

## **In the Meantime, We Struggle** Ephesians 6:10-20

"Put on the full armor of God ..." If you were raised in church, this is not your first exposure to the "armor of God." In Bible School, you may have colored a soldier arrayed in such armor. I've even seen plastic "Armor of God sets" for kids available at Christian bookstores. But this armor is not just for children. I suspect, in fact, that it begins to mean the most to a person as he discovers the reality of a real battle being waged by Satan to undermine his personal growth as well as the purposes of God.

Someone observed that the spiritual disciplines of many today are about as anemic as one man's morning calisthenics that he described this way: "I talk my way through it. I say, 'Ready, now. Up, down – up, down.' After two strenuous minutes I tell myself: 'O.K. Now, the other eyelid.'"

Paul has masterfully described what God has been up to through the ages and what is already being accomplished by the work of Jesus. A Fallen creation is being lifted up by its Maker. Essential human relationships that flew to pieces because of sin are being restored. Racial walls are crumbling. Marriages and homes are being healed. All of this will be completed at the end of the age, but make no mistake, even now the kingdom of God is slowly but surely breaking into this present world order.

In the meantime, a conflict rages. It is a predictable struggle, for Satan, the prince of this world and the ruler of this age, has no intentions of quietly stepping aside while the kingdom of God takes shape on earth as it is in heaven. He will resist the work at every turn. He will destroy the unity of the church. He will undermine the love and safety of the Christian home. He will impair the pursuit of maturity by believers. That is why we are called to put on the full armor of God. We are engaged in a battle against powerful forces. God wants us to stand firm. Paul tells us how that is possible.

### **I. Recognizing Our Adversary (10, 11)**

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

#### **A. Our Enemy Is a Real and Personal Adversary**

Two little boys were discussing the Sunday School lesson on the Devil. One asked, "Do you believe in the devil?" The other boy said, "Naah! He's like Santa Claus. It's really your dad."

The devil is not just a literary personification of evil. He is a fallen, created being. He is the father of lies. "Devil," means "deceiver." Without the alertness that comes from our knowing that we are in a struggle with a cunning foe, we are sitting ducks for all kinds of temptation and we are utterly useless in the struggle against the cosmic falsehood that wars against God. This word "schemes" brings out the devil's strategic nature. When he tempted Eve, he didn't just embolden her to disobey God. He lied to her. "God didn't really mean what He said! You'll be like Him if you eat from this tree."

Three smiling corpses lay in an Arkansas morgue. A reporter goes to the coroner's office for the story. The coroner points to the first: "Cletus died of shock after winning a \$20 million lottery. Bo here has been begging the widow Jones to marry him. She finally said 'Yes,' and he just keeled over." Of the third fellow, the coroner said, "Bubba was killed by lightning." The reporter asked, "So why is the fool smiling?" Says the coroner, "He thought he was having his picture taken."

That's the devil's game - misrepresentation. He is not about horns and pitchforks. Who would fall for that? "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (II Corinthians 11:14). His strategy today is that if a lie is pervasive enough and told with enough bravado, people will swallow it. When believers simply absorb whatever worldly philosophy is trendy, Satan weakens their ability to stand firm in future days of crisis. The devil exploits intellectual passivity. Believers must stay close to Jesus.

## **B. We Win this Battle Only as We Fight It in God's Strength**

In our own self-sufficient stubbornness, we try to do the work of the Kingdom, tend to our worldly vocations, make all the connections for the kid's activities and still preserve time for our own recreation. Who has time to draw near to God? Of course, the weaker we become spiritually, the less fruitful we are. Jesus knew this. He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If anyone remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

We get caught up in much wheel-spinning that has little to do with the cosmic conflict in which we are engaged. How can we fight temptation? How do we resist the divisive tendencies that undermine the work of God in His church? How can we avoid being caught off guard by fits of anger or illicit passion that not only damage our testimony but also find us excusing our sinful attitudes? Are we just going to whip these things into submission by the power of our remarkable self-discipline?

Consider the phrases in these verses – "strong in the Lord," "in his mighty power," "armor of (or, provided by) God." If we hope to remain standing in the aftermath of powerful spiritual onslaughts, we must rely on the resources that God provides. Early in this letter, we learned that that as believers, we are already the recipients of "the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (chapter 1:7, 8). Here, His resources are described not as riches, but as armor that He provides for us so that we may stand firm even against the most insidious spiritual attacks.

## **II. Grasping our Strategy (12)**

<sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

### **A. Our Struggle Is Not Against Flesh and Blood**

It is difficult at times not to despise and want mix it up with those who flaunt their decadent values while they belittle Jesus, His Church and His people. Still, they are not the enemy. From His cross, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of such people. Nearness to Christ teaches us to distinguish the enemy from those who are merely blinded by him. Paul speaks of "rulers", "powers", and "authorities." These were ancient designations for the hierarchy of the evil powers that filled the air.

There is no consensus among Christians about the role of activism. Many believe that involvement in the political process is crucial, not only at the ballot box, but as candidates, in the streets and over the airways. Others put little hope in the process, concluding that the best chance this world has is for believers to commit themselves to building up churches that will shine forth with God's light through the present darkness. It's hard to know what are the best strategies for fighting invisible enemies.

## **B. Our Struggle Is on an Invisible Front**

All this “war with the devil talk” may conjure up thoughts on personal struggles with sickness or hardships, violent images of persecution or even sinister images of satanic ritual and cultic activity. This text on God’s provision certainly speaks to such things, for Christ is sufficient in all things, but don’t let the extreme distract you from the typical. Al Menconi writes: “Selfishness and immorality are far more consistent with Satan’s strategies than drinking blood or drawing pentagrams.”

Most of Satan’s activity does not occur by way of frontal attacks on individual believers or on the culture. I read this week that Satan works not so much “in” the background as he work “on” the background. In other words, he chips away at our foundations. He molds a culture that undermines traditional Christian values and that ridicules chastity, integrity and beauty. That way, many believers begin to act and think worldly even though they profess to be thoroughly Christian.

Stretching the truth, stretching the law, pilfering on the job, cheating at school, blowing up at people, spreading rumors, sexual sin - many Christians will never go the mat to stand against such things. They may even justify their own involvement in such sins, because the devil has blunted their sensitivities with a steady drumbeat of: “Who are you to judge,” “People don’t care about this,” “Everybody does that,” “It’s no one’s business” and so on. If we are only exposed to the voices of this world and we are not disciplined in the matters of knowing God’s truth, praying or being accountable to other believers, we will not be prepared to fare well in moments of overt attack.

Let us link this passage to the overall movement of Ephesians. What struggle did Paul have in mind as he was wrapping up this masterpiece about the eternal purposes of God? Clearly, the devil does not want God’s purposes to succeed. He does not want everything that has flown apart due to sin to be drawn back together in unity and beauty. And, he certainly does not want the church to be a cosmic showcase for God’s reconciling work. So, what does that mean, specifically?

The devil does not want Jew or Gentile, or for that matter, any two races of people to present themselves before a watching world as one new man in Christ. He does not want marriages to reflect the beautiful community that God had in mind when he established the union. He needs for fathers and their children to be at each other’s throats. He wants the workplace to be “dog-eat-dog.” The church needs to be a place of tension and distrust. Christian marriages need to be wars between self-absorbed people. Christian homes need to be cold, harsh, bitter and loveless. Bigotry must flourish.

Think about it. That’s what the devil wants to bring to pass in stark contrast to what God in Christ *IS* bringing to pass. For whose cause are you most useful? Before you answer, if you are blissfully unaware that such a struggle even exists or, if you are not trusting God’s equipping for that struggle, then, it is likely that you are more useful to the devil’s schemes than to God’s eternal purposes.

## **III. Mastering our Weaponry (13-17)**

<sup>13</sup>Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. <sup>14</sup>Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup>and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Paul speaks of a “day of evil.” Most students of the text do not think he is referring to any one specific monumental moment in time, but to recurring days of evil that believers in every generation must face. How we fare will depend largely on how we prepare. We must be familiar with the divine resources at our disposal. Here, these resources are identified as “the full armor of God.”

1) A belt was the first item a soldier readying himself for battle put on. It secured his loose fitting tunic so that he was unencumbered. His belt is where he hung his weapons. Paul likens truth to such a belt. If we do not begin with truth, none of the other implements for battle will fit right. Is Paul talking about the truth of the Gospel or about the truthfulness or integrity of a man’s inner being that God desires? One must produce the other if we are to be credible warriors in this decaying age.

2) An ancient breastplate protected the front of the torso and all the vital organs from a mortal wound. Interestingly, it offered no protection to a man’s back. Righteousness as a breastplate guards the heart as we move forward. True righteousness is proven by facing evil, not by avoiding the battle.

3) This “readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” is better than the hob-nailed cleats of the Roman soldier that enabled him to march quickly through any terrain and that gave him secure footing on any incline. Knowing that we are at peace with God gives us a firm footing. No matter what onslaught comes, we can face it because we know that our eternity with God is already secure.

4) Faith is our shield. Paul has in mind the huge oval-shaped shield that protected a forward-moving warrior’s entire body. Such a shield was fashioned from multiple layers of wood and other materials. Because these shields were so thick, flaming arrows were simply extinguished.

Satan’s attacks are appropriately likened to “flaming arrows” for his intent is that they will start unquenchable infernos. When we think about keeping unity in the church or living at peace with our spouse, we know how counter-productive temptations in regard to pride, selfishness, or anger can strike us out of nowhere. You might even be trying to pray your way through such a conflict when the focus on that conflict will cause you to start brooding. It is an act of faith to put those feelings into perspective and to choose the path of peace that honors God.

5) Why is salvation likened unto a helmet? Nothing guards one’s mind better than the assurance of salvation. If we are constantly in doubt of God’s faithfulness to us when we are under attack either by temptation or evil, we have little chance of standing firm through the vicious onslaughts of darkness.

6) God’s word is called a sword. Here, “word” is not *logos* which is used of Jesus as “the Word of God” or “God’s full self-expression.” The word is *rhema* which refers to a more specific utterance. This could mean that whatever the nature of your temptation, the Scripture has spoken to it. Hence, it is invaluable for a believer to know God’s Word. Certainly, this was how Jesus used the Scriptures when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Three times, the devil tried to coerce Jesus to shortcut His way into men’s hearts with some grandiose, but short-term trick. Three times Jesus rebuked Satan by speaking the Word of God to Him. “Who are you, devil? God has spoken!”

Everything we need to stand up against the schemes of Satan to undermine our lives, our church, our relationships and our homes is ours. The salvation of God includes powerful assurances, mighty perspectives, precise direction and remarkable promises – but we must gird ourselves for the fight.

## **IV. Clinging to our Sufficiency (18-20)**

<sup>18</sup>And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

<sup>19</sup>Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

### **A. Pray in the Spirit Constantly**

Paul spoke of armor for "the day of evil." Here, he speaks of prayer "on all occasions." Prayer is our training regimen for the battle. A sign in a high school restroom read: "NOTICE! In the event of a nuclear attack, the federal ruling against prayer in this school will be temporarily suspended." By our natures, we are better "crisis pray-ers" than "all-occasion pray-ers," but prayer is vital before the battle rages - about all sorts of things - on all occasions. An army is no better than its preparation.

Satan is constantly at work "on" the background, chipping away at the foundations, trivializing uniquely Christian values. That is how he prepares for the day of evil. We need to prepare in constant prayer, recognizing what he is up to. A posture of constant prayer is a posture of discernment. Don't sensationalize the phrase, "pray in the Spirit." Paul is simply contrasting Christian prayer with pagan babbling. Phrases like "in the Spirit," "in Christ," "by the Spirit," "with the Spirit," "of God" - these are typical throughout Ephesians. They simply remind us that our resources are divinely bestowed.

### **B. Paul's Only Prayer Request Was for Loyalty Under Fire**

In prison, Paul had many reasons to be frightened into silence. Still, he did not ask for prayers for his deliverance from the hands of mean people or from dangerous trials. When one is truly garbed in the provisions of Christ's salvation, this remarkable armor of God, one's outlook tends to be trusting and fearless. Who knows what God may have in mind? Life is more rewarding when, in difficult times, we see ourselves in the hand of God rather than as victims of circumstances. Soldiers and magistrates were not Paul's enemies. His real enemy was the satanic enticement to bow to fear.

I believe that people are lost in their sins until they turn to Jesus in repentance. I believe He's coming back to establish His eternal reign. If you share my beliefs, then join me as cannon fodder for the wise of this age, who desire to embarrass us into silence. But, know that the real enemy, the author of their blindness, is the devil. Find strength in the armor God provides. And, especially, have hope in knowing that this war was already won when Jesus died for your sin and defeated the grave.