

## Warfare Prayer

4 of 8 in *Paul's School of Prayer*

January 26, 2020

Ephesians 6:10-18

Allow me to begin this message with a couple of questions—and I direct these questions especially to those of you who identify as Christians— which is most of you.

Here's the first question. As you seek to follow Jesus, do you ever feel *opposed* – like *something or someone is set against you*?

How many of you would say, yes, I feel like I'm opposed— like something or someone is set against me— if not all of the time, then at least some of the time?

A lot of you.

Here's the second question. *Why do you think that is?*

What's the explanation for this sense that so many of us have, this experience that so many of us share in common? It can probably be explained by a combination of factors, but from a scriptural point of view, the foremost factor is something called *spiritual warfare*.

The Bible is both clear and unapologetic in its assertion that certain forces are indeed set against all humanity, especially against those of us who follow Jesus.

Renowned author C.S. Lewis said that:

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin.

Lewis was of course referring to the devil and the demons that do his bidding.

Spiritual warfare—the cosmic struggle between unseen supernatural forces of good and evil is not just one among many themes in the Bible. As author John Eldredge says:

It is the backdrop for the whole Story, the context for everything else. God is at war.

And so are those of us who follow him. Eldredge goes on to say that:

Until we come to terms with war as the context of our days we will not understand life.

We will misinterpret much of what is happening to us.

Too often, we mistakenly assume that the only characters on the stage of life are human beings and God. As a result, many Christians come to one of the two following conclusions (or perhaps a combination of the two) when they experience hardship or difficulty or opposition in following Jesus. Have you ever come to one or both of these conclusions?

1. **Something's wrong with me.** It's all my fault. I'm a lousy Christian. I'm blowing it. I'm not mature enough, not disciplined enough, and so on. There's this sense of personal inadequacy.
2. **Something's wrong with God.** It's as if he's holding out on me. He's not answering my prayers. Maybe he's not as powerful or capable as I had hoped. Or maybe God's not trustworthy—not true to his promises. After all, didn't Jesus promise us abundant life? *I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*<sup>1</sup> Yeah right, some conclude. How many Christians are actually experiencing *that*?

But were you aware that Jesus' promise of abundant life goes hand in hand with a statement about the existence of a thief? In John 10:10 Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." And then he adds, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Our lives begin to make a whole lot more sense when we understand that an enemy opposes us—an enemy who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy the life that Jesus comes to give us.

Jesus comes to give us fullness of life—love, freedom, joy, purpose, blessing. But in the same breath, he warns us: *Heads up; there's a thief. My fullness of life isn't going to come to you without a fight.*

That's because God's Story—and by extension, your story and mine—has a villain. Spiritually speaking, we are at war.

Today, we continue in our series called *Paul's School of Prayer*, we'll be studying the Apostle Paul's famous passage on spiritual warfare in Ephesians chapter 6, verses 10-18. If you

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<sup>1</sup> See John 10:10. All scripture quotes taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

have your Bible, or a Bible app, I invite you to find this passage, and follow along as we make our way through it over the course of the message.

As we unpack this text, we're going to consider *who we fight, what we fight, and how we fight*. It's when we get to the last section of the message on *how we fight*, that we'll be looking particularly at the place of prayer in spiritual warfare. After all, this is a series about prayer. But first, we need to consider:

## 1. Who we fight.

In verse 12, Paul says:

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.

Who do we fight? We fight **the spiritual forces of evil**, says Paul.

As followers of Jesus, our fight, ultimately speaking, is not against flesh-and-blood human beings, but against supernatural and personal forces of darkness that operate in the unseen spiritual realm that surrounds us—what Paul calls *the heavenly realms*.

Now some of you may be thinking:

*Man, this is 21st century North America—and here we are talking about the devil and demons?*

And yet to this day, a very large percentage of people on this planet—especially in places like Africa, Latin America, and Asia—have no problem believing in demons and unseen spirits. For them, it's a given. It's part of their worldview. But in the Western world, many find this a foreign concept. Here people are more inclined to believe that everything has a natural cause and a scientific explanation.

Some have argued that things like racism and violence come from a lack of education and civilization. It's only the more "primitive, uneducated, uncultured" peoples that get caught up in such forms of evil. Really?

Five years ago I visited Switzerland with my daughter, and one day, we travelled into France where we visited the site of the Natzwieler-Struthoff Concentration Camp. We stood on the

very ground where thousands of Jews died in Nazi gas chambers, and we saw the crematorium where their lifeless bodies were burned to ashes.

Consider the fact that death camps like this—and the Holocaust itself—arose out of what was considered among the world’s most educated and cultured nations.

A strictly rationalistic, scientific worldview simply cannot account for evil of that magnitude. But the Bible doesn’t have that problem. There are unseen, sinister spiritual powers that stand behind the human evils in this world that we can see, says Paul.

Indeed, the Bible teaches that evil came from the free will of two races of beings, both of which God originally created as good: angels and humans. Some of the angels fell by exercising their free will and rebelling against God. These fallen angels—the devil and his demons—are personal supernatural beings—the spiritual forces of evil.

And then you have the human race. We too rebelled against God, and as a result, sin and evil resides in our heart. And the sin that’s deep in our souls—our innate self-absorption—is aggravated by the unseen but very real influence of the devil and his fallen angels.

It explains much of why this fallen world is the way it is. So as Christians, who do we fight? We fight these spiritual forces of evil. Next, let’s look at:

## 2. What we fight

In verse 11 Paul tells us to:

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.

What do we fight? We fight **the devil’s schemes**. The devil is wily. He’s a schemer. In 2 Corinthians, Paul speaks about making sure we don’t let Satan outwit us, *for we are not unaware of his schemes*.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s look at a few of the key schemes the devil uses.

First, the devil tries to get people to either *underestimate* or *overestimate* the power of the spiritual forces of evil.

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<sup>2</sup> See 2 Corinthians 2:11

C.S. Lewis famously said that there are “two equal and opposite errors” people can fall into when it comes to demons:

One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.

The demons, says Lewis, take equal delight in both errors.

The demons delight in those who underestimate them—whether it’s the scientific rationalist who denies their existence entirely—or whether it’s the professing Christian who has heard about the devil, but essentially lives as if God’s Story has no villain. Such people pose no threat to the devil’s dark agenda.

The demons also delight in those who overestimate their power. I remember back in the late eighties when I was a student at a Christian university in New York State. It seemed like everyone on campus was reading the hottest new Christian book at the time—*This Present Darkness* by Frank Peretti.

It’s a best-selling novel about angels and demons that battle for control of the citizens of a small town. The book sold millions of copies, and was even made into a movie. From what I remember, it was quite a scintillating read, and it did open the eyes of many Christians to the reality of spiritual warfare. Still, I quite agree with the following critical review, which says that:

Peretti’s book has given a shot in the arm to those who find a demon under every bush and who jump to the remedy of exorcism for every spiritual malady.

So on the one hand you’ve got the “demon-behind-every-bush” Christians who attribute too much to the spiritual forces of darkness, blaming nearly everything on the devil. And on the other hand you’ve got those who, for various reasons, live as if spiritual warfare isn’t a reality at all.

Both errors equally please the demons, says C.S. Lewis. But from the language of our Ephesians 6 text, it’s clear that Apostle Paul neither underestimates nor overestimates the enemy.

He speaks of how we struggle—the originally Greek is literally *wrestle*--against the spiritual forces of evil. From a military point of view, it’s one thing to shoot arrows at an enemy from a distance. It’s another to engage an enemy in sword play. But to be on the ground wrestling with an enemy is the most desperate kind of life and death struggle.

So Paul is implying that we've got a serious fight on our hands. And look at the phrases he stacks up in verse 12 to describe the enemy. He calls them *evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world... mighty powers in this dark world, and... evil spirits in the heavenly places*. So as followers of Jesus we face a formidable foe. In no way does Paul underestimate the power of the spiritual forces of evil.

But neither does he overestimate their power. He makes it very clear that we can be strong in the Lord's mighty power, and stand firm against the enemy. If we put on the spiritual armour and take up the spiritual weapons God so graciously provides for us, we can expect success in spiritual warfare.

As Christians, you and I share in and can wield Christ's matchless spiritual authority over the forces of darkness. Why do you think the devil schemes to get you to underestimate or overestimate his power? Because he wants to blind you to the fact that in Christ, you are a formidable foe to the enemy—yes you!

So let's not fall prey to the devil's schemes to get us to underestimate or overestimate the power of the spiritual forces of evil. Until Jesus comes again, battles will rage—we have a serious fight on our hands. But through his cross, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has already won the war, dealing the enemy a blow from which he'll never recover. The final outcome is inevitable.

As Paul says in Colossians, Christ:

disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly, triumphing over them by the cross.<sup>3</sup>

In Christ's unrivalled power we fight an enemy who still has claws, but knows that he can't win in the end. And so we can confidently sing the words of Martin Luther's great hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*:

The Prince of Darkness grim; we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure; for lo,  
his doom is sure. One little word will fell him.

And that little word is the name above all names—Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Colossians 2:15

Just before we move onto to look at *how we fight* the spiritual forces of evil, and at prayer specifically, I'd like to take a few minutes to further consider the schemes that the devil employs against us.

The key is to realize that the devil's main strategy is the lie. Jesus says that:

When he lies, [the devil] speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.<sup>4</sup>

Popular culture has taught us to think that if the devil's influencing someone, it's going to look like a scene out of *The Exorcist*. But the devil's work is usually subtle. Remember, he's a schemer—a liar—and scheming liars rarely get "all up in your face." They're much more nuanced and cunning.

Christian counsellor John White writes about the ways in which the spiritual forces of evil tend to work against us. He says if you open the top of a piano, and sing a note into the strings, the string that's attuned to the note you sang will vibrate and ring out, even though you never touched a key.

White says this is a picture of how the devil and his forces lie to us. The devil takes flawed people—which all of us are—and makes them worse by getting their weaknesses to reverberate.

The enemy's strategy is to sing his lies into your piano, so to speak, to get your inner vulnerabilities begin to vibrate and ring out.

For example, earlier in Ephesians, Paul says:

Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, if you linger in your anger, it gives the enemy the ability to sing into your piano, amplifying that note of anger within you, until unwittingly, you've allowed the devil to establish a foothold of bitterness in your heart.

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<sup>44</sup> John 8:44

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:26-27 (NLT)

In 1 Timothy, Paul talks about how church leaders should not be recent converts, lest their position go to their heads, and they get puffed up with pride and tripped up by the devil.<sup>6</sup>

So playing on your sense of pride and self-importance—the subtle pleasure you take at the thought of being a cut above other people— is another example of how the enemy can play on your weaknesses.

Whether it's pride, anger, or something else, *how does the enemy tend to sing lies into your piano?*

So far we've looked at *who we fight*—the spiritual forces of evil— and *what we fight*—the devil's schemes. Now, it's time to consider:

### **3. How we fight**

We fight **by putting on the armour of God in prayer.**

In verse 13 we read:

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.

Yes, spiritual warfare is an unfortunate reality of life until Jesus comes again. But God is good. He provides us with effective armour and weaponry, so that if we make use of it, we can stand firm against the enemy's attacks.

<sup>14</sup>Stand firm then [says Paul], 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.

I don't have time today to unpack the meaning of each of the different parts of the armour of God.

But this is a series on prayer, and what we especially need to take notice of in this passage is this: To this point, Paul has been using a *metaphor* to speak about all the benefits that we have in Christ— benefits which enable us to stand firm in the midst of spiritual warfare.

What's the metaphor Paul has been using all along? *Armour.*

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:1, 6, MSG.



And throughout the passage what has Paul been telling us to do with this armour? He's been telling us, over and over, to put it on, to take it up, to use it!

The question is, *how do you put on a metaphor?* How do we actually put on this metaphorical armour of God? How do we personally appropriate all these benefits that Christ has wrought for us, so that we can stand firm against the enemy?

Paul tells us in verse 18. That's the point in the passage when he stops speaking metaphorically, saying:

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 Lord's people.

Tim Keller says that:

Many interpreters of this passage try to list prayer as one of the items in the armour... That won't work, however, because every other item is likened to something like a helmet, a sword, or a breastplate. [But] when he comes to the end, [Paul] just says, *pray, pray pray...* You can't get more basic than that. Prayer is the way that all the things we believe in and that Christ has won for us actually become our strength. Prayer is the way truth is worked into your heart to create new instincts, reflexes, and dispositions.<sup>7</sup>

Prayer— of all kinds and on all occasions, as Paul puts it— is the ultimate weapon against the enemy that we have at our disposal. Prayer is how we put on the armour of God, because prayer is all about drawing near to God himself.

How do you resist the devil? Come close to God through prayer. As the Bible says in James:

So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you.<sup>8</sup>

All authentic Christian prayer is warfare prayer, because prayer is the way we draw close to the God and Father of our risen, victorious King, Jesus, who vanquishes every enemy. That's why the enemy trembles at the very idea of a praying Christian, let alone a praying church.

You see, all the devil's schemes against us— all his lies—are designed to do one thing: to drive you away from communion with God. God is the devil's mortal enemy, so don't you think the spiritual forces of evil would do everything they can to distance you from God?

As followers of Jesus, we're at war. That's just reality for us until Jesus comes back and vanquishes Satan and his forces once and for all. It's not a fun reality. But listen to these hopeful words from John Eldredge:

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, p. 131-132.

<sup>8</sup> James 4:7-8a (NLT)

God desires to use the Enemy's attacks to remove the obstacles between ourselves and [God], to re-establish our dependency on him as his sons and daughters in a much deeper way. Once we understand that, the warfare we are in begins to feel totally different. It is not really even about Satan anymore, but about communion with God and abiding in Jesus as the source of life.

And that communion with God, that abiding in Jesus, are found in prayer. God is calling us to prayer, which means he is calling us to himself.

It's a timely call for Cornerstone, because God has given us a big bold vision for the next few years. In order to make space to develop new leaders, and to make space to reach people in a new context, God has called us to plant a new Cornerstone campus in another community a few years from now. And as we work toward that, God is also calling us to start a third Sunday service here in about a year's time, as well as to develop a Leadership Institute.

We encourage you to join us on February 1<sup>st</sup> for the first of a series of **Prayer and Visioning meetings** about the campus plant, whether or not you see yourself potentially being part of the new campus or the Plant Launch Team. We need the combined prayer power of our whole church family in this.

As well, during worship service on February 23, you'll have the chance to sign up for a **40-Day Lent prayer challenge**. We'll provide you with a daily prayer guide to use throughout Lent, based on the prayers of the Apostle Paul. We hope the large majority of you will take up this special prayer challenge.

And finally, I want to encourage you to Google [Daily Prayer Extended Version](#). This will link you to a powerful prayer from Ransomed Heart Ministries.

It's fairly lengthy— you'll need a good 10-15 minutes to pray through it. But it's wonderfully comprehensive, deeply biblical, and oh so powerful. The prayer provides helpful warfare prayer language that will help you to assert the authority that you have in Christ against the devil's schemes and attacks. Use it. Learn from it. I use it often, and find it really packs a punch. Check it out.

## **PRAYER MINISTRY AT END OF SERVICE**