

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 28, 2019)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

Standing Firm Against Unseen Enemies

(Ephesians 6:10-20)

Study #12

Introduction: What could go wrong...?

From where I sit, we are seeing one of the most exciting and dynamic seasons at Northwest in some time. To wit:

- The Bristol apartments will soon be completed, residents will move in, allowing us to serve our new neighbors in Jesus' Name.
- Over the last year, we've used the Land Sale Proceeds to improve our serve here in San Antonio and around the world. We're going to get to keep investing in kingdom projects in the year to come.
- The Next Steps meeting set for August 25th will give us all a rich time to connect over a great meal (cooked in our new church kitchen, perhaps...?), to rejoice over what the Lord has done recently, and to dream of what is to come.
- The Elders are proposing full integration of Encuentro into Northwest. (How exciting is that?!)
- ESL and Citizenship classes will again start up in September, giving us another year to serve in these ministries.
- Lives are being touched through Care Groups and Adult Bible Fellowships while kids are being well-served in Sunday Schools.
- We'll be connecting with each other this evening at the Family Growth Gathering.
- And, Women's Studies will soon begin, a Men's Fellowship is set for next Saturday with Men's Bible studies to start up in September.

- The youth have given three of their Saturdays this summer to serving in Jesus' Name.

That's a lot of great stuff - and that list is only just scratching the surface. Exciting, indeed.

These are all overwhelmingly positive and they all give us great reason for optimism about the coming months. Smooth sailing ahead, right? I mean, what could go wrong?

Well...since our world is broken, lots of stuff could go wrong, including health problems that would sideline leaders, scheduling conflicts, tech problems, relational fractures, financial mismanagement, sexual scandal, weather disasters, along with Satanic opposition.

Yes, I said that.

In addition to the more "normal" problems that might derail any of our ministry plans, add to them the reality that there is an unseen enemy who is committed to fighting our every dream to advance the Gospel and to serve others in Jesus' Name.¹

Given this, it makes perfect sense that the last thing the Apostle Paul writes about in his letter to the church in the city of Ephesus,² after urging us to take next steps with Jesus and help others do the same, is spiritual warfare.

He wants us to know that if we intend to apply what he has said in this letter, we are going to attract the attention of an enemy. And when he turns his attention to us, we need to know how to respond.

¹ I am reading a book - The Unseen Realm - by Michael Heiser, a very insightful book about the overtly spiritual mindset of the writers of the Bible. Heiser is opening my eyes to the role "spirit beings" (positive and negative) have played throughout history and the role that they continue to play in our world today. I highly recommend this book.

² Note that the Ephesians destroyed their magical arts, Acts 19:19, as a demonstration of their growth in Christian discipleship.

This morning's time in God's Word will provide critical truth that will equip us all, and we'll start off with some thoughts about the flesh-and-blood world in which we live.

The Material World and the Spiritual World

Our Flesh and Blood World

Our five senses are bombarded all day long with sights, sounds and smells. We taste and we touch. We exercise, eat, work, and work out. There is no question but that our world is a material world.

Then, too, ours is a world of ideas. Back in the day, I earned a minor in college in philosophy. I studied the best ideas the western world has had to offer, from Socrates to Plato, from can to Kant (sorry).

And we live in a world filled with rich emotions. At various times on any given day, we may experience *rage* (when someone has wronged us), *anguish* (over loss) or *nervousness* (over the threat of loss), *happiness* (at our own good fortune) and *resentment* (over the good fortune of others), *frustration* (at a good deal gone bad), *relief* (at a calamity averted) and *joy* (in victory).

This is *your* world AND it is the flesh-and-blood world *the Bible* describes, too.

The Bible's Flesh and Blood World

Read your Bible and you'll see the colors of Noah's rainbow and you'll hear God's Sinai thunder. You'll feel the embrace of the father as he welcomes the prodigal son home. You'll smell Mary's perfume as she anoints Jesus. You'll taste the Passover meal.

The Bible is also the best place to go for a rich smorgasbord of big ideas. We consider the beginning of everything, human justice issues, the conflict between good and evil, the relationship of God's sovereignty and our moral freedom, and so much more.

And there is no richer well to draw from if you're looking for fullness of emotion than Scripture.

There is Peter's *grief* after denying His Lord and the Lord's *compassion* for the multitude. There is the *love* between David and Jonathan, the *hatred* of the Pharisees for Jesus, the *sorrow* of a widow whose son has died, the *joy* of Mary over Jesus' resurrection, and the *confidence* of Stephen as he is stoned to death for Christ.

The Bible portrays life as it is. Life as we experience it.

But, the Bible layers another dimension on top of all that we see - the realm of the spirit - and the Bible talks about the spiritual realm as easily as we discuss the weather.

Another Kind of World; a Spiritual One

It's on our minds

You've noticed that the realm of the spirit and the world of the supernatural is on our minds today. It's everywhere.

It's the theme of books and shows. We see it in the reboot of The Twilight Zone and in the newer Stranger Things, in superhero movies and in all things zombie. Our culture is obsessed with a realm we never see.

And, while interesting, our culture doesn't know of what it writes. Our aim this morning is to think biblically - that is, *realistically* - about this invisible realm.

The Bible's presentation of a world we do not see

Throughout the Bible, the writers assume the existence of a personal Creator we can neither see, taste, touch, hear, or smell.

Jesus tells us in John's Gospel, "**God is spirit.**" (John 4). That doesn't mean He isn't real. He is spirit. He is here and He is real.

The Bible speaks of others, too, who inhabit this realm of the spirit.³ We most often call these spirit beings *angels*. Angels are real.

Scripture makes repeated reference to angels and to their activities in the Old and New Testaments. Every New Testament writer speaks of angels.

We discover that angels are free-will agents who choose to worship God or not, just like us. There are angels who are aligned with God and there are angels who are opposed to God. Scripture refers to both and it tells us that their works intersect with and impact our world.⁴

Today's passage brings us face to face with that vision of another dimension of reality and highlights the activities of those who oppose God. Paul tells us who follow Jesus that they are our enemies.

[12] For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Our enemy's existence

The activities of these spirit beings who oppose God span the centuries of biblical history. The first appearance is in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) and the last is at the very end, when the most vile of the lot - Satan/the devil - is judged (Revelation 20).

³ The Bible says that people are material and spiritual beings, with the capacity to know God. In Genesis, we understand that man was created in the image and likeness of God, with the resulting capacity for relationship with God. In Genesis 2:7, we read how God breathed into man the breath of life. This is more than the act of making him physically alive; it is giving him a dimension of life that is different from the animals. The people with whom we rub shoulders every day are spiritual beings, made in the image of God, who will live forever, and who have the potential of relating to God - because they are spiritual beings.

⁴ Angels ministered to Jesus after His forty days of being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. They worship God in heaven and carry messages from God's throne. They protect God's people, and they execute God's judgments.

There is biblical evidence that Satan was, at one time, a spirit being of the highest order. He was created innocent (like Adam and Eve), and he (also, like Adam and Eve) rebelled against God, aspiring to be "like" God. For this, God cast him out of His presence.⁵

He is not all-powerful, yet he and the other angels (demons) who oppose God are powerful. They are all, also, unalterably opposed to those who follow God.⁶

So, whether you want one or not, if you name the name of Jesus, you have enemies.

Our enemy's devices

Paul writes here in Ephesians 6 about the chief enemy, the devil. The devil is active in his scheming against Christians and Paul says that we are to ***[11]...stand firm against the schemes of the devil.***

We read elsewhere that the devil's schemings are often behind roadblocks to our plans to serve Jesus. Paul wrote that it was Satan who kept him from visiting Christians in Thessalonica.⁷

When he wrote about having ministry opportunities in the city of Ephesus, he told the Corinthians, ***[1 Corinthians 16:9]...a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.*** I have long suspected that some of those adversaries may have been spiritual in nature.

Some of his malignancy is neither indirect nor veiled. It's overt wickedness. But our enemy is capable of subtlety, too.

Paul's word here - ***schemes*** - was used in ancient times to speak of animals who used cunning to surprise and kill their prey.

⁵ Passages that likely describe Satan's fall are Isaiah 14:12-14 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, although he is not named in either of these passages.

⁶ Names by which we know Satan: The accuser of the brethren, the devil, slanderer, the serpent, the great dragon, the prince of demons, the evil one, destroyer, tempter, deceiver, and ***"the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience."*** (Ephesians 2)

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 2:18.

Paul's telling us that Satan will often attack us from the blind side, rather than with a frontal assault.⁸

For instance, he will often seek to get us Christians to not forgive each other. When he succeeds in this, he's won a major victory. (2 Corinthians 2:5-11) Another scheme is to convince us to hang on to our anger. He ensnares lots of Christians that way. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Of course, he tries to trip us up in other ways, too.⁹ Don't miss that we have an enemy who is committed to our spiritual destruction.

It may be odd for you to think of yourself - a Christian - as being in a battle zone under fire from an enemy. But that's true.

We tend to be comfortable thinking of ourselves as God's *children* and even as His *servants*. We're much less comfortable thinking of ourselves as His *soldiers*.

Yet the Bible speaks of the spiritual life in terms of battle every bit as much as it does in terms of serving.

If you and I are going to be successful in our efforts to live for Jesus, we're going to have to learn how to fight and win spiritual battles.

Paul's instructions in Ephesians are perfectly fit for that time when we are to fight. Paul refers to that time as "***the evil day.***" And the "***evil day***" might be a day of CALAMITY.

Our enemy's opportunism

[13]...that you may be able to resist in the evil day"

⁸ One of his most successful "schemes" is to seek to get us Christians to not forgive each other. When he succeeds in this, he's won a major victory. (2 Corinthians 2:5-11) Another trap is to convince us to hang on to our anger. He ensnares many Christians regularly with that one. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

⁹ Sexual temptation, the lure of ill-gotten gain, the temptation to gossip, discouragement, substance abuse, and more.

He takes advantage of calamity

Job's calamities, recorded in the first two chapters of that book were, for him, an "***evil day.***" When Mary's and Martha's brother Lazarus died, they faced an "***evil day.***"

Maybe a personal earthquake has hit your family, the doctors have given you bad news, you are not cutting it at work, or primary relationships in life are broken.

For you, these are "***evil days.***"

He takes advantage of temptation

"***Evil days***" may also be days of intense TEMPTATION. Peter's temptation to deny Jesus was an "***evil day***" for him.

It may be that you are currently facing a tempting "***evil day.***" It could be a temptation to stop following Jesus, to act out sexually, to violate integrity, or to in some other way fall for the devil's schemes.

Every day is, to some extent, an "***evil day***" for you, for me, for all of us. And some days are more evil than others.

Paul would tell you that Satan is looking to take advantage of every calamity or temptation to pull you down, to get your eyes off Jesus, to sideline you for God.

What do we do when the "***evil day***" comes and the enemy attacks?

Paul says that we will need to assume a certain posture and we will have to take up certain armor.¹⁰

Listen for the posture.

¹⁰ He mentions this posture three times in this passage. I guess he's serious. :-)

Fighting Evil with Good

Stand Firm!

[11] Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to STAND FIRM against the schemes of the devil...[13] Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to STAND FIRM. [14] STAND FIRM therefore...

Paul sounds like Winston Churchill speaking to his countrymen when the Nazis were threatening. *“Don’t retreat. Give no ground. Don’t give one inch. Stand firm, stand firm, stand firm.”*

Never - not here and not anywhere else in the Bible - are we told to attack the devil. He may attack us, but we are not to attack back. We are to simply ***“stand firm.”***¹¹

James tells us the same thing. Not *“Go on the offensive! Attack!”*, but ***[James 4:7] Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.***

Our standing firm, though, will only be successful as we ***“put on”*** the armor Paul describes in the verses that follow.

You’re not surprised that Christians have varying opinions about what the pieces of armor Paul mentions are all about. (They are obviously metaphors. But what do these metaphors mean?)

Some teach that putting on the armor involves a Christian holding fast to certain positional truths. I respect people who believe that, but I disagree.

I take a very pragmatic approach here. I believe that the armor we put on is the lifestyle we adopt, in submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

For instance, let’s look together at ***“the belt of truth.”***

¹¹ In James 4:7, we read the same thing, along with a promise, ***“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.....”***

Put on the Armor of God

We are to take up certain armor in preparation for the battle:

[14] Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth

The clothing of a first century warrior was held together by a belt. Obviously, the soldier would cinch that belt down tight before he rushed into battle.

It would be dangerous for a soldier to engage an enemy with his open robe billowing in the wind. And it would be dangerous for a Christian to try to stand firm against Satan’s attacks without the protection of integrity and truth-telling.

The devil has been a liar from the beginning. Jesus called him ***[John 8:44] “the father of lies.”***

Do you want to successfully stand against Satan’s lies? His lies wilt as you simply speak truth and live with integrity.

It can be so tempting to speak near truth or to “spin” just a bit. When you lovingly speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, when you live with unimpeachable integrity, you are unassailable by the schemings of your enemy.

Paul moves on to a second piece of armor.

[14] Stand firm therefore... having PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS”¹²

The breastplate a Roman soldier wore in battle was a tough, sleeveless piece of leather that covered his torso. Onto this leather garment was sewn pieces of metal molded or hammered to conform to the body. It protected the soldier’s vital organs.

¹² Some teach that Paul is referring to the righteousness that is ours in Christ, the *imputed* righteousness we receive when we trust Jesus for eternal life. I disagree.

We are protected against the attacks of the devil in ***“the evil day”*** of calamity or temptation by a ***“breastplate of righteousness.”***

We put on this breastplate as we do what Paul has been urging us to do throughout the letter. He’s simply couches his words here in the vocabulary of battle.

If you *steal* rather than work hard, deal in *bitterness* rather than kindness, *tear down* others with your words rather than build them up, behave *immorally* rather than in purity, and *get drunk* rather than allow yourself to be filled by the Holy Spirit, well, you open yourself up to getting pierced through the midsection.

The enemy wins. Your testimony is destroyed.

Paul continues.

[14] Stand firm therefore... [15] and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace”¹³

Today, there are shoes for every activity: basketball, football, baseball, tennis, jogging, sprinting, trail running, hiking, and more.

A good pair of boots enables a soldier to be ready for a march, an attack, or, as here, a stand. In ancient times, all shoes were sandals, not boots. But soldiers have always fought with their feet shod.

Paul says that Christians are to make sure that we are wearing the shoes of the Gospel of peace.

He’s not telling us how important it is to *remember* the beautiful truths of the Gospel. He’s telling us how important it is to *share* the beautiful truths of the Gospel with those who have not yet come to know Christ.

Spiritual protection against Satan’s attacks comes as we tell our friends about Jesus. How practical is that?

¹³ The “gospel of peace” spoken of here refers to the good news that men and women can be at peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

It isn’t that your life will go well or that you won’t have trials if you witness regularly. Of course, he’s not saying that.

But if you want to know the joy of the Lord, have a growing confidence in Christ, and be empowered by God’s love, share Jesus.

For victory over the enemy’s attacks, put on your “share Jesus” shoes as you leave today. Double knot the laces. Pray for boldness and open doors and get ready to tell someone you know the greatest message they will ever hear.

Here’s the next piece of armor.¹⁴

[16] in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one.¹⁵

The shield in view here was a full body shield measuring two and a half feet wide and four and a half feet high. It protected a soldier’s entire body and was made of wood and covered with either metal or heavy, oiled leather.

The soldiers who carried these shields were the on the front lines. They formed a protective shield for the soldiers behind them.¹⁶

Now, in ancient warfare, the tips of the archers’ arrows would often be wrapped in pieces of cloth that had been soaked in tar. Just before the arrow was released, the tip would be lit, and the flaming missile would fly at the enemy.¹⁷

The Roman soldier with the full-body shield would be saved from those flaming arrows.

¹⁴ Some believe that we are to put on the first three pieces of armor prior to the beginning of the devil’s attack. We keep the last three in readiness for when the actual fighting begins. I’m not sure we can be so precise as that.

¹⁵ One more time, notice that we are not fighting against vague impersonal forces, but “the evil one.” (the devil)

¹⁶ The front line in a Roman offensive sometimes measured a mile long.

¹⁷ Try to imagine the effect of seeing a flaming arrow headed your way!

The devil sends flaming arrows of temptations and trials our way that could undo us, derail us, devastate us.

Paul tells us that we Christians need a shield, too. We need a **“shield of faith.”**

And this is not a nebulous call to an abstract *“just have faith”* cliché. This is a call to victory over the enemy’s flaming arrows by **FAITHFULNESS.**

Faithful living won’t protect you against life’s tragedies. It will protect you against the enemy’s attempts to use them to break you. Remain faithful to God and you will be shielded from faithlessness.

And, of course, every soldier needs a good helmet. Every Christian does, too.

[17] And take the helmet of salvation

This image obviously relates to our thinking. The helmet covers the head, the brain. What is to be *“on the mind”* of the Christian who wants to stand firm when under attack by the enemy?

What is to be on your mind is the most wonderful gift anyone could ever give you: eternal life by faith alone in Christ alone.

You’re to think often of the enormity of Jesus’ sacrifice for you when He died on the cross. Bring to mind the depth of God’s love seen there. Fix your mind on the spiritual gifts God has given you in Jesus.

And, finally, this last piece of armor.

[17] And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.¹⁸

The sword in view is the short sword used by the Roman soldier in close, hand-to-hand combat. It was six to eighteen inches long and was carried in a sheath on the belt. It was always at hand.

This sword was a unique weapon in that it was used both offensively and defensively, to deflect the enemy’s attacks and to thrust at the enemy.

Christians have a sword, too, and it is also useful on offense and defense. Our sword is the content of Scripture used against the devil as he attacks in **“the evil day.”**¹⁹

This metaphor of God’s Word being a “sword” is pretty perfect.

Swordplay was won by the warrior with the most skill. Brute force wasn’t the main thing. Wielding the sword with great control in just the right way to deflect a blow or to exploit a weakness was the crucial thing.

That’s how Jesus used the Word of God when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. To each temptation Satan put in front of Him, He responded with a fit **“word”** from the Word. (Matthew 4)

- *The devil said, “Turn stones into bread, Jesus.” He replied, [4] “**Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.**”* (Deuteronomy 8:3)
- *“Throw Yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, Jesus.” He shot back, [7] “No, Satan, **You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.**”* (Deuteronomy 6:16)
- *“Worship me, Jesus!” Jesus said, [10] “**Begone Satan, for it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and SERVE Him only.’**”* (Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20)

The sword of the Spirit is not a broadsword to be waved about indiscriminately. It’s a dagger to be used with precision.

¹⁸ Significantly, the Greek word used here for “word” is not “logos” but “rema” (ρημα), signifying a specific truth, pertinent to a given situation.

¹⁹ When we open the Bible, we are not listening “for” a word from God, as if He might or might not speak to us. No, when we read the Bible, we are listening “to” the word of God. The Bible IS, objectively, God’s Word.

Jesus didn't view God's Word as a good luck charm. He knew it by heart - literally; backwards and forwards - and so was equipped, in the *"evil day"* to use it to resist the devil's temptations.

A Roman soldier's sword could be sharp as a razor, but if he didn't know how to use it, he wouldn't last long in battle.

A Christian facing an enemy attack won't long survive unless he makes the Bible his own.

My dream is that you will give yourself to gaining great skill in using Scripture by study and meditation so that you can bring God's truth to bear on the temptations that come your way.

The last thought about spiritual warfare Paul mentions in Ephesians highlights the **spiritual** nature of our warfare. If we want success, we must pray, pray, pray, pray.

We are to PRAY! PRAY! PRAY! PRAY!

[18] With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, [19] and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, [20] for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

Paul believed that God's power is released as we pray. That is why he asked that people pray for him. And if it was important that people pray for the Apostle Paul, how much more do I and do you need people praying for us?!

All the other pieces of armor are held individually. Here is the one piece that is based in community: prayer. We must pray for each other.

To the extent that we are praying for each other - for boldness, for strength to stand firm and to resist - to that extent we will have victory over the schemes of the devil in the *"evil day."*

Conclusion:

The attention we pay these days to super-heroes and super-heroines is, generally good, clean fun.

Thor and his crew are all the rage and The Twilight Zone is up and running (again) after a 55-year timeout. Less wholesome are the shows and movies that highlight the dark side, and they're popping up all over the place.

These shows are all fiction, of course, and the zombie apocalypse isn't looming.

But our fascination with powers beyond our own and with a world beyond what we see speaks to our instinct that there is more than the physical world around us.

Our instinct isn't wrong.

There is an unseen realm, and it is real. And the only reliable source of information about that realm is the Word of the God who rules the physical and the spiritual realm.

Our takeaways for today are that:

- We have an enemy who opposes us because he opposes our God;
- As much as it may seem that our biggest problems in life concern physical health and financial stresses, our real struggle is against this unseen enemy;
- Following Jesus will involve the need to stand firm against our enemy's attempts to get us to stop following Jesus;
- Standing firm will involve leading a courageous life of obedience consisting of putting on the "armor" of God.
- We need to pray like crazy for each other if we want to have victory in Jesus.