

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE CONFLICT AND THE TRUTH

THE LAST SECTION of the Epistle, save for closing greetings, brings us back to the thought which is brought out in the opening up of the letter, but from a different point of view. Ideally, the believer is in the heavenly places, but they are the area of conflict. And whether he is aware of it or not, the Christian is involved in the conflict. And so we read:

"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (6:10-12).

When the Apostle says that we wrestle not against "**flesh and blood**," he seems to be thinking of humanity as earthborn and earthbound, and insulated from GOD. The moral conflict is not primarily with men, either individually or collectively.

The real conflict is not on that level or in that sphere; it is against supernatural powers. These heavenly principalities were created by CHRIST and for Him (Colossians 1:16), but they rebelled against the rule of Heaven.

At the Cross their power was broken and they were "disarmed" (see Colossians 2:15). And now He who vanquished them is "**far above**" them (1:21), and that endlessly.

"Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (v. 13).

Two expressions stand over against one another in that sentence - "**the armour of God**"; "**the evil day**."

The thought of the Apostle seems to have turned to a passage in Isaiah from which he borrows some of the phrasing. In chapter 59 of that book, the prophet describes what was indeed an "**evil day**." It was exceedingly so. The moral obliquity which he describes was of the most aggravated

character. Notice some sentences in the indictment:

"Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness . . . Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace (Isaiah 59:2, 3, 7, 8).

He utters a cry of spiritual consternation which is almost one of despair.

"Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us: we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men . . . And judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter" (Isaiah 59:9, 10, 14).

And then he describes the attitude and conduct of the Lord.

"And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak" (Isaiah 59:16, 17).

We are then in a state of conflict. How are we to account for the conflict? It is related to a great spiritual fact which we might almost speak of as a spiritual principle. We may put it in a sentence: Wherever GOD expresses a choice, there Satan commences a conflict.

Notice some illustrations of this.

We know that from eternity GOD has had His eye upon the human race, and that He has entertained singular purposes of grace toward mankind. He has linked Himself up with humanity. It was part of the eternal counsel of GOD that His only begotten Son should wear a human form. The glory of GOD has shone forth, and will shine forth forever, in a human face. Here is a divine choice; we may look for a Satanic conflict. We shall not look in vain. The earth upon which we live appears to be the stage upon which is being enacted the moral conflict of the ages; the soul of man is the moral battleground. Moral issues are being settled here for eternity. Wherever GOD expresses a choice, there Satan commences a conflict.

But GOD's choices are not only general; they are particular.

He looks upon the human race; He beholds the nations of the earth, and He makes choice among them. **"This people have I formed for myself" (Isaiah 43:21). "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2).**

And once again Satan commences a conflict. What pen could describe, what catalogue could enumerate the age-long afflictions of Israel? They have made that nation the miracle of history. Their history, century after century, has been a prolonged and incessant tragedy.

Or again, turn aside from the human race to the earth upon which we live. GOD has made a geographical choice. It is written in the Pentateuch, concerning Palestine:

"A land which The LORD thy God careth for: the eyes of LORD thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even until the end of the year" (Deuteronomy 11:12).

And what has been the history of Palestine? Century after century the armies of the great world powers crossed and recrossed it; and it passed as a chattel from hand to hand.

But the choice has been a more particular one. Divine affection fastened itself upon a city; and that city became the City of the Great King. Of Zion it was said, **"He hath desired it for his habitation"** (Psalm 132:13). And what has been the history of Jerusalem? It has been a history of siege. The city which the Lord called a city of peace the Adversary has made to be a city of war. But when GOD took an elect people and put them in an elect land, He commissioned them to prepare an elect literature. And the books which they wrote became "the Book." And what has been the history of this Book? It has been a history of siege.

But turn again to the human race. There is one Man who has walked across the stage of human history who was in a unique and singular sense GOD's choice man. **"Behold my servant, whom I uphold"** (Isaiah 42:1).

Will this elect One escape the opposition of the enemy? Nay, verily. All the hatred of the human heart, inspired by the malevolence of Satan, is hurled upon Him, and the spotless One expires between two thieves.

But the Son of GOD is not here now. The malignity of Satan is powerless to touch Him any more. How will this principle express itself? It will seek out those who are **"chosen... in Him."** And so the Church becomes the target of attack, and the enmity of Satan fastens itself upon those who are fastened to CHRIST.

Now the Christian is engaged in a double conflict - a conflict within the area of his own personality and a conflict with the spiritual antagonisms of an unseen world.

It has been said that every Christian is three men - the old man, the new man, and the Christian man.

- The **"old man"** can be none other than sinful.
- The **"new man"** can be none other than holy.

It is of the carnal mind that the Apostle speaks when he says, **"It is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be"** (Romans 8:7).

- But of the **"new man"** John says, **"Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for . . ."**

he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (I John 3:9).

But in between the "**old man**" and the "**new man**" stands the Christian man; and he is at the center of the conflict. And this conflict is not supremely between ourselves and our sins; it is not even supremely between man and Satan, but between the arch-enemy and GOD. The human race has been brought into the conflict to magnify the grace of GOD, and to create a superlative spiritual fellowship. And so the Apostle admonishes us to be panoplied with the armor of GOD.

"Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (vv. 14-17).

It is interesting to observe that, unless it be as to the sword of the Spirit, all of these figures of speech are taken from Isaiah, that incomparable master of spiritual similes. And as to the exception, Isaiah comes very close to it when he says that the Messiah will "**smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked**" (Isaiah 11:4).

But before the Apostle enumerates the armor, he utters a twice-repeated exhortation to "**stand.**"

Chrysostom, in commenting on this passage in his homilies on Ephesians, refers to the Israelites, who, when they came out of Egypt, partook of the Passover with their loins girded, their shoes on their feet, and their staffs in their hands.

It suggests a standing posture. But the Israelites assumed both their dress and their posture as befitting a journey they were about to take. They were pilgrims. The standing, however, of which the Apostle here speaks is that of the soldier. And the homilist of whom we have spoken does not overlook this. Those, he says, "as have had experience in wars know how great a point it is to know how to stand." The standing spoken of in the text is the standing of resistance; it implies a firmness of foot which will hold itself against the strongest assault.

The Apostle speaks of the girdle first, and the girdle he likens to truth. "The well-fastened girdle," says Moule, "kept together the soldier's dress and accoutrements, and added conscious vigor to his frame." There is nothing that will keep everything in place, whether in life or character, or walk or testimony, like the truth.

What is truth? If we may philosophize, we might say that truth is the substance of permanence. The question was once asked in a never-to-be-forgotten scene in Pilate's judgment hall. The answer to the question was expressed in the very words of the interrogation. Truth is "what is." But let us follow up the inquiry and approach the conclusions which we may reach in a series of steps.

In doing this we may regard truth in connection with four relations, or from four successive points of view. We may contemplate truth, first, as passive; second, as positive; third, as progressive, and fourth, as persuasive. That is to say:

- (1) In relation to itself
- (2) In relation to its opposite
- (3) In relation to other truth
- (4) In relation to moral beings - to men who are being brought under its power.

Truth, then, is first of all passive. As we look upon truth in this initial and rudimentary way we see that it possesses - if we may speak of it in terms of personality - a threefold nature, and can be approached from the physical, the intellectual, and the moral side successively.

Truth expresses itself in the most obvious and simple ways in the physical order, in the material universe, in the things that we see.

Every phenomenon of nature as noted by the accurate observer, every fact of history as recorded by the faithful chronicler, every incident of experience registered with fidelity upon the inner consciousness becomes a contribution to truth. But as these phenomena of nature and these facts of history and these incidents of experience are taken into the mind and absorbed, we find that in connection with the work of assimilation the mind is engaged upon another process - the process of induction.

We are endeavoring to relate experience to history, and history to natural phenomena, the part to the whole, and by this process of comparison and adjustment and readjustment to work out a philosophical system which will entertain every fact which has been received into the mind, and unify them consistently. We have now lifted truth out of the sphere of the physical into the realm of the intellectual. Truth is no longer merely a concrete fact; it is an abstract relation. But we proceed a step further.

In the process of assimilation and induction we have taken into account every impression which the mind has absorbed and have related them. Now the moral faculties begin to assert themselves, and we commence to compare these facts thus related and unified with what ought to be. Truth has now been lifted up out of the intellectual realm onto a moral plane. We see, then, the processes of observation, induction, and discrimination in connection with the physical, intellectual, and moral aspects of truth. This, then, is the first step in the inquiry into the nature of truth. We must regard it first of all as passive, or in relation to itself.

But we proceed to take the second step and see truth to be positive; we see it in relation to its opposite.

It can hardly be supposed that truth depends upon its antithesis for an expression of itself; yet as we look at GOD in connection with a disturbed moral order, we think of Him as a GOD of truth hating iniquity. And although it may be possible for us to entertain a conception of truth apart from the thought of error, yet this is not the Scriptural point of view.

In becoming positive, truth has encountered its opposite; it has met its antagonist. It is face to face with a lie. "**Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity**" (Hebrews 1:9). This is truth in its positive mood. All the richest expressions and conceptions of Scripture become impoverished and meaningless if we endeavor to eliminate the positive aspect of truth, in which it is seen in antithesis to its opposite.

"**Mercy and truth are met together**"; but if we rob truth of its positive mood, what manner of diluted idea does mercy suggest?

Where, it may be asked, does the antithesis to truth originate?

That is something that has not been revealed; it is a question we cannot answer. But we know that it has been personified in him who is "**a liar, and the father of it,**" and that "**there is no truth in him**" (John 8:44). How, then, is a lie produced? By a disarrangement or dislocation of truth. The worst form of lying is in perverting the highest forms of truth. (See II Thessalonians 2:8-12)

But truth is not only passive, as seen in relation to itself, and positive, as seen in relation to its opposite; it is progressive, as seen in relation to other truth. GOD is working out a program of redemption by successive stages. As the ages succeed one another, the program progresses, and the truths in relation to the sections which are being carried out come into view, so that Peter speaks of being established in the present truth (II Peter 1:12).

Even practical precepts receive their emphasis from the dispensation in which they are spoken, from the stage of the program where they emerge. We read in Leviticus: "**Ye shall not steal; neither deal falsely, neither lie one to another**" (Leviticus 19:11).

These same admonishments appear in this Epistle, but the phraseology has changed. The dictum becomes an appeal. And the ground and motives for these moral restraints are on a new plane. We are to speak the truth because "**we are members one of another**" (4:25); we are to labor, and not to steal, "**that [we] may have to give to him that needeth**" (4:28).

And in the fourth place, truth is persuasive, and is seen in relation to moral beings. There is a moral power in the truth of revelation which cuts into the conscience, moves the heart, and is one of the divinely appointed agencies for transforming the life. Truth, therefore, is to be obeyed (Romans 2:8; Galatians 3:1). Yet it may be resisted (II Timothy 3:8). But it has within itself sanctifying power (John 17:17).

Now, truth in each of these aspects was incarnated in JESUS CHRIST. In its passive aspect He focuses all truth in His own personality. He is full-orbed. In Him all fullness dwells. The contemplation of CHRIST becomes thus an end in itself. But truth is seen in Him also in its positive form. It confronts every lie (John 8:40). It evokes the antagonism of all that is false. But it is progressive as well. In Him truth becomes living and historical. He transacts truth. He can say, "**I am the truth**" (John 14:6). And in Him truth is persuasive. He himself is the supreme appeal. He presents Himself not only as the essence of truth but as its power. The armor and the other equipment of the soldier of CHRIST will be considered in the next chapter.

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