

Success in Spiritual Warfare

Our New Testament reading is Ephesians 6:10-20. Paul encourages the church to engage triumphantly in spiritual warfare.

Read **Ephesians 6:10-20**:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of 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. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Almost 14 years ago our country suffered perhaps its greatest national trauma with the devastating Attack on America. We can question the effectiveness of our “War on Terror,” and whether or not our very costly wars and strategy for national defense have been effective in making our lives safer. But whatever the case, we know our nation must continue to be vigilant against terrorist attacks.

And that’s the way it is in our spiritual warfare. At the cross, Christ won for us the decisive battle and Satan’s stranglehold was broken, but he is still roaming about in guerilla warfare against God’s people. But we can and must, as children of God, live in the victory Jesus has given us and practice vigilance. Paul gives us the strategy for victory in spiritual warfare.

Regardless of how skeptical we are about the existence of a personal devil, we’re either, through Christ, free from his dominion or we’re under his control. The Apostle John writes, “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). If you’re a child of God, there’s no way you can avoid being in the fray of spiritual warfare. The issue is not whether we we’ll face conflict. The issue is whether we’ll be victorious in battle or defeated by the forces of evil.

Paul warns us to wake up and become vigilant about the devil, who’s able to outwit unaided intelligence. “For we are not unaware,” he writes, “of his

schemes” (2 Corinthians 2:11, NIV). Military intelligence is crucial for victory in warfare. Security measures are vitally important to protect innocent citizens from terrorists’ attacks. None of us likes to go through the inconvenience of airport security checks in airports, yet we really their importance for our protection. The intelligence given us by the Word of God about the Enemy and his forces is much more reliable than any intelligence a national security system could provide.

Strength is needed to overcome the foe. Satan, as Peter reminds us, is prowling around like a lion on the loose, looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). He’s more of a threat than any human terrorist (Or than the Zimbabwean lion, Cecil, tragically hunted down and shot by the American dentist!). Yet we do have authority over him (Matthew 28:18), which was given to us the moment we became children of God. The much-superior Holy Spirit lives in us (1 John 4:4).

CS Lewis, in his classic *The Screwtape Letters*, has demon Uncle Screwtape advising his demon nephew Wormwood to try to entice humans assigned to his influence to either deny the existence of the devil or to be intimidated by him. Certainly we as believers are not to fear the devil and his demons. We’re to fear the Lord who alone has the power over life and death. But we are to be aware of the reality of Satan and his power, and must depend on the Holy Spirit to deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:13).

We must take heed of Satan’s schemes. Satan attacks the flesh, the old sin nature. He’s aware of the chinks in our armor, our weaknesses and vulnerability. We’re not talking about Halloween spooks and goblins, but the real thing. He is out to destroy us, and he is bigger than we are. These words of Paul are amazing—“*For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh.*” Paul was brutally attacked, mobbed, stoned and beaten nearly to death! And yet Paul had the spiritual perception to realize who the real enemy was. People are merely the dupes of Satan and desperately need to be freed from his strangle hold.

As I write this, I think of the two young teenagers in Waukesha County, awaiting sentencing for their attempted murder of a classmate, done under the influence of a fictitious but dark character, Slender Man. Such behavior has to be attributed to demonic influence.

We must resolve to stand “withstand on that evil day,” or as the NEB translates, “when things are at their worst.” We’re taught by our Lord Jesus to pray for daily deliverance from evil (Matthew 6:13b). But there also comes to each one of us that particularly evil day. This may be our day of our supreme test or temptation. That’s the evil day in our lives when we stand in greatest danger of a spiritual downfall.

You may at this moment be in a great struggle of faith. You may feel absolutely weak in faith, and God may seem far away. You’re on the verge to giving in to temptation to be unfaithful. You may be on the brink of even renouncing your faith in God. This perhaps is you evil day. The devil is

prowling around for the attack, as Peter says (1 Peter 5:8). But we can be victorious. We're not to be like the American legendary pioneer Davey Crockett, who as a young boy went bear hunting with a switch, and as the legend goes, "killed himself a bear when he was only three." We are to meet our adversary, the devil, in God's strength.

It's a battle we must and can win. Satan has a tether, and God's purpose is for us to be successful in this cosmic battle. God has provided armor for us to wear. Perhaps as Paul wrote these words from prison in Rome, being under house arrest, he was chained to a Roman soldier who was wearing armor. He describes the armor God provides for us in spiritual warfare.

The first part of our armor is the belt of truth. This includes the truthfulness, integrity or sincerity of the Christian soldier. Without the wholehearted sincerity before God and full, uncompromising commitment to Jesus as Lord, any other "virtue" is mere hypocrisy and superficiality. As the belt held other pieces of the armor together, so our honesty and integrity before God is foundational.

The breastplate is the righteousness of Christ that's imparted to us through faith. God imparts the grace to become like Christ. It's the new nature we have in him that enables us to do the right thing and to join him in his cause of righteousness and justice.

"The sandals of the preparation of the gospel" allow us to stand firm and to resist the onslaught of the devil. These sandals refer to the Roman soldier's hobnailed sandals that took a firm grip and allowed for stability and mobility. These sandals could refer to the grip on life that the gospel gives us, but also to our being able to, with finesse and speed, take the gospel to others who need peace through Christ.

The large Roman army shield made of leather, and soaked in water in order to extinguish the flaming arrows of the enemy is Paul's picture of faith. The shield of faith is a reference to our saving faith and our continuing trust in Jesus, who enables us to ward off the fiery darts of the enemy. Paul himself lived a shielded life, but not a sheltered life. There's a fundamental difference. God does not shelter us from the darts of the devil, the world and the flesh, but he does shield us from any harm to our faith relationship with him. Our lives aren't sheltered from life's disappointments, tragedies and grief, but God shields us from despair and spiritual defeat.

And, we must put on the helmet of salvation. Perhaps this is salvation in its future dimension. This is our great hope of future glory. This awareness and hope will keep our minds in proper focus, and will help us keep present difficulties and temporal experiences in proper focus. We must measure the value and impact of things against eternity, and always remember the crown of life that awaits the faithful soldier of the cross. The helmet is also a symbol of surrounding our minds with the awareness of the presence of God.

And, we take up the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The Christian soldier is now ready to be on the offensive. We're not only standing our ground, but also are able to launch attack against the forces of Satan, wielding the sword of the Spirit that is sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12). A lot of people have a Bible, but using it carefully and usefully is difficult. The Bible is unfamiliar and strange—useful just for decoration, like an African sword that decorated a wall in my study. For many, a Bible in the house is like having a decoration or a first aid kit, to be opened only in emergencies.

We need to make the sword of the Spirit, the Bible, our sword, so we can use it. Like Jesus himself, we need to draw it out and use it when tempted (Matthew 4:1-11). We need to use it when discouraged and needing to be strengthened in God (Psalm 119:9-16). We need to use it to encourage others, and to instruct our children, and to bear witness to the lost. It's the sword that penetrates the most hardened heart and conscience (Hebrews 4:12).

We put on the armor daily as we engage in spiritual warfare by continual prayer in the Spirit. As the old gospel song says it, "Put on the gospel armor, each piece put on with prayer." Fervent prayer in the Spirit is the greatest weapon we have to use against the devil, and ironically, is probably the most neglected activity we use to battle against Satan's strongholds.

King David was vulnerable, and would have been less at risk had he gone to war, wearing his armor with his troops, "at the time when kings go off to war" (2 Samuel 11:1). At least had he gone to war, he would have been wearing his armor. But instead, David remained behind, and was vulnerable to the tempter who enticed him to sin with Bathsheba. That's why I say the safest place is always in the center of God's will, even if it's in the fray of the battle. We must put on the armor with prayer and engage in the battle, with our dependence on God. Putting on the armor isn't enough. There's a battle to be fought.

Paul says we are to "keep on praying for all the saints." Jesus taught us to pray in the first person plural, "Lead *us* not into temptation, and deliver *us* from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13). Our Scripture today heightens my appreciation for you faithful people of prayer here at Dale Heights. The territory of our spiritual battle includes praying for the advance of the gospel and social justice in our community and throughout the world.

If you're a Christian, you can't "dodge the draft." You've already been drafted/enlisted, and you're in the King's Army now. The only reasonable recourse for us now is to be victorious in spiritual warfare and to join in the responsibility of mutual protection against the real Enemy. We realize the importance of national security and vigilance against political enemies. We need to also realize the need for God's security against our constant enemy of our souls.

Let me encourage us all to do something very practical. In the place where you have your personal prayer time, post a picture of a soldier in his armor, and then ask God, before you leave for school or the workplace, to arm you with truth, integrity, righteousness, and the peace of the gospel message. Be sure you are shielded with faith and trust in Christ, and have his mind as your “helmet,” being able to see things from a kingdom perspective. And be certain to take with you the word of God as your shield, as you keep on the armor with prayer and as you are prepared to ward off the attacks of the Enemy.

Church is Christ’s provision to us to be victorious in spiritual warfare. Some of us this morning need encouragement in this spiritual battle we’re engaged in and we need the fellowship of prayer. Ancient shields were made to link together, so that soldiers would form an impenetrable, massive front, and would advance together against the enemy as an inexorable force. We’re small in number but mighty in prayer.

As your pastor, I need your prayers. But I also realize I alone can daily put on the “gospel armor.” I must don the armor God has made available to me, especially during these days when I feel vulnerable to doubt, discouragement, and a feeling of desperation that tempts me to go into the battles of life unprotected and ill-prepared. Sometimes I want to rush things, so much that I forget to do the essential things—like being in such a hurry to get somewhere that I forget to fasten my seat belt. That’s when I’m most likely to have an accident and be a danger, not only to myself but to others.

Let’s remember the armor.