

problems. However, most of us, if we are honest, have experienced at one time or another the same sort of difficulties as Ruth did. This is one of the reasons why the book of Ruth is so useful to us. Let us notice, then, how God met Ruth's needs.

Firstly, Ruth began to meet her own needs! Common-sense (often lacking in God's people), led to careful thought and sensible action (verses 2, 3 and 7) and proved to be part of God's guidance to her. She did what she could and left what she couldn't do in the hands of God.

Secondly, Ruth sought the advice of others close to her (verse 2) and found the will of the Lord in their sensible advice. Indeed she discovered God's care for her on a number of occasions in the same way. She found God's care in the tenderness, compassion and generosity of others (verses 8, 9). That was another way in which God provided for her.

Thirdly, Ruth found God directly at work in her circumstances. Humanly, by complete coincidence, God led her steps to Boaz, the person most able to help her! This fact was noticed by the author of Ruth (verse 3).

All this leads to some very practical lessons. We notice that God's provision was not miraculous. Many

believers have an exaggerated regard for miracles and they do not seem to think that God is at work if they have not experienced a miracle. For them, the book of Ruth may be disappointing since there is no hint of a miracle here. But God does provide for her and those of us (i.e. for most believers) whose lives are as free of miracle as Ruth's. This is a great comfort: if God provided for her in her ordinary, unexciting, day-to-day experience, he can and will do the same for us!

Moreover, God is seen to be at work in *all* Ruth's affairs and in her case they were mostly small ones! What comfort this is to us in our small lives!

It is also important to notice that there is no dramatic change in Ruth's life (not yet, at least!). Rather God showed himself in his daily, detailed attention to her in the middle of all her needs. God did not suddenly deliver her. He met her where she was.

It is this fact which enabled her, and should enable us, to trust him even in the middle of our needs. Boaz's wish (verse 12) should become a conviction which, by faith, governs our lives as it did Ruth's.

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Ephesians 6:12

The True Nature of the Believer's Conflict

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When school-leavers are job-hunting, they usually read the advertisements in the paper with the descriptions of the vacancies, and wonder if it is worthwhile applying. They may see a post advertised which sounds to be along the lines they have been considering. They wonder about applying: Are they qualified for it? Could they cope with it?

It is an important question—what are we capable of? Some applicants for jobs are only wasting the time of the employer. They have neither the experience, the training nor the ability needed. I have occasionally been in the position of interviewing, and I can tell you that it can be very irritating to have to interview someone who is not even remotely likely to be offered the post. We have, therefore, to be realistic about ourselves. We have to get to know ourselves and our capabilities.

The apostle Paul says: *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood.* Before he tells us what is ahead of us, he is reminding us of ourselves and our weak human natures. We have to be realistic about ourselves. We have to come to know ourselves, for until we do, we will lose many battles through being unaware of the odds against us. Let us think about this.

What Does Paul Mean?

Of course, by *flesh and blood* he means fallen human nature. That means people. So the apostle is saying that the focus of this spiritual war in which every

Christian is engaged is not against people as such. It is primarily against a whole array of evil spiritual forces which are under the control of the devil.

But does that mean that we do not need to bother about human nature, because the only real enemies Christians face are the devil and his agents? Does it mean that our fallen human natures and the fallen human natures of others pose no threat? That is not what he is saying. For those interested in technicalities, this phrase *our struggle is not against flesh and blood* is what is called a 'negative of comparison'. It means, 'not mainly against flesh and blood'.

Paul says that because he has already dealt with *flesh and blood*, that is, fallen human nature, earlier in the letter in ch. 2.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in them who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature the objects of wrath . . .

In other words, *flesh and blood*—our natures crippled by sin—pose an enormous problem. See the phrases he uses to describe our human natures: *the cravings of our sinful nature . . . its desires and thoughts . . . following the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air* (he means the devil), and so on. When he says in our text that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, he is saying, 'We have been thinking about flesh and blood in great detail, and I hope you have remembered what I have already written about this. We are not forgetting the problem of our human natures, but we have to distinguish between human nature and the devil. The two are not the same.' That is the thrust of what he means here.

Before, therefore, we go on to consider the main part of Ephesians 6:12, we must glance back at what Paul has said about fallen human nature. Otherwise we will not be properly ready to stand against the devil's schemes. We must first know *ourselves*.

You see, even after we have been born again, even when the Father has set his love on us, Christ has forgiven us and washed us in his own blood, and after the Holy Spirit has put his mark upon us as belonging to God forever, even after all that, we are still *flesh and blood*. We surely know that, do we not? We know that we are weak, and easily shaken. We know that we quickly become discouraged. We know that we are tempted to backslide and desert Christ. I hope we are in no doubt about all of this.

When wine is being made, and it is at the stage of fermentation, a sediment is left over from the chemical process of the yeast reacting with the sugar and fruit.

This sediment, called the 'lees', sinks to the bottom of the fermentation jar. Several times over, the liquid has to be carefully poured from one jar to another to leave the sediment behind. If you take the wine jar while the wine is still fermenting, even though it looks clear and pure, and you give it a shake, then the sediment is stirred up and the wine becomes cloudy and murky.

Christians have natures which are like that. Give our redeemed natures a 'shake' and the sediment of our old nature is stirred up, and our desires and wills become cloudy and murky. That is why we have to understand Paul is not here counting out the fallen human nature. That is why he mentions it. He means, 'Our struggle is not *primarily* against flesh and blood—remember what I have said about that *old nature* we all have. Don't forget it.'

The Disadvantages of Flesh and Blood in the Fight Against Satan

I am always fascinated to watch archeologists working trying to uncover and preserve something of the past, perhaps part of an original town wall. A few towns in the United Kingdom have parts of their ancient walls intact. York, Chester, Conway and Carrickfergus are examples. I love to visit such places to study the archaeologist's plans of the original wall, and then to visit the remains to try and picture what it must have looked like centuries ago.

Every person is something like one of those mediæval walled towns. Inside the walls of our lives is a palace called the Soul, originally built by our Great King to live in himself. But Satan has cunningly gained entrance and the great King has left in sorrow. The Lord Mayor of our 'town' has been put under house arrest in a dark place with neither windows nor light. But the walls are still there. The city gates are still there. And we still have certain defences against the enemy.

What I mean is we are still people created in God's own image. The Lord Mayor (our minds) is still in charge, though working in complete darkness. But the enemy, Diabolus,¹ can come and go pretty much as he pleases through those gates—Eargate, Eyegate, Touchgate, Mouthgate. His aim is to try and flatten the walls completely, and so throw open the town to every wicked, marauding, looting devil from his pack who wishes to enter.

But we all have a natural protection against Satan. A kind of city wall, with gates. Satan has to breach those walls before he can bring his devils in. What do I mean? Let me put it like this. Your average unbeliever who pays his bills, lives a decent life and is a nice guy, is very unlikely to be demon-possessed, because the natural defences of the walls of Mansoul are still more or less intact. The person, however, who is demon-

possessed is someone who has allowed Satan to break down his personality, through the abuse of alcohol or drugs, or through getting involved in gross immorality or in some other extreme form of wickedness.

The natural, God-created defences of the human personality can be broken down by open indulgence in sin. When a person opens the town of Mansoul's gates, Eyegate, Eargate, Mouthgate, or Touchgate, and lets Satan come and go as he pleases, Satan will work to build up sufficient strength in the inner citadel of the soul to make a breach in that person's natural defences.

That is what happens, for example, when a man or woman is possessed by the demon, Drink. I'm not saying alcoholism is not an illness. It is and as an illness it can be medically treated. But there can be a demonic side to the problem, as well as a human—*flesh and blood*—side. A demon can gain access into a life as the natural walls are broken down. When that happens, the personality begins to disintegrate.

If you think about it, you will quickly realize how foolish it is to try and fight the devil in our own strength. Fallen sinners do not have a chance. He has already got control of the gates to our souls. If we go along with his schemes, he will ultimately bring in powerful forces to break us down.

A hundred years ago, as people were beginning to get to know about Charles Darwin's book, *The Origin of the Species*, many were saying, 'If man evolved from primates, then there is no need for any God after all.' Then teaching called 'modernism' began in the theological colleges where ministers were trained. Modernism said this: 'Jesus was just a man, an ordinary man. But he was a wonderful man, and gave us excellent teachings. What we must do now is to put his teachings into practice. We must follow this Jesus, and imitate his life. That is what the churches should be preaching.'

In other words, what modernism was saying was that man is getting better and better. He is gradually improving. The world is getting a safer, happier place. And Christianity is a way of life this man Jesus taught which offers us a kind and unselfish way to live.

Lots of books were written which said this sort of thing. Some preachers actually taught that Jesus was neither born of a virgin nor rose from the dead. The former Bishop of Durham is actually about a hundred years behind the times. What he is saying today has all been written before. In a church where I was minister some years ago, I had members who had been taught all this by a previous minister who had systematically and deliberately destroyed their faith in the deity and uniqueness of Christ.

But where did that leave the churches in the fight against Satan? It left them armed with flesh and blood alone. That is why many churches in England, Scotland and Wales are nearly empty today. Irish churches were never so heavily taken over by modernism as they

were in Britain. Here, churches are empty because people discovered they *could not* imitate Jesus Christ. They *could not* follow him. Have you ever tried to imitate Christ in your own strength? I have. It is impossible. You are bound to fail. As the hymn has it, 'The arm of flesh will fail you, Ye dare not trust your own.'

I was thinking about all this one day, and I went through from my study to watch the 6 o'clock news. The first news-item was about a Borough Council, where officials have stolen ten million pounds over the past few years. The next news-item was about a lawyer whom the President of the United States had nominated as his new Attorney-General, but this candidate was found to have cheated over tax and quite openly to have broken the law. The news bulletin ended with an account of the National Front and attacks by thugs in England on Asians who, after being beaten unconscious, discovered on their persons a calling card which was shown on the screen and which said, 'The service you have received means you have been ethnically cleansed'—the idea being that when an Asian is beaten up and left unconscious, the calling card is slipped into his pocket to explain to him what has happened.

I went back into my study to continue thinking about Ephesians 6:12, reminded of the massive weakness under which human beings are toiling. The devil can come and go as he chooses through those gates which give entrance to people's hearts. The disadvantage 'flesh and blood' has in the fight against Satan is too great. Every news bulletin gives us undeniable evidence of that. Flesh and blood, human nature, is like putty in the devil's hands.

The Advantage the Christian has in the Fight Against Satan

What about the Christian? What about our human natures, what Paul calls *flesh and blood*, after Christ has become our Saviour? What about the Christian girl at school, the Christian youth at college, the Christian housewife at home, the Christian at work? Ordinary people, still flesh and blood, which means still with human natures which are weak and wayward—how is it with Christians in this fight against the devil?

What Paul has said in ch. 2 is that God has come back into the citadel in the centre of that walled town, into the palace he originally built for himself, and which he left in sorrow when Adam by his disobedience let Satan in. Now his banner flies again from the flagmast with the message, 'The great King is in residence here.'² God has let the Lord Mayor out of the dark dungeon where he was imprisoned. That is, our minds have come out of darkness, and into the light of the

knowing God through his Word. Also, God has set guards at each gate—Eargate, Eyegate, Mouthgate and Touchgate.

Our loving Lord, now enthroned in the palace of our souls, knows us very well. He knows us better than we know ourselves, so he knows just how weak we are. He knows that we take bad colds and 'flu, which leave us feeling rotten. He knows that we get tired and discouraged. He knows that our morale can often be very low. He is aware of all of that. *He knows our frame, and remembers that we are dust* (Ps. 103.14).

And when the citizens of our town have some job to do, and it is not done very well, in fact, we make a mess of it, the Lord of our souls knows about that as well. His words are, *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*. There is many a life in which King Jesus is enthroned, where the townsfolk constantly let him down, and do not carry out his instructions as they ought. My life is one of them. Thus his reprimand comes to me, 'I know your spirit is willing, but your flesh is still too weak'. And I am ashamed of my failure.

When the tempter comes to those gates which are the entrances to my soul, when he whispers foul suggestions in at Eargate, or he displays some attractive opportunity for sin to Eyegate, or he offers a cruel remark to Mouthgate, or an exciting experience to Touchgate, the Lord of my soul, from his throne in my life, exercises his great power and will not let the temptations be any stronger than he knows I can endure.³

In other words, with Christ living in our lives, we have a massive advantage in the fight. That is why Paul says that our struggle is not primarily with flesh and blood, but is mainly with Satan himself and with his wicked force, rather than with our human natures.

While we are making a very clear distinction between fallen human nature on the one hand, and the devil and his wiles on the other hand, it is important to understand that the two often become intertwined. Think of the battle for a nation under attack. The invaders are trying to clear a town of its occupants. So they turn their artillery on the town, and houses get damaged and destroyed. The attackers have nothing against the houses. The opposite. They actually want the houses for themselves. But the houses get caught up in the fighting because the defenders are hiding in them and fighting from them.

That happens with our human natures. Some of us may be very determined by nature. God can use that; but Satan can use it as well. Some of us may have some special talent. God can use that talent, but Satan can use it also, if we let him. Some of us may be very inventive, creative and have ideas. God can use that gift he has given us; but if Satan gets hold of it, he can use it too. So the distinction between our human

natures and the work of Satan can become blurred, as the two become intertwined.

That is why you and I need to know ourselves. We need to know that Christ has come into our lives, and is working to undo the damage the devil has done during those years he occupied us. We also need to know that the devil can seize something in our human natures and exploit it and use it for his own evil purposes. That happens when Christians quarrel with each other. I recently heard of serious trouble in a little church in a Third World country, where a personal friend was working. Christian there was set against Christian, until one family locked another family out of the church! The conflict was not really against flesh and blood. But human nature became all mixed up in the conflict and the devil was making gains by using weak flesh and blood for his disruptive and destructive purposes.

'What about the trouble some Christians have when unbelievers persecute them? Is that not a conflict against flesh and blood?' someone asks. Yes, in a way, we must answer. Men hated the Lord Jesus and crucified him. But what was his prayer? *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Lk. 23: 34). The Lord knew the real hand behind his death. So when others mock you or oppose you because you are a Christian, do not see them as *the* enemy. Pray for them, and see beyond them to the one motivating them. Pray that they will be freed. Pray that, as so often has happened, they will come to know Christ. That is a wonderful indication of the real balance of power in this spiritual conflict, when those whom the devil is using as his human agents are won for Christ and change sides. That is why Paul can write, *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood*.

We rest on Thee, our shield and our defender;
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy Strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

Yea, in Thy name, O Captain of salvation!
In Thy dear name, all other names above;
Jesus our righteousness, our sure foundation,
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.

We go in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing;
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

We rest on Thee, our shield and our defender;
Thine is the battle; Thine shall be the praise
When passing through the gates of pearly splendour,
Victors, we rest, with Thee, through endless days.

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