the forms in which his assault comes. It affects us in such a way as almost to overwhelm us and put us out. That is because he is taking the initiative, and he knows enough of strategy in warfare to know that it is with the one who takes the initiative that a great deal of the advantage lies.

Now we shall always of course meet that and he will always be doing it, but what about the other way round? Paul met a very great deal of the onslaught of the enemy upon spirit and mind and body. It came along every line and by every channel and means conceivable. He tells us a good deal about the nature of his conflicts, spiritual and temporal, in his ministry and life, but Paul by no means left things there. He also makes it perfectly clear that he took the initiative as well, and these words which we have just read concern the initiative of the Lord's people on this matter. If the enemy is out with all his might and all his cunning to frustrate this purpose of God in the saints, namely, their coming to the fulness of understanding, their having the full knowledge of Christ; I say if he is out by every means to frustrate that, there has to be some initiative from the other side. There has to be a real throwing of ourselves into this matter in a spiritual way against this assailing of the children of God, so that God's end shall not be frustrated.

"What great conflict I have for you," says the Apostle, "striving." You know how he uses that word in his Corinthian letter about the Olympic games. "If a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (2 Tim. 2:5). He sees this man in the arena or on the track stretched out, throwing himself into the battle, striving for the mastery. It is the same word. And here it is striving for the mastery over the enemy and for the will of God, that His people might know the mystery of God, even Christ, unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, and so on. Well, the emphasis is clear and does not need a great deal added to it of words from me.

My deep feeling is that there has to be another side to our concern about this matter of the Lord's desire for His people to come to fulness, beyond the personal, and until that other side is brought in the end will not be reached. That means there must be those who will really throw themselves in to strive, by the enablement, the energy of the Spirit, to strive over this matter.

### **An Old Testament Illustration**

When I was thinking about this, there came back to my mind the very familiar story of Elisha and the Shunammite, and her son. It seems to me to be a propos of this very matter. Elisha, as you well know, sets forth in type that which was ordained to remain here on this earth after the Lord was risen, had passed through the Jordan, the Cross, and been translated to heaven, and the great issue upon which that continuation of the testimony here depended was that there should be with him a double portion of his master's spirit. His request was that. He was put on probation over that. He was tested and drawn out concerning that, but, having been approved, Elisha received a double portion of the spirit of his head. The sons of the prophets always spoke of Elijah in those words - "Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" (2 Kings 2). Elijah was his head. Now when the head was received up into heaven, the double portion of the Spirit came upon Elisha. He was here on this earth in the power of the Spirit to maintain and carry on a testimony of life, so that at every move, in every connection, Elisha is found meeting conditions of

death. He is called upon to prove that the Spirit is with him as the Spirit of resurrection by having to encounter death in many forms.

Amongst these many instances is the one of the Shunammite's son, full, I think, of helpful features and elements if we were dealing with it as a whole. We only have one thing in mind at the moment. Here, for instance, in grace the Lord had visited her and given her that son; for I think it is quite evident that she had closed that chapter in her life as something which would never be. You remember she asked the prophet not to mock her, and then later when the son died, she said, "Did I desire a son of my lord?" as much as to say, I had closed that chapter, that was something which I killed in my heart, I was not any longer thinking in that direction; you did that. It was something that could not be, but the impossible was done. The thing that she no longer dared to think about or hope for had become an actuality by the grace of God. It was something God had done in grace, and the son existed.

Now the son dies. Strange mysterious ways of God, to give something altogether of Himself, something beyond our powers and beyond our expectations, and then, having done something so much of Himself, to allow it to fall under what looks like a mere calamity, to die. Strange ways of God! The Lord does do strange things, things that are strange to our understanding. He is beyond us.

When the boy is dead, there is one there who has not been by the way of the Cross and the anointing, namely, Gehazi. He was not there to go through the Jordan with Elijah and Elisha. He did not come back again across Jordan in the power of the anointing, triumphant over death. He was not under the anointing of the double portion; he was a mere professional, not an anointed one. He came to a very sad end, a very tragic end. The leprosy of Naaman the Syrian came to him. That, by the way, happens to people who take up Divine things not crucified, uncrucified people, unanointed people. Gehazi went to this death chamber and tried to do something for this boy, and nothing happened, and he had to go away acknowledging that there was nothing. Elisha came, and you remember his procedure. He went in and he stretched himself upon that body, hands to his hands, feet to his feet, lips to his lips, eyes to his eyes. He got right down on this situation, so to speak. He got into it, he identified himself with it, he made himself a part of it. But he was in the good of the power of resurrection. It is safe to do it when you are there. He was under the anointing, and because he was a man under the anointing on the ground of resurrection, he could come into touch with that situation, not to his own undoing but to the undoing of it. It was as though he literally lifted that boy out of death.

Few things in the New Testament more amply describe that sort of thing than these words about Epaphras: a servant of Jesus Christ striving for you in his prayers. It is like that. I am not just giving you Bible Study. This is the point: I do not believe things are going to happen until we get down to it. I believe God is waiting for a getting down to this situation. There have to be some people who really do get down to it.

### **The Factor Of Prayer In Relation To The Lord's Purpose**

Take the present situation among the Lord's people. God has a purpose, but are we taking it for granted, are we waiting for something to happen, looking out all the time, observing, spectators, weighing it up, judging it? This is not happening and that is not happening, this is all we can see! I do not believe anything will happen until a people really get down to this; a people, mark you, who

stand on resurrection ground, who have the anointing, and then get down to it to break the deadlock of death, to break the bonds which bind. It is real business. There has to be a striving over this matter. It is not going to happen, it is not just going to come to pass. All this that Paul says and all that is here in the Word is sheer nonsense if the mere fact of a thing being in the will of God ensures its happening, apart from any other consideration. What are you striving about, Paul? There is no need for all that agony, travail, striving of yours! The Lord purposes it, it is the will of God; you just believe and be quiet and it will come to pass, the Lord will do it! Well then, all this is unnecessary, and therefore it is nonsense. Is it? Does this not represent something, count for something? You see what I mean.

In Colosse, in Laodicea, and for many others who had not seen his face in the flesh, all those churches, their being knit together in love unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding that they may know the mystery of God, be presented every man complete in Christ, that hangs upon this man's conflict and the conflict of Epaphras and others. How much of this are we doing? It is so easy to criticize one another's spiritual life, and the spiritual life of other people. It is so easy to take account of small measure, little growth, the arrest and limitation. It is so easy just to be lookers-on. Yes, in our hearts we are troubled, we are perplexed. In a way, we ask the Lord continually to do something, we are not detached altogether, but are we quite sure that we are where Paul was? "How greatly I strive for you." How I get down to this, how I identify myself with this situation, this need! - this that has come in which is just the opposite of what God intended, this that has interfered with the continuation of progress and development in a life that God produced, this which undoubtedly is of the Lord but locked up, fallen under something in the way of a blight, a lack, an arrest, a hold up.

There is the sovereignty of God, of course, in this, the sovereignty of God which works over the enemy in order to draw out some people. As we said at the beginning, our own enlargement is bound up with our vocation; or, to put it in another way, we shall not make much progress spiritually until we take spiritual responsibility. It is vital to our growth that we have concern for souls, our own spiritual growth. I do not believe people do grow, however much information they accumulate along spiritual lines, if they are all the time turned in on themselves. Responsibility is a tremendous thing for enlargement, and here is a man who took responsibility to the full. But he turns to these Philippians and he says, "To you it hath been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer in His behalf," and these sufferings are very often along this line, soul suffering for the saints. "I... fill up... that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ... for His body's sake, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). The sufferings of Christ; it is given to you to suffer with Him. The sufferings of Christ for His Body's sake which is the Church - I fill up that which remains of that.

It might be that the edge of a great deal of the enemy's assault upon us would be blunted if we were a little more of the assailing kind. I think we feel the keenness of it because we wait for it. I think there is something that really does save us when we are turned out in the aggressive. There are values, great values, to our own spiritual life, safety and growth, by a positive and an aggressive spirit in the interests of the Lord; for undoubtedly a positive state is a protection. To be fervent in spirit is a great protection.

I do not want to say a great deal more. I felt that the Lord wanted that emphasis this evening. You are concerned and I am concerned in a way. We recognize a need, a great need, and in relation to that need perhaps we come to wonder why this and why that. Then we begin to try and interpret it

and explain it, and we give this interpretation and that interpretation, and all too often it again becomes a turning in on ourselves or on ourselves collectively.

Well, let us face this to begin with, that the Lord's people never did in all their history come through to His end for them without terrific conflict, a great withstanding. It was always so, and they have never come through only as the Lord has had a vessel which has taken up that issue in a most positive way. It was like that with Israel in their getting through to the land. Joshua and Caleb took up that issue and fought it through, and by them a generation came in. Daniel took up that issue when the people were in captivity and fought it through in the heavenlies. The coming back of the remnant was undoubtedly to be laid instrumentally at Daniel's door. And here is Paul in the same thing on the higher spiritual level; Satan out to withstand this coming of the Church to God's end in fulness. Amongst others, here is Paul taking it up, fighting it out. It always has been, it always will be. In every city Paul had to meet it and fight it through. He is there himself on resurrection ground under the mighty anointing, but look at Philippi and the jail and the stripes, look at Corinth. There was evidently very real need for the Lord to say to Paul about Corinth, "Fear not, I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:10). It was very necessary for the Lord again and again to come alongside and fortify His servant because of what he was meeting in the city. See what he met in Ephesus: the sentence of death, he despaired even of life. Right in the conflict in every city, but fighting it through. The Lord needs that kind of instrument.

Again I say, while there may be various subsidiary causes for arrest or limitation, here is the big issue, that the enemy is out to prevent our going through, to prevent the Lord's people from knowing what His thoughts are about them, being brought into touch or led into touch with that which will be for their enlargement. It is all a mighty campaign of the enemy, blinding, nullifying, neutralizing, hindering, putting up blankets, clouds and smoke, everything and anything. It is all a part of this determination of his that the saints shall not be brought through to completeness in Christ.

Over against that, there have to be those who, together in the Lord, standing on the right and sufficient ground, take up this issue in the Name of the Lord and fight it out. "How greatly I strive" has to be true of a company of us.

The Lord give us grace for this and really work in us, and we shall see things breaking. No one will doubt, no one will dispute, that we are in a life or death issue. We are going to live and live triumphantly, or we are going to die, going to fade out. Perhaps in the Lord the issue rests with us along this line. The Lord add to the company of Epaphras!