



MAKING DECISIONS

Do you like to make decisions, or does just the thought of an important decision make you want to avoid it as long as possible? Wherever you find yourself on the decision-making spectrum, we must make decisions, occasionally life-altering ones.

In Proverbs 3, God tells us to avoid leaning on our own understanding; instead, we are to acknowledge God in all our ways. When facing an important decision, ask God what He wishes you to do.

Ask yourself whether this decision violates God's Word or whether it does something that might take you away from hearing His Word or fellowshiping with other believers. For instance, the job offer might look wonderful; but will it require you to work on Sundays, or will it exhaust you so much that you will not have time for family or God's Word?

But what about those decisions that do not violate God's Word? What about two or more options that are both attractive?

I believe that God guides us through His Word, through circumstances that He orchestrates, or through the safety of a "multitude of counsellors" (Prov. 11:14). He guides by His peace with His Spirit bearing witness with ours.

A friend of mine whom I consider a counselor stated that sometimes God gives clarity about what we are to do. At other times, the clarity is not there, but still a decision must be made. I recently found myself in those two situations.

We had to decide when to take our vacation—not a big deal generally. However, I wanted to go earlier; in fact, I had a very strong feeling that we were supposed to go earlier. I admit that we need to be careful about doing what we feel.

We decided to go at the earlier time and spent time with my wife's mother, who passed away unexpectedly while we were in the area. We got to see her before she entered eternity, which we would not have been able to do had we not gone earlier.

I recently made a life-altering decision with less clarity beforehand; yet I fully believed it was God's will. After much prayer and godly counsel, I made the decision. I had peace that it was the right choice, although it had been difficult. God gave me His peace after the decision was made, not before.

God leads us in various ways; the important thing to remember is that He wants us to walk with Him as He guides our paths. ★

—John Strong.



GOD'S STRENGTH, MY STRENGTH

One of God's hardest lessons for me to learn is that I cannot "do" the Christian life unless I am walking through life depending upon Him. I am still learning how to do this! Sin is essentially choosing to act not as dependent but independent. As we were created to live in dependence upon God, choosing to live otherwise is sin. God will, if need be, use the circumstances of our lives to bring us to the end of ourselves. It is better that we learn the lesson quickly rather than have to go through very difficult trials.

God makes it clear in the book of Ephesians that we are in a battle. This warfare is more serious than any other. The outcomes have to do with the souls of men and eternity.

Paul instructed us how to live the Christian life, to live a life worthy of our high calling as God's children (Eph. 4:1). He essentially ends the book instructing us how to deal with the warfare we face.

We are told to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (Eph. 6:10). We are commanded to allow God to strengthen us. It is the same process (and the same essential result) as being filled with the Spirit (5:18). We receive God's strength by yielding control of ourselves to Him and allowing

Him to control our responses to life, including circumstances and people.

When we yield to God, He gives us His strength; He empowers us to do what we, in and of ourselves, cannot do. We cannot overcome our old nature, our flesh; instead, we allow God to kill it by choosing to yield to Him (Rom. 6).

We can never live the Christian life on our own. Trying to do so will only yield frustration and possibly defeat. Our enemy, Satan, will tempt us to try to "do" the Christian life in our own strength, for he can then defeat us. When we are living in God's strength, we are more than a match for him and can successfully resist him. The scriptural process is "Submit . . . to God. Resist the devil, . . . Draw nigh to God" (Jas. 4:7, 8). We have God's promise that the devil will flee from us.

When we are tempted to act and react in ungodly ways, we must draw on God's strength. We plead for His patience when we are impatient. We draw on the Spirit's fruit of self-control when we would much rather lash out.

To live the Christian life, we must allow God's life to flow through ours. We must live in utter dependence upon Him. ★

—John Strong.



KNOW YOUR ENEMY

One of the most crucial ingredients of successful warfare is to understand our enemy—how he thinks, his tactics, and how he might exploit our weaknesses. Ignorance of our enemy's tactics would likely lead to a weakened defense and possibly cause us to suffer a crushing defeat.

In our warfare against Satan and his forces, we must not be “ignorant of his devices” (II Cor. 2:11). He is likened to a roaring lion, wandering around, looking for someone to “devour” (I Pet. 5:8). We are told to resist him (vs. 9).

It is difficult to resist him unless we understand him. “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). We are to stand our ground against Satan. We are to stand against his “wiles.” He will seek to use against us those weaknesses each of us has.

Satan will exploit our particular weaknesses. He knows what mine are and what yours are, which are different and individual. He probably knows us better than we know ourselves, and he will also use that knowledge against us.

As stated in last week's lesson, we must yield to God so that we gain His strength. Standing firm against Satan is essentially what it means to resist him. We refuse to believe his lies.

We must first recognize the lies. Satan whispers so many lies that we often mistake his voice for our own. John Bunyan illustrated this in his *Pilgrim's Progress*. Poor Christian thought that those wicked thoughts came from himself, but Satan put them in his mind. He did not recognize the voice of the enemy. We must learn to recognize his voice. No, I do not mean a little voice but the thoughts that pop into our heads. Some of these thoughts are downright wicked. If we think that we are the authors of them, we will feel like terrible Christians.

There is no condemnation to those who are “in Christ” (Rom. 8:1). When we are feeling condemnation, it is not from God. The most likely candidate is Satan, who will exploit our personality to make us feel condemnation.

Be aware of Satan's voice of accusation and condemnation, and reject it as a blatant lie. Know his “wiles” (Eph. 6:11), his tricks. He will pick you off if you are unwary. Do not give in to his lies; he lies all the time and will try to get you to believe lies about yourself and about our Father, who loves us “with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3). ★

—John Strong.



WHO IS OUR ENEMY?

We are at war. We have stated this fact in previous lessons—we are at war against the devil and his demon helpers. So, why use the above title? We know who our enemy is. Yes, in our heads we do know. But sometimes we forget, so this is just a reminder.

God tells us that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph. 6:12). Our warfare is against the devil’s powerful helpers.

Our enemy is relentless, he is vicious, and he will stop at nothing to lure people away from God. He will trip us up, exploiting any and every weakness we possess. He lives and breathes to bring destruction to the crowning glory of God’s creation—mankind.

The intensity of the battle is hidden in the word “wrestle.” To Paul’s first readers, it would have been clear that while there were some rules in the ancient Olympic games, wrestling was pretty much a no-holds-barred sport. All was concentrated on achieving victory. They understood the intensity of this word picture—this is all-out war, where defeat is unthinkable! We are not to give up or give in—a very real temptation for some of us!

OK. Most of us know the devil is

our enemy, but we need to get a handle on the fact that he will show no mercy. If it were not for God’s grace in restraining Satan and not allowing him free rein, we would be no match for him. God is with us and will give us the strength to resist the devil if we yield to Him and His control.

As we struggle with Satan’s attacks, however, his role sometimes becomes unclear. We may not recognize his hand in the events of our lives. It is easy to lose sight of his tricks as we deal with difficulties, heart-wrenching circumstances, and people who get on our nerves. It is easy to view people as the enemy instead of seeing Satan’s hand behind it all.

People are not our enemy. It is hard when it seems that this is the case. My point is that people are not the driving force. Difficult people who may be in our family, our church, our workplace, or our neighborhood are not the originating problem. Satan will use people against us (and us against others, lest we think we are innocent). Satan loves to hide behind people and problems and act as though he is nowhere around. Trust me—it is not the people we fight against. We fight our arch-enemy, Satan. ★

—John Strong.



ULTIMATE VICTORY

You may be struggling right now. If not, maybe you just got through a difficult time, or you may be headed for one. This is not to alarm you or to disrupt your peace; it is to remind you to be prepared and to walk with God.

We saw last week that people are not the enemy. Satan is the enemy, and he is at work to defeat us. Although God has allowed Satan a lot of leeway, he is living as a defeated enemy. God and God's people will come through the battles of this life victoriously—all because of God's grace.

This ultimate victory (if you are on God's side) and Satan's ultimate defeat would not be possible without the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the hope of Easter.

Near the end of the resurrection chapter, I Corinthians 15, Paul said, "Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory" (vs. 57). This victory is ours "through our Lord Jesus Christ." It is only through His death and resurrection that we can have victory. His resurrection assures us of our resurrection; we will not remain dead but will be raised again to life. It will be life as God intended it to be lived—in unbroken fellowship with our Creator.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ ensures that our efforts here will not

be in vain. Our work here had meaning—our efforts, faltering though they may be, even sometimes failing, still are not in vain, or for nothing.

God speaks to us, encouraging us that our efforts for Him (done in His strength) are not for nothing but are valuable. His command is to be like a rock, standing firm in Him. We are to be "stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58).

That is why it matters that we hang in there. Although Satan attacks us and sometimes wins a skirmish or two, he is defeated! He is not the final winner—God and those who know Christ are the final victors.

What we do in this life really does matter—it matters that you rise up again after Satan has knocked you down for the millionth time. It matters that you are living out the life God has given you, no matter how insignificant it may seem. God calls us to faithfulness—to keep at it and to rest in our ultimate victory.

This is the hope of Easter—we have ultimate victory over death, our lives really do matter, and our vicious enemy will go down in utter defeat. ★

—John Strong.



DO NOT LEAVE THE BATTLE!

As we engage the powers of darkness in allowing God to live His life through us, God tells us to put on our armor. The grammatical construction in Ephesians 6 is that of putting on the armor once for all with the intention that we keep it on until we are with God in heaven. Our armor is to be a permanent fixture of our lives.

There is no retirement from being a Christian, from doing God's work. Our work may end up being fettered in a body that does not work anymore or with a mind that loses its bearing. Our work may be to be a vibrant witness to our last breath. Whatever our individual path with God, we are not to retire from the field of battle but wage it to our death.

Perhaps this sounds a bit grim, but I think it is good to consider that God wants us to persevere, to continue to serve Him with the means He still allows us. He is not finished with us until He brings us home.

Paul instructs us to take the whole armor so that we can "withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13). The idea here is to stand and, even after the most vicious attack, to remain standing as the victor in the battle.

The phrase "the evil day" (Eph. 6:13)

has the idea of an especially vicious attack, an all-out assault against us. This is no ordinary, everyday attack. It is calculated to take us down, to prevent us from some special work, or to dull our effectiveness in a time of great blessing and victory.

Since we do not know when such an attack may come, we are to be prepared at all times—which is why we cannot get lazy in our Christian lives and take our armor off for even a moment's break. Satan, like any predator, will level his attack when our guard is down. We are to be watchful, even in times of ease, even when it seems that God gives us a break from the battle.

The analogy in Ephesians 6 is to a group of Roman soldiers who would fight as a unit. They would stand their ground together. The picture there is that each one has an individual responsibility but also must work with the others as a unit. All of us are to work in harmony, standing our ground with our local church.

Each of us has a place in the battle line. We are to keep our place—not shirking our responsibility but carrying it out faithfully until the end of our journey. Then and only then may we leave the battle, laying our armor down. ★

—John Strong.



INTEGRITY AND TRUTHFULNESS

The idea of integrity is an important concept in today's world. It always has been important, but perhaps it is more so in our present society, where deception runs rampant. For example, people cheat in the workplace, they lie to family and friends, and they act spiritual when their hearts are a mess before God.

In our Christian warfare, Paul instructs us to gird our loins with "truth" (Eph. 6:14). The idea of this word is truthfulness, or that quality we call integrity. It is choosing to live our lives in truth. It is agreeing with God about the state of our own hearts. It is refusing to play games with God and others about how well we are living the Christian life. It is choosing to be truthful about our struggles.

God knows it all—our utter depravity, the wicked things we consider and love to think about, even if we never say them or carry them out. He knows all and yet loves us still—how marvelous is grace!

The belt of truthfulness is our being honest before God and before trusted people. The "trusted" part is vital, for we do not wish to be honest with those who cannot handle it or who would judge us for our strug-

gles. We want to ask God to enable us to develop a small circle of fellow strugglers who are not afraid to admit in such a safe environment that they do, in fact, struggle in their lives.

We find it quite easy to be truthful about the failings of others and love to point them out—for their sake, of course! God is calling us to do the harder thing—to be honest about ourselves. When we are honest about our sin and our hearts before God, He then can show us more and more what we need to see.

We can take an honest inside look because we are secure in God's love. He exposes our sin and wants us to admit it (confess). It means to agree with God that it really was a bad thing. He exposes our sin so that we will allow Him to work it out of our lives. He does not expose sin to shame us; He does it so that we can see how ugly it is and be more willing for Him to purge it from us, to even ask Him to take it and deliver us from it.

Psalm 62:8 tells us to pour out our hearts before Him, that is, to be open, honest, and truthful with Him. He loves us more than we know, so we can be honest with Him. ★

—John Strong.



PROTECTED

God has given us the provisions we need to live the Christian life. Our spiritual growth is important to Him. He protects it, and this protection has multiple facets. However, one crucial “piece” is that of putting on the “breastplate of righteousness” (Eph. 6:14) along with other parts of the armor as described in that chapter. In old times, the warrior’s breastplate protected his vital organs from harmful objects, much as body armor protects soldiers and police officers.

In our warfare as Christians, it is vital that we put on the breastplate that righteousness provides. Our righteousness is twofold. There is what theologians call “positional righteousness,” which is what God did when we trusted Christ as Saviour. He gave us Christ’s righteousness in exchange for our sin, which Christ took on the cross. As for our position before Him, He views us as holy in His sight (II Cor. 5:21; Eph. 1:4).

If we believe that we are holy in God’s sight, it will help protect us from giving in to Satan’s lies when he accuses us. We must understand deep in our hearts that because Christ took our condemnation, we no longer are under it (cf. John 3:18). “There is . . . no

condemnation” to those who are “in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). That refers to all who have put their faith and trust in Him as their Saviour from sin.

The other part of righteousness is that of our everyday righteousness—how we really live—which is, sadly, not on a par with our position. However, God is at work in us to make it more so. We call this “sanctification.” Our standing before God as holy is called “positional sanctification.”

What God is doing in our lives to make us righteous in our everyday lives is our actual sanctification. “Sanctification” is a big word that means God sets us apart for Himself; it is the idea of us being and becoming holy people.

Hebrews 10:14 says that Jesus “hath perfected (completed) for ever them that are sanctified.” Here we have both our position before God—forgiven—and the process—being sanctified or made perfect. God is at work in us to develop us more and more into completely righteous people. We are not perfect, but we continue to grow.

Rejoice in your righteous standing, and cooperate with God as He builds righteousness into your life. It will protect you from accusations. ★

—John Strong.



BE PREPARED

Preparation is something that some of us are good at; others of us prefer to “fly by the seat of our pants,” taking life as it comes. No doubt either view can be a problem if taken to excess, but both have merit as we consider how we live.

The Christian soldier’s armor as seen in Ephesians 6 includes footwear. The Roman soldier (no doubt the model for Paul’s metaphor) wore sandals studded with nails so that he could stand his ground, along with the rest of his unit, and push against the enemy.

We are to be prepared, or ready, with the gospel, the good news of salvation. It is only the gospel that is the “power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Only the gospel gives hope for our sin-ravaged world; only through a changed life through Christ can anyone have any hope for this world or the next.

We are to be prepared. According to Peter, we should be “ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (I Pet. 3:15). This is part of the preparation of the gospel of peace. We must be ready and prepared to answer people who ask us why we live righteously when all around us, it seems, many choose not to. Why do we have the spe-

cial hope we do? We need to tell them the gospel is the only hope they have of peace with God, now and for eternity.

No matter that many mock the gospel and refuse to believe it—it is the *only* way to God. Men can deny it, refuse it, disbelieve it—it still remains the only hope of salvation, the only way to eternal life. Hold fast to the gospel when dealing with people about their souls; do not water it down, and do not sell it short. Speak the truth of the gospel—sin is horribly ugly and requires a desperate cure.

Hold your ground; stand fast on the gospel. Know that your own salvation is secure; make sure *you* know Christ. Then hold fast to the necessity of the gospel for anyone to ever have peace with God. There is no other way.

To keep us from sharing it, Satan wants to raise doubts in us about believing all of the gospel. We must maintain our stance—it is the gospel alone that gives us a relationship with God. It is the only way that our friends and family can have one too. Do not allow yourself to lose that focus. Do not whitewash the facts—believe them, and proclaim them to others. Hold fast to the hope you have. ★

—John Strong.



ABOVE ALL

God is so gracious to us—He gives us so much. While He allows us to sometimes suffer affliction and to be attacked by His and our archenemy, Satan, God gives us what we need to stand our ground and refuse to give up in the battle. Satan would like nothing better than to take us out of the battle, but God commands us to stand our ground, to hold fast, to refuse to give in or give up.

With regard to the armor of God, we are instructed “above all” (Eph. 6:16) to take “the shield of faith,” by which we can stop all the flaming arrows Satan shoots our way. “Darts” have the idea of deadly arrows. “The wicked” in this text literally means “the wicked one,” that is, Satan, who aims all sorts of arrows at us.

He may shoot betrayal, lust, dependency, pride, or any other “arrow” that can bring us harm and take us out of the battle. We must keep the shield in place so that the arrows hit it instead of injuring us in a vital spot.

The shield of faith is undeterred faith in God. It is believing in God’s goodness and faithfulness when the evidence seems to be against it. It is believing God when He says He is good and faithful even when our lives

seem to be spinning out of control and when life is hard.

Faith is not us in our own power hanging on to God with all we have; faith is us trusting God, who is hanging on to us with all that He has. Faith is believing that God is the One who is making us more like Christ. Yes, we have a serious responsibility to cooperate with Him and His process. He is the One, however, who is going to make it happen (Phil. 1:6).

An abiding faith comes to us from knowing and understanding God’s Word. Our faith grows and increases as God’s thoughts progressively become more our own. These are not just facts that many of us have stuffed in our heads. We need to understand those facts worked out in our daily lives.

Faith is simply believing and trusting God—that He does all things well, even in difficult times. It is believing that He includes your best interests as He works all things “after the counsel of his own will” (Eph. 1:11) and for His glory. It is believing that His intentions toward you are good. It is believing that He cares for you and will take care of you and will preserve you “unto his heavenly kingdom” (II Tim. 4:18). ★

—John Strong.



FOR HEARING EARS

A MOTHER'S FAITH

We have heard of mothers in our own day as well as those of past eras who have influenced their children for God. Some mothers are held up as examples for how to be effective in raising godly children.

The Apostle Paul singled out two mothers who were influential in the life of his protégé, Timothy. "I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice" (II Tim. 1:5).

To be pointed out in Holy Scripture for all generations of Christians to see speaks highly of these two women and their faith. God used their faith and its influence to shape Timothy, whose father apparently was not a believer (cf. Acts 16:1).

There are some characteristics that we can infer from Paul's words. Lois's faith carried down to her daughter Eunice, who passed it down to her son Timothy. We see two faithful mothers passing the faith down to the next generation. Their faith took effort, hard work, and perseverance.

Passing on a mother's faith is not a sprint but a marathon that lasts as long as the mother lives. It is a faith that perseveres despite hardships and dis-

couragements. It is a faith that never gives up hope that her child(ren) will follow God. Granted, not all children do, but God calls mothers (and fathers) to faithfully offer their faith to their children, no matter how old they become and no matter if or how far they stray.

Another characteristic of a mother's faith is that it is observable. These two women's faith was known to Paul, who may have known them well or perhaps on the basis of Timothy's account. Either way, their faith was observable; it was obvious to the most important person—Timothy. He apparently observed their Christian faith and learned it when he was young.

We can infer that these women were intentional in sharing their faith. Mothers are to share their faith—taking their children to church and instructing them in the things of God. While the first responsibility lies with the father if he is a believer, the mother is also to instruct her children, complementing the father's efforts.

Only eternity will reveal the full extent of faithful mothers who shared their faith with their children. This sharing is instruction. What gives power to the instruction is a mother's life of faith. ★

—John Strong.



KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE, AND USE IT!

As we journey on earth before we go to our Father's kingdom, we are opposed by the devil, Satan. God commands us to hold our ground against Satan. To do so, we are to resist him by using the armor God has provided for us to live in victory.

We are to "take the helmet of salvation" (Eph. 6:17). In I Thessalonians 5:8 Paul referred to the "hope of salvation" as a helmet. The hope of salvation, that assurance that we are right with God both now and forever, is a vital part in our victory. It gives us hope to carry on; it gives us security when Satan tries to make us doubt. If we lack assurance of our own salvation, we will be so concerned about ourselves that we do not share God's Word with others. Know what you have, and live accordingly.

We have also been given the mighty sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (cf. Eph. 6:17). This weapon is both offensive and defensive in our warfare. We are to use God's Word to fend off Satan's lies.

God's Word will empower, strengthen, and uphold our faith, which we are to use as a shield against the lies Satan shoots like arrows at us. We must be well acquainted with God's truth,

His ways, and His will for us as taught in the Bible.

One lie Satan likes to suggest to us is that God has deserted us. We counter Satan and his lie with Scripture that says that God promises nothing or no one can separate us from His love and that He will never abandon us (cf. Rom. 8:35-39; Heb. 13:5).

When Satan or our own hearts accuse us and we are feeling condemned, remember that there is "no condemnation" to those who are "in Christ" (believers) (Rom. 8:1). When Satan lies and tells us that it would be better to give up, remind him that God says we will "reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9). Fainting has the idea of giving up. Reaping has the idea of gaining, that is, if we refuse to give up.

Use the sword God has given us—His Word. Use it to share the gospel and to defend yourself against Satan's lies. Share with people that they are sinners bound for eternal separation from God but that He loves them and has provided a way to live with Him forever. Use the Word for the sake of others and for yourself. It is the only way to conquer Satan's deceptions and live our lives according to God's truth. ★

—John Strong.



GETTING GOD'S RESOURCES

God has all that we need to live victorious Christian lives. This does not mean that we will never fail or fall, sometimes very hard. It does mean that His resources are always there for the taking if we will choose to take them.

God's strength is available to any and all who will choose to yield their will to His and allow the Spirit to control (Eph. 5:18; 6:10). We gain this strength by yielding and also by praying. After God instructed us about the armor He provided for us, He said that we are to be "praying always with all prayer . . . watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints" (6:18).

Prayer is God's way of getting us in tune with Himself so that our hearts are yielded to Him and we are walking with Him, bringing all sorts of things to Him, both for others and for ourselves. Prayer is God's way for us to grow in our relationship with Him.

Prayer is our asking for what we need, for His strength to carry on, and for assistance for all sorts of things. It is us adoring Him and lifting our hearts in praise. It is coming to Him as desperate for spiritual needs as we would for physical or financial needs.

We try all sorts of ways to get what

we need/want; yet we do not receive. God may be testing us, but it may also be because we have not asked Him. James stated that we "have not, because ye ask not" (Jas. 4:2). How much does God withhold because we do not ask Him? Thank God that He often provides without our asking. He is faithful in supplying our needs; but how much more would we enjoy if we accessed God through prayer? It is not so much our asking Him for things; it is getting to know Him better and working on our relationship with Him.

God tells us to access His strength for our daily lives. The early believers, such as Paul, prayed and asked for boldness to speak God's Word to a dying world. He asked the Ephesians to pray for him to have boldness (cf. Eph. 6:19-20). The early believers reminded God of the persecution the Jews threatened and then prayed for boldness to keep proclaiming God's truth (cf. Acts 4:29)!

We can go on in our journey home only by God's grace and empowerment. Pray that He will help us and those around us; pray for other believers and for the unsaved. The resources are there for us if we ask. ★

—John Strong.