

“Forewarned, Forearmed”
Ephesians 6:10-20

January 7, 2018

SI: We’re going to spend the next 12 weeks or so looking in depth at a few verses at the end of Ephesians, chapter 6 verses 10-20.

This is a famous passage in Paul’s writings.

It’s sometimes referred to as the armor of God passage.

The theme of the passage is spiritual warfare.

What is that? What is spiritual warfare?

Are we talking about demon possession? Are we talking about exorcism?

This passage is definitely about supernatural evil and our conflict with it.

But Paul clearly understands it to be something that’s not rare or unusual, but something every single one of us will encounter and have to deal with in the life of faith.

INTRO: I knew a man once who was a commercial airline pilot for many years.

But he got his start in aviation as a navy fighter pilot in Vietnam.

He said those experiences flying combat missions for the military gave him a unique perspective.

One time he was piloting a commercial jet when one of the engines quit.

He explained that's not inherently dangerous, that a twin-engine jet can fly on just one engine, but for safety you land as soon as possible.

Anyway, he started to make plans to land at the closest airport.

He looked over at his co-pilot who was a younger man, no military experience, civilian trained, and he said I could see that he had broken out into a sweat.

I laughed and said: What are you worried about? Nobody's shooting at us.

Keep that conversation in mind.

The Apostle Paul begins this passage with the word "finally."

That's not just to indicate he's about to finish the letter.

Instead, it's a signal that he's putting everything he has said in the letter up to this point into a certain perspective.

He's setting the entire letter in a particular context.

So let me give you a thumbnail sketch of the entire letter.

Ephesians has a simple outline. Just two parts.

Chapters 1-3 are about who you are as a Christian.

Chapters 4-6 are about how you are to live as a Christian.

Who are you?

Paul says that being a Christian is the greatest and most amazing thing in the world.

A Christian is a person chosen by God the Father, purchased by God the Son, sealed by God the Holy Spirit.

A Christian is a person adopted as a son of God, made a member of the family of God, made a citizen of the kingdom of God, made spiritually alive and built into a temple of the living God.

A Christian is a person who has been enabled to grasp how wide an long and high and deep is the love of Christ. That's the first half of the letter.

So how are you to live as a Christian?

Paul says: Live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Be who you really are.

Put off your old self and put on your new self.

Put off lying and put on truthful speech.

Put off sinful anger and put on patience.
Put off stealing and put on sharing
Put off unwholesome talk, speak what is helpful to build others up.
Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, be compassionate and forgiving.
Don't be drunk with wine, be filled with the Holy Spirit
Have a Spirit filled marriage, husbands and wives love and serve each other.
Have a Spirit filled home, children obey, parents don't frustrate.
Have a Spirit filled workplace, servants and masters respect one another.
Exercise humility, gentleness, and patience in the body of Christ.
Use the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given you.

And then Paul says: Finally. And here's the context.

As you do all this, as you live out your Christian life and identity
remember that someone is shooting at you.

You're in a combat zone.

You've got enemies who are trying to make you crash and burn in every one
of these areas and relationships where you are trying to live as a Christian.

If you've got a problem, if you've got a difficult circumstance in life—
if you've got an engine out—that's not your only problem.

Somebody's also trying to kill you.

What Paul is introducing here is what is often called spiritual warfare,
some writers have called it Christian warfare.

It's the context within which we follow Jesus Christ.

So like that old airline pilot, who always looked at flying through the lens of war,
so we must learn to do the same.

So let's start with some introductory ideas.

1. The reality of spiritual warfare
2. The experience of spiritual warfare

We have to understand and believe it exists
and we have to recognize it when it is happening to us.

MP#1 The reality of it

Paul teaches that there is a whole realm of life that is unseen.

It's inhabited by spiritual beings.

Even though we can't see this spiritual realm it is there and it makes a difference because it means this world is a battle ground.

Every square inch is claimed by Christ and counterclaimed by the Devil. It's not just Paul who says this, every NT writer speaks of this spiritual realm.

Peter: Your adversary the Devil, a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

John: Speaks extensively in his first letter of the Evil One

Whole world under the control of the Evil One, but the Evil One cannot harm those who are born of God.

And the book of Revelation John describes the Devil and spiritual warfare in very vivid, symbolic language. The red dragon, that ancient serpent.

Jude: Mentions a strange episode, archangel Michael disputing with the Devil

All the Gospel accounts describe Jesus' words about the Devil and conflict.

Jesus says the Devil was a murderer from the beginning, no truth in him, lies are his native language.

The Devil challenged Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, wilderness temptation.

Remember Jesus' words to Peter—Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, Peter.

In much of the Western world and within secular societies, people don't believe in a supernatural realm and conflict with the Devil.

You never hear the educated class in America, the primary cultural voices, talking about a supernatural source of evil.

If they use that word at all, the source is looked for in political or environmental or biological sources.

But the Bible clearly teaches a spiritual realm of evil and warfare.

So what difference does this make in the way you live?

It gives you a very different perspective.

As a Christian you realize you can't blame all your problems on flesh and blood. Paul says early in the passage that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Usually when Paul says "flesh" he means our sinful nature.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to satisfy lusts.

But when he uses the phrase "flesh and blood" he doesn't mean the sinful nature

he just means the human, the realm of human life.
So here's where the matter of perspective comes in.
When people face trouble and evil, they tend to blame problems strictly on flesh and blood, on themselves or on other people or on society or economics.
I have troubled marriage because of me or because of her or because of the in-laws or because of the money.
Paul isn't saying we don't struggle with flesh and blood, of course we do.
But he's asserting that there's usually more than meets the eye.
There are also spiritual forces of evil.

What this means practically is that Christians ought to be able to see that problems are often multi-dimensional.

I've been helped to understand this by a famous sermon by Richard Baxter.

Richard Baxter was a popular preacher in England in late 1600s.

One of his sermons was titled:

"The cure of melancholy and overmuch sorrow, by faith"

It's about depression. That's what they called it then. Melancholy.

He says there are so many people in our church who suffer from depression.

I've shared this with you before.

He says one cause of melancholy is what he calls physical distempers.

Back then they believed the body contained these different humors, illnesses are caused by imbalance of humors. Baxter said melancholy could be an imbalance.

What's the cure?

Seek "an ancient, skillful, experienced, honest, careful, circumspect physician, and neglect not to use him."

If someone you love doesn't want to go to the doctor, try to persuade.

Another possible cause, temperament.

Some people are naturally sensitive, have a tendency to be overly introspective.

You need to avoid your musings, spend time in pleasing, cheerful company.

He even says that if melancholy takes on a negative religious tone, reading the

Bible and praying make you more depressed, quit doing those privately, and focus on public worship and prayer with friends.

If living with someone like this, do all you can to make things calm.

Another possible cause, guilt. A guilty conscience can lead to melancholy.

The cure is repentance.

If you know someone like this, tell them often about the Gospel promises and that God loves sinners

He says sometimes a shock, a loss causes melancholy.

Loss of a child, loss of a limb, a major financial loss.

About the only thing that can cure this is time.

If you're friend of such a person, do little things to please them,
assure them of God's providential care.

And then he says that sometimes—and here's why I'm using this illustration—
sometimes melancholy is caused by demonic attack.

He describes it as a stream of terrible thoughts thrust into mind by Satan.

It's fascinating how he approaches this.

He says do not entertain these thoughts. Do everything you can to interrupt them.

He mentions using music and singing as a way of interrupting them.

Then he says: But don't be too troubled by them either—because they aren't you.

You say, Why am I thinking these terrible thoughts. I must be a terrible person.

I must not be a Christian. No, no, no. Don't fall for that.

They've been insinuated in your mind by the enemy.

What I find interesting about Baxter's sermon is that he doesn't say

Melancholy is just chemical, it's just psychological. It's just flesh and blood.

That's the way many secular people approach it.

He also doesn't say it's just spiritual, just demonic as Christians sometimes do.

There may be multiple causes that require different cures.

That's helpful.

But my main point in this example is the reality of spiritual warfare.

His recognition that there could be a demonic element.

So how do you recognize it?

MP#2 The experience of spiritual warfare

I want to focus on just one phrase in verse 12. Look at that verse again.

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.

Rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, we'll get to all that later.

Those are descriptions of demonic forces.

The phrase I want to focus on is “we wrestle.”

We don't wrestle against flesh and blood, but by implication, we do wrestle against these spiritual forces of evil.

I usually read the NIV. But I'm reading a different Bible version this morning, the ESV because of the translation of this verse.

NIV says: For we struggle. That's how it translates this word.

Struggle is not wrong. Or you could translate it fight.

But struggle and fight are more general words.

The real nuance of this word is wrestling.

One Greek dictionary says that in Homer this word is used to describe a contest between two in which each endeavors to throw the other and which is decided when the victor is able to hold down his prostrate antagonist with his hand upon his neck.

I have a Bible computer program with the Greek text and then all these different English versions and you can also add other modern languages, so I have a Spanish there as well.

And I was amused to see that the way this word is translated in Spanish is lucha.

Which of course makes me think of that Mexican wrestling—Lucha Libre, where they wear the hilarious masks.

So here's my question about this word wrestling.

Paul says: Stand firm in the strength of the Lord and his might.

Put on the full armor of God. He uses the image of a soldier in armor.

Then he seems to switch his images and he starts talking about wrestling.

But soldiers in armor don't wrestle.

Or do they? Paul hasn't changed his illustration.

He hasn't jumped from the military to athletics.

He's not talking about the sport of wrestling.

When do soldiers wrestle? Not those in the artillery.

Soldiers who wrestle are those in the trenches.

Soldiers who wrestle are those fighting hand to hand.
The enemy is right there and you feel him and smell him.
He's trying to kill you and you're trying to kill him.

When I was a boy, there are a number of World War II veterans in our church.
Some of them would tell stories.

I asked my parents once about a man, was he in WWII?
You know how it is when you are a child and your parents say something that awes you. They said: Yes, he was in WWII but he will never say a word about it because he experienced terrible hand-to-hand combat.

Paul is saying that you will mostly experience spiritual warfare in intensely personal and seemingly small battlefields.
You're going to wrestle with you opponent in your foxhole.

Let me just give you a tiny example of this.

Think of the last time really made an effort to get close to the Lord.

Something sparked a desire in you—a sermon, a conversation, a thought.
You say to yourself, I'm going to read God's word more carefully and regularly,
I'm going to listen to what the Lord has to say, I'm going to pray.
And you did, and the fellowship was sweet and you saw good things in life.
But then some weeks or months passed and you found didn't seem to have time.
Devotions became sporadic and then missed altogether.

Why? Why did you quit? Was it because doing those things were so hard?
Does this sound hard? I'm going to get up early enough every day to have 15 min.
to read the Bible and talk to God. That doesn't sound hard, does it?
If your boss said, We're changing things and starting workday 15 minutes earlier.
You would make the change the next day and never miss a beat.
If the school bus started coming 15 minutes earlier. Get kids up and out.
But if you say: I'm going to talk to God for 15 minutes—why is it so hard?
Because you're lazy? No! We wrestle not against flesh and blood.
Because it's an intense, personal, hand to hand fight.

I've been asked before if it bugs me that so many people are late to church.
Shouldn't everybody be here early preparing their hearts, speaking words of encouragement to each other instead of missing the call to worship and coming in halfway through the opening songs?
You wouldn't be late to work week after week.
A wise old minister told me years ago:

Remember, the Devil works overtime on Sunday morning.

When you see a family come to worship late, maybe looking a little flustered and distracted—they've fought the Devil and won.

How easy it would have been for them to say, we're late, let's just skip it.

I think as Presbyterians we tend to focus on evil inside us.

The remains of the sinful nature, our old self, lust, sins.

So we would tend to say about our struggles and failures it's mostly my failures, my weaknesses. And might be more inclined to challenge each other same way. And, of course, there's biblical warrant for that.

But it's my impression that our Pentecostal brothers tend to focus more on the evil outside us, the evil forces allied against us.

They would tend to say things like: The Devil works overtime on Sunday morning and really get that and approach it in a different way.

And that might lead to different strategies.

It gets back to what I said earlier about how this gives us a bigger, multi-faceted view of the Christian life.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said in one of his sermons on this passage:

The Christian life not a clinic but a barrack.

I find that bracing and encouraging.

It's biblical to say: This is not me, this is outside me. This is coming against me.

Brother, I know that's not you. It's an attack coming against you.

Let's fight it with God's strength.

Interesting passage. Interesting topic.

We'll see how this goes in coming weeks.

Let's try to widen our perspective about the Christian life.