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Walk Worthily... Be Strong

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Two familiar exhortations from the letter to the Ephesians:

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called" (Eph. 4:1).

"I beseech you... therefore..."

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might" (Eph. 6:10).

Although they are not identical words, there is a similarity of meaning in the 'therefore' of Eph. 4:1, and the 'finally' of Eph. 6:10. They both mark a point up to which the apostle has been leading, and from which he gives his exhortation. You know that this word 'finally' means more than just something at the end. Paul is fond of using this word in his letters, and what the word really means, and what he really meant, was: 'Now then, because of all that, from this time, in view of all that, do so-and-so.' In this case: "Walk worthily", therefore, because of that; and because of that, "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might". It is all that leads up to these two words 'therefore', or 'finally', or 'from now onwards', that gives point to the exhortation. Why be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might? What is the point of being strong? Well, the apostle has put behind the exhortation a tremendous reason.

The first three chapters of this letter contain the greatest unveiling that has ever been given by God to man; crammed and packed into so small a space, yet with words used that exhaust all language, he has given to us the reason why we are to be strong.

First of all, there is that in Ephesians 1:4: "...even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" - He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world. The eternal election in which now, through the call of His grace, we stand. The apostle tells us why we were chosen in Christ, but all that is not for our consideration now. We can gather that all up into one statement: if God from all eternity took an action like that in relation to His Son, it is no insignificant thing. It is no insignificant thing that He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. This letter will tell you why, there it is: chosen... in Christ... before the world was! Our being in Christ today is no accident of time, not chance or hap; it comes right out of the fore-knowledge, foreordaining, fore-choosing of God in relation to His Son. It is a mighty thing behind our belonging to the Lord. There are purposes of God bound up with this, which only begin in time, for which time is only a preparation, a very drastic preparation, as we are all proving. Chosen in Christ!

Then, in Ephesians 3, the apostle Paul tells us about the heavenly calling, the heavenly vocation, which again takes us completely out of human understanding and comprehension. It is so great, that, having chosen and now having called, that... "now unto principalities and powers in the heavenlies might be made known the manifold wisdom of God by the church". That, I say, is beyond us altogether, and so often eludes our grasp as to be of perhaps too little practical value in our lives. But here is the statement of Scripture, the statement of the Word of God by the Holy Spirit - that *now...* not in the future - but *now...* intelligences that are other than worldly intelligences are being taught the manifold wisdom of God by what He is doing in and with the church.

It is a tremendous vocation; it matters tremendously in Heaven how we behave, how we stand, and withstand, and having done all, stand. It matters to these intelligences just what kind of people we are here by the grace of God on this earth; it matters there. I think angels sometimes must weep over us; I think sometimes they must be deeply disappointed with us, because if this word means anything, it means we are set here to instruct them as to the wisdom of God through grace, of which they know nothing. They know nothing of grace; they have never come to our need of grace; they are above that; they are being instructed as to the grace of God expressed in a many-sided wisdom. Now, that may not register very much with you, but here is the statement that it is so, that *now...*

And then going back to Ephesians 1:9-10 where the apostle gives us the great purpose into which the church is called concerning Christ: "In the fulness of the dispensation of the times, to sum up" - to 'gather together', to 'reunite' "all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth". In a word, to counter that immense disintegrating effect of evil. Evil disintegrates, like corruption disintegrates an organism - it will fall apart. Evil entered into this universe and disintegrated heaven so that the very angelic hosts were divided, and a whole mighty number of them were cast out, and as the apostle says: "are held in everlasting chains" - the "angels which kept not their first estate" - heaven was rent by evil. We know that it happened here. There was a beautiful harmony and state of peace and tranquillity. And evil entered; and man himself became a disrupted person in his own personality - every one of us knows that! The race became disrupted by evil and the first family was smitten with the awful horror of murder. And so it has gone on spreading, and God knows today the disruption of this earth, this world, is a terrible thing; it has all happened through evil. It has all gone to pieces; men are trying to put it together, but it won't stay put!! Every time they try to bring together, it goes into more pieces than ever. But here it is said that He is going to reunite all things in

Christ, things in Heaven and things on the earth, according to the purpose which He purposed in Him. And the church is the first sphere of that Divine activity of recovered cohesion. Oh, what a poor expression, but here it is!

Now, you see, all this is the background of these two exhortations: walk worthily of the calling, and be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might; because of all that in which we stand through grace - what an immense thing it is! Therefore, there is a lot to be thrown away, to be let go, to lose, to miss, if we are not strong. Because of all that is involved, be strong!

Then, of course, the apostle immediately goes on to show that while that is the great background and occasion for being strong, on the other side there is a tremendous conflict raging over all this. "Be strong". "Put on the whole armour of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Because of the conflict in relation to all that of which we have so imperfectly spoken and only just indicated, there is this battle, this raging warfare, which will not cease until at last this church stands perfect, complete, triumphant in the end. But it is an important thing for you and for me to constantly remind ourselves as to the *nature* of this warfare; we need enlightenment as to the nature of this warfare, not only the occasion of it, but the *nature* of it. And the apostle sums that all up into one word: "wiles".

Wiles of the Devil

The *wiles* of the devil. The whole nature of this spiritual conflict is that; and it is a very interesting word, that word 'wiles'. In the Greek it is one of our very common English words which would convey very little to us. It is simply 'metodia', or the 'methods', 'the methods of the devil'. Well, what does that convey to you? It does not get you very far. But the word in its original means much more than that: it is craftiness; deceit; cunning devices; all this activity working under cover to catch you, to ensnare you, to make you believe that a lie is the truth, and the truth is a lie; somehow, you see, in deceitful working.

In Ephesians 4 the apostle uses the word again in another connection; he speaks of the 'doctrines', the 'wiles of error'; and then he gives a little definition of what he means by 'the wiles of error'. And he says: "Whereby they lie in wait to deceive" - what a graphic exposition of 'wiles'! 'Ambushed lies the evil one...' - lying in wait, out of sight, watching for any opportunity whatever to get the advantage. That is the word 'wiles'; and that is the whole nature of this warfare to be caught!

Oh, what a lot that does involve, does it not? What a lot of ground that covers. Are we not very often just put out of the fight, weakened in the warfare individually and collectively, by being deceived? Let me put it this way: would we not hold together much more strongly if, when any matter arose, we at once thrust in the question: Is that true? That insinuation, is it true? That suggestion, is it true? That accusation, is it true? Is it all true, or is it only half the truth? Is that only one side of things, and not the whole? You see, we are very often weakened, especially in corporate life, by being deceived over something that looks to be so true, so genuine, and yet it is not true; when you sift it out to investigate, that was not the meaning of the thing at all. That is how *you* took it, how you looked at it, how you accepted it; you were deceived! Deception was the first work of the devil to disintegrate God's creation; it is all "the wiles of the devil".

And therefore the apostle goes on immediately with his presentation of the "whole armour of God" piece by piece, in relation to the wiles. Always look at this armour, every bit of it, as over against some wile of the devil.

I cannot go through it all, but just take the first in relation to what I have just been saying: "The girdle of truth". The apostle has got this Roman soldier at his side, and he sees that that man's armour is held together by the girdle, and that that man's sword is hanging from his girdle. The girdle is that responsible thing to hold things together and to hold things for the battle. Everything is held together in strength; it is the symbol of strength. And he calls it the "girdle of truth". Here you are then; make very sure that you are on true, sound ground in your position. Make very sure that it is the *truth* about everything; if not, then you lose the girdle, and everything loses its cohesion. The girdle of truth! Oh, this wile of the devil to loosen us up by something false, a falsehood of some kind.

Or, take the "breastplate of righteousness". This is the thing that covers the heart, and the heart has got to be established in righteousness. What does that mean? Oh, the mighty provision of God in Christ to answer all the "fiery darts of the wicked one" as to our unworthiness, our sinfulness, all that we are in ourselves by nature. Oh, how the enemy tries to get us on to that ground, to pierce our hearts with accusation, and bring us low. But God has provided a righteousness in His Son, which is absolutely perfect and wholly satisfies Him, for our hearts, to cover our hearts. Do we not need the mighty strength of this breastplate to keep us in the days of accusation and fiery darts of wickedness? Well, you see these are darts of the 'wiles of the devil'. The breastplate of righteousness.

"Feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace". What does the apostle mean? Well, 'preparation' could be better translated 'readiness'; "shod" - you have got your boots on; you are not in your slippers; your feet are not uncovered. You see David, "in the time when kings went out to battle went up on to his bed upon the housetop..." he took off his shoes! He took off his boots! And was caught in the great sin and tragedy of his life. Psalm 51 is the most terrible cry of the sin-smitten soul in the Bible; he took off his shoes when he ought not to have done. He was not 'on his feet'; that is the point. Feet shod with the readiness of the good news of peace means we should be 'on business' with the gospel and not take time off when we should be engaged.

And so we could go on with all this armour, but look again, and see that it all has to do with some wile of the devil. And I come to gather it all up again; you see why you must be strong. As the apostle looked at that Roman soldier by his side, he saw the very embodiment of strength. He probably commented to himself: "My, what a strong man this is!" And then he thought: "Yes, he may be strong in himself; maybe, but the thing that really makes him strong is his armour; he would be vulnerable but for his armour; it is the armour that makes him strong." Therefore the apostle says: "Wherefore, *take* the whole armour of God." *Take the whole armour!* It is God's provision that makes us strong, not what we are in ourselves. We would be vulnerable in ourselves, but for the whole armour of God. Now, this is so familiar that we miss the point very often. He said: "Take," or "Take up," or, "Take unto you the whole armour of God." There has got to be a positive action on our part over all this.

That comes out, of course, very clearly, in the matter of the "sword of the Spirit" which is the Word of God. The Holy Spirit's sword is the Word of God. Now, the Lord Jesus is said to have been "led of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil"; the Spirit, you see, is in action. How does the

Lord Jesus come through by the Holy Spirit into absolute victory, so that the enemy, worsted and crestfallen, leaves Him? By the Spirit. He said: "It is written... it is written... it is written..."; the Spirit's sword was the Word of God. Satan says something about us, and our unfitness, and our unworthiness, and our sinfulness, and our faultiness. What have we got with which to answer him? Nothing but: "It is written!" "Oh, the Lord has left you; the Lord has forsaken you; the Lord has given you up; the Lord is no longer with you..." so he says. What does the Lord say? "I am persuaded that neither life nor death, things present nor things to come... principality nor power, nor any other creation, shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." What can he do against that if you really stand upon that ground? Nothing! Nothing can separate us from the love of God - not our love for Him, but His love for us! It is written! "Oh, but there, you did sin; it is not just imagination; you did do that wrong thing, it was sin; therefore you have committed sin, and you know what that means..." so he accuses; so he weakens; so he puts us out of the fight. What have we got for an answer? "*It is written!*" "If we say we have not sinned we deceive ourselves, but if we confess our sin He is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness!" The Word of God stands rock-like for all eternity. But how often do we take it like a sword for battle? "Wherefore, take... Take up unto yourselves..." And so, with every other thing provided; for heart, the breastplate; for mind, the helmet of salvation. It is written: Take it!

We must leave it there, but the exhortation is, "From henceforth, be strong *in the Lord*." And if you look again at all the armour you will see it is only features of Christ. He is made unto us righteousness, sanctification, redemption. It is Christ; what He is. Take Him! Take Him for all your need. "Be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength of *His* might." The Lord help us.

But I must remind you that the apostle does not finish without saying: "Praying at all seasons in the spirit, and watching thereunto...". I suppose the soldier at Paul's side knew that he had many friends, and that Rome had many enemies, and perhaps all over the world those who knew that this man Paul was in prison. Therefore that soldier is alert; he is watching every opening in all directions, constantly on the move against anything that might suddenly take an advantage, and rob him of his prisoner. He is watching; he is watching everywhere. And the apostle says: You have got to do that; "*watching* thereunto..."; be always on the alert; always on your guard. These principalities and powers with which we are wrestling in the heavenlies are themselves very alert; we know it. Very, very quickly and suddenly they pounce upon any opportunity that we give. Oh, why were we not more watchful? Why did we say that? Why did we do that? Why were we off our guard? "Watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication".