

The Sword of the Word, and Prayer

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon highlights the critical role of prayer and the Word of God in overcoming spiritual challenges and maintaining a victorious Christian life.

Scripture: Judges 7:1

Topics: "Prayer", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical role of prayer and the Word of God as the primary weapons against the enemy's strategies, drawing from the biblical accounts of Saul and Jonathan. He illustrates how the enemy seeks to undermine the faith of God's people by stripping them of their spiritual weapons, leading to fear and disunity. Jonathan's faith stands in stark contrast to the prevailing weakness, demonstrating that even a small, faithful remnant can achieve victory through prayer and reliance on God's Word. Sparks urges believers to remain vigilant against distractions that hinder their prayer life and to recognize the power of God's Word in both prayer and spiritual warfare. Ultimately, he calls for a sifted company of believers who are wholly devoted to God, as they are the key to overcoming spiritual challenges and bringing others into victory.

Transcript

Reading: Judges 7:1-7. 1 Samuel 13:2-7, 19-23. Ephesians 6:17-18.

As we come to the end of our meditations on prayer there are just one or two further things that need to be said, and these are largely connected with the passages of Scripture given above.

Gathering up the content of chapters 13 and 14 of the First Book of Samuel, the situation is just this: Saul, who officially represents the people, is in a state where faith in God is almost a minus quantity. The result is the domination of fear, and everywhere there is trembling and a tragic absence of cohesion and oneness. The enemy is in the ascendant. The people are unable to do anything because, by a strategic move of the enemy, all the weapons of war have been removed and the forges have been destroyed. In the midst of such a situation there is one man at least who has faith in God, and whose faith sets him in positive opposition to the prevailing conditions. Jonathan still believes profoundly in God, and, therefore, not only denounces the existing state of things, but repudiates it by setting himself positively and actively against it. Thus he becomes God's small instrument for the overthrow of the enemy's power in a day of almost universal declension. He raises a testimony in the midst of very general spiritual weakness and apprehension. Such instances are found scattered through the Scriptures, and through the history of the

Church since Bible times. There are two things which are significant and especially to be noted in this story. One is:

The Strategy of the Enemy

This strategy meant that the Lord's people were virtually defeated before there was any battle. Their weapons had been confiscated and the means for producing more had been removed and destroyed.

That was a wily move, and truly one of the master-wiles of the enemy. Can we not see that in this incident in the literal history of God's people there is an indication of how the enemy of God's testimony is always trying to work? And is not this the very thing which obtains very largely today? We have seen in our earlier meditation that the weapons of the people of God are primarily prayer and the Word. Bringing that back to this special connection, it at once becomes clear that a master-stroke of the enemy is to forestall us in that twofold direction. It is of no small importance to us to remember that our adversary does not wait until the hour of battle to set his forces in motion, but is always at work well ahead in anticipation of that hour. For him to do otherwise would be fatal to him. The same applies to us. We have found so often that when we have actually come to deal with a situation we are unequipped, for the essential equipment has been taken from us in advance. In that hour of emergency there is no facility for getting equipment, and we learn a bitter lesson by helplessness in a moment of great need or opportunity. The demand is that we should maintain a steady and strong life of prayer and in the Word when there is no particular call or need, and only thus shall we be on the spot and spiritually equipped when special need arises.

This unequipped condition represents spiritual dishonour and loss of position before God. Have you been struck with the change of title given to the Lord's people in these chapters? Sometimes they are called 'the Hebrews'; sometimes 'Israel.' If you look closely you will find that the Spirit of the Lord calls them 'Hebrews' when they are on the side of the Philistines, and 'Israel' when they are not. They lose the dignity of that name 'Israel' - a prince with God - when they are on the side of the Philistines. When they are not on that side the Lord, in grace, still calls them 'Israel,' even though they may be in a state of weakness, and far short of what He would have them be. But the Philistines always called them 'Hebrews,' and the Lord allows that title to stand when they are in Philistine hands. Their dignity as 'a prince with God' has gone. What is it that makes us princes with God? It is that prayer-life and that life in the Word. We lose our dignity, our position and our ascendancy if the enemy robs us of our prayer-life and our life in the Word. Is that not true to experience? Of course it is! We were probably taught this when we were first saved, but there is a special and particular activity and determination of the enemy that we shall not pray nor get to God's Word in that larger realm of spiritual conflict and warfare where the whole testimony of the Lord is involved, in that 'advance position' of the people of God where they get away from the earthlies as Christians and into the heavenlies as members of Christ's Body. By forestalling, preventing, frustrating and destroying that prayer-life and that life in the Word, he will very soon demoralize the Church and its members spiritually and rob them of their ascendancy.

May the Lord again bring to our hearts the stress and emphasis of the necessity for standing against the wiles of the devil! For they are directed, not only to oppose the prayer-life that we have, but to prevent us from having more of a prayer-life and a life in God's Word. Do suffer this repetition, for I am certain that it is needed. You realize that if the enemy can have his way you will not have a prayer-life. He will put anything and everything conceivable, natural and supernatural, in the way of prayer to prevent it, and in the way of your life in God's Word. These are the two mighty weapons of our warfare. There needs to be that aliveness and awakesness to the enemy's devices which put us also in the place of being able to forestall.

The Apostle said: "We are not ignorant of his devices," and to be aware of what the enemy is out to do is half the battle. Oh! things come along so often to hinder prayer and our life in the Word! They come along in such a natural way, in such an unassuming and unpretentious way that they seem to be just the sort of things that would naturally happen and we expect them as the natural and, perhaps, to be expected things of our lives, but when we have gone on a few weeks we have found that our prayer-life has gone. How did it go? The enemy did not make a demonstration, nor come in some obvious way and announce that he was going to destroy our prayer-life with this or that, but it just happened.

Watching unto Prayer

Watch unto prayer! Watching and praying in this sense is watching that you may pray, and watching against things that would stop you praying. And there must be a 'lest' in us: "lest Satan should get an advantage." You see, there is forestalling, prevention on our part, a standing against the wiles of the devil. We must have a fresh question about very ordinary, natural occurrences to see if there is not some weapon in them, some subtle device of the enemy to rob us of prayer. What is it that prevents the necessary, the essential prayer-life? Let us ask whether, after all, this is a thing about which we have to take a stand. Let us interrogate the thing. There has to be a greater watchfulness on our part against the strategic movements of the enemy in this direction lest we have our weapons stolen, or unsharpened. Well, I am sure that that is a note that needs to be rung out more and more. Do watch against the wiles of the enemy which are directed to take away your weapons of warfare, your prayer-life, and your life in the Word!

The Place of the Word in Prayer

These two things are joined together by the Holy Spirit: "the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God; praying..." The Holy Spirit has linked these two things closely. He might have put the sword in the beginning, or He might have put it somewhere else. You would have thought that the Apostle, taking in the Roman soldier as he stood there, seeing the girdle and the sword attached to the girdle, would have put the sword next to the girdle and said: 'Having on the girdle of truth and the sword of the Spirit.' But no, he has taken the girdle apart from the sword, and he gets on with the other parts of the panoply which are protective and defensive, and then he brings the two offensive things together at the end: the Word and prayer. They are both basic to a life, not only of being able to resist and have the defensive, but of actual victory, of overcoming, a life which is progressively aggressive. That is what comes out in 1 Samuel 14. There was a sword with Jonathan, and there was a going up on his hands and feet. There was the activity of faith with the weapons of warfare on his part, and he overcame. We have said that it is a tremendous thing to be able to come with the Word of God backing up your prayer and to be able to say to the Lord: "...according to Thy Word." It is a great strength to be able to give the Lord His Word.

Let us take Psalm 119 by way of illustration and point out how frequently the Psalmist used that very phrase: "Quicken Thou me according to Thy word" ... "Strengthen Thou me according unto Thy word" (verses 25, 28). Then let us go on to fill in the word that corresponds with the petition: "But if the Spirit of Him That raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, He That raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by His Spirit That dwelleth in you" (Rom. 8:11). That is God's Word. It is a great thing to have the Word of God with you in prayer so that you may take it before the Lord. It gives you a place of strength. And it is also a great thing to be able to meet the enemy with the Word of God. The Lord Himself went into the wilderness and was tempted of the devil forty days. How did He meet the devil? Just with the Word of God! The Word of God was His weapon, and in the end He went through and

overcame with that weapon. It is not that we meet the enemy objectively and begin to quote Scripture audibly to him. That may be necessary sometimes, and it may sometimes be good exercise to meet the enemy with an audible declaration of what God said, but, dear friends, it is necessary to have God's Word in our hearts so that we stand on the promises at all times of temptation and pressure and inward spiritual assault. We cannot stand on them if we do not know them. There is a great strengthening of position when you have the Word of God under your feet. A life in the Word is a very necessary thing for effectual prayer, and these two things go together in a positive, aggressive overcoming of the enemy.

Prayer and the Overcomers

Then this further thing comes out in this portion: That it is a small company which is there in that position. Jonathan says: "There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (1 Samuel 14:6). It is a comparatively small company, but they represent the key to the whole situation for the Lord. They stand for the others in a relative position, and the Lord knows that the others would be hard put to it were it not for this small company. The Lord must have them for the sake of the rest. In the final issue the others come into the good which this small company has secured for them. It is what we have so often called 'the overcomer company,' a little group - comparatively speaking - who are standing their ground and maintaining their prayer-life and their life in the Word. These are the hope of the Lord's people, and the Lord's people have no hope apart from them. They are the Lord's key to the larger situation, and He must have them there for the sake of the rest. It is Benjamin, the link between the alienated and distant brethren and the one who is by the throne. It is the little one who is the occasion of their being brought into the full blessing. It is a privileged position, although it is difficult, costly and fraught with much travail and suffering. I must say more to myself, and you must say more to yourself, about the privilege of being an overcomer. I am afraid we are very much impressed with the suffering, the cost and the strenuousness of it, but it is the privilege of standing in a position which is going to mean much to the Lord in a great number of others who may not be in that position at present which ought to impress us.

If the Lord is to bring them, He does not do it, nor can He do it, directly. He does it through the ministration of those who are in that close fellowship with Him which represents a mighty victory over the strategy of the devil. It is a position of privilege, and that is why those who are going that way with the Lord become the central object of the devil's hate and malice, and why it is such a battle for them to maintain the position to which the Lord has called them. So much hangs upon them because of the responsibility which is theirs by reason of the link, and the value of that link, between them and - perhaps - multitudes of others. So Jonathan and his armour bearer (and this is the part of the story that I like so much) had a secret understanding. There were those two massive, forbidding crags on either side, and the Philistines were up there in the place of advantage. Their secret understanding was this: 'If they say that they will come down to us, all right, we will wait for them. But if they say: "Come up to us," then we shall know that the Lord has delivered them into our hands.' You would have thought that they would have put it the other way round, for then they would have had all the advantage and it would have been comparatively easy. But to believe that being called upon to scale those difficult, forbidding crags was the Lord's sign of victory, well, that makes the situation a very strong one, does it not? And the Philistines said: 'Come up to us!' So Jonathan said: "The Lord hath delivered them into the hand of Israel," and as they advanced on hands and feet, which was very difficult climbing, they said: "The victory is ours." They were climbing in a victory, not for one. They had their weapons, they had faith in God, they stood in a victory and went on in that victory. And Jonathan hewed the Philistines down. They fell before him and his armour bearer slew them. Then the Lord sent an earthquake. When faith had gone as far as it could go, He co-operated and sent

consternation among the Philistines. Then the poor, weak Hebrews saw their chance and turned on the Philistines. That was not very noble, nor very honourable, but Jonathan had been the instrument to bring them out of their weakness into strength, out of their indistinctiveness into a clear testimony, and out from the place where the clearness of their testimony was lost into a place where now they could take their stand. And a lot of people just need a Jonathan activity to bring them into a clear place. They will come in if the Lord has an instrument strong enough to meet the enemy on their behalf, but they will not come in until there is something that begins to smite the Philistines for them. Are you going to be one of these?

The Sifted Company

I must close, but I do want to say just a word about the Lord sifting down until He gets something like that, about the necessity for reducing unto effectiveness. Jonathan, his armour bearer and a little company represented a sifted people. They were sifted down on this matter of faith in the Lord, and they were sifted right down to the ground where prayer and the Word were their very life. Gideon's company represented that: a sifted company brought down to a position of absolute faith in God, for that was what God was after - "Lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me saying, 'Mine own hand hath saved me'" (Judges 7:2). They had to be right down to a place where God was their only estate, and faith in Him was the ground upon which they stood. Then every man had to put his sword on his side and stand in his place. You have a very good picture in Gideon's 'three hundred' of a sifted company standing in prayer and the Word of God: "The Sword of the Lord" - the Word of the Lord. The Lord saw to it that all who had heart trouble went home, for a fearful heart is useless. Faith is necessary here. A divided heart is no use and disqualifies its owner. A fearful heart was the first test, and a great host went home because they were fearful-hearted. A divided heart was the next test, and those who went down on their hands and knees to drink the water showed that they were not wholly ready for this business. Those who stood and lapped out of their hands were eager, for they kept on their feet, and this drinking was only done because it was necessary.

Those who lapped were of undivided heart and were wholly in this business. A divided heart disqualifies, and the Lord sees to it that divided hearts are sifted out. At last He gets His company, and they are all with Him in the faith of the Son of God, having a life of deep fellowship with Him in prayer and in the Word. That will always be a sifted company, and we should not be discouraged or think that a strange thing has happened when the Lord begins to sift out and many go home. That is the Lord's way of getting effectiveness. He must sift. He Himself, while here on the earth, gave us very much in His personal teaching in this very connection. He calls, and the reactions to His call are: "Lord suffer me first to go and bury my father." Then there are other interests: "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to prove them"; "I have married a wife"; "I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it." That is a divided heart! And then we have His own word: "If any man cometh unto Me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple"; "Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after Me, cannot be My disciple." That is no faint heart! The Lord calls for that, and by the three hundred He delivers the Midianites into our hands, and He saves Israel. They are the salvation of the rest.

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