

God's New Society

Message 12

The Warfare of God's Society

Ephesians 6:10-24

New Life

The young man opened his eyes and blinked. He was surrounded by wonderful fruit trees. A stream gurgled nearby, birds sang in the trees, and rabbits and squirrels played on the grass. Everything was so bright and clean. The air was exhilarating, and the young man jumped up and ran through the wood for the sheer pleasure of it. Something about this world seemed very familiar, but it also seemed very different. New, is how it felt. He had a dim memory of another world, very much like this one, but not so new. Old, in fact – and dark, and poor, and unhappy. But the young man did not dwell on those thoughts. In time he met an amazing woman. They married and had delightful children. Life was good.

But slowly the young man began to notice problems. Sometimes he and his wife would quarrel. Sometimes the children would misbehave. Occasionally the neighbors would threaten the happy family. These growing problems increasingly distressed the man and his wife, but they did not know the source of the problems or how to solve them. Then one day the postman came with a letter from the king. The letter was an alert that an enemy was loose in the realm, and everyone must arm themselves at all times. There were instructions in how to identify the enemy, how to protect themselves, and how to attack. The man and his wife were thrilled to receive this precious information. They read it carefully several times, and began to notice the work of the enemy in their marriage, in their family, and in their neighborhood. But now, with the king's armor, they began to defend themselves and to launch devastating attacks against their foe. The last time I heard problems still cropped up, but the enemy was steadily retreating.

Did you recognize that story? Whose story is it? Is it Adam's? Is it pure fiction? No, this is your story – if you believe in Christ. When you were born, you entered a wonderful world – a world God Himself created. This world is full of delightful natural beauty and contains amazing creations of man. You yourself were made in God's image, so you embody divine characteristics. But this world is also dark, ugly, and sick. An enemy invaded and has been looting and pillaging the world ever since. Disease, famine, poverty, and war ruin the best of life – and the specter of death looms over all. Everyone in this world will die, and everyone faces eternal death in hell.

This world will perish, but God did not abandon His world. God sent His angels and prophets to call out a people who would ally themselves to His cause, and when the time was right, God sent His own Son to defeat the enemy and save His own people. But Jesus did more than defeat Satan and pay for our sins. Jesus began to create a new world – one in which all people live in harmony and purity – where everyone imitates God their father. Since then, in every generation God has called people into this new world. He has rescued them from death and given them new life. If you first believed in Jesus when you were past childhood, you probably remember the thrill of new life. Suddenly you were free of sin. Suddenly God became real to you. Deep, inner joy replaced the simmering anxiety of your former life. You were born again!

But as you get used to your new surroundings, you notice that all is not perfect. Those sins that no longer enslave you still drag you down sometimes. You enjoy brotherhood with all Christians, but sometimes you do not act like brothers. And there are even times when you wonder if God actually loves you. In the midst of such doubts and struggles, many believers are profoundly confused. Did they miss something about following Jesus? Or are they perhaps not really believers after all? What they need is a message from God – an explanation of their new life and how to deal with their problems. The last chapter of Ephesians is that message.

Spiritual War

Why did you become a Christian? Did you need help with your problems? Did you want that intangible something your friends had and was so appealing? Were you trying to escape hell? What did you think you were getting into when you believed in Jesus? Did you think that He would help you get through life more successfully? Or did you realize you were enlisting as a foot soldier in a great war? In his commentary on Ephesians James Boice said, “Many Christians today...see Christianity not as an entrance into warfare but as an exit from it. They see it as the solution to our problems.”¹ Of course Christianity – or Christ – *is* the answer to our problems – but not in the simplistic way many people expect. Jesus immediately solves our problem of spiritual death and enslavement to sin. Jesus will eventually solve every problem of man. But in the meantime, Jesus enlists us in the war against the source of our problems – our ancient enemy, the devil.

Some of us romanticize war. We thrill to the thought of glory won on the battlefield, and long to get our share of that glory. When I was a child I greatly admired George Patton, general of the Third Army in Europe during World War II. Patton was a man’s man. He trained relentlessly and never lost a battle. His philosophy was to attack constantly. If you are always attacking the enemy is always forced to defend. On one occasion, when reflecting on the nature of war he said, “War is the noblest endeavor of man. God how I love it!” Others of us are a bit shocked by such a statement, and wonder if perhaps Patton loved war too much. We might fight if necessary, but not with any pleasure. And some are opposed to war and will never fight. But whatever your opinion of war, scripture teaches us that war is a constant reality. Jesus decisively defeated Satan when He rose from the dead, but Satan is still alive and active. He is enraged that Jesus tricked him by rising from the dead, and he dearly desires to make you pay for it. Satan’s one joy is life is to see you suffer because that is what brings the most sorrow to God. And this will never change until Jesus returns at the end of history. Until then we are in a constant war, whether you like it or not.

What is the most dangerous place is war? Is it in the air? On the sea? In the field? A tank provides protection, but is a death trap if its armor is penetrated. Each place in battle has its dangers, but the most dangerous place is anywhere you are unarmed for the battle. If you are an infantryman but do not wear your helmet, your chances of survival are greatly reduced. If you are an artillery gunner but do not get the ammunition for your gun, you will more likely be hit yourself. If you are unaware there is a battle in progress and you wander out into the street, your chances of living through the day are slim. By far the most dangerous place in anywhere that you are not armed for battle.

This passage of scripture has many interesting aspects to it, but this is the one important lesson: you are at war! If you try to deny this, you will pay dearly for your stubbornness. Verse 12 says, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” This war is deadly serious. If God has chosen you and adopted you, if Christ has redeemed you, if the Spirit has sealed you – you will never be plucked out of the Father’s hand. But you may suffer terribly if you fail to fight wisely.

The Enemy

Let us begin our study of this passage by noting what Paul has to say about our enemy. Going to war without a good understanding of your enemy is incredibly foolish, but many Christians are ignorant of Satan and his methods. Paul calls our attention to three characteristics of the devil.

First, the devil is powerful. Satan is far more powerful than we. We are no match for him, and any attempt to fight him in our own strength is not courage, but stupidity. But some people greatly overplay Satan’s power. They speak as though Satan were a dark form of God. This is totally false. The devil is a

¹ Boice, p. 224.

created being. He corresponds to the archangels such as Michael and Gabriel – not to God. Satan is not omnipotent. His power far exceeds yours, but it has limits. He is not omnipresent. People often talk as though Satan is at work here, there, and everywhere. False. Satan is at work in only one place as a time. Satan is not omniscient. His knowledge is vast, but not unlimited. It is true that Satan uses demons and people in his evil work. He also takes full advantage of the sin that resides in our flesh and its corrosive influence in the world. But as a being, Satan is only one creature with limited power. C. S. Lewis pointed out that the devil is *God's* devil, and hell is *God's* hell. God made them both, and they do His will. Nevertheless, do not be an idiot and think you can overcome Satan yourself.

Second, the devil is evil and destructive. His evil is pure evil, undiminished by the grace of God in human beings. John Stott says of the devil and demons, “they have no moral principles, no code of honor, no higher feelings....They are utterly unscrupulous, and ruthless in the pursuit of their malicious designs.”² Never think you can compromise with Satan. He will destroy you if you try – and enjoy it.

Third, the devil is sly, crafty, and scheming. In other words, he is a lot smarter than you are, and he will trick you into falling for his lies. He attacks in various ways. Peter says he attacks like a roaring lion – as if to frighten us to flee the field (1 Peter 5:8). He appeared to Eve as a friend, offering good advice and willing to help her get ahead in life (Genesis 3:5). In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul tells us that Satan comes as an angel of light. On this topic Martin Luther said, “When you look for the devil, don’t forget to look in the pulpit.”³ There are pastors who lie to their flock, leading them to hell. In 1 Timothy 4:1 Paul says, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons...” Beware you do not listen to pastors who depart from the truth. Flee such churches.

Paul says, “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” Commentators have attempted to explain what these principalities, powers, rulers, and hosts really are. Some suggest they are different ranks of demons. Others have suggested they are different aspects of rule. I think both somewhat miss the point. Paul is not so much referring to different positions among the evil forces, but illustrating the comprehensiveness of evil. It is similar to the song I sang as a child in Bible school. “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white; they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” The point is not that red means American Indian, or yellow means Chinese (although as I child that is what I thought). These different groups represented the whole of human childhood. Even as a child I grasped that. So these various evil powers represent all evil power.

“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood”, but flesh and blood are certainly part of our daily struggle. Here Paul’s point is that in our problems with other people and the real wickedness they perpetrate, Satan is behind it all. We do not mean that all thieves and murderers and fornicators are demon-possessed. We mean that Satan casts a long shadow. His influence is passed from person to person and is captured in evil institutions, such as slavery and abortion. A flesh and blood doctor may kill the unborn baby, but Satan is the evil force that creates the situation in which such atrocities can occur. The real battle is in the heavenlies – which the NKJ translates “heavenly places” and the NIV “heavenly realms”. This is that spiritual dimension, that alternate universe which is just as real as ours, but is invisible. Paul introduced us to the heavenlies in 1:3 where he said God has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ”. In 1:20 Paul tells us this is where Christ is enthroned, and in 2:6 this is where we also sit now. In 3:10 God’s wisdom is revealed to the “principalities and powers” in the heavenlies, and now we

² Stott, p. 264.

³ Boice, p. 234.

discover that these powers are fighting us right in the new universe where Christ has brought us.

What is the point of all this? The point is that the battle is not ultimately with your atheist professor who is trying to destroy your faith, or your immoral roommate who is trying to destroy your purity, or even with Saddam Hussein who would love to destroy your life. These are mere front men. These are skirmishes on the sidelines. They are very important skirmishes, and they must be fought. But the heat of the battle is elsewhere – in the spiritual dimension where spiritual beings fight for supremacy on earth. This battle determines the course of the whole war. This is the battle we must win, and this is the battle that requires spiritual weapons.

The Armor

You cannot go into battle with a spade shovel. You cannot fly passenger planes in war. You need the right weapons to fight effectively. You will not win spiritual battles with weapons of the flesh, such as intelligence, education, social skills, or good looks. God can use these and other positive qualities you may have, but they are not the weapons that will win the war for you. Paul proceeds to list the spiritual weapons that *will* be effective in defeating your enemy. William Gurnall spent 1200 pages on these in his legendary book *The Christian in Complete Armor*. We will just get started.

First is truth. You must have a growing knowledge of God's word. Remember that Jesus defeated Satan's temptation by quoting scripture. If you have a poor knowledge of scripture, you are poorly armed. If you are not growing in your knowledge of the Bible, you are setting yourself up for defeat. Second is righteousness. Most of chapters four and five are about practical righteousness. If you are not growing in holy living, you will someday fall into serious sin. Next there is the preparation of the gospel. Peter said, "...always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you..." (1 Peter 3:15) What sort of soldier is a man who is not ready? Fourth is faith. Daily trusting in Jesus is the key to the Christian life. Do not allow your battleworthiness to be impaired by legalism or licentiousness. If you are trusting Jesus, you will be unaffected by Satan's temptation. Then there is your salvation. Remember that Jesus bought you, and the Father will never allow you to be plucked from His hand. You can face death because you know you are saved. Next there is your sword, the word of God. Master it. Do not remain clumsy in using the Bible. Finally there is prayer – spiritual artillery by which we call down the powers of heaven against the enemy.

Most commentators compare the armor listed in this passage to the armor of the Roman soldiers in Paul's day. There is some merit in this, and I am sure Paul knew how the Romans equipped themselves for battle. But more pertinent for understanding this passage is its precursor in Isaiah 59. Let us read verses 15 to 20.

Then the LORD saw it, and it displeased Him That there was no justice.
He saw that there was no man, And wondered that there was no intercessor;
Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him;
And His own righteousness, it sustained Him.
For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head;
He put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, And was clad with zeal as a cloak.
According to their deeds, accordingly He will repay,
Fury to His adversaries, Recompense to His enemies;
The coastlands He will fully repay.
So shall they fear The name of the LORD from the west,
And His glory from the rising of the sun;
When the enemy comes in like a flood,
The Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him.

“The Redeemer will come to Zion,
And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,” Says the LORD. Isaiah 59:15-20

In this passage you can see the armor of God – the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation. What is remarkable about this passage is who wears the armor. This passage follows an account of Israel’s sinfulness. God saw the sinfulness of Israel, and He was unhappy about it. He looked around for someone who would remove Israel’s sinfulness, but there was no one. So God did it Himself. When evil had to be fought there were no soldiers to do the fighting, so God armed Himself. God put on the armor and prepared for battle. And how will he fight? He will repay the wicked for their sins, but He will come as a redeemer for His own people.

The key lesson of this passage is that Jesus is the warrior of His people. You must fight, but your fighting is a follow-up to Jesus’ fighting. You are not in this alone. Jesus said He would be with you to the end, and Jesus is armed and fighting right by your side. And as you look at the pieces of the armor, you can see that they are simply aspects of Jesus. Jesus is the truth, Jesus is our righteousness, Jesus delivered the gospel, Jesus is the man of faith, Jesus accomplished salvation, and Jesus spoke the word of God. Another way of saying that we should put on the armor of God is to say that we should put on Jesus - which Paul has been saying all along in the book of Ephesians.

God Our Fortress

Martin Luther grasped that ultimately Jesus is our armor. Throughout his life he was attacked, excommunicated by the pope, crippled by disease, tormented by sin – yet he fought on, because he clung to Jesus. His great hymn says in four verses more than I have said in these four pages.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God Martin Luther, 1483-1546

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and pow’r are great, and, armed with cruel hate;
On earth is not his equal.
2. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing.
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He;
Lord Sabaoth His name, from age to age the same;
And He must win the battle.
3. And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.
4. That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still;
His Kingdom is forever.

Are you prepared to let goods and kindred go, even life itself? Your body will perish, but God's Kingdom will endure. If you are in God's Kingdom, you have nothing to fear. Someday you will get a new spiritual body. If you believe in Jesus you have invincible armor. Put it on, and rise – let us fight for our Lord. And if you do, you will win glory for God, extend His Kingdom, and make your life really count.

Do you want to look back on a life spent earning money and buying things? No! Whether you are a CEO or a ditch digger, a scientist or a housewife, you can fight the spiritual war. And in the end you can look back on a life well-lived. As William Shakespeare had King Henry V say after the battle Agincourt, those who fight together form a tight bond of brotherhood.

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

You do not want to stand in eternity with the saints who fought well, who lost their possessions or their lives, and admit that you were too lazy or cowardly to fight. This vision of the Christian life is vividly painted in another war hymn, "For All the Saints".

For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight;
Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

O may Thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave, again, and arms are strong.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;

The King of glory passes on His way.
Alleluia, Alleluia!

From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Isn't that what you want? Don't you want to fight bravely to the end, and then join the mighty throng of victorious warriors as they march triumphantly into the eternal city? By God's grace you shall! Let's take up His armor and pray for God to make us successful warriors.

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April 26, 2005