

THE FIGHT OF FAITH

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There are some who teach that those Christians who engage in spiritual fighting are living below their privileges. They insist that God is willing to do all our fighting for us. Their pet slogan is, "Let go, and let God." They say that the Christian should turn the battle over to Christ. There is a half truth in this, yet only a half truth, and carried to extremes it becomes error. The half truth is that the child of God has no inherent strength of his own: says Christ to His disciples, "Without Me, ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). Yet this does not mean that we are to be merely passive, or that the ideal state in this life is simply to be galvanized automations. There is also a positive, an active, aggressive side to the Christian life, which calls for the putting forth of our utmost endeavours, the use of every faculty, a personal and intelligent co-operation with Christ.

There is not a little of what is known as "the victorious life" teaching which is virtually a denial of the Christian's responsibility. It is lopsided. While emphasizing one aspect of truth, it sadly ignores other aspects equally necessary and important to be kept before us. God's Word declares that "every man shall bear his own burden" (Galatians 6:5), which means, that he must discharge his personal obligation. Saints are bidden to "Cleanse themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit" (2 Cor. 7:1), and to "keep themselves unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). We are exhorted to "overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21). The apostle Paul declared, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (1 Cor. 9:27). Thus, to deny that a Christian is called upon to engage in a ceaseless warfare with the flesh, the world, and the Devil, is to fly in the face of many plain Scriptures.

There is a very real twofoldness to the Christian life, and every aspect of Divine truth is balanced by its counterpart. Practical godliness is a mysterious paradox, which is incomprehensible to the natural man. The Christian is strongest when he is weakest, wealthiest when he is poorest, happiest when most wretched. Though unknown (1 John 3:1); yet he is well known (Gal. 4:9). Though dying daily (1 Cor. 15:31), yea, dead; yet, behold, he lives (Col. 3:3-4). Though having nothing, yet he possesses all things (2 Cor. 6:10). Though persecuted, he is not forsaken; cast down, he is not destroyed. He is called upon to "rejoice with trembling" (Psalm 2:11), and is assured: "Happy are ye that weep now" (Luke 6:21). Though the Lord maketh him to lie down in green pastures and leadeth him beside still waters, he is yet in the wilderness, and "in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is" (Psalm 63:1). Though followers of the Prince of peace, Christians are to endure "hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ" (2 Timothy 2:3); and though "more than conquerors," they are often defeated.

"Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12). We are called upon to engage in a ceaseless warfare. The Christian life is to be lived out on the battlefield. We may not like it, we may wish that it were otherwise, but so has God ordained. And our worst foe, our most dangerous enemy, is *self*, that "old man" which ever wants his way, which rebels against the "yoke" of Christ, which hates the "cross"; that "old man" which opposes every desire of the "new man," which dislikes God's Word and ever wants to substitute man's word. But self has to be "denied" (Matt. 16:24), his "affections and lusts crucified" (Gal. 5:24). Yet that is by no means an easy task. O what a conflict is ever going on within the true Christian. True there are times when the "old man" pretends to be asleep or dead, but soon he revives and is more vigorous than ever in opposing that "new man." Then it is that the real Christian seriously asks, "If it be so (that I truly am a child of God) why am I thus?" Such was Rebekah's puzzling problem when "the children struggled together within her" (Gen. 25:22).

What a parable in action is set before us in the above Scripture! Do we need any interpreter? Does not the Christian have the key which explains that parable in the conflicting experiences of his own soul? Yes, and is not the sequel the same with you and me, as it was with poor Rebekah? "She went and inquired of the

Lord.” Ah, her husband could not solve the mystery for her; no man could, nor did she lean unto her own understanding and try and reason it out. No, the struggle inside her was so great and fierce, she must have Divine assurance. Nor did God disappoint her and leave her in darkness. “And the Lord said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). But the meaning of such a verse is hid from those who are, in their own conceits, “wise and prudent.” But, blessed by God, it is revealed to those who, taught of the Spirit, are made to realize they are babes, that is, who feel they are ignorant, weak, helpless—for that is what “babes” are.

And who were the two nations that “struggled together” inside Rebekah? Esau and Jacob, from whom two vastly different nations descended, namely, Edom and Israel. Now observe closely what follows: “And the one people shall be stronger than the other.” Yes, Esau was so strong that Jacob was afraid of him, and fled from him. So it is spiritually, the “old man” is stronger than the “new man.” How strange that it should be so! Would we not naturally conclude that that which is “born of the Spirit” is stronger than that which is “born of the flesh” (John 3:6)? Of course, we would naturally think so, for “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). But consider the matter from the standpoint of spiritual discernment. Suppose the “new man” were stronger than the “old man”—then what? Why, the Christian would be self-sufficient, proud, haughty. But God, in His infinite wisdom, allows the “new man” in His children to be weaker than the “old man.” Why? That they may depend upon Him. But it is one thing to know the theory of this, and it is quite another to put it into practice. It is the one thing to believe the “new man” (Jacob) is weaker than the “old man” (Esau, who was born first!), and it is quite another thing to daily seek and obtain from God the needed strength to “fight” against the “old man.” That is why it is called the “good fight of faith,” for faith treats with *God*.

“Fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12). Our circumstances are the battleground. The “flesh” is never long satisfied with the “circumstances” in which God places us, but always wants to change them, or get into another set than we are now in. Thus it was with Israel of old. The “circumstances” into which God had brought the children of Israel was the wilderness, and they murmured, and wished they were back in Egypt. And that is written as a warning for us! The tendency of circumstances is to bind our hearts to the earth: when prosperous, to make us satisfied with things; when adverse, to make us repine over or covet the things which we do not have. Nothing but the exercise of real faith can lift our hearts above circumstances, for faith looks away from all things seen, so that the heart delights itself and finds its peace and joy in the Lord (Psalm 37:4). This is never easy to any of us; it is always a fight, and only Divine grace (diligently sought) can give us the victory. Oftentimes we fail; when we do, this must be confessed to God (1 John 1:9), and a fresh start made.

Nothing but faith can enable us to rise above “circumstances.” It did so in the case of the two apostles, who, with feet fast in the stocks, with backs bleeding and smarting, sang praises to God in Phillipi’s dungeon; that was faith victorious over most unpleasant circumstances. We can almost imagine each reader saying, “Alas, my faith is so weak.” Ah, ponder again this word; “Fight the good fight of faith”—note the repetition! It is not easy for faith to rise above circumstances; no, it is not. It is difficult, at times, extremely difficult; so the writer has found it. But remember, a “fight” is not finished in a moment, by one blow; oftentimes the victor receives many wounds and is sorely pounded before he finally knocks-out his enemy. So we have found it, and still find it: the great enemy, the “flesh” (*self*) gives the “new man” many a painful blow, often floors him; but, by grace, we keep on fighting. Sometimes the “new man” gets the victory, sometimes the “old man” does. “For a just man falleth seven times and riseth up again” (Pro. 24:16).

Yes, dear reader, every real Christian has a “fight” on his hands: self is the chief enemy which has to be conquered; our circumstances the battle-ground where the combat has to be waged. And each of us would very much like to change the battle-ground. There are unpleasant things which, at times, sorely try each of us, until we are tempted to cry with the afflicted Psalmist, “O that I had wings like a dove, that I might fly away” (Psalm 55:6). Yes, sad to say, the writer has been guilty of the same thing. But, when he is in his right mind (spiritually), he is thankful for these very “circumstances.” Why? Because they afford an opportunity

for faith to act and rise above them, and for us to find our peace, our joy, our satisfaction, not in pleasant surroundings, not in congenial friends, nor even in sweet fellowship with brethren and sisters in Christ; but—in God! He can satisfy the soul. He never fails those who truly trust Him. But it is a fight to do so. Yes, a real, long, hard fight. Yet, if we cry to God for help, for strength, for determination, He does not fail us, but makes us “more than conquerors.”

There is that in each of us which wants to play the coward, run away from the battlefield—our “circumstances.” This is what Abraham did (Genesis 12:10), but he gained nothing by it. This is what Elijah did (1 Kings 19:3), and the Lord rebuked him for it. And these instances are recorded “for our learning” (Romans 15:4), as warnings for us to take to heart. They tell us that we must steadfastly resist this evil inclination, and call to mind that exhortation, “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you (act) like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13).

“Fight the good fight of faith.” Nor does the Lord call upon us to do something from which He was exempted. O what a “fight” the Captain of our salvation endured! See Him yonder in the wilderness: “forty days tempted of Satan, and was with the wild beast” (Mark 1:13), and all that time without food (Matthew 4:2). How fiercely the Devil assaulted Him, renewing his attack again and yet again. And the Saviour met and conquered him on the ground of faith, using only the Word of God. See Him again in Gethsemane; there the fight was yet fiercer, and so intense were His agonies that He sweat great drops of blood. Nor was there any comfort from His disciples: they could not watch with Him one hour. Yet He triumphed, and that, on the ground of faith: “when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared” (Heb. 5:7).

Those two instances are recorded for our instruction, and, as ever, their order is beautifully significant. They teach us how we are to “fight the good fight of faith.” Christ Himself has “left us an example!” And what do we learn from these solemn and sacred incidents? This: the only weapon we are to use is the Sword of the Spirit; and, victory is only to be obtained on our knees—“with strong crying and tears.” The Lord graciously enables us so to act. O that each of us may more earnestly seek grace to fight the good fight of faith. We shall have happy and peaceful fellowship together in heaven; but before we get there, the “fight” has to be fought, and won or we shall never get there at all (2 Tim. 4:6-8).