

**The Collect** GRANT to thy faithful people, we beseech thee, merciful Lord, pardon and peace, that they may be cleansed from all their sins, and serve thee with a quiet mind; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Ephes. 6:10-20** MY brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; and for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

THERE was a certain nobleman, whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus was come out of Judæa into Galilee, he went unto him, and besought him that he would come down, and heal his son: for he was at the point of death. Then said Jesus unto him, Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe. The nobleman saith unto him, Sir, come down ere my child die. Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way: thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. Then enquired he of them the hour when he began to amend. And they said unto him, Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him. So the father knew that it was at the same hour, in the which Jesus said unto him, Thy son liveth: and himself believed, and his whole house. This is again the second miracle that Jesus did, when he was come out of Judæa into Galilee.

## *The Meaning of the Miracle*

Popular religion demands the negation of the will; that is, we must decrease so that God might increase. But Christianity teaches the reverse – Christianity teaches that Christ *emptied* himself; he humbled himself to the lowest depths of creation that we might be exalted. He became poor in order that we might become rich.

Christianity does not ask for us to subordinate our will to God's will because ours is in competition with his. That is not the point. God created our wills. And he says in the psalms that he does not want a horse or a mule that has no understanding to jerk here and there with bit and bridle.

No. The Church teaches us that because Jesus Christ willingly subordinated his will to the Father - in order to serve and to glorify us – we should too. That's why the Church asks us to subordinate our will to God's – because Jesus Christ did it first. He showed the way. He is the author of our salvation. He is the author of an obedient will.

One form of popular religion calls for us to *grovel* before God. Christianity says that crawling on the belly is a behavior fit for serpents, not for men and women created in the image of God, brothers and sisters and fellow heirs of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

No - Paul says that *our* destiny is to stand upright. And not just upright, but to stand fully outfitted in the divine regalia of military armor - the helmet of salvation; the sword of the spirit - our loins girt about with truth, having on the breastplate of righteousness; and our feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. But above all, Paul says, we are equipped with the shield of faith, wherewith we shall be able to quench all the fiery bolts of the wicked."

All of them. The Devil simply cannot stand before the truth. Not when we are in full armor. Because the devil does not fight against the truth, since there is no fight against the truth. There is no argument against truth. Because Christ is the logic of all arguments. He is the logic of the whole universe, John says.

And Christ is the judge of the living and the dead. And one day every living soul will stand before him and he will be the judge. This is yet another feature that sets our religion apart from all the religions of the world. You can say that Jesus is just another prophet. But the New Testament lays out another case. It is the case for Christ.

It is complete with miracles and signs which substantiate the Christ as indeed the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and that he will one day return in righteousness to judge the world and slay the wicked with the sword of his mouth.

And the devil will be pulled down from his seat from which he deceived the nations through his mistress city, Babylon and both together cast into hell. And all nations that have drunk of the wine of

the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth that have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth that have acquired an abundance of riches trafficking in her delicacies will see the smoke of their burning.

And they will see the fear of her torment, saying, Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come. They will see that their deception is discovered – that their affair with the devil has been revealed. And the entire court of heaven will see that their souls have raged against the love and redemption of God, Jude says, as raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.

And they will see that there was no truth in the devil. He only used the truth to construct his lies. The devil does care for the souls of men – except to eat them. This is why the devil goes about as a roaring lion. He's hungry. He lies in wait secretly as a lion in his den: he lies in wait to catch the humble to draw him into his net of deceit and lascivious self-indulgence. This is our true warfare Paul says. It is against the world, our own flesh and the devil.

And the devil is a formidable opponent. Because he is the master of deceit. He did not submit his will to God; he set up for himself. Thus when he speaks, he does not speak absolute truth. No he speaks of his own. He creates his own *relative* reality. And he tries – by any means - to draw us into his deceitful world of darkness and death.

The devil distracts. The devil deceives. The devil discourages. The devil encourages us to feel sorry for ourselves. The devil encourages despair. Apathy. Laziness. The devil confuses the issue. The devil plays upon our anger and our pride and our lusts. He uses us and abuses us under the pretext of helping us to get what we deserve.

How do we escape all this deceit? We escape all this by standing in the truth. The truth about ourselves. The truth about our world. The truth about God.

And then we must girt upon ourselves the whole armor of God and go out and *continually* face the world, our own selves, and even – the devil himself. It is either this or we surrender to death. Then death itself will be our shepherd. Like sheep, the psalmist says, we will be laid in the grave and death shall feed upon us. For those who refuse the shepherd of life who will feed his sheep; they must go to the shepherd of death who will feed upon them.

Where did Satan get all this power and authority? Well, the Apostles teach that God gave it to him. As Jesus says to Pilate – you could have no authority whatsoever unless it were given to you by my Father in heaven. Satan gets his power and authority from the same place and principle that the Sanhedrin got their power and authority to rough Jesus up and humiliate him and to kill him with death. It is from the same place and principle that every tyrant that has ever lived has gotten his power and authority to persecute and to terrorize and to humiliate and to murder. And many people follow these tyrants because of their power.

This is why in John, Jesus expresses his profound disappointment that “Except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.” It is only an evil and adulterous generation that seeks after a sign,”

Matthew says. And later in John, Jesus says: *Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the signs, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.*

And this is why Jesus appears to be so gruff with the nobleman. *“Except you see signs and wonders, you will not believe.”* The point is this: the raw power of the miracles really doesn't matter. Not in the context in which we usually think of them. The important thing to Jesus and to these apostolic writers is not the *display* of power.

The important thing is what the power does. The important thing is that we and they who see the signs understand them and *believe* what they are telling us about Christ. That's why the miracles are important. The important thing that Christ's miracles are saying to us is not the mere power to heal or to fill our bellies with food. The important thing about Christ's miracles is that they *do* heal and that they *do* nourish us. It is a message that is repeated over and over again, in every miracle and sign that Jesus works.

In John, in every act of power that he records, he attempts to lead the reader to an appreciation for what the act of power *means*. What does it say about Jesus and who he is? That's why these acts of power are important to John – not because they *are* acts of power – but because *they say something about who Jesus is*.

This explains Jesus' anger. He is disappointed because the people do not care about what the signs are saying – *they only care about their power and effect*.

And this means that for these people every powerful, charismatic leader who comes along from now on may lead these people wherever he wants to. The beast, the dragon, the false prophet – they all do miracles. Their power is so enormous that even the chosen ones of God could almost be deceived. But they are not deceived. Because they are *reading the signs of that power*. What is the sign of the deceptive power of the Beast? It is a sign that points straight to hell.

The purpose of the miracles in the New Testament is not to say that “might makes right.” Our wills are not in competition with God's power, they are in competition with Satan's egotism. Christ does not say ‘follow me because I am powerful.’ He is not saying that ‘might makes right.’ The power of Christ says: though I possess all power and all judgment, it is that I have laid down my power and my rights and my life in the grave for your redemption. My humility and my obedience are my credentials. The only thing that the miracles do is to confirm this testimony. God's testimony in me. And it is impossible for God to lie.

Remember what Jesus tells John's envoys in Luke: “Go and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.” The Beast doesn't work miracles like this. Ultimately, he only works miracles for *his* benefit, not for us. It is not the miracle per se. It is the *meaning* of the miracle. If the meaning of the miracle is that ‘might means right,’ then it is right to follow every anti-Christ that comes along that can work one.

We follow Christ not because of the signs and wonders, but for what they mean. We know how to predict the weather and we know the signs of the times. We know what's going on in our world. We know the sign of *this* generation. It's the sign of Jonah, who was buried in death for our transgressions, and was raised to life eternal for our justification. Again, that's Jesus' credential. This is the meaning of the miracle. Anyone who gives his only son for the salvation of the world - to suffer death and humiliation so that we might gain his virtue and be made beautiful for his marriage feast and obtain the thing that our souls most long for - that's the miracle-worker I will follow. That's the Christ, the son of the living God. - *Amen*