

2021-12-26
The Full Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-18

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,

Some of you may be asking, how does spiritual warfare and the armor of God relate to Christmas? I'm so glad that you asked. I see connections on two levels. First, consider Herod's response to the visit of the Magi. Herod reacted, not in worship like the shepherds, but rather by ordering the slaughter of every boy in the Bethlehem area 2 years old or younger. Think about that for a second: 30-50 little baby boys dead. Think of the devastation, not just in one family but in a whole community. Is it any wonder Matthew quotes Jeremiah 31:15, **"Rachel weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted because they are no more."** This is clearly the work of the evil one.

And secondly, we need only look at our own lives during the Christmas season to see Satan's maliciousness. How many distractions are there that keep you from reading or from praying or from simply spending time with your spouse or your children? How many unmet expectations are there throughout the Christmas season? How many stressors? How many aggravations? Peace on earth? Good will to mankind? You're kidding right? Do you see it? The devil is always weaving his lies so skillfully that we often don't notice them until it is too late.

Well, my brothers, my sisters in Christ, God's word for us today is good news, even in spite of the downer I just laid in front of you. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the reality of the war that we are in. But he also described God's way to not just survive the battle but to thrive in the midst of it.

My goal today, as we walk through Ephesians 6:10-18, is three fold. First I want us all to realize that we are in a war. Not a skirmish, not an argument or disagreement but an all out war. Next I want us to identify the real enemy. It is difficult, if not impossible, to follow hard after Christ if we are not loving as Jesus loved and fighting as Jesus fought. And lastly, I want to survey the tools God himself has supplied so that we may stand against the evil one. This will give us hope

that even though the war will rage until Christ returns, as we stand firm we will know that we have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I find it interesting that Paul does not take time here to establish the doctrine of evil nor does he seek to prove the existence of Satan. He does clarify the nature of our enemy, which we will consider in a few minutes. But for now I want to ask this question: Is there really an enemy and is he really at war with us? Here are just a few texts to consider:

First Genesis 3:1-5:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Notice some things: first what is the enemy's objective? Does he care at all about Eve or for that matter Adam? No, as Jesus would say in John 10:10 **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy"** And what is his main weapon? If you said "deception", you're definitely on the right track. But if we are to understand God's enemy and our own, we need to look closer. His deception here, as it is throughout Scripture, is one of half truths and plausible falsehoods. The first shot taken at God's people is this little question with a huge implication: "did God really say?" And guess what? That single, simple question is tearing churches and families apart to this very day. Abortion, gender issues, finances, racial equality just to name a few. Did God really say this is wrong? Did God really say this is sin? Did God really say Jesus is the only way? Did God really say he will love you no matter what? Did God really say there is no condemnation? Did God really say he will make all things new? Did God really say?

Next, let's look at Job 1:8-11:

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."

There is really only one thing I want to point out from this passage for today: Satan even has the bravado to play his deception game with our almighty God. While we should never worry about God himself being deceived, consider this: If the devil is willing to ply half truths and plausible falsehoods before an all knowing God, how much more is he willing to do so to any of us?

Now let's check out: Matthew 4:3,5-6,8-9:

And the tempter came and said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

My comments from Gen 3 and Job 1 apply here as well. Half truths, plausible falsehoods, confronting the Son of God himself. But there is one other dimension to Satan's attack that this passage highlights. He is a master manipulator of God's word. How many times has an out of context verse been used to start a cult or incite a heresy? How many sins have been justified by misusing or misapplying the word of God? We should also remember that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14)

Finally consider Revelation 12:12:

Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!

It has been said here at LEFC and elsewhere that the devil is a defeated foe. This is a true statement. Jesus' death on the cross was the decisive victory. Sin atoned for. Death defeated. And yet the war rages on. Consider Gettysburg and Vicksburg in the Civil War. Together they turned the tide in that great conflict. And yet that war lasted much, much longer. Or consider Normandy in World War II. Once the Allies had a foothold in Europe, Hitler was a defeated foe. But did he surrender? On the contrary, the most bloody fighting was still to come. So it is with our great enemy. He rages on because he knows his time is short.

And while I've looked at only a few passages, the pattern is clear: there is an enemy of God and he is doing everything possible to subvert God's plan and God's people. If I stopped here, this would be really bad news.

But in Ephesians 6 Paul gives us some really good news: First, he identifies our adversary. You may ask, why is this good news? For two reasons. First, if we are to stand up against the onslaught of our enemy, we need to know his tactics, his methods, and his very nature. Here's a simple example, I use different devices to capture mice than I would to capture rabbits. The same is true for spiritual warfare. If we were in a human war, we would need tanks and an infantry, perhaps a navy or an air force. But those tools and resources are wholly inadequate if our battle is spiritual in nature.

Look with me at verse 12:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Take a moment and absorb what God is saying to us. Our neighbor is not our enemy. That politician we disagree with is not our enemy. The talking head on the cable news channel who gets everything wrong all the time is not our enemy. Even the abortionist and the activists are not the real enemy. Have they sinned? Undoubtedly. Do they need Christ? Most certainly. But they are not our true enemy. In fact Jesus would call us to pray for them, even in this moment: "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing"

What then is the nature of our battle? Put quite simply it is a spiritual battle, fought in two spheres. First there are forces at work here on earth that perpetuate "this present darkness". What keeps your neighbor or coworker from believing the gospel? What keeps you from fully grasping your freedom in Christ? Why is there unrest and disunity even in the best of churches? It is because the god of this age is blinding our eyes to what is real and what is true.

In 2019 my family and I took an adventure of a lifetime in hiking across the Grand Canyon (my adult children may describe it differently). But part of that experience was hiking through the night as we climbed out of the Canyon's North Rim. Along the way, as we periodically rested, we would hear roaring waterfalls. They were clearly there, but in the pitch blackness of the Arizona night, we were blind to them. So in our exhaustion and in our proverbial blindness, we simply trudged on, missing the beauty and the glory God had prepared for us thousands of years ago.

Satan is doing or attempting to do this all the time. Consider the messages from social media? Consider the messages in ads during football games and on HGTV? Consider the best life now theology that even seeps into our own prayers? Where does this come from? The world? Surely. The flesh? No doubt. But we must never forget the third crucial ingredient: the devil himself.

But there is another plane in this battle. There are spiritual forces in the heavenly places. Satan is not content to blind my eyes or to confuse your mind or to tempt another's heart. No he's continuing to do what he did back in Job. How does John describe him in Revelation? He is the accuser of the brethren. And here is Satan at it again: Luke 22:31-32:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

So both here on earth and in heaven above, Satan continues to seek to steal and kill and destroy. The obvious question seems to be "what can we do?" The fact is that Paul anticipates this question and provides a wonderful answer, which is the second part of his good news to us.

The answer, in summary is in Ephesians 6:13, **Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.**

You see God himself has provided the armor for this fight. As Peter would say: God has given us everything we need. And, it is interesting how Paul phrases this statement. God is not just the one dispensing the armor. He is giving us his very own armor. The implication here is that this is not some arm's length, impersonal transaction. Rather, it is God, our loving, Heavenly Father caring for us so much that he wants to ensure we have exactly what we need to endure the battle against Satan.

That said, let's look a little closer at God's very own armor. First up in verse 14 is the belt of truth. Given that the devil's primary tactic is deception and cunning, truth as the first piece of armor is incredibly important. While ferreting out lies and deceptions may have modest value, knowing and embracing the truth is tremendously more powerful and effective. Consider Jesus' prayer in John 17:17, **Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.** And his words to his followers in John 8:31-32, **"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** I could go on to John 14:6 or John 18:37, but as we look at these passages we come to see this is not our version of the truth or some convenient facts that we happen to like. No this is God's truth personified in Jesus Christ: absolute, inerrant and transformative throughout time.

Also in verse 14 is the breastplate of righteousness. Think about how the enemy accuses and tries to deceive us. One tact he takes is to play to our pride. That was his approach in the garden and with Jesus in the wilderness. But Satan is also the accuser of those who believe. That was the attack on Job and is also found in Zch 3. What is our defense when the accusations come? How do we stand? It is not our own righteousness (the basis of the attack) but rather on the ground of the righteousness of Christ. Stop and ponder the power and freedom found in Isaiah 53:5, **But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.**

Paul goes on in verse 15 to the gospel of peace. This piece of armor, of course deflects the attacks of accusation that come at us. But it also addresses the attacks of pride. Consider the essence of the gospel: Jesus has done what we could never do: be 100% righteous before God. And he has also taken on the just wrath of God on our behalf. Then, in what is often called "the great exchange", Jesus takes from us the justice, wrath and debt that would externally condemn us to hell, bearing that sin for us and then gives to us the righteousness, peace and fellowship with God that rightly belongs exclusively to him. Where am I in all of this? Where are you? We are simply bystanders and recipients. Pride has no foothold when the gospel is rightly understood. And, because of the imagery used here, Paul also makes it clear that the gospel does not terminate on us. It is a message to be proclaimed in this dark and dying world.

What ties this all together? It is faith as Paul makes clear in verse 16. Church, brothers, sisters, hear me when I say, none of this matters if you don't trust the triune God of the universe. We have to believe that God is our Abba, our daddy, and that he cares for us even or especially

when the wheels fall off the bus. We have to believe that Jesus died so that we can live and he rose again as the demonstration of both the sufficiency of his righteous life and atoning death, but also of the power that is available to all who believe. And we must believe that the Spirit is interceding for us even now so that each of us would walk in a manner worthy of the calling that God has placed on our lives.

Here is the question: do you really believe this? Do these realities mark your lives? If so, praise God! You have put on the full armor of God. But if not, I plead with you, on behalf of Christ, be reconciled with God. Come talk to me, or Dan or Ryan or one of the other elders. Do not let this day pass without considering fully the salvation that only Jesus provides.

There are two more pieces of armor and those are salvation and the word of God. I think Paul lists these last because it is really the word of God and salvation that undergirds everything we have discussed. We cannot see Satan and his schemes without the word. We cannot know God and his goodness without the word. We cannot appreciate the depth of our sin or the magnitude of our sin or the extent of Jesus' salvation without the word. I mentioned John 17:17 earlier. We are to be sanctified by the truth that is embodied in the word. I would also add Col 3:16. We need to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. That phrase is a sermon unto itself, but without the word of Christ in us constantly, all the armor Paul mentions will be ineffective and useless.

So where do we go from here? Paul helps us in verse 18. First and foremost we are to pray. This is a spiritual battle after all. Pray for what you may ask. My response would mirror Paul's: pray for everything. And as Matt Chandler would comment: pray from where you're at, not from where you think you ought to be. So maybe we need to pray for eyes to see the battle in front of us. Maybe we need to pray for the strength to not consider those around us as our enemies. Maybe we need to appropriate the truth of Christ's righteousness or the gospel or the faith to believe everything that God has done. Maybe we need to pray for the word to be more real in our lives or that it would dwell in us richly. And I'm confident we can all improve in our praying these same things "for all the saints".

Secondly, stay alert. We must always remember the devil is a roaring lion seeking for someone to devour. Remember that we are at war but Jesus has won the decisive battle. His call to us today is stand firm in the strength of his might.

As I end this sermon, I want to close with the benediction from Jude. I do so for two reasons. First it reassures us that this battle, though very real, is temporary. And it reminds us that our triune God is lovingly, joyfully majestically sovereign over all things, including our spiritual battle. Would you please close your eyes and receive the benediction of God: Jude 1:24-25 **Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever.**