

Becoming: *Overcoming the Already-Vanquished Opposition*

Ephesians 6:10-20

The past week we commemorated Veterans' Day here in the US. Each year we do, I remember the conversations I used to have with my Dad about his service in World War II. He was in the old Army-Air Corp, flying missions in the European theater. One of the stories that we would talk about was how certain Winston Churchill was that, as soon as the US entered the war effort, the war was as good as done.

Do you know the story? The war had been going poorly for the **British Empire** and **Prime Minister Churchill** was deeply concerned about the future. On December 7, 1941 after the invasion of Pearl Harbor, Churchill was at his country estate, **Chequers**, with a few friends and his family. At dinner he seemed depressed, holding his face in his hands for minutes at a time. Just after dinner, he heard of the attack. Churchill immediately surmised the consequences of the attack for the course of the war. Later, he wrote about it:

"I thought -- So, we had won after all! ...We had won the war. England would live; Britain would live... How long the war would last or in what fashion it would end no man could tell, nor did I at this moment care. . . Hitler's fate was sealed. Mussolini's fate was sealed. All the rest was merely the proper application of overwhelming force."

You must remember that, when Churchill thought this, it would still be almost four years before the war would end. Hitler and Mussolini were still fully in power in 1941. But, in Churchill's mind, with the US entering the battle, the war was already as good as done even though there was formidable opposition still at work. I'm sure my Dad didn't think that way when he was in London with German bombs being dropped on the city. So, notice again what Churchill said, "**All the rest was merely the application of overwhelming force.**"

You might wonder what this history lesson has to do with the conclusion of our series in Ephesians and our text, Eph 6:10-24. So, I tell you – a lot! Paul's letter to the Church in Ephesus is one that repeatedly tells us of God's promise of what his church will become when he is finished with his work. At the same time, God's beautiful promises for what we will become have not yet been completely fulfilled. Indeed, we still are in the midst of a ferocious battle in this world. And that's what we see as we open God's Word today. I'm calling my message: "*Overcoming the already-vanquished foe.*" Let's begin with God's promised victory:

#1: The Assured Victory – *God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight... I pray you may know his incomparably great power for us who believe... Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power(1:4,19; 6:10).*

Our series has been called, “Becoming.” For this entire fall, we have been considering week after week what God says we will become when he has completed his work in us. Let me show you again some of his words:

God’s promised goal for us as a church:

- Unified in all things under Christ (1:10). It’s promised but not yet complete;
- God’s masterpiece doing good works (2:10) – promised but not yet complete;
- In every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (3:15) – also, not yet complete.

God’s promised goal for us as individual Jesus-followers:

- Holy and blameless in his sight (1:4),
- Filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (3:19),
- Like God in true righteousness and holiness (3:24) – all promised but not yet complete.

God’s Word repeatedly tells us that these promises are so sure that it’s as if they are already completed! But, we look at ourselves and ask, “How could that possibly be?” We are, right now, individually and as a church, far from all these things God promises. But, basically, God says, like Churchill said, “We’ve won! The battle is as good as over!” Right now, I merely want you to see that if Churchill could be so confident of victory after the US entered World War II and say, “All the rest is merely the proper application of overwhelming force” -- then, we should have even more confidence in God’s ability to complete his work. Look at what Ephesians 1:18-20 says: *I pray that... you may know God’s incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead...*

That is my prayer for you all today too.

#2: The Formidable Opposition -- *Stand against the devil’s schemes. 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 (6:11b-12).*

As your Sr Pastor, I really feel I need to speak with you about why things often seem to be so hard in this world. Do you ever have this feeling that something is impeding your spiritual growth or – that discourages you when you make a commitment to obey God in some way? I'm sure you do.

So, I need to talk to you now about the devil. I need to say a few things about this because, here in SoCal, even though many people believe in spiritual realities, most struggle with the idea that there is a real personal being called the devil and real personal beings like those Paul calls the “*spiritual forces of evil*”. Do you?

We tend to think of the things that are wrong in this world as all being due to natural causes: including greed, dishonesty, racism, violence, etc. Mostly, we attribute those wrongs to bad psychological factors, bad upbringing or education, or bad sociological factors. This is the world view of most of us who have grown up in North America or Western Europe. **And, note this carefully: “Natural causes” often do lead to all sorts of atrocities and problems.** But, if all problems are only due to natural causes, then we should also be able to find natural solutions to all the problems– e.g., medicine, counseling or some other therapy.

But, we Westerners seem to shy away from the notion that there is supernatural, personal evil. We don't even like the word “evil”. Using that word means we believe there are moral absolutes. When we speak of evil, we're accused of making value judgments. So, here in SoCal, we speak of things that most of the world views as evil in medical terms – like “dysfunction” or “pathology”. And, those things are real. But it is getting harder and harder to say that mass shootings, holocausts, childhood slavery are all due to natural causes and that all we need to do to deal with them is have better laws, brighter street lights, and more education.

Have you read Thomas Harris's *Silence of the Lamb*? A young woman police officer named Starling goes to a high security prison to meet a cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal Lecter. After having a horrible conversation with him, she leaves



the cell and asks a colleague, “What happened to him to make him so twisted and cruel? Lecter heard her and said: “*Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a*

set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants - nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling?"

The Bible clearly teaches us that created beings can become evil, including evil supernatural beings. Note this: The devil and his minions are not God. Evil beings are limited in power and knowledge. Jesus could cast them out by simply speaking a word. But they are real, and they are formidable.

When I talk about this, I'm sometimes told that I've become narrow minded. But have I? Or, is it really narrow minded to reject out-of-hand that there might be real evil and real supernatural beings? You see, I am convinced that there is a multi-dimensionality to the evil in the world. There is our human fallenness (i.e., the flesh)— our proclivity to being dishonest and self-centered. There is the world we are in – and its systems and cultural ways often built on generations of wrongful human decisions. And, the Bible says, there is a devil.

Boiling this point down:

- * There are spiritual realities in the universe – so be aware.
- * God's people have a formidable enemy – so be on your guard.
- * Evil forces are not God – so be aware and be on your guard but do not fear.

So, let's see how this battle against evil is to be won – for it most certainly will be won!

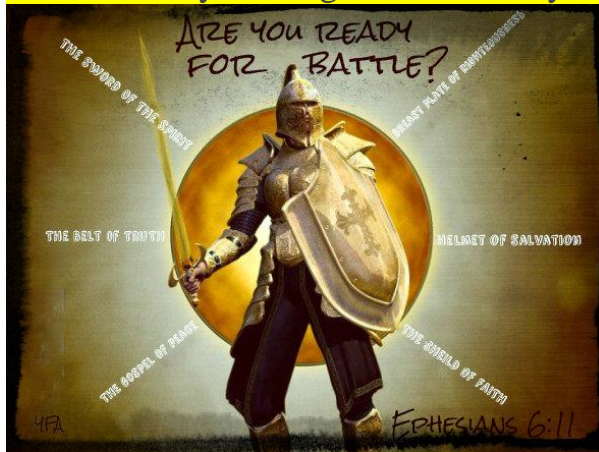
#3: Our Responsibility and God Resources for the Battle – 1) *Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.* 2) *Put on the full armor of God... and stand firm. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions...*

In this last passage in Ephesians, I feel that Paul takes on the mantle of a loving pastor on one side wanting his people to be aware of the challenges they would face in the world while, at the same time, assuring them that they can live confidently. So, he speaks of the spiritual realities in this world because if our battle is against spiritual realities, we will need more than just material, intellectual and physical resources to withstand them. But, then he wanted them – and I want you – to know that God is greater than any powers in this world or in the heavenlies. Notice the God-centeredness of each of the Bible's instructions to us:

First, *"be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power"* (6:10) -- When I was a boy growing up, I had to face bullies on the path as I walked to school. They did what all bullies try to do, i.e., intimidate, rob you of your joy – and your lunch money, etc. So, my brother – a weight lifter, football player and one of the

biggest/strongest kids in school -- always had to go to school early for football meetings. So, I decided I would go early too – with him. When I saw the bullies on the path, I just walked strong – about an inch away from him – and had no fear. God’s Word is saying something like that. It teaches us there is opposition in this world and that, on our own, we will be undone. But, we are not on our own. Our responsibility is to be strong – strong in the Lord. I want you all to know and to count on the presence of God daily -- and to be strong.

Second, “*put on the full armor of God... and stand firm*” (6:11,13-14) – The image Paul uses here is of getting ready each day for the realities of this world – of being prepared for the fact that this world is not yet heaven. You don’t put on armor in the midst of the battle but in preparation for it. The armor we have is all a part of God’s gracious gift to us. Paul speaks both of what we wear as well as what we carry as we go into each day of our lives representing the Lord.



What you put on to wear as you prepare for each day:

- Garment of Truth (6:14a) – Scholars disagree about this piece of armor is – but I believe it is not a belt but the foundational piece of clothing that went underneath all the rest of the armor. If so, all the rest of the armor begins with this,

i.e. truth. That means that you prepare for each day of life with 1) making sure that you go into each day as one whose faith is in Jesus who is the truth. And it means that you will be committed to living a life of truth, i.e., as a trustworthy person of character. This leads to...

- Breastplate of Righteousness (6:14b) – If you live a life of truth that represents Jesus well, then you will have nothing you have to hide – from your family, spouse, friends, etc. This breastplate protected vital organs, especially the heart. What this calls you to do each morning is to ask God to search your heart, your inner being. After you do, then confess whatever is wicked in your thoughts and attitudes and receive his forgiveness. Clothe yourself with Christ's righteousness. And, hear the Lord say to you, "That sin you just confessed, I will remember no more. But, you -- go and sin no more!" You see, when you have nothing to hide, the evil one has nothing to accuse you of. Then, you are ready to put on...
- Sandals of the Gospel of Peace (6:15) – With truth as your foundation and integrity in your life, you're ready to go out and run the race in the midst of an opposition-filled world. You see, when you have your shoes on, you're ready to move on – to carry Christ's message of peace with God and to show his love to those who need compassion and an advocate.

What you carry into each day:

- Shield of faith (6:16): The shield fends off destructive things – like fiery darts that you can expect enemies will throw at you, e.g., untrue accusations, unfair gossip. These darts can rob you of your inner peace and make you anxious and vengeful. But, at such times, remember your faith is in Someone who will never betray you – and in his love that can never be taken away from you. Trust him!
- Helmet of salvation (6:17a) – This, of course, protects your head. The Apostle Paul used the word "salvation" for what this series of messages in Ephesians is all about, i.e., becoming everything that God has promised you will become. So, when your battles are tough, remember God will never give up on you. This remembrance will always – always give you hope to go on.
- Sword of Spirit (6:17b) – As all Christians have recognized, this is the only offensive weapon. He says it is "the Word of God!" It's what Jesus used against the devil when he was tempted. So, keep learning more and more of the Word. In the midst of the battle God's Spirit will bring it back to your mind and it will guide you – just as it did Jesus.

Third, “*pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of requests... for all the Lord’s people* (6:18).

When this armor is put on, then the culmination is that you are ready to enter each day in prayer, i.e., “*prayer in the Spirit*” (6:18-20). The means that you should enter into your day in prayer. And, as you pray, pray in communion with the Spirit, with acknowledgement of the presence that the Spirit will be with you wherever you go, and will be more than sufficient for each day’s battles. And, when you pray, pray for others too. That’s what Paul asked for as he was in prison (5:19).

Pray for the global church, including brothers and sisters who are in prison as Paul was. Pray for your friends and family who are in distress. Pray about the injustices and evils that fill our world. The reason that you should pray for those things is that the Spirit with whom you pray is the Spirit of the living God, the God of the universe. So, when you pray for people anywhere in the universe, for the Spirit of God in you is also where they are – and is sufficient for their struggles too. Because of that, your prayers matter.

My final pastoral words based on Paul’s final pastoral words:

With this, our messages in Ephesians come to an end. Paul’s call to his church were that they should be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power – and that’s what I want to say to you as well.

- **Be confident about your church family today** -- because God’s eternal plan has been to bring together a church just like ours that, through its unity in the Spirit and its witness to Christ will bring glory to God. Satan will try to attack our unity and undermine God’s glory and our witness – but we must make every effort to live out this unity confident in the presence and power of God’s Spirit who dwells here.
- **Do not be surprised when you leave church today and face opposition** – even struggles that are really hard. God has declared that victory is sure – but the battle is not yet fully over.
- **Do not be anxious or afraid in the face of the struggle** -- and even in times of momentary loss or failure. The God who is with you and in you is greater than anyone and anything that stands against,
- **Start each day equipped with the armor of God and praying in the Spirit** -- Prayer is the gift that God has given us – prayer to carry one another’s burdens; indeed, prayer that all of us, through our lives and words may “*fearlessly make known the gospel of Jesus Christ* (6:20).”

The victory has been declared. God himself proclaims that the battle against evil has already been won. Satan's fate is sealed. All the rest is merely the proper application of overwhelming force."

That force is the mighty power of God. It is all -- to God's glory alone.

Our closing benediction read together based on Ephesians 6:23-24:

May the peace of Christ and the love with faith from God go with all the brothers and sisters who have worshipped here today.

And, may the assurance of God's presence and grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.