

Battle Ready

Ephesians 6:10-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this last Sunday of August, 2024, the last Sunday of summer (which I know many people—including myself!—aren't *quite* willing to let go of yet), on a Sunday where the weather is warm and the sky is blue, where some, perhaps, are looking ahead to one last long weekend before the rush of kids and school and regular fall routines and rhythms begin again...

On this lovely late-summer Sunday... the theme is spiritual warfare, and the central image comes from the domain of the battlefield.

Aren't you glad you came to church today?

I have a suspicion that spiritual warfare is a topic that many of us view with, well, *suspicion* (at best).

What, are you talking about horns and pitchforks? Demon possession and low-budget horror movies?

We'll get to that.

I also suspect many of us who have been formed in peace church traditions might struggle with the imagery Paul uses here.

Why helmets and shields and swords? What about all that "swords into plowshares" language from the prophets? Didn't Jesus tell Peter to put *away* his sword when Peter was ready to do battle with the forces of evil in Gethsemane?

Yes, they're just metaphors. But why compare the gifts God gives his people to resist evil to the instruments of war?

We'll get to that, too.

I want to start, though, by reflecting on at least one of the ways in which this text has been used, at least in my experience.

It may connect with your own experience. It may not.

When I was a kid I remember hearing this passage taught in Sunday School (and seeing illustrated images of soldiers with all their armour helpfully highlighted with the right words—"truth" on the belt, "faith" on the shield, etc.), and kind of getting the impression that that there was this big bad world of evil people who didn't believe the things that we did, and we had to strap on our armour and go out there and do battle with them.

(Not literally, of course, but, you know, with the obvious superiority of what we believed.)

- Truth = our ideas
- Righteousness = our morality
- Gospel of peace = shorthand for "the gospel" which was, "how to get saved"
- Faith = the strength of our personal convictions
- Salvation = pretty similar to "gospel"
- The word of God = the Bible (more specifically, our interpretation of the Bible).

All of these were tools that God had given us to go out and vanquish the enemy. Which, again, was people who didn't believe what we did.

I may be guilty of caricaturing things a little, but only a little.

This is not what the text is about. This is not how Christians should use this text.

God knows that our cultural moment has enough people who are convinced that they have all the truth and everyone who doesn't agree with them is captured by evil lies.

Pick any conversation about any controversial issue. The other side is not just misguided or in error, but dangerously and deliberately wrong, possibly even evil. Our side is not just right but virtuously and faithfully so.

This is the basic dynamic that drives politics (and we'll see plenty of it in the news this fall!).

This text is not our marching orders to march off and do battle with all the wicked people who disagree with us even though, sadly, many Christians have interpreted it in this way over the years, sometimes in the most grimly literal terms.

Last week we talked about what it means to live wisely in the times God has placed us. I said last week that wisdom involves humility. I am still convinced of this a week later 😊

So, it is really important to be clear on the nature of the enemy Paul is speaking about in this text.

He says it quite plainly in verse 12:

Our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Which brings us back to spiritual warfare. As I said, my guess is that this is an uncomfortable subject for many of us.

We obviously don't see an unseen realm where God and the forces of evil are operating (that's why it's called *unseen*!).

Isn't this whole world of demons and angels and warfare language something that perhaps less educated and more credulous Christians believe?

Aren't there already too many Christians who believe that there is a demon lurking around every corner or that every bad thing that happens in the world is the result of some failure to properly account for the supernatural!

And what does Paul even *mean* with that whole list of rulers and authorities and cosmic powers and spiritual forces...?

I get all these concerns. I have felt them at various times and to varying degrees in my life.

But I think it is both unwise and unfaithful to Scripture to just dismiss the whole realm of spiritual warfare.

For starters, as I gestured toward a few weeks ago and will repeat today, I think there is a clear socioeconomic dimension to our discomfort with what Paul describes as “our struggle against the spiritual forces of evil.”

I mentioned one of the guys in jail that I recently met, the guy with God and the devil tattooed on his neck to remind him every time he looked in the mirror that he was in a battle.

He is a constant reminder to me that those who know their need tend to believe in an unseen realm where a spiritual battle is taking place.

Those whose lives are a daily struggle against poverty, addiction, all forms of dehumanizing prejudice, against their own inner struggles with shame and guilt.

It is not hard for these people to believe that there is an unseen realm, a whole array of powers bent on thwarting God’s purposes for the world and for their lives.

Their lives *feel* like a battle.

And I know that even those of us who spend most of our lives insulated by our wealth and our education and our comfort can find ourselves plunged into circumstances where it’s clear that we are powerless against what threatens us, whether it’s addiction, shame, or despair or conflict that seems impossible to overcome.

We don’t need to think about horns and pitchforks here to take seriously the reality that there are powers in the world that resist God’s saving and liberating activity.

Among C.S. Lewis’s more popular works is a little book called *The Screwtape Letters*. The story takes the form of a series of letters from a senior demon, Screwtape, to his nephew, Wormwood, a junior tempter. They are collectively trying to make sure that an unnamed person referred to as “the Patient” doesn’t become (and, later, remain) a Christian.

In the introduction to the book, Lewis writes these words:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race fall into about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.¹

Lewis wrote this book in 1942, almost exactly in the middle of World War 2 which witnessed some of the worst atrocities our race has ever seen. I don't think many people who witnessed the gas chambers, and the mass slaughter of Jews and other minorities would have needed much convincing that perhaps there was something demonic at work in the world.

Anyone who has lived or is living through the horrors of war is very aware that there are forces of darkness and even evil that animate nations and groups and individuals, that drive them down dark and destructive and dehumanizing paths.

In his commentary on the book of Ephesians, Mennonite scholar Tom Yoder-Neufeld says this about Paul's list of who our struggles are against:

Whatever the origins of these terms, they are intended to be shorthand for the myriad of powers, great and small, personal and impersonal, individual and systemic, that resist the saving activity of God among humanity.

Powers great and small, personal and impersonal, individual and systemic. That covers a lot of ground.

It's easy to see this in things like Auschwitz. We're not at war.

But are there areas in our relatively affluent, relatively educated, relatively secular culture where there are powers at work that "resist the saving activity of God among humanity?"

There is much that could be said here. I gestured toward four areas of our life last week where I think our culture can and does lead us badly astray, and where Christian wisdom is desperately needed.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), 9.

I will focus only on one area this morning. I wonder if in our time one of the areas in which the principalities and powers might be at work is in our assumptions about human life and death.

I am aware that there are *hugely* complex cases at both the beginning and the end of life. And I realize that issues like medically assisted dying and abortion are among the most controversial ones in our culture.

I know that these are issues that affect people and families in deeply personal ways, that some of you *have* walked through these things or *are* walking through them with those you love or *will* do so in the future.

And I would never want to place limits on the mercy of God, which I believe can and does enter into every situation of human pain and sin and brokenness.

But the ease with which we can and do end life in our country and in Western culture more broadly makes me shudder.

Is it crazy to think that there might be some anti-God, anti-life powers at work in the world that we are giving in to, the world that we are creating?

I think that from a Christian perspective, we can only say that there is an evil at work in any culture that sees life as an intolerable burden and not a gift to be stewarded (however challenging this might be); a culture that treats what God created and called “good” as “bad” or “inconvenient” or “disposable.”

So, all this is to say that I *do* think that there are “powers” at work in our world. I think it is spiritually irresponsible and empirically dishonest to imagine otherwise.

Let’s move on to the “armour of God” part. Here, too, I suspect many of us have our reservations.

As Mennonites, as a historic peace church, we may squirm at all the weaponry metaphors. Even if we might struggle with the doctrine of pacifism, with how peace and violence and protecting the vulnerable work in this fallen world, we would still prefer less militaristic imagery!

On Friday, Joani and I were hunting around on the internet for an image to put on the bulletin cover. Almost every google search for “Armour of God” yielded some intimidating looking medieval knight ready to march off into battle.

N.T. Wright points out that the weapons Paul speaks of in this passage are mainly defensive: “The belt, the breastplate, the shoes, the shield, and the helmet, are all to enable you to remain safe under attack. Only the sword has a potentially attacking capability” but the sword is “the word of God.”² I’ll say a bit more about that later.

So, again, we cannot really find justification for going into attack mode from this passage.

The armour of God is to help us stand. To resist. To not give in to all that would seek to lead us away from God’s saving purposes in the world.

So, quickly, what is this armour? Well, the most important thing to note here is that it is the armour *of* God. It is not some set of tools or virtues that God gives us, at least not primarily.

The armour is, fundamentally, what *God has already accomplished*, settled realities upon which we can stand firm.

Truth. “The primary thing about the Christian message is that it is *true*; if it isn’t, its meaningless. It isn’t true because it works; it works because it’s true.”³ God, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, defeating the powers in his cross and resurrection. The forgiveness of sins. The hope of glory. This is the truth about who we are, about who God is, and about the ultimate destiny of the world.

Righteousness/justice. “This isn’t just private moral “virtue,” important though this is part of it. It’s fascinating to me that the word righteousness can also be translated “justice.” God will make what is wrong and unjust right.

The gospel of peace. Peace between God and us. Peace between previously hostile groups (Jews/Gentiles). Peace that changes the nature of the battle. Peace that allows

² N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (London: SPCK, 2002), 74.

³ Wright, 74.

Christians to do crazy things like put down their weapons, even lay down their very lives, secure in the knowledge that this is how Jesus defeated the enemies that threatened him.

Faith. Belief in Jesus as the risen and conquering lord, the power that stands over all other powers, will protect us when the enemy's arrows fly, whatever the arrows may look like (doubt, despair, difficult life circumstances, temptation).

Salvation. The sword of the spirit, the only offensive metaphor in the list of armour, is the word of God. My Sunday school teachers, bless them, were wrong. It's not "the bible." Scripture is certainly important, but "the bible," as we know it now, did not exist when Paul wrote these words.

Again, Tom Yoder-Neufeld is helpful here:

In Ephesians, the term *word of God* has not yet come into use as a synonym for Scripture. Instead, it refers to the whole variety of divine revelation and intervention.⁴

And, of course, if we have John's gospel in our minds, we cannot help but think, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..."

The decisive divine revelation and intervention was, of course, Jesus. Jesus is the Word of God, the "sword" we wield against any and all enemies.

Each one of these pieces of armour is something that God *is* or God *has done* in Jesus Christ. They are not helpful tools that God gives us to go out and fight on our own. They are accomplished realities upon which we stand.

So, we might sum up by saying, "To be battle ready is simply to boldly and confidently stand in the reality of the finished work of Jesus Christ."

The passage ends with a call to prayer. That's the image that we ended up going with on the front of the bulletin.

Prayer is many things, but among them is a form of spiritual warfare. Yoder-Neufeld describes prayer as "struggle and solidarity."

⁴ Yoder Neufeld, 304.

But Paul ends very personally. He asks the Ephesians to remember him in prison. He asks that they pray for boldness. Even Paul, who doesn't often seem lacking in confidence or conviction, asks for the church to pray that he would have the confidence to proclaim what he knows to be true.

And this is what I pray for each one of us.

That we would not be naïve about the powers that seek to thwart God's purposes for us and for the world.

But that we would live out our faith boldly and confidently secure in the knowledge that the Divine Warrior, our Prince of Peace, has already won the battle.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

