

## 8. The Present Moment

“In performing the duties of the present moment, everything tends to draw us from the path of love and simple obedience. We need great love and heroic courage to hold fast to a straightforward and active faith and to join confidently in the song in which grace also plays a part, but sings a different tune in a different key, which convinces us that we are deceived and have gone astray.”<sup>1</sup>

--Caussade

*<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. <sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. <sup>8</sup>Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup>Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

*<sup>10</sup>And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. <sup>11</sup>To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

--Peter

“We seek God alone. All else is irrelevant.”<sup>3</sup>

--Caussade

*<sup>12</sup>Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

*<sup>13</sup>When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup>but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”<sup>4</sup>*

--James

We left off our last installment (#7 “Hold Fast...Fear Not”) mentioning a short list of four things every sincere Christian must have if he or she is to fight the good fight of faith in the warfare in which we find ourselves. So we better finish up what we were talking about before going on to today’s subject: **The Present Moment**. Do you remember what those four things were? Humility, vigilance, the will to resist, and prayer. They are very simple, yet absolutely necessary if we are to please our Creator and walk with

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<sup>1</sup> Abandonment, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> 1Peter 5:6-11, NIV. Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup> Abandonment, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> James 1:12-15, NIV.

Him in the New Jerusalem. Now do not be concerned if one author says there are four things necessary and another says there are seven, as some do. The number of different features or characteristics of the spiritual life is of little consequence because I could fit the seven “necessary” things into the list of four. The important thing is recognizing that there are helpful insights that can be listed and discussed...and prayed about. So, to facilitate our search for God, let’s take a look at the list of four. You can expand this list in your personal devotions or class study, if it calls for it.

**Humility:** I agree with those who say that humility is the foundation on which all spiritual life rests.

*<sup>5</sup>Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,*

*"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

*<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. <sup>7</sup>Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.<sup>5</sup>*

The Christian community was well aware of the Pharisees and their general tendency to regard themselves superior to other branches of the Jewish people. Indeed, they were strict in their adherence to Jewish spirituality and, as Jesus’ parable tells us, proud of their self-judgment. Popular sentiment would have agreed with the Pharisees when they were compared with tax collectors. Of course, Jesus did not.

*<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*<sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

*<sup>14</sup>"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 5:5b-7, NIV.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 18:9-14, NIV.

In a letter acknowledging the gifts and graces of a leader, Caussade cautions a woman that she handle God's trust in her with a humble heart. "Your chief care," writes Caussade, "must be to guard these precious gifts with watchful humility."<sup>7</sup> This is good advice for us all. And, this is a natural way to move to our second point: vigilance.

**Vigilance:** We must always keep our hearts on alert, especially against enemies of the soul. In classical spiritual literature, vigilance is spoken of as "watchfulness." This means, of course, that we must know something of what the enemy looks like. Not that we look for a beast with a forked tail but we hone our spiritual senses so that we can recognize when something is wrong or out of place. Vigilance or awareness is a natural part of warfare, since the enemy may be disguised and we are in danger of being caught unawares. Peter warns us that the evil one, "like a roaring lion," sneaks around, seeking someone to destroy.<sup>8</sup> When asked, who is Lucifer" (the devil)? Caussade answers, "He is a radiant angel and the most enlightened of all, but an angel hostile to God and his designs."<sup>9</sup>

In his book, The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness, Erich Fromm says of Hitler, that he had a malignant aggressive personality. Quoting an authority on this kind of person, Fromm observes that Hitler had two faces: "the friendly one, and the horrifying one—and both were genuine."<sup>10</sup> However, the friendly face served the horrifying one. This would mean that you would have to be really sharp in detecting the true person, and not to be fooled by what you thought you saw in that person. This kind of personality is especially sinister in supernatural beings such as Satan.

I want to quote once more from Fromm. This quote is very important in the way a malignant aggressive person sees himself as well as in how he attempts to deceive others. "Lacking any center within himself, any genuine principles, values, or convictions, Hitler could "play" the kindly gentleman and not be aware himself at the moment that it was a role."<sup>11</sup> I have known such persons and can say that unless you are really vigilant you can be fooled until it is too late, and you find yourself in a real fix that

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<sup>7</sup> Fire of Divine Love, NIV.

<sup>8</sup> I Peter 5:8.

<sup>9</sup> Abandonment, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Anatomy, p. 471.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

may be almost impossible to get out of. I wonder if the spirit of evil is such a being himself, that is, a being without a center, without values, without feeling for others.

The third element of spiritual warfare is having a “**will to resist.**” In Christian terms the will to resist comes into play at the time of temptation. First, one needs humility, and increasing amounts of it! Then one must be vigilant because those who love evil are always looking for companions. But suppose you are attracted to that which you know is trouble for you, or maybe you think you can handle your problems your own way. What you need, the spiritual fathers tell us, is a strong will to resist the first hint of temptation. What you need is a strong center of spiritual power, a relationship with the Almighty that will be protection for you. The will to resist will counter the will to give in. It is dangerous to attempt to wait until the moment of trial is upon us; we must be prepared *in advance* if we are to triumph over the devil.

There is another danger at this point: the false notion many have that they can take care of themselves when the time comes. The earlier we seek God in our lives the better. Psychologists tell us that psychopathy begins in childhood it and gets worst from that point on. If that is true of evil, it is also true of righteousness. Listen to Caussade’s advice to the man or woman under pressure to do evil. “So, my soul, plunge ahead, sweeping through all the monster-plagued dangers ahead, knowing that you are guided and sustained by the mighty, yet invisible hand of God. Let us carry on to the end without the slightest tremor of fear, full of peace and joy, with everything that befalls us becoming the occasion for fresh triumphs.”<sup>12</sup> Peace and joy! The sure combination of goodness and strength for the risk that befalls us. And they will befall us, to be sure!

And how can we prepare ourselves for the dangers that threaten us? By applying the fourth aspect of preparation for spiritual battle: **prayer**.

Time spent in prayer is time well spent. As far as Caussade is concerned, the Christian meets God all along the path to the kingdom. Whether your prayer is long or short, one written or a single word, prayer opens us up to God. A prayer uttered in sincerity is heard and answered. God is available any time, any place. I have referred

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<sup>12</sup> Abandonment, p. 112.

already in our series to Psalm 121. It is a beautiful psalm of God's providential care 24/7.

<sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?  
<sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.  
<sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you will not slumber;  
<sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
<sup>5</sup> The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;  
<sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
<sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;  
<sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.<sup>13</sup>

This certainty of God's saving presence is based on the Hebrew understanding of God as Creator. "My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." Old Testament scholar Artur Weiser says,

"The activity of the creator extends beyond the creation of the world; the Creator-God is not dormant, but continues to act; he is for ever the *living* God. Thus creation in the biblical sense is comprehended as the living power of God which continues to operate and is constantly creative."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the biblical notion of creation and Creator "possesses a vitality of its own [and] is based on the permanent activity of the never-resting God."<sup>15</sup> We serve a "never-resting God." Hallelujah!

What do you think the content of prayer is as we prepare for spiritual warfare? It is a constant prayer for peace. We want peace, not chaos; life, not death; joy, not pain. Psalm 122 has a play on words regarding peace. The psalmist says we are to pray for the peace of Jerusalem: Pray for peace in the "city of peace." So we become what Jesus said we ought to be: "peacemakers," and as peacemakers we will be the "children of God."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Psalms, TNIV.

<sup>14</sup> Psalms, p. 748.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 5:9, NRSV.

We will be in character what the Father is: one who works for peace. In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, peacemaker is an active word, not a passive word. This means we are called to do what is necessary to make peace. This is considerably more than just the absence of war.

This answers a very important question for sincere Christians: How can we love those who hate us? Well, we can offer prayers on their behalf. We can pray that they will focus on their response to God, not to us. We can ask God to enable them to seek Him. We can pray that they will. We want our enemies to change, so we can pray that they will in turn pray good prayers for us as they try to worship, if they worship. We can meet as intercessory groups to pray for their salvation as well as our own. This is a good time to pray for terrorists the world over.

### **The Present Moment**

Ruth and I have some friends who many years ago sold their house and moved to another city in a different state. Now and then they will pass through our town and may spend a night or two with us. At some point during their stay they will drive past their old home to see how the "new" owners are caring for it. Sometime they like what they see, sometime they don't. But suppose this trip they think the bushes in front of the house don't really blend in well with the rest of the lawn. What can they do about it? Legally they can't touch it! If they do, they subject themselves to problems they do not really want. Why? They sold the house. They have no say-so over the place anymore. It does not belong to them.

When I was a young Christian our youth group at the church used to talk about being "sold out" to Jesus. We would sing songs about being "love slaves" to God. "Love slaves" is a saying used by the Apostle Paul of first century Christians. Actually we were not far off the mark by using words like those to describe our desired relationship with the Lord. Caussade's writings are over 200 years old and, to my surprise, he said,

"We must completely forget ourselves, so that we regard ourselves as an object which has been sold and over which we no longer have any rights.  
We find all our joy in fulfilling God's pleasure—his happiness, his glory

and the fact that he is our great and only delight.<sup>17</sup>

Completely forgetting ourselves is a ticklish thing. It might be better to think in these terms: In speaking of love, Christians love God first, family second, others third, and self fourth. I have not included love for objects or pets, which can be discussed in your Sunday class. Caussade, however, is clear: We are called to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Doing this, everything else will fall into its proper place. Then we can do what Caussade suggests: Spend the rest of our lives rejoicing in God.

What seems most important is that our love for God takes place in “the present moment.” This is a helpful concept from Caussade. In one of his prayers, Caussade says,

Like the prodigal son, I will come home hungry for your bread. I will abandon all ideas and books about spiritual matters and have nothing to do with them unless they work together with your will. All I want to do is love you and devote myself to the duties of each moment, and so allow You to act on me as you wish.<sup>18</sup>

Caussade seems able to narrow his desires to only one: to do the will of God. He seems to find this easy to do because he focuses on the “duties of each moment” and thereby allow God to do with him what He wishes. In this Caussade is like the Lord’s mother, Mary. She tells the angel that she is prepared to do whatever God asks of her, even to the giving of her body to bear God’s only Son. Mary had narrowed her desire to one: to do what pleases God *at that moment*. She will not cloud up the issue by reading books or sharing ideas with others. She simply does what she thinks is God’s will.

“Every moment we live through is like an ambassador who declares the will of God, and our hearts always utter their acceptance.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, “we can find all that is necessary in the present moment. We need not worry about whether to pray or be silent, whether to withdraw into retreat or to mix with people, to read or write....” All we need is what the present moment requires, to do that, and to rest in God that His will be being done. This is the sure way to holiness. Caussade says, “Our only satisfaction must be to live in the present moment as if there were nothing to expect beyond it.”<sup>20</sup> This leads us

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<sup>17</sup> Abandonment, p. 72. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Abandonment, p. 58. Emphasis mine.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

to one gigantic insight: in every moment, regardless of what it is, contains the will of God, whether it be good to our eyes or bad. If the present moment seems dark and mysterious, observes Caussade, “The darker the mystery, the more we are illumined by it. So a simple soul finds God where he seems not to appear at all.”<sup>21</sup>

### **His Life, Not Ours**

One genuine surprise to many converts to Christianity are the demands placed on them by the Lord. Do you know what I mean? There is often a subtle expectation that one’s life is about to take a wonderful turn with few, if any, problems. So when St. Paul speaks of the faith as a war requiring a special kind of armor, it is easy to be shocked. Then when the history of the church seems filled with savagery propagated against its members, cruelty of every kind against the saints, it is enough to give some second thoughts. But to others, believe it or not, threats, beatings and worse, are encouragement to be faithful since they had a keen awareness that the Lord Jesus suffered for them, to gain eternal life for His faithful.

One of the most celebrated cases of martyrdom occurred in the early second century AD to Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and later bishop of the church at Smyrna in Asia Minor.<sup>22</sup> It still stands as a strong testimony to the uniqueness of Jesus and as an example of what it means to be a Christian in a hostile environment.

**Polycarp** was arrested by the Romans on the charge of being a Christian. At this time Christianity, with its belief in Jesus as king, was regarded as a threat to the empire. Because of his age, late eighties, and his apparent gentile nature, all Polycarp was required to do was say, “I swear by the fortune of Caesar, “Away with the atheists (Christians!)” He would then affirm that Caesar is Lord and offer a pinch of incense to Caesar’s statue. That would be enough to absolve the old man, allowing him to escape torture and death.

Hearing the charges laid against him, Polycarp must have stunned all present by saying: “Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” Christians who were present attested that a

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. I, Early Christian Fathers, p. 149f.

voice from heaven said, “Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.” As a result, Polycarp was burned at the stake. Though many have died since him, Polycarp set the benchmark, so to speak, for those who would rather suffer death than live a lie. All he could do was affirm the truth. He was also right that to deny Christ’s lordship would have been blasphemy. But Polycarp could stand firm because he no longer belonged to himself but to Christ. In *the present moment*, with his attention focused on Christ his Lord, Polycarp lived and died triumphantly, as can we.

### **Reflections**

1. St. Paul once wrote to the Galatians Christians, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (2:20) Can you think of incidents in Paul’s ministry where it is obvious he believed that with all his heart?

2. If someone asked you what Christians mean by “spiritual warfare,” what would you say?

3. Caussade, in giving spiritual insight to an inquiring person, once wrote: “Perpetual desire is perpetual prayer.” What do you think he meant by that? How does Caussade’s comment relate to what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18?

--Jerry Mercer  
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