

## 5:1 THERE'S A WAR ON!

**I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.** *Isaiah 49:25*

**When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.** *Luke 11:21-22*

**If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.** *Matthew 12:28*

Cyber warfare is a fact of our times. Nations or terrorist groups can use computer technology to disrupt their opponents' systems, discover their best-guarded secrets and feed misinformation into their media. One example is how the Stuxnet virus was successfully deployed to put Iranian nuclear centrifuges out of action.

I'm sure most of us feel completely out of our depth here. But the Bible warns us that an even more deadly war is being waged 'in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12). We can't afford to be in ignorance about this; at the same time, we need a balanced perspective – because the Lord Jesus Christ is greater than all the powers of evil. Just as he dealt with oppressive forces in his earthly ministry, so he still releases people from spiritual slavery and death today, and soon 'he will reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15).

We are called in our various ways to work with him in this campaign. 'They triumphed over him (the enemy) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Revelation 12:11). The cross declares the irreversible defeat of evil (Colossians 2:15). But the victory won there by Jesus has to be applied by the Spirit through the demonstrable faith of his followers. The kingdom has to be contended for in every generation, and that will involve us.

*'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8:31). Help me, Lord, to understand the real situation. Use me to join in contending for the kingdom, not in my name or my strength but in yours. Praying for others is a way I can do this. If I'm flagging or disorganised, revive me.*

## 5:2 KEPT SAFE

**Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.** *Philippians 2:12-13*

**Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.** *Psalms 51:10-12*

Does God save me, or do I save myself? How much do I have to do to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in me? Do I simply sit back and let God do everything, or should I be striving to make sure I'm safe?

An army rock-climbing instructor is training an enthusiastic recruit. He ties the lad securely on the rope and goes up the route, making fast at the top. The youth thinks it's a breeze and ascends confidently. Then doubt takes over as he meets a harder section of cliff: he nearly falls off, but for a helpful tug from above and advice on what holds to use. He arrives at the top in a reflective frame of mind. 'Did I climb that, or was it you who got me up?' 'Perhaps it was both of us,' says the instructor.

David thought being king was a breeze. In his eyes he was temptation-proof, until he found he wasn't. He wrote Psalm 51 out of the contrition and self-doubt that resulted from his fall.

In the life of faith, God's Holy Spirit isn't just there to save us when we're falling. He is actively working in us in order to get us up the long climb; without him we'd give up. David's prayer, 'Grant me a willing spirit!' avoids the extremes of over-confidence and despair. God's Spirit and ours combine to keep us climbing.

*Lord Jesus, I depend on you to bring me safely through my life in this world. 'Be thou my guardian and my guide, and hear me when I call; let not my slippery footsteps slide, and hold me lest I fall.'*

### 5:3 GUIDANCE

**Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.**

*Romans 8:14*

**I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.**

*Psalms 32:8*

When you buy a new car, a sat-nav is often included as standard equipment. This amazing gadget watches your every move from a satellite and tells you in the clearest possible words which way to go. But it isn't infallible, and it can, and sometimes has to be, overridden by human decision-making.

When we join God's kingdom family by faith in Christ, we are given the Holy Spirit as 'standard equipment'. He does not confer a magic infallibility upon us, but we are promised that he will lead us in our decision-making with our intelligent and prayerful cooperation.

The Spirit isn't a thing, he's a Person. Unlike a sat-nav, we can talk back to him. He has our best interests at heart, and he knows us through and through. He knows the territory ahead of us; he also knows and loves the other people we are going to be dealing with, bumping into, speaking with, thinking thoughts about.

How does God's Spirit lead us? As we pay careful attention to his word in the Bible; as we pray and consider; as we take advice from friends; as circumstances play out. He won't override our choices, though if they are contrary to his will he is unlikely to leave us in peace.

In the Lord's Prayer we say: 'Our Father in heaven, may your name be hallowed, may your kingdom come, may your will be done.' This isn't resignation to a blind fate, or a catch-all formula for getting prayer answered. It's intelligent and active cooperation in the purposes of One who knows us and loves us, and whose plans are far more wonderful than we ever dared hope (Ephesians 3:20).

*'Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life' (Psalm 143:8). A good prayer to start the day!*

### 5:4 SPECIFIC LEADING

**Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.**

*Acts 16:6*

**How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'**

*Isaiah 30:19, 21*

It was all very odd. Asia and Bithynia were the most civilised and influential provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire and it seemed obvious that the Jesus message should arrive there as a priority. Yet through a process of what felt like trial and error, but was guided at every point by the Holy Spirit, Paul's little team was funnelled in a north-westerly direction through comparatively unimportant Mysia until they reached the coast, where Paul had his famous dream about a man from Macedonia begging for help.

Voices, dreams, intuitions, hunches: can we always trust them as being from God? The answer is 'no': they can be, but they may not be. When one is short of sleep, for instance, or under stress, one may hear specific words in one's head that don't actually mean a thing. Someone in a pathological state may hear voices telling them to commit murder or do something dangerous. This is very different from the clear and loving guidance of the Holy Spirit!

Isaiah's 'voice' could be our conscience telling us what is right and wrong; or it could be God's instructions about the next thing to do. A classic example is the series of nudges given to Philip resulting in the conversion of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40). We should pray and check such intuitions with the Bible, or discuss them with a trusted friend; but we shouldn't dismiss them out of hand (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). The Lord has promised to lead us, and he will.

*A prayer based on Psalm 23: 'Lord, you are my shepherd, I lack nothing. You guide me along the right paths for your name's sake. I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. Thank you.'*

## 5:5 POWER TO GO ON

**‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.**

*Zechariah 4:6*

**Apart from me you can do nothing.**

*John 15:5*

Coming to the end of one’s strength is not a pleasant experience. It can happen to people of any age. You simply run out of the ability to continue. This once happened to me on a Swiss mountain where the effects of altitude and setting too fast a pace overtook me and drained my youthful energy to zero. The only option was for me to abandon the climb and go down again slowly with a companion.

The exiles from Babylon returned to Jerusalem and started to rebuild the Temple. But the lack of resources, the opposition of enemies and the pathetic appearance of the building compared to Solomon’s Temple unnerved them. How could they possibly go on?

Archippus, a church leader, got a sharp message from Paul: ‘See to it that you complete the ministry you have received in the Lord’ (Colossians 4:17). We don’t know whether he was idle, or had tried everything and come up against a brick wall. But it must have stung.

Similarly we may come to a point in our work for Christ when we have done our best, but all to no avail. The forces against us are too strong. No human strategy or device seems to work. So do we simply despair? At such a point Jesus’ word and his Holy Spirit combine to bring us fresh hope. If we can do nothing apart from him, then the reverse is also true: ‘I can do all things through the one who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:13 ESV).

This isn’t magic, or a kind of secret switch which turns on a hidden dynamo. It is the moment when we tell the Lord we can’t go on, and our only hope is for him to take over. This may be painful and humbling, but it may teach us a lesson for life, as it did for me.

Lord, I want to ‘go from strength to strength’ (Psalm 84:7). I don’t want to pack it in through utter weariness. But your word reminds me that I need to depend one-hundred-per-cent on you and on your renewing Spirit. Please do this for me now.

## 5:6 PRAYER FROM WEAKNESS

**The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.**

*Romans 8:26*

**The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.**

*Psalms 145:18*

Groaning suggests something isn’t right. It indicates pain, perhaps, or disappointment, or a system that isn’t working properly. Paul has been saying that the whole creation is groaning because it’s in bondage to decay, and it longs to share the freedom of the finally redeemed children of God. We too are groaning in frustration while we wait for this to happen. We know things aren’t right; but our certain hope is that they finally will be. The Psalmist felt this too.

Meanwhile however we are to express our hope by praying. Prayer isn’t for specialists. There is only one specialist in the art of praying, and that is the Holy Spirit. Let’s remind ourselves who the Spirit is. He is none other than the Lord Jesus himself, who in his time on earth often went out at night or early in the morning to pour out his heart to his Father; and who in the garden of Gethsemane ‘offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears’ (Hebrews 5:7).

Prayer isn’t for those who feel strong. We pray out of a sense of helplessness and dependence; if we thought we could manage on our own, we wouldn’t bother to pray. But then we discover that we can’t even pray properly! Despite knowing from the Bible what God’s will is in general, we often find it very difficult to apply it to our immediate situation or to others’ needs. We desperately want to ask God for something but we don’t know what it is. We try to put our longings into words, but grammar and syntax fail us and all we can do is to groan incoherently.

*Allow yourself to groan. You can’t express it, but you truly long for things to be put right and for God’s kingdom to come. Maybe all you can say is, ‘Oh Lord!’ or ‘Please do something!’ or ‘Help!’ Trust the Spirit to beam your longings directly to God so he can use them for his will to be done.*