

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 8

THE CHRISTIAN SOLDIER'S SHOES

A discussion of Ephesians 6:15 and Philippians 4:1-9

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IT IS WITHOUT DOUBT AN INEXPRESSIBLE PRIVILEGE TO LIVE IN THIS WORLD AS A CHILD OF GOD. Yet, genuine Christianity always has a component of struggle – against the flesh, the world and the devil. Those whom God has saved, live to the end in this world as strangers in enemy territory.

The well-known Ephesians 6:10-20, which deals with *the Christian's armour*, is of the utmost importance if one is to remain victorious in this struggle. Unfortunately, there is hardly a passage of Scripture about which more nonsense is taught, with the result that there is much confusion over these vitally important truths. One verse in particular about which there is uncertainty is verse 15, which deals with *the Christian soldier's shoes*. These uncertainties are mainly due to the fact that the text lends itself to two equally correct but totally divergent possible translations.

So let us take a closer look at this verse. It is important to interpret it correctly. What, after all, is more useless than a barefoot soldier?

EPHESIANS 6:15 CLOSE-UP

□ The Greek verb can be literally translated as: *having put on as shoes*. Adequate foot-gear is, of course, of vital importance to a soldier. The shoe worn by the Roman warrior was a type of sandal with studs on the sole (almost like a rugby or soccer boot). Apart from its

other functions, it thus helped him to *stand firm* in hand to hand combat with the enemy. This is probably what was uppermost in the apostle's mind, because the necessity to remain standing in the spiritual struggle is, in fact, the main theme of the passage (vv. 11,13,14).

Note, further, that it is the *responsibility of the Christian soldier himself* to put on the shoes and to wear them at all times.

□ The word which is translated as *readiness* in the New International Version (NIV) (Gr. *hetoimasia*), occurs only once in the New Testament.

In classical Greek this noun means *firmness* or *foundation*. It gradually underwent a shift in meaning, so that in New Testament Greek it means *readiness*. [*Preparation* and *equipment* are additional, but less likely possibilities.] The authoritative lexicon of Louw and Nida describes it as: *a state of being ready for action*.

□ The qualification, *of peace*, indicates that the gospel has peace as its content. This indicates the good news of reconciliation in Christ between God and sinners (2 Cor 5:18-21).

□ The relationship between *readiness* and *the gospel of peace* is ambiguous in the Greek. It can be translated in two ways: either as *readiness for* the gospel, or as

readiness of the gospel. The former would indicate a readiness to proclaim the gospel; the latter a readiness, a preparedness, which the gospel of peace provides in order to repel the attacks of the enemy.

This precisely is where the different translation possibilities arise.

□ Certainly, proclamation of the gospel is the way in which the Lord conquers the kingdom of Satan and saves people from the power of evil (Acts 26:18). The question is, however, whether that is what this passage is about. In such cases of uncertainty the context must always dictate. Viewed in this way, the second possibility fits perfectly – which cannot be said of the first. There are four arguments:

Firstly, this passage is about *standing firm* against the attacks of the enemy. This argues precisely for the second possibility: the idea of readiness and stability under attack.

Secondly, the emphasis throughout is on the defensive, not on the offensive.

Thirdly, doesn't such an interpretation fit in with the other pieces of armour? They indicate different – but closely related – aspects of our inheritance in Christ and our relationship with Him. Not what I do for the Lord, but what He does for me, is what it's all about. Yes, I certainly must put it on and appropriate it, *but the armour is nothing but different facets of my inheritance in Christ!*

Fourthly, how can simple *willingness* to proclaim the gospel (and not the proclamation itself) have much effect in this war?

□ If then we accept the second possibility, the question arises: *How does one put on these shoes?* How is such a readiness realized in my life? The gospel speaks of a peace that has been brought about. But that has happened outside of me (i.e. it is objective). To equip myself and to get ready for the attacks of evil require that something must also happen inside me (i.e. subjectively). That happens when in faith I embrace and hold onto the fact of my peace *with* God, which then becomes established within me. *And it is this inner peace which enables me to stand firm on the day of evil. Nothing is better for 'cushioning' the attacks of the enemy than precisely this.*

□ To summarise: The gospel, the message of reconciliation with God – and especially the inner peace, security and steadfastness which it brings – provides the anchorage which prepares one to stand firm without flinching on the day of evil (v.13), when the enemy attacks with all his might. To wear the shoes of the armour is to know and embrace the message of the gospel, the message of peace with God, and then to rest in Christ – and to treasure as a precious jewel the peace of God which emanates therefrom.

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FROM PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9.

□ Without doubt Paul was also thinking of the Christian soldier's shoes when he wrote Phil 4:1-9. The resemblance between the two passages is unmistakable.

Here too he starts off with the idea of *standing firm* (v.1).

Christian *peace* is also prominent (vv. 7, 9). It is a peace which "transcends all understanding" and which guards the believers' hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (lit. guarding by a military garrison).

□ In these nine verses the apostle gives *five practical guidelines*, all of which help the Christian to experience the Lord's peace. *As such the passage sheds meaningful light on how the believer wears his shoes.* Let's examine each of these guidelines.

REJOICE CONTINUALLY IN THE LORD (v.4)

□ Philippians 4:1 begins with "therefore". It indicates a connection with chapter 3. Indeed, the apostle already commands in 3:1 that believers must rejoice in the Lord. This is a "safeguard" (NIV; Gk *asphales*: derived from a word meaning *slippery, uncertain, likely to make one stumble*, with a negative prefix.) *Rejoicing in the Lord thus brings stability, steadfastness, certainty.* And that's what it's all about!

□ What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord?

In 3:3 Paul begins with "for" (NIV; Gk. *gar*). In the following verses he explains the essence of the gospel (especially in vv. 3 & 9). Not *my* religious merit, but the imputed righteousness of Christ forms the grounds for my reconciliation with God – *and as such the content of Christian joy.*

But it cannot end here. In the final analysis it revolves around *rejoicing in Him personally, and the adventure of knowing Him* (v.10).

□ Delight in the Person and work of Christ thus brings a certainty, a security into my life. In this way the gospel of peace provides the shoes which enable the believer to stand firm, so that the enemy does not overpower him or drive him back. *To rejoice in the Lord and in His perfect atoning work is the very first secret of spiritual warfare!* [In this regard compare also Rev 12:10-12.]

Note that this passage is not about joy by itself, but joy specifically *in the Lord*. What is more, it is joy which has meaningful truth as content. Too many people forget these qualifications and eventually there is very little to distinguish their 'joy' from the enthusiasm of a sports pavilion.

GUARD YOUR INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS (v.2-3,5)

□ Note how the apostle's thoughts run. In v.1 he commands his readers

to stand firm. Then he immediately thinks of a situation which undermines that steadfastness – there is tension in the congregation of Philippi (v.2). Peace is, after all, the footwear by which we must stand firm. Yes, it is primarily peace *with* God, and the peace *of* God that it brings. *But there are few things that are more likely to disturb this 'vertical' peace than tension with my neighbour, especially my brother and sister in the Lord.*

Satan runs amok in a congregation in which division reigns. Constant restitution, forgiveness and reconciliation are so important that refusal in this regard makes those involved candidates for church discipline (Mt 18:17). As a matter of fact, people who persist in these sins give the enemy such a foothold that he eventually drags them into eternal damnation (Mt 18:21-35).

□ In contrast with the negatives, Paul states the positives in v.5: he commands his readers to show "gentleness (Gk. *epieikes*) to all" (NIV). This is a rich concept, indicating friendliness, goodwill, readiness to accommodate, gentleness. It means not being a difficult person who always stands on his rights. It is the attitude of Christ, as described in Philippians 2:1-8.

This is how a Christian, and a congregation corporately, wear the spiritual shoes.

PRAY CONTINUALLY ABOUT ALL NEEDS (v.6)

□ There are dozens of promises in the Word to the effect that the Father cares for His children in every respect. And there are many invitations, even commands, that they must approach Him for His care and provision – "in everything" (v.6). This is good and right; it is necessary, a must, that they do it. The Bible leaves no doubt that the Father takes delight in this.

This wonderful privilege is mine through Christ who has brought about peace between me and God. Therefore I can go to the Father's throne of grace again and again with the greatest confidence (Hb 4:16; 10:19-21). *And this is one of the ways of putting on the soldier's shoes.*

On the other hand, a lack of confidence makes me a barefoot soldier. This leads to all kinds of worries and plays into the hands of the enemy – because it undermines my peace, draws my attention away from Christ, and therefore destabilizes me in the spiritual struggle.

□ Little faith and distrust are our real problem. A wonderful cure for these ailments is to meditate on and embrace, again and again, the Bible's promises about the Father's care for His children – and to live accordingly.

□ Compare, for example, these

two glorious promises in connection with our material provision: 2 Corinthians 9:8 (with its five positive affirmations – five times "all" or "every"), and Hebrews 13:5 (with its five negative assurances in the Greek). The latter verse is so overwhelming that most translations don't even attempt to do justice to it. The five negatives could be rendered as: *I will not forsake you! Never! No! Never and in no way will I leave you alone!*

□ I must also *thank* the Father for His faithful provision (v.6). Apart from the fact that I owe it to Him, it reminds me of His goodness, and so builds my faith and confidence before His throne of grace.

□ This is a matter which Paul had mastered. Philippians 4:10-14, following immediately after our text, is significant in this regard. Verse 10, in which he thanks his readers for their material gifts, controls the whole section. However, he testifies that in any case he experiences *contentment* (NIV) in all circumstances. What is contentment? It is the absence of inner unrest. It is nothing other than inner peace.

Because he has learned to trust his Heavenly Father in everything, he lives spiritually booted and spurred! And that, take note, equips him to stand his ground – even in the most difficult circumstances (v.13). He is thus equipped to triumph in the spiritual war.

MEDITATE CONTINUALLY ON THE THINGS OF THE LORD (v.8)

□ The enemy directs his persistent attacks at, among other things, our thoughts. The Christian must recognize and resist this. *How quickly do sinful and negative thoughts banish our peace! What steals our shoes more quickly than critical, cynical, suspicious, pessimistic, covetous, lustful, envious, vindictive thoughts?*

□ No, commands the apostle, think about that which is Biblically positive. Discipline yourself, and fill your thoughts with the things of the Lord – and the Lord of the things.

He also speaks about this elsewhere: "set your minds on things above" (Col 3:2) and "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col 3:16).

□ Blessed is the believer who masters the art of v.8. The fragrance of Christ hangs over him like a cloud, he experiences the peace of the Lord which transcends all understanding, and he is a rock in a world as unstable as water.

Directing our thoughts and our attitude to life does not come easily – especially for some. But we simply *must* keep watch over that with which we feed our thoughts. The Puritan saying is true: *The peace of the Lord comes on foot and it flees on horseback.* Therefore one must be careful of casually exposing oneself to just any movie, TV programme,

magazine, place or conversation.

LIVE IN FAITHFULNESS TO THE APOSTOLIC TEACHING AND EXAMPLE (v.9)

□ Paul refers here to that which the Philippians learned from the apostles, and consequently accepted as instructions from the Lord. Actually, he had in mind what they had heard from him and seen in him. Particularly in the initial stages, the apostles were largely responsible for shepherding the early church. As such their teaching and example were of the utmost importance (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

The question now is: What role did this play in the spiritual struggle of individual believers? The answer lies at hand. *Nothing brings more inner peace, steadfastness and security than a clear grasp of truth, than a fixed norm for behaviour, than deep-seated convictions. Besides, these give one a single-mindedness and discernment which protect one from the errors and temptations of the father of lies (Jn 8:44).* As ministers of God's New Testament revelation, who demonstrated the practical implications of that revelation in their own lives, the apostles naturally played an immeasurable role in the believers' holy commitment to the Lord.

□ Although theirs is a much smaller role than that of the apostles, local church pastors and elders still have this function. They must minister the

full counsel of God to the congregation, demonstrate it with godly lives, and guide the congregation in that counsel (Hb 13:7,17; Acts 20:25-32; 1 Pet 5:2-4). Blessed is the flock with such shepherds. *This brings contentment, inner and mutual peace, security and steadfastness for both individual and congregation.*

□ This also explains the command of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 that believers must withdraw from anyone in the congregation who is idle and *does not live according to the apostles' instructions.* Such people are 'rotten apples in the barrel', who very soon disturb the mutual peace with loose tongues. They are the enemy's 'fifth column' within the city walls, and open the gates for him on the sly.

A LAST WORD OF COMFORT

□ The above five guidelines really offer everything that is necessary to ensure that the Christian soldier as an individual, and the congregation corporately, wear the shoes of peace and thus stand firm against the attacks of evil without flinching.

□ But Philippians 4:9b has further comfort for those who live out the above: *The God of peace not only gives His warriors the shoes they need to stand firm; He positions Himself alongside them in the war!*



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