

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's

LENT 2018 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES

"What the Church Is All About"

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Ephesians Study #6: The Struggle of the Church (Chapters 1, 6)

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, in Jesus you have given us victory over all the forces of evil; teach us now, by your Holy Spirit, how we can take our stand for the forces of light that your kingdom might grow and prosper; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Have you ever felt yourself in the midst of a spiritual struggle? You are doing all you can to live the Christian life, but things seem to keep going wrong? You do the things you do not want to do and yet don't do the things you should? You come to church and sometimes it just makes things worse? The first person you see is the one person you can't stand? You see hypocrisy and insincerity in yourself and in others? Following Jesus seems such a struggle sometimes.

One of the reasons we get discouraged is that we don't realize that the struggles we face as individuals and a church are part of a wider conflict, a spiritual battle. So, in this, the final study in our series on the Church from Ephesians, we are going to look at how the church as the body of Christ is involved in spiritual warfare and how we are not only to survive but to advance in the midst of the struggle.

The Reality of the Struggle against Evil

Now, in dealing with evil and the spirit world, we need to avoid two errors into which it is easy to fall, as C.S. Lewis told us.¹ One is becoming preoccupied with the Devil and seeing a demon behind every bush. The other is to ignore him and his forces. This would be naive and dangerous. As Paul ends the letter, he reminds his readers that the devil and his minions are still around and so we need "to be strong in the Lord and his mighty power" (Ephesians 6:10). We need to "Put on the full armour of God so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes" (verse 11). The situation we are in is like that towards the end of the second World War. The success of the assault on D-Day in June, 1944, was the decisive battle; the end of the war was determined that day. However, it took another eleven months before the war actually ended. There were a whole series

¹ "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall 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 or a magician with the same delight." C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. (NY: Harper Collins, 1996[originally 1942]), pg. 9.

of other battles and casualties before the final victory was secured. In the same way, the cross and resurrection of Christ are like D-Day - there, the final verdict was determined. However, we are now between Christ's first and second coming, the in-between time of skirmishes and battles to achieve the final victory. The devil is a defeated enemy but he is trying to wreak havoc in best way he can with as many casualties as possible to prevent God's Kingdom from advancing.

We saw earlier in our study series that God's plan is to bring reconciliation of all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10). *God* wants to break down walls between us (2:14f) - *the devil* wants to build them up; God wants his reconciled people to live together in harmony and purity - the devil will sow seeds of discord and sin. We are the body of Christ, at peace with God and one another, but Paul wants his readers to realize that this peace will "be experienced only in the midst of a relentless struggle against evil."²

This struggle involves a dimension of existence people are now calling "The Forgotten Middle." Paul, writing to his Christian friends in Ephesus and the surrounding region, tells them: "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 the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12-13). In recent years, Christians in the Western World have rediscovered the Biblical truth that there is a realm occupied by spiritual beings such as angels and the forces of evil that interact with our lives. Having been the only civilization on earth to ignore this realm and its reality, we are now being brought face-to-face with it through contact with other cultures and the resurgence of interest in the occult, psychic phenomena, and so on.

This resurgence is demonstrated by the presence of fortune-telling booths in suburban shopping centres and the thousands who attend "Psychic Fairs" held in such cities as Toronto and Montreal and even locally in Sidney! In the UK the 2011 census revealed that there are over 80,000 people who identify as adhering to pagan or related beliefs, including over 12,000 Wiccans.³ There is a tremendous amount of New Age literature that people are soaking up - books on angels abound - but not from a Christian perspective. For that I recommend the novel by Frank Peretti, *This Present Darkness*,⁴ which has sparked Christian interest in the reality of this realm. We are becoming aware of the "forgotten middle."

The Dangers of the Occult

Now someone might be thinking, "What's so wrong with fortune-telling or Ouija boards or the like? Isn't it just innocent fun?" The Bible is quite clear about the reality and dangers of the occult. In the Old Testament we read: "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead ...because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you"

² John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pg. 262.

³ See "Neopaganism in the United Kingdom" on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neopaganism_in_the_United_Kingdom

⁴ Frank E. Peretti, *This Present Darkness*. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986).

(Deuteronomy 18:9-12). In the New Testament (Galatians 5:19-21), we are told that witchcraft is one of “the acts of the sinful nature” alongside sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and so on. In Revelation, “those who practice magic arts” are listed among those who will end up in the lake of burning fire (Revelation 21:8). God’s people are not to have anything to do with occult practices.⁵

Why is this so? I can see two reasons:

1. ***The danger of control by the forces of evil:*** The first reason is the danger of control by the forces of evil. The spiritual dimension is real. God’s Spirit is not the only spirit to inhabit it. Occult experience is real, but is it good? There are angels and there are demons. When you engage in it you are not only co-operating with powers that want to destroy God’s loving work but you are opening yourself up to the influence of spiritual powers beyond your control. I know a person who could fix watches just by looking at them. Her grandfather had had this ability. She was a Christian and was frustrated that she was not growing in the Christian life. She was led to see that by fixing watches she was involving spiritual powers beyond what God allowed. She gave it up to God and she actually saw the spirit leave her. She could no longer fix watches, but she grew in the Lord! The occult is dangerous for your spiritual health.
2. ***Its affect on human nature:*** The second reason for avoiding the occult is its affect on our human nature - it is used to serve the self and its appetites. Magic has to do with manipulation of the spirit world; find the right phrases and incantations and names and you can get the spirits to work for you. How you live is irrelevant. Then, much of astrology is fatalism; it places one at the mercy of the movements of the heavenly bodies. They are the powers that control you in this life. Why work for change in yourself or society if all is fixed? In all of this there is no call to a changed life or care for others. The occult paralyses any change for good in you and society.

The occult is dangerous because it opens you up to the influence and control of the forces of evil and it has a negative effect on human nature and society.

⁵ Occult practices or psychic beliefs may be summed up as follows: (As I list these, I do not wish to malign all the people involved in them as particularly evil or wicked; many are sincere and genuine people. However, through their involvement in the following, they have opened themselves up to being more directly influenced or controlled by the forces of evil.)

1. Precognition or fortune-telling: foretelling the future by means of visions, crystal balls, playing cards, palm reading, Ouija boards, meditations, drugs, etc.
2. Extra-sensory perception: telepathy, clairvoyance, etc.
3. Astrology, horoscopes
4. Techniques of so-called mind expansion by drugs, hypnotism, transcendental meditation, etc.
5. Sorcery or witchcraft; Wicca
6. Spiritism or spiritualism (and all other cultic movements, including Free Masonry - in which a good many genuine and sincere people are involved without understanding its occultic origins and linkages)
7. Healing by methods other than the Spirit of Christ such as therapeutic touch
8. Certain physical phenomena: telekenesis, levitation, astral projection.
9. To these we could add what many see as harmless physical disciplines such as Yoga and Tai Chi. The issue here is not necessarily the actions themselves but the spiritual roots of the practices which open oneself up to the spiritual forces behind them.

Ephesus - a Centre of the Occult

The people in Ephesus and the surrounding region had no misconceptions about the reality of the spirit world and occultic practices. This great city of a quarter of a million was the capital of the province and a major religious centre with influence all over Asia Minor. Ephesus was the “New Age” capital of the ancient world. The practice of magic and astrology was rampant. It was the home of the great temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Artemis was the goddess of the underworld and believed to wield effective power over the spirits in nature and wildlife. Around the neck of her statue was a necklace with the signs of the zodiac on it to show that she was a cosmic goddess who could influence even the stars and the astral spirits who controlled people’s fate.⁶

The new Ephesian Christians came from this occult background. In Acts 19, after Paul had had a number of what have been termed “power encounters,” it says, “Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to (the modern equivalent of) five million dollars. In this way the word of God spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:18-20).

Clinton Arnold, in his very helpful book on Paul’s epistles and the occult background of the early Christian believers, *Powers of Darkness*, points out that “These new believers needed help in developing a Christian world-view and how to respond to the gods and goddesses they formerly worshipped and the various astral, terrestrial and underworld spirits they had feared.”⁷ What happens when your child gets sick and you were used to going to the sorcerer for a magic potion to placate the spirits? Where is Jesus in relation to the spirit world?

How Do We Fight Evil?

So, Paul addresses these issues in his letter to the Ephesians and people in their region. His approach helps us get a proper perspective on the occult and the struggle against evil. How *do* we fight evil? Are there any special “techniques” we have to learn? Should we all watch and take notes from movies like “The Exorcist” and “Ghost Busters” and arm ourselves with incantations, ectoplasm guns and so on? No. Paul does not get us into fancy techniques. Instead he does two things: first he points us to the victory of Jesus over evil, and second, he urges us to live in holiness in our daily lives.

1. *Jesus’ Victory Over Evil:*

It is interesting that Paul does not go on about how bad the old ways are but instead, shows how good and powerful is the true God who has brought us victory over evil through Jesus Christ. He tells the Ephesians and us four realities which we can take to heart in our struggle with the forces of evil:

⁶ “Her image bore the signs of the zodiac to reassure her worshippers that she was a cosmic deity who also influenced the astral spirits who controlled the unfolding of fate.” Clinton Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pg. 151

⁷ Ibid., pg. 150.

- i. God is in control
- ii. Christ is all-sufficient
- iii. God's power is available to us
- iv. We have a new perspective on power

- i. ***God is in control:*** First, he shows that it is God who is control, not other forces. “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children” (Ephesians 1:4-5). The new Christians in Ephesus with their background of astrology and magic were probably still concerned about fate and the influence of the stars. So when Paul speaks about God choosing and predestining us he is not speaking about whether we have free will or not but to assure these new Christians that it is God, not the stars or fate, who is in control. When he goes on to say that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (verse 11) he means that “Neither the stars nor the astral spirits - commonly believed to control human destiny - can countermand God’s plans. Only the God...who chose a people to be his own before the creation of the world, has control over history and human destiny.”⁸ God is in control.
- ii. ***Christ is all-sufficient.*** Second, Paul shows that Christ is all-sufficient; no other power is necessary. “I pray that you may know “his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule, authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in this present age but in the one to come. God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (1:19-22). Here, Paul shows Jesus is all sufficient in three ways:
 - “far above all rule...” (verse 21) lets us know that Jesus has unrivalled power and authority.
 - “far above...every title” (verse 21) would have communicated to those previously involved in magic where the right use of names to manipulate the spirits was crucial. Prayer in Jesus’ name is the only prayer we need to offer.
 - “God placed all things under his feet” and “head over everything” says that Christ alone is supreme; “there is no conceivable god, goddess, power, spirit or demon who does not fall under the dominion of Christ”.⁹ Christ alone is supreme.
 So we don’t need to have dealings with other spirits to help us - Christ is all-sufficient.
- iii. ***God’s power is available to us:*** Finally, Paul tells us that the power of God is available to us. “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power” (3:16) and again, “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (6:10). We need this power because, “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. Therefore, put on the full armour of God...” (6:12-13). God’s power is available to us.

In our struggle against evil, the first thing we need to do is know that Christ has already won the ultimate victory which means that God is in control, Christ is all-sufficient and God's power is available to us. Before we move to the second thing we need to know the fourth reality arising from the victory of Jesus over evil. It is:

⁸ Ibid., pg. 101.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 107-108

- iv. ***We have a new perspective on power:*** God's power is not like the old power of the demons and spirits the Ephesian Christians used to try and manipulate; it is different. They (and we) have:
- **a new source of power** - the supreme God: "One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:5) – we don't have to worry about someone having a more powerful spirit on their side; God is supreme.
 - **a new access to power** - "in Christ": "Through him we...have access to the Father by one Spirit" (2:18) – we don't have to pay to manipulate spirits to do our bidding; Jesus is freely available to us.
 - **a new purpose for power** - holy living: "live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (5:2) – we do not use magic or evil force to get things go our way; we accomplish God's will by living his way.

2. ***Holiness in our Daily Lives:***

This leads us directly to the second way we fight evil and that is through holiness in our daily lives. The purpose of God's power is to accomplish God's will by living his way. For example, in chapter 4, we read "do not give the devil a foothold" (verse 27) in the middle of a discussion on anger. When we experience unrighteous anger, we open the door for the devil to work. The devil loves to take advantage of people's mistakes, sins, and misunderstandings and magnifies them. This is his favourite technique as the "accuser of our brothers and sisters" (Revelation 12:10). He has no resources of his own, so he works with what we give him and moves on from there. However, when we allow God to help us work through our anger or other sin through confession and reconciliation, we see healing and deliverance from oppression. It is through living out the life of the Spirit in our normal, day-to-day lives as individuals and the church that we experience victory.

Paul has already laid the foundation for this in sections of the letter we were not able to cover (4:17-24 and 5:3-17). We are to "put off the old self...be made new in the attitude of your minds and...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:22-24). We are to "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness and...be very careful...how we live" (5:11, 15). Paul builds on this groundwork in the concluding chapter of the letter.

Putting on the Armour of God

In chapter 6 Paul describes our defence against evil as a Church and individuals in terms of holy living in our every-day activity and attitudes. He uses the picture of the armour of a Roman soldier to demonstrate how we can do this. He was probably shackled to one as he dictated this letter. We are to "be strong in the Lord" (verse 10) by putting on "the whole armour of God" (verse 13). We will now look at the components of that armour and what they represent. As we do this, we will see that the weapons overlap, so we do not need to go into great detail as to why this or that piece represents this or that aspect of our defence but rather gain an overall impression. The whole passage is meant to build up the picture of a "crescendo of protection."

1. ***The components of our armour:***

The first piece of armour is the ***belt of truth***. This is both the truth of what we believe, correct

doctrine, but it is also the truth of heart such as integrity and sincerity. A belt kept things together and so does truth. If we are confused as to the truth about Jesus we will not know where we stand, what resources are available to us. If our lives are full of hypocrisy and we say one thing and do another, not only will that discredit our message and our Lord, it will also eat away at us inside

The **breastplate of righteousness** also represents two aspects of our lives. There is the righteousness that Christ has given to us through his death on the cross. We have been delivered from condemnation and given a new life from him. It also represents our own righteous living - not that we are earning our own salvation; that we have from Christ, we can not earn it ourselves, as we saw in Ephesians 2:8-9. However, when we are living in right relationship with God, the lines of communication are open. If our lives are being compromised by sin, we will find we will not be able to hear him; our zeal and power for living will be subdued. To avoid this, we need to let the Spirit examine our hearts and have regular confession before God.

The **boots of the gospel of peace** allow us to stand firm when assaulted by the devil because we know our security is in God - the Gospel message tells us so. Good footwear also allows us to move quickly to spread the good news of Jesus so others can find release and the power to live the new life. The **shield of faith** keeps away the flaming darts of the evil one. These are the devil's accusations, "How can you call yourself a Christian if you do such and such? Are you really loved by God - you! Ha! Ha!" Faith lays hold of God's promises in times of doubt and depression and gives strength in times of temptation. The **helmet of salvation** means that God's saving power is our only defence, not our own efforts or goodness.

The **sword of the Spirit**, the word of God, is the only offensive weapon in the armoury. Knowledge of the Bible is essential for the Christian's defence. We need to be constantly reminded of how God looks at us and the world, not what others or the enemy say. Jesus used Bible in his temptations in the wilderness, we need to do the same. Read it regularly and study and memorize it.

But, the most important piece of our defence is not even given a picture by Paul. He speaks of it directly. It is **prayer**. "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...be alert and always keep on praying for the saints...pray also for me" (verses 18-19). Prayer keeps an open communication between us and our "Commander-in-Chief." Through it, we can cry "help" when we are in danger and need reinforcements. Through it, we can also receive fresh instructions for the battle.

Prayer also taps into the victory Jesus has won for us before which the devil shrinks. Prayer releases God's angels to use God's power. In the story of Moses and Joshua at the Battle of Rephidim (Exodus 17:8-15), it was prayer which won the day, not Joshua's fighting on the front. His direct encounter was crucial, but even more so were the prayers of Moses behind the scenes. This is why Paul urges us to "Pray...on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (verse 18). God likes to hear from us - all the time no matter how seemingly trivial our concerns! Then, we are to "keep on praying" (verse 18) - don't give up. Finally, we do not act alone in prayer, we work as a body, as Paul says, pray "for all the saints" (verse 18). This is the working of the whole body of Christ together. We need one another's prayer support. And so, Paul asks for prayers for himself - "Pray also for me" (verse 19). Jesus prayed; Paul prayed; Paul needed the prayers of

others. Prayer is the essential piece of our defence in the spiritual battle.

2. Putting on the Armour of God daily:

Arising from all this, here is a suggestion to follow each day: in the morning, picture yourself putting on each piece of the heavenly armour. As you put on the helmet, know that your salvation depends on God's grace alone, not your own efforts. As you put on the breastplate, remember that you possess Christ's righteousness which you need to work out in your own life. If there are any "chinks" in your armour, confess them to God and receive forgiveness. Use the shield of faith to quash any of Satan's accusations. Take up the sword of the Spirit - the Word of God - as your guide. As you put on the belt of truth, remember the uniqueness of Jesus, who he is and what he has done for you and the need for integrity in your life. Finally, as you put on the Gospel boots, remember the Gospel which not only gives you a firm foundation but a message to bring to the world. All this is done in the context of prayer - communication with our Commander-in-Chief.

Here is a form of prayer you might like to use as you do so:

The Armour of God – Daily Prayer Sheet

Father, we put on the Helmet of Salvation,
The Breastplate of Righteousness, the Belt of Truth,
The Shoes of the Gospel of Peace, the Shield of Faith
And the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, in our right hand.
And we cover ourselves with the precious blood
Of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God,
Over every inch and over every single part of us.
And we declare that this is the day that the Lord has made
And we shall rejoice and be glad in it,
And the Glory of God is our rear guard.
And we sign ourselves ✠ in the name of the Father
And of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Asking you Father to watch over us,
Protect us and keep us this day
In Jesus' name. Amen.*

*(*You may make the sign of the cross as you mention the pieces of armour)*

The way we fight evil is knowing the victory Christ has won and living out the faith of Christ in day-to-day life. This is the true and right power for the Christian in the spiritual struggle against evil.

Conclusion

Are you feeling the effects of the spiritual struggle? Then you are in a good place. It is not because you are weak in the faith, but because the devil wants to undo the work God has done and is doing in and through you. This applies to us as a congregation as well. As the body of Christ, we are involved in spiritual warfare. As the body, we need to work together on our spiritual defences, especially prayer. Christ has won the victory! Live in the strength of that victory in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. This is part of what the Church is all about.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you are head over all things for the Church, your body; therefore, by your Holy Spirit, help us to stand against the devil's schemes, clothed in the full armour of God by living out your victory in our daily lives, and so stand our ground for the Kingdom of our Father in heaven. Amen.

(Adapted from Ephesians 1:22, 6:11, 13)

See: Reginald Hollis pamphlet, "Put On the Whole Armour of God"