

Prayer as Warfare

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Christian life is a warfare with spiritual forces, and prayer is the battleground where this warfare is won or lost.

Scripture: Nehemiah 4:9-20, Matthew 26:41, Luke 18:1, Romans 8:26-27, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, James 5:16

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

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Christian life is a spiritual warfare, which only becomes apparent after one is saved and aligned with Christ. He explains that this battle is not merely against worldly evils but against spiritual forces led by the devil, and that the primary battleground is prayer. The enemy's main strategy is to disrupt the believer's prayer life, as it is crucial for spiritual victory and the testimony of Jesus. Sparks urges believers to recognize the necessity of fighting for their prayer life, asserting that true spiritual growth leads to a deeper understanding of this conflict. Ultimately, he calls for a commitment to prioritize prayer, as it is foundational to the believer's effectiveness in spiritual warfare.

Transcript

Reading: Nehemiah 4:9,17,20. Ephesians 6:18.

The Christian life has very often been likened to a warfare, and the appeal has been made to 'come and join the ranks and enter into the battle of the Lord.' But there is an irregularity about such an appeal, because, while it is true that there is such a warfare and such a militant company, the real consciousness of the fight, the battle, the warfare, does not exist until we are saved and are 'on the Lord's side.' The unconverted do not know anything about this battle. For them it is something merely reported and spoken about, something objective - outside of themselves and something about which they have altogether confused and wrong ideas. It is not until we are really in Christ that we either know the reality of the battle or understand its true nature.

But it is not just the warfare of the Christian life in the general and ordinary sense with which we are concerned here at this time. It is that warfare which is especially connected with, and related to, the full testimony of the Lord Jesus. The general conception of Christian warfare is that which has to do with evils, wrongs, vices, the things in this world, and human conditions which ought to be otherwise, and it is there that the mistaken apprehension of unconverted men and women is found. They think that to enter into the Christian army means to go out to battle with the evils, the wrongs, and the vices which abound in this

world. But when you really come into touch with the full testimony of the Lord Jesus you very soon develop another consciousness: that it is not merely evils, wrongs and sins that you are having to deal with, but spiritual forces - intelligent, cunning, artful, venomous, malicious forces - which are at the back of everything else. It is that warfare with which we are concerned just now, that which is related to the full testimony of the Lord Jesus, to His absolute and perfect sovereignty and lordship in this universe, and that warfare is not with things but with spiritual persons, headed by a great spiritual personage, the evil one.

Spiritual Conflict Implies a Spiritual Position

This warfare is related to a position. It is a consciousness which only comes to us in a certain realm. You may be a Christian, and as a Christian you may realize that you are up against adversities, difficulties, oppositions, and things which make the Christian life strenuous and full of conflict, calling out all the militant features of life, and yet you may not have entered into the ultimate things of the testimony of the Lord Jesus and the ultimate realm of the battle of the saints. But if you come as a believer to a revelation of the fullness of Christ in His personal sovereignty and lordship, in the greatness of the work of His cross in every realm, and then into the light of the Church which is His Body, you enter immediately into a new realm of conflict, the battle changes its character, and you begin to develop a consciousness, or a consciousness begins to grow in you, that you are up against something far more sinister, far more intelligently evil than those wrongs that abound in the world. You become increasingly conscious that it is with the devil, directly and nakedly, and with his forces that you are having to do.

But that consciousness is bound up with a specific position, and the experience of believers is that as they go on with the Lord (which means going upward, away from the earthlies to the heavenlies, more and more away from the old creation to the new creation life, and more and more away from the flesh to the spirit) the more closely do they come into contact with the ultimate spiritual forces of the universe, and the conflict assumes new forms and the warfare takes a new character. It is a warfare linked up with a specific position to which the believer comes, and with the consciousness which comes in only in a certain realm. It is in a fuller measure a spiritual warfare, and being that, it pre-supposes a spiritual state on the part of the believer.

To put that in another way: the more spiritual we become, the more spiritual does the warfare become; and the more spiritual the warfare is in our consciousness and in our knowledge, so we may realize that we have become more spiritual. When we are carnal our warfare is carnal, and I refer to believers and not to unbelievers. The unbeliever is not spoken of as carnal. He is natural. When we are carnal as believers, our warfare and our weapons are carnal. That is, we meet men on their own level and answer back their challenge with that with which they challenge us. If they come out in argument we counter with argument; if they come out with reason we meet them with reason; if they come out with fierce temper we meet them in the heat of the flesh; and if they come out to us with criticism, well, we give them what they give us and try to go one better, meeting them always on their own level.

That is carnal warfare, using carnal weapons. When we cease to be carnal and leave all carnal ground, becoming wholly spiritual, we find ourselves in a new realm at the back of men, dealing with spiritual forces directly and not with merely carnal forces. We have come into touch with something at the back of carnal man, and the carnal man is utterly helpless in the presence of a spiritual man for the simple reason that he cannot get the spiritual man to come down to his level. Therefore he is disarmed, and sooner or later he will have to recognize that that spiritual man is his superior. But the superiority is not just in that the spiritual man is on a new level. It is that he is meeting not the man naturally, but the forces behind the

man. It is spiritual warfare now. We cease to fight after the flesh; we cease to fight man; we cease to battle with flesh; our warfare is in another realm altogether. That represents spiritual advance, spiritual growth, and it represents spirituality. And when we come into real spiritual warfare a spiritual state is pre-supposed. In that realm the natural man's resources are utterly useless. They are ruled out, because for that warfare only spiritual equipment is either permissible or effective. The warfare then is with spiritual weapons, spiritual resources and spiritual equipment. So Ephesians 6 finds us in the heavenlies, battling, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, but we are equipped with a spiritual armour, the armour of God.

The Prayer-life - the Objective of the Enemy

That is all preliminary. What we are coming to immediately as the thing of basic importance for us, having seen the nature of our warfare, is that the battlefield of this warfare is prayer. When the Apostle Paul has shown us the whole panoply of God, the armour in all its parts, and exhorted us to take it up and to stand, and withstand, he, as it were, spreads the ground under our feet and says: "With all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." The battleground of this warfare is prayer. What I mean is this: that this battle is won on the ground of prayer, these forces are dealt with and defeated on the ground of prayer, and, that being so, the chief objective of the enemy is the prayer-life of the believer. That is the focal point of all the enemy's attention and strategy.

Now if we said no more than that, that is the supreme thing for our grasping and for our recognition. We have said the most important thing that can be said in this connection. The focal point of all the enemy's attention and strategy is the prayer-life of the believer. If he can destroy that by any means he has gained the day, defeated the saints and frustrated the ends of God. The enemy fights prayer persistently, energetically, violently and cunningly, and he fights the prayer-life of the believer. He fights it in various ways. First of all, he fights it along preventive lines, in the direction of prevention, and there has to be a tremendous battle and conflict to get prayer - not only to pray, but to have prayer, get prayer - and there is nothing in all the range of his wit, his cunning, his craftiness, his ingenuity and his resourcefulness that the enemy will not employ to prevent real spiritual prayer. I think it will probably be enough for us if we concentrate upon that just now.

The Battle for Prayer

I am quite sure that I have the agreement of most of the Lord's people when I say that one of the most difficult things, if not the most difficult thing, is to be able to get to prayer and give ourselves to prayer. When we contemplate prayer we meet a host of unsuspected and unforeseen difficulties which suddenly rise up as ambush forces breaking out upon us. Anything to prevent prayer! I am not saying something that you do not know, but I am saying it in order that you may recognize it clearly, definitely and deliberately, and face the fact that it is not just ordinary circumstances, but a designed, well-laid scheme of the enemy to prevent prayer. The enemy, instead of objecting, will promote occupation with a thousand and one things for the Lord if thereby he can crowd out prayer. He does not mind how busy we are in the Lord's work, nor how often we are found preaching, conducting meetings, and doing the many-sided work of the Lord, as we may call it. He knows quite well that all the work for the Lord which is not founded upon triumphant spiritual prayer will count for little or nothing in the long run and will break down. I say that he does not mind you working. Work for the Lord as hard as you can, but if you leave out prayer you will not accomplish very much. One of the subtleties of the enemy is to get us so busy, so occupied, so much on the go and on the rush with - as we think - things for the Lord and the work of the Lord that our prayer is

cramped and pushed up into a corner and limited, if not almost entirely ruled out; and the Lord will never accept the excuse: 'Lord, I am too much engaged in Your interests to pray.' The Lord never favours an attitude like that.

You will remember that when the children of Israel began to talk about and contemplate their exodus from Egypt, the enemy's reaction was to double their labours, that is, to get them so much more deeply occupied with work that there would be no more time for contemplating an exodus. Immediately you begin to contemplate or purpose a fuller prayer-life, the enemy launches a new scheme for keeping you more busy and occupied, heaping up the work and crowding in demands so that you will have no time or opportunity for prayer.

I think that we must face this quite definitely. Of course, there are all the arguments about duty, obligation and responsibility, and it does sometimes look as though to put some things aside for prayer would be neglecting duty, or failing in obligation, or breaking down in responsibility, but there is a place where we have to cast those matters upon the Lord, and pray.

Now, of course, it is very difficult to apply that. There are always dangers about saying a thing like that, because there are always people who are more than ready to let go of their responsibilities, or who do not take their responsibilities seriously. They would be only too ready and glad to hand over their domestic affairs to someone else while they cultivate a devotional life. The Lord must safeguard this word. But we must recognize this: that the enemy will construct his best arguments about responsibility, duty and conscience to stop us praying, and there is a place where, if we see prayer is utterly ruled out, or brought down to such a limited place that it is completely inadequate for a life of spiritual ascendancy and victory, we have to say: 'Lord, I am going to trust the responsibility with You while I pray, that You will not allow my breaking away for this time to have detrimental results, and that You will protect this prayer-time - which I seek for Your glory - from the inroads of the enemy.'

The principle of the tithe does work, even in this realm. Give God His portion, His place, and you will find that when you have given the Lord His one-tenth, you are able to do more with the nine-tenths than you could do with ten-tenths. That principle works. But there is a battle for prayer, and the necessity is for a strong, a mighty, a deliberate and a determined stand in Christ, by the victory of His cross, to get prayer, to bring in the full weight and the value of the victory of the cross of the Lord Jesus to secure prayer and to drive the enemy off the ground of prayer so that that ground may be held for prayer. It is like Shammah of old, when he stood in the lentil patch with his sword in his hand and, singlehanded, fought the Philistines and preserved that lentil patch, and the Lord wrought a great victory. The lentil patch may represent our prayer-ground, which has to be defended against the enemy in the fullness of Calvary's victory. There is a fight to get prayer and a battle for prayer. We have, I am afraid, too often accepted the situation that it is not possible to pray just now, or things are such as to make it quite out of the question to pray. Yes, they will be if the devil has his way; they will be always such as to make prayer out of the question. That is one of his tactics. We have to clear the ground for prayer in the victory of His Name and of His Cross. The Cross is just as effectual in securing time for prayer, if we will apply it and use it, as it is in any other realm.

But we have to approach prayer on victory-ground. We have to take up this attitude, and we shall find it more and more necessary to do so: 'Now prayer must be. Everything makes it impossible on the human side, but, Lord, I claim in the victory of Calvary a time of prayer, a clear space for prayer.' We have to stand in that victory, and it may mean standing before we get through. It is not only the many things that may press in upon us along the line of external circumstances and happenings, to leave no room for a

time of prayer. How true it is that when we are actually down on our knees prayer is withstood! It may be nothing on the outside. There may be no doorbells ringing, no telephone going, nor callers coming. We may be shut up in the silence of our own room and be actually on our knees, and then a mighty interfering activity commences. It may be physical. We may suddenly develop a physical consciousness that was not there a little while before, and it will threaten the whole of our prayer-time, so that we find that bodily we have to take up a tremendous burden, a deadweight. We may even develop positive symptoms of illness of which we were unconscious before. These are facts. And then mental conditions may come in just at that time which were not there before. Oh, immediately, what an inrush of a thousand and one things which have not bothered us up till that moment! The mind becomes occupied by way of reflection and with things we must not forget which have not troubled us until that moment. And what about that sense of numbness, coldness, distance and unreality that descends upon you at such times? If you pray audibly your voice sounds strange and far away, and you seem to be talking into the air. All these things, and many others, come when we purpose prayer. They come on the very threshold, and for a time we meet all manner of discouragements and set-backs to prayer, and if we take the first five, ten or even fifteen minutes as our criterion, we will give it up, close down, get up and get on with something else.

Yes, the enemy is out to prevent prayer, and there is a phase of the battle which has to be gone through in order to get prayer. Again I say, this is nothing strange or foreign to you - unless, of course, you have not had a prayer-life at all, or are one who has never seriously taken up the business of prayer. But I am not saying all this to inform you. I am saying it to you and to myself in order that we may recognize that this is a thing which calls us into battle. It is the warfare of the saints to get to prayer, and not only to pray through. There is this aspect of the enemy's activity which is to prevent prayer, and to obtain it is a battle. There has to be a standing, a taking up of a position, and a withstanding in prayer for prayer.

I trust that the saying of all this which is so true to your experiences will nevertheless have the desired effect of making you recognize that in the future your prayer-life is not going to develop if the enemy can prevent it, and if you are going to have it and it is going to develop, then you will have to stand for it. It will not just come. You will not find that you just drift into it. You will never find that you drift into a mighty prayer-life, or that you walk with ease into such a thing. You will find that there is some making and breaking, some conflict and some battle to get it, that every realm of things will be taken hold of by the enemy to prevent it, and all that he has at his command of supernature will be used. You and I, dear friends, have to fight for our prayer-life, and the more we advance with the Lord spiritually, the more we shall find that to be so. It is not that the enemy is out to stop you and me from having a personal prayer-life. That is not what he is against. It is the testimony of the Lord Jesus which is so closely bound up with the prayer-life of the Lord's people that he is out to destroy. You and I, as individuals, as human beings, do not mean anything to the enemy. It is that which is bound up with us, and with which we are bound up in Christ - His sovereignty and His glory.

What Is Involved in Prayer

Now does it occur to you, or even strike you with considerable force, that this resistance to prayer-life on the part of the enemy implies - or more than that, it positively declares and proclaims - that the Lord's glory and honour, His Name and His testimony are preeminently secured by prayer? If that is the focal point of the enemy's activity, then it means that the Lord's highest interests are served by prayer. That puts prayer in the first place. That, again, is not new to you, and yet it is a further emphasis upon the fact that the enemy is always trying to get prayer into the last place. He will try to get anything else in relation to the Lord before prayer, and get prayer in the last place. And it does not matter how you put it, or what you say

to Christian people about this, you cannot get it home to them. 'Oh, it is only the prayer meeting tonight!' On Sunday night, when there is ministry of the Word and preaching, you will have a large gathering, but on prayer meeting night you go into a side hall which will be perhaps a little more than half full. And yet on Sunday night you have said that our main ministry is prayer and everything goes if our prayer-life fails! You may say anything you like along that line, emphasize it and stress it, but it does not make any difference. I must confess that I am often bewildered by the fact that so many really spiritual people - for so I give them credit for being - will crowd to preaching meetings and conferences, but they are rarely seen at a prayer meeting and leave so few to do the praying in the corporate prayer-life of the assembly.

Yes, it is just like that, as though listening to an address were the first and primary thing, and as though getting Bible teaching and truth were more than anything else. No, dear friends! Not at all! All that can only become vital, living and effective in so far as our prayer-life, individually and corporately, is maintained in strength and given the first place. So suffer whatever there might be of correction in the word, for it is true, is it not? Oh, we have all been guilty. We all have to say to ourselves: 'Thou art the man!' We do need so much to get the Lord's estimate of the value of prayer, and if you go through the Word you will find that He estimates prayer at a higher value than anything else in His people. Look at His own life! Oh, amazement of amazement, that One such as the Son of God, in all that He was, should yet maintain such a prayer-life! "A great while before day," or "continued all night." Yes, He prayed!

And has it occurred to you that some of the most glorious unveilings of truth that we have in the Bible came in prayers? Read those prayers of Paul in Ephesians and Colossians! "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father...", and then he goes on and gives you his prayer, and in that prayer you have a revelation which is matchless. It has come in prayer, so that your teaching is based upon the prayer-life of a man. Your light, in its true value, comes out of prayer, and there is no light of real value that is not born of prayer. All the value of truth depends upon the prayer which is behind it, so that our conferences, our meetings, our addresses, and all the truth that comes just remain so much negative matter if there is not a commensurate prayer-life on our part in relation to it. We have to pray it in and pray it out, and I feel that after a conference the thing to do is to get to prayer more than ever on the ground of what has been said, and take that up before the Lord. If we did that, how much more fruit there would be from our conferences! Instead of having truth in our notebooks we would have it in our lives. Instead of so much more truth that we have now become acquainted with, we would be entering into the working power of that truth if we came back with it to the Lord in prayer. No one is more conscious of the need of having things said to him on this matter than I am at this time, but we are speaking together of these things and I trust that we are all taking them to heart. Oh, for the day when, not for the sake of numbers (for it is not a matter of counting heads) but because of the recognition of the pre-eminent place of prayer, the prayer meeting will be as crowded as any conference gathering! It only needs the apprehension of God's estimate of prayer, and we shall regard it as at least as important as any conference meeting with a theme and an address. The Lord burn that into our hearts, for that is the preeminent work - prayer.

It is not a great deal that has been said, but it is very important, and let us remember the word in connection with the enemy's determination to prevent prayer. We shall go on to show you that if he cannot prevent it, he will try to interrupt it; and if he cannot interrupt it, he will try to destroy it afterwards. There are other aspects of this thing, but we have perhaps seen enough to get us into some very definite place in relation to our prayer-life in facing it in the Name of the Lord.

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