

Be Strong in the Lord
Part 1: Know Your Enemy
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Ephesians 6:10-17

Opening question: *When you were a kid, where did you feel the most safe and secure?*

Ideas: Treehouse, blanket fort, in your room, with a particular adult or at a certain person's house.

We crave that feeling of safety and security right now.

We feel especially afraid because:

- there is a life-threatening illness out there; and
- we aren't sure how to contain it, much less cure it; and
- people we love are dying; and
- we are lonely and struggling in our isolation; and
- we have the highest level of unemployment since the Great Depression; and
- people we love are out of work and/or we are out of work; and
- our plans for the future feel tenuous at best; and
- as if all that weren't bad enough, the killing of Ahmaud Arbery leaves many of us questioning if there is such a thing as justice in United States.

We are facing an enemy.

But who is it? Who is the enemy? At the beginning of shelter in place, the answer would have been easy. The Coronavirus is the enemy, and we must come together to defeat. But as weeks have become months, our frustrations have become directed at other people. Who is to blame for our suffering, the president who wants to reopen business or the governor who wants

businesses to remain closed? Who is the greater threat to my liberty: The local leaders who seek to limit movement and use surveillance with infected citizens, or the armed protestors screaming outside city hall??

These are evil days. When the days are evil, we gotta know some stuff.

1. We gotta know who the enemy is.
2. We gotta know who the enemy isn't.
3. We gotta know the one thing we are supposed to do.

As we come to the end of Paul's extended reflection on power, he is going to answer these questions.

Eph 6:10-17

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 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. 13 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. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish 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.

As you listened, did you hear who the enemy is, who the enemy isn't, and the one thing Paul repeatedly says we will are to do?

Verse 11 says we to put on the full armor of God so that we can stand against the devil's schemes.

We have an enemy, and that enemy is the devil, aka Satan.

When Paul talks about the devil, he was not imagining a red-skinned, goat-footed man-monster with a pitch fork. He was thinking more about a job description. We typically think of the devil as the author of evil, the source of every terrible thing that happens in the world. But in the Old Testament Sātan is a judicial term referring to an “accuser,” “slanderer,” or “adversary” in court. Satan is always about the business of trying to separate humankind from the experience of God’s full and complete love. In so doing, Satan seeks to convince us that we are infinitely less than we really are.

To be under Satan’s influence is to be in bondage to lies. While devil may have many schemes, there is only one goal: *To convince us that God – if God even exists – does not really want us, cannot truly love us, and is not actually able to save us*. If Satan can convince us of this, then we remain locked in fear, and in separation from God and from one another. When people are scared, they do bad things. Really horrible things.

Which brings me back to Ahmaud Arbery.

We have seen the fruit of fear everywhere during this pandemic, right alongside the fruit of faith. When we are in fear, our rational brains shut down and we run on nothing but survival instinct. We try to figure out where the danger is coming from, and then it’s *fight or flight or freeze*.

Even though we have the promise of Romans 8 that nothing can or ever will separate us from God’s love, Satan will continue to accuse, continue to sow fear, and then let that fear take its natural course.

If Satan is the true enemy, Paul says, then it is critically important that we recognize who the enemy isn’t.

If Satan is the true enemy, then my neighbor can’t be.

Having drawn our attention to the schemes of the devil, Paul pans back to give us the Big Picture in Verse 12:

12 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.

Our struggle is NOT against flesh and blood. Flesh and blood is what Jesus became. Flesh and blood is what was given up on the cross. Christ's body the church is made up of flesh and blood people. Jesus DIED to redeem our flesh and our blood. So we cannot – MUST NOT – ever start believing that people are the problem. Satan wants us to believe that lie. That path leads to internment camps, civil wars, and genocide.

So what is Paul talking about here? In a real sense Paul is trying to talk about everything. That is, he is trying to sum up in a few words all the forms of power that exist in the universe - seen and unseen. (Remember: Power has been a driving theme for this chapter.) He want these few words to include the rulers who wage war, and the demonic spirits of war that compel them. He wants us to understand that we in the midst of a larger, mostly invisible reality that we cannot see directly and cannot comprehend fully. We may throw around terms like Empire, Military-Industrial Complex, Capitalism and Socialism, Racism and Slavery, and even Global Pandemic, but that doesn't mean we can fully understand them, much less control them. This is where evil exists on a macro level and yet is largely a mystery to us.

The term we often use to talk about this larger struggle is *spiritual warfare*. In the church where I first met Christ and became a disciple, spiritual warfare was the topic we discussed more than any other. We met three or four times a week to usher God's kingdom in with our praises, to pray for God to break down spiritual strongholds, and to be ever mindful of the devil's many schemes. We were continually reminded of the many ways Satan could tempt us to fall away from our faith and pursue the lusts of the flesh.

Unfortunately, the focus was almost exclusively on the personal level. And when we did, we operated from the belief that if every person just gave their heart to Christ and turned away from their personal sin, then all the problems in our community would just go away. The problem is, when we only focus on personal sins like addiction and crime but ignore systemic evil like racism and economic exploitation, it is easy to conclude that personal sins – and the person bound up in them – are the cause of all our problems. We learn to hate the sin and blame the sinner.

We see where this kind of thinking has gotten us. At this moment, when the US should be taking a leadership role in drawing the world together for a common purpose and a common good, we are more tribal and nationalistic and partisan than ever. Instead of being directed by the gospel of grace, we repeat the same old pattern of scapegoating others. This is the pattern Jesus came into the world to end once and for all.

So what are we supposed to do, now that we know who the real enemy is and who the real enemy isn't?

Paul uses one word four times in this passage.

We are to STAND.

This the part that is the most bewildering to me, as someone who grew up steeped in the language of spiritual warfare. Paul says we are to be strong in the Lord's strength, and put on the whole armor of God, not so that we can *fight* but so that we can *stand!*

Why does Paul say this? Surely it is because he understands that the battle has already been won by Christ himself, at cross. The resurrection is the proof. All that needs to be done has been done.

But "standing" is not the same as "standing around." There is nothing passive about this the act of standing. In the evil days, when others collapse, the church of Jesus Christ stands. When the schemes of the devil seek to divide and conquer, those who are anchored in their identity as the Beloved of God will stand united. When spiritual forces beyond our comprehension assail us like hurricane winds, the Body of Christ will remain firmly rooted – a place of hope and refuge that will draw others to it. To stand is to bear witness to the truth of the gospel when fear leads others to believe ridiculous lies. During these days – perhaps the most evil days we will ever see in our lifetimes – the call comes from heaven: Stand.

Amen.

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