
STANDING IN THE STRUGGLE

EPHESIANS 6: 10-20

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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If I place the Book of Ephesians into our current context, I'd have to use the phrase, "The struggle is real." By that, I don't mean that my WiFi is slow or I have a 9am class on Monday morning or I can't find matching socks. I mean what Ephesians says. "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." Classes haven't even started yet and I'm already talking about struggle? It's too early in the morning to talk about our struggles. But I can't help it with all of the military images and language pertaining to ancient Roman soldiers—"the armor" "the belt" the "breastplate" "shoes for your feet," a "shield" "helmet" and "sword." The struggle is real. And the "struggle" in this biblical text is a wrestler's or soldier's close quarter grappling as an image for the spiritual life.

My recently retired colleague, Professor Chuck Campbell, would say that the context of preaching, and let me expand that, the context of the Christian life, is the activity of the principalities and powers. And these powers are legion—rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces in heavenly places. Heavenly yet manifesting earthly. Spiritual yet also material. The struggle is real. There's some serious grappling going on these days. Just take a look at Afghanistan, Haiti, and right here in the US with all of our squabbles and tensions over the pandemic. The struggle is real.

But keep in mind that our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh. That is, it's not against each other. This is where we often go astray because we see each other as the enemy. People may be pawns of the powers for sure, but faces will change yet the same evil will still exist. It's like the faces of Carolina's basketball team change but they still lose to Duke! Some things never change. The struggle continues. Our roommates and professors and colleagues are not our enemies. The enemy is evil itself and the powers that seek to oppress and depress and divide and pull our lives apart.

Ephesians reminds us that the struggle is real and a part of the life of faith. I wish I could have named this sermon "Five Easy Ways to Get Through a Struggle to a Life of Bliss" as if it was that simple to just check the box five times and avoid all the mess! There are no quick fixes to dealing with suffering and evil. There's no certificate you can receive from taking an online class so you can graduate beyond the powers and never have to engage them. I wish it were that easy for us but it's not. Theologian Marva Dawn once talked about the old hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers," and said that following Jesus by praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, forgiving endlessly, and so on, is in many respects to live embattled.

If Christ had to endure a cross, we will surely endure struggle. All of us. Notice that it is "our" struggle, not just 'my' struggle. We're all in this together as the people of God. We can't close our bedroom door, shut off the lights, jump into bed, pull the covers over our head and suck on a lollipop and practice mindfulness, hoping the battles and wrestling in this world would just disappear. In the face of struggle, we might just want to fold or flee or fight. But none of these are the responses in Ephesians.

In Ephesians, there are two words that tell us how to respond to the struggle: stand and pray. These are actually two great words of advice for this new school year. Stand and pray. "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil....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. Stand therefore...." One singer put it this way: "After you've done all you can, you just stand." When the world and powers that be are making lots of noise and chaos is flooding all the media outlets, you just stand. It doesn't encourage us to attack or maim. To stand is not a sign of weakness amid a storm. It reveals spiritual strength and stamina in the face of struggle.

“Jesus did not choose the means of the Domination System,” Chuck Campbell writes. “He did not choose coercion. He did not choose weapons or war...he did not choose violence. From the temptation to the cross, the only sword Jesus wielded was ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.’”

And this word is propelled through prayer. That is the second key word—pray. “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication... 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... Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.” Stand and pray.

There are those who would think prayer is useless when they hear stories like when a missionary was walking in an African jungle, and he heard the ominous noise of a lion behind him. The missionary began to pray, “Oh Lord, Grant in Thy goodness that the lion walking behind me is a good Christian lion.” And then, in the silence that followed, the missionary heard the lion praying too: “Oh Lord, I thank Thee for the food which I am about to receive.” There are those who will say you can’t just pray like when people critique others who say after a crisis of some kind, “my thoughts and prayers are with you.” On one level, I understand the critique. The missionary needed to do something like run away or at least run while praying. But on the other hand as our scripture today reveals for our struggle, and as one person has noted, “Prayer is not a substitute for action; it is an action for which there is no substitute”(Marjorie Thompson).

In prayer, we wield words to work for others. The emphasis in Ephesians is on supplications, that is, prayers for other people, not us, even while we struggle. In prayer, we don’t turn to our own navels, but as we stand in the struggle, prayer also turns us to God. And remember, prayer doesn’t change things. God changes things, yet in the process, prayer changes us; it doesn’t change God. Like the character C. S. Lewis said in the movie, *Shadowlands*, “I pray because I’m helpless.”

There are struggles out of our control, even cosmic ones, so we can’t just muscle or think our way out of them. They are beyond our capacity. Even as people of faith, many of whom are successful professionally and now some have been accepted at a prestigious university like Duke because of our pedigrees and gifts, we may sense that ‘we’ can do it on our own.

But we can’t. The challenges ahead, now and in the future, are too great, are legion. Stand and pray, yes. But the only reason we can stand is because of God. “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand...” It is only because of the armor of God that we are able to stand in the struggle. Otherwise, we would fall. Notice that this armor is defensive and protective. It is not aggressive. It surrounds believers. It covers us. God surrounds us in the struggle, and it is God’s strength and power that will help us endure.

The only offensive weapon is a sword, and even that sword is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Again, it is “of God,” not of us. God is *the* resource in our struggle. There is no provision lacking from God—truth, righteousness, faith, peace, the Spirit. You have everything you need in God for the struggle and for what lies ahead this year. The legion powers may be at work in high and low places, but God is right there with us, around us, surrounding us, covering us like baptismal clothes of Christ, from the top of our head to the soles of our feet.

In fact, earlier in Ephesians, we hear, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places....God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

During the apartheid in South Africa the government tried to shut down opposition by canceling a political rally, so Archbishop Desmond Tutu declared that he would hold a church service instead. On this occasion, St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town was filled with worshippers while outside the cathedral hundreds of police gathered, which was a show of force intended to intimidate. As Tutu was preaching, they entered the Cathedral, armed, and lined the walls. They took out notebooks and recorded Tutu's words. But Tutu was not intimidated. He preached against the evils of apartheid, declaring it could not endure. And at one extraordinary point he addressed the police directly. He said, "You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked. So, since you've already lost, since you've already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" And with that the congregation erupted in dance and song amid the struggle.

In the face of the principalities and powers, they knew that Christ is the head of the church and rules over every power and every name in high and low places. So do not be afraid. Stand and pray and sing like reformer Martin Luther:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing
Our Helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe
His craft and pow'r are great, and, armed with cruel hate
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He
The Lord of hosts His name, from age to age the same
And He must win the battle.

And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly pow'rs, no thanks to them, abideth
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever.

In other words, as we start this new academic year with everything going on in the world and in our lives, the Powery cliff notes version of this message is simply this—God's got this, and God's got you.