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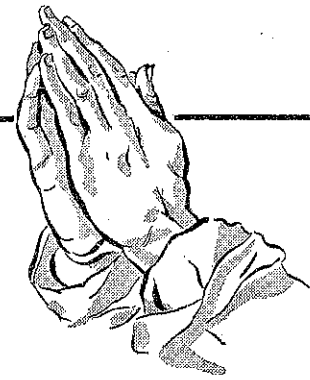


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God Is a Warrior

by **KILIAN McDONNELL, O.S.B.**

THE Israelites were a poor nation and weak; they were without military arms and military experience. A captive nation living under the tyranny of the Egyptians, they made bricks for their masters. God sent Moses to lead them into a land they could call their own. Miracles and wonders marked their exodus. The Lord went before them as their guide in the form of a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. God parted the waters of the Red Sea before the unarmed Jews and closed the path in the waters when the Egyptian army in full battle formation attempted to follow. Yahweh, the God of Israel, had led them out of exile and destroyed their enemies. Yahweh proved that He was mighty in word and in work. He was, in all truth, their God and they were His people.

The Jews celebrated their deliverance with a dance during which they sang this song of victory: "The Lord is a warrior, Yahweh is his name. Your right hand, O Lord, has shattered the enemy. Who is like you, magnificent in holiness? In your mercy you led the people you redeemed. In your strength you guided them." The Jews had attained their goal not because of any great strength of their own, but because "the Lord was fighting for them against the Egyptians."

This is the pattern which was repeated again and again in the history of Israel. God was a warrior who fought Israel's battles and won her victories. After the Israelites left Egypt, they wandered in the desert for forty years. Then God decreed that they should enter the Promised Land and subdue its people. Josue led the Jewish army and quickly conquered Canaan because "the Lord . . . fought openly on the side of Israel."

The history of Israel is the spiritual history of each soul. There are goals to be attained which we cannot reach by our own strength. We, much more than the Israelites, need the strength of God and the power of God to fight

for us. The destination of the Jews was the Sinai desert and the Promised Land. But our destination is no earthly land. Our goal is God Himself; our promised land is the life of God; our land flowing with milk and honey is the joy of the Lord. We can never attain this goal, indeed we cannot even make a first beginning in its direction unless God do battle for us. God is a warrior, and unless He fights with us there will be no victory.

If God is a warrior, fighting openly for His own, He is also a jealous warrior, jealous of the battle and jealous of the victory. He will fight only for those who acknowledge their weakness in battle and acknowledge the sureness of defeat if they fight alone.

The profession of our weakness is the basis of Christian optimism in the face of the impossible. We want to attain God and His perfection. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." But we know only defeat. Our experience is the same as St. Paul's: "To wish is within my power, but I do not find the strength to accomplish what is good. For I do not do the good that I wish, but the evil that I do not wish, that I perform." The goal is too high, the weakness too radical, the inclination to sin too strong for man to be victorious in this battle. Repeated resolutions are followed by more good resolutions and more failures to keep them. A firm purpose of amendment is found to be not so firm. And so on.

The acknowledgement of our weakness has nothing in common with that pretense at humility which says "I cannot" when it can, or "I am nothing" when it is something. Least of all is our acknowledgement an excuse for doing nothing. If "the Lord fought openly on the side of Israel," the Lord was not left to fight alone. The Israelites fought and fell in battle. They spilled blood and were wounded. The glory of the battle and the triumph of the victory belonged to God, but the Israelites were in the forefront of the fight. God fights

no battles for warriors, Jew or Christian, who sit on their shields.

There is no reluctance on our part to admit our repeated failures. There is even something of eagerness, something almost of the boast in our admission of weakness. "Gladly," says St. Paul, "will I glory in my infirmities that the strength of Christ may dwell in me." Our boast does not arise from a morbid inclination to self-accusation, nor from a perverted delight in self-flagellation. Our readiness to declare our weakness comes rather from the conviction that Christ perfects infirmity with the strength of God. St. Paul complained to God about his physical and spiritual weakness and received this answer. "My grace is sufficient for you. For strength is made perfect in weakness." Our weakness as we strive for divine perfection is the very condition of our arriving at that perfection. The Christian must be weak before he can be strong. The Christian is a sinner before he is a saint. "When I am weak then I am strong," boasted St. Paul.

WE who plod the way of perfection, conscious of our failings, can take comfort. The Jews were a nation chosen out of all the tribes of the earth. The wondrous works of God, miracles and prodigies, were a commonplace in their history. Chosen though they were, they felt their weakness and wept for it. The man who said, "When I am weak then I am strong," was the man who was "caught up to the third heaven" in ecstasy, "caught up into paradise and heard secret words that man may not repeat."

If Israel, God's chosen nation, and Paul, God's chosen messenger, stumbled and cried for help, it should not be a matter of surprise that imperfection and sin weigh heavily upon us.

We are optimistic in spite of our failings. If God is with us, who can be against us? "The Lord is a warrior." If He fights openly on our side, who can ultimately prevail against us?