

OVERCOMING SATAN IN GOD'S STRENGTH

[Reading, Ephesians 6:1-18: Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your 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. 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. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.]

The book of Romans that Wayne summarised last week showed how the Christian is meant to become the new humanity, saved by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We become "those who live in accordance with the Spirit [and] have their minds set on what the Spirit desires". We are agents of the kingdom, bringing in God's new creation. But if we look at ourselves, it doesn't often feel like it. We, like Paul in Romans 7, often get into a state of frustration where "I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time." (The Message). We get proud of our achievements; or we envy others; we get greedy for money, we gossip, we forget to pray, then feel guilty about these things.....don't you feel like Paul at times? I know I do.

What stands in the way of us becoming "free in Christ" to be the new humanity? The Bible stresses three elements, the flesh, the world and the devil. What's the flesh – these are human urges that pull us away

from relying wholly on God. What do we mean by the world – these things around us that lead to mental habit patterns, called strongholds, that are not in line with God’s truth. The third, our topic today, is the devil. To hear about the other two, and implement ways to overcome them by God’s truth, why not come on the “Freedom in Christ” course starting tomorrow – there’s still time to join, and I encourage you to see Claire to register afterwards!

Who is Satan?

We are going to look specifically at Ephesians 6:10-18, that was just read, but we need some preliminaries. The devil? Who in the world believes in him? But he does give rise to good stories. [Apologies in advance to little boys and lawyers!]

A little boy always went next door to play even though his mom had warned him against doing so. This worried his mom so badly that she asked him why he was so disobedient.

He replied that Satan tempted him so bad and he did not know what to do.

His mom then advised him to say 'get behind me Satan' whenever he was tempted. She then built a fence around the house.

This worked for a week, then one sunny afternoon his mom looked out the window and there was her son playing on the neighbors lawn having cut a hole in the fence.

“Jeremiah”, she yelled, "come here!" She then said "did I not tell you to say 'get behind me Satan' whenever he tempted you?"

“Yes”, the boy replied, "I said, 'get behind me Satan', then he went behind me and pushed me through the hole in the fence."

It seems St. Peter and the Devil had an agreement to share the costs of maintaining the fence between Heaven and Hell.

One weekend there was a bit of a brawl in Hell that got out of hand, and part of the fence was smashed. St. Peter had it repaired, paid the bill, and then asked the Devil to pay his share of the expense.

Satan ignored St. Peter's request for weeks. Finally, in exasperation, St. Peter said he would sue the Devil if he didn't pay up.

"Oh yeah?" snorted the Devil. "And where do you think you're going to find a lawyer?"

Satan loves these jokes. They ensure people fail to take him seriously, giving him free rein. He also loves the materialistic, rational, scientific view of the world that claims the spiritual doesn't exist. But we need wisdom here. Look coolly at the world – can you deny that evil is rampant - in 9/11, the Holocaust, the killing fields of Cambodia? Don't those horrors go beyond mere human evil? But we can equally go too far the other way – blaming the devil for us not making an appointment when we failed to fill the car with petrol. How do we find a balance? C S Lewis in the Screwtape letters wrote “there are two equal and opposite errors into which humanity can fall about the devil – one is to disbelieve in him, the other is to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest”. Where do Satan and his cohorts come from? How do they operate? How can we resist them? The Bible tells us.

Biblical witness

The Bible teaches that there is a spiritual world – this is Paul's assumption in Ephesians. Ten years ago, I didn't believe in evil myself. Then, Scripture makes clear that Satan exists and is a created being. This means that unlike God, he can't know everything and can't be everywhere at once. In fact, he was an archangel who fell from heaven after disobeying God, before man was created. Ezekiel 28:14 says “You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.” And 1/3 of all angels followed him. Having fallen from heaven with his angels, Satan was there on earth to meet Adam and Eve in Eden, as the serpent, **tempting** them to disobey God, **lying** about him, having led them to doubt his word. And they went along with it...the start of all our troubles. In the Old Testament he is the **accuser** of God's people. In Job, he seeks to so discourage Job that he will curse God. In Zechariah he **accuses** Joshua the High Priest of his sins, so he stands before God in “filthy clothes”.

In the New Testament, Satan tempts Jesus in the desert, but Jesus answers him with the Word of God. Listen to this “The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It is written: `Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' " Note though that the Bible admits to Satan’s power on earth, due to the fall, and he is often called “the Prince of this world”.

Jesus triumphed over Satan on the cross as it is written in Colossians 2:15 “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross”. This fulfilled the prophecy in Genesis 3, even at the beginning of time, that God would send one of Adam’s descendents to defeat Satan “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Satan’s ultimate defeat is hence assured by the cross, and is prophesied in Revelation 20:10 “the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” We as God’s people are like the allied troops in 1944-5. D-Day – Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection - has taken place and the fall of Nazi Germany – the realm of Satan - is in sight, but the war is still on, God’s people are still in a struggle with cosmic evil.

Satan’s methods

So how does Satan work? We must understand that so we can combat him. He works through a network of fallen angels. These are the “rulers, authorities, and powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” that we just heard about. He puts thoughts in our mind with sometimes disastrous consequences, as he did David in 1 Chronicles 21:1 “Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel” – which led to plague, or Judas at the last supper “the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus” (John 13:2) – leading to the crucifixion. Or Ananias as Peter says in Acts 5:3 “how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for

yourself some of the money you received for the land?” – which led to Ananias’ death. Satan can plant thoughts of **temptation**, like these; **accusation** as we saw above, but he also uses **deception**, as he did to Adam and Eve. Jesus tells us of Satan in John 8:44 “When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Do we have to listen though?

We are weakened in our resistance when we allow Satan a foothold in our lives through sin, such as anger. Paul warns the Ephesians “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (4:26-7). Or through unforgiveness. This is exactly what 2 Corinthians 2:10 refers to: “If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” Do you get angry, and brood on your anger? Is there unforgiveness, a bitter root, in your heart? Let’s reflect on it.

As Christians, we are strongly protected against Satan because as Guy Chevreau put it Christian is linked at the centre of their being to God’s Spirit, which Satan can’t undo, as Paul says triumphantly in Romans 8:38-39 “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This is why Satan resists strongly a non-believer coming out of his grip, as I can witness when I became a Christian. It’s a long story that some of you have already heard, but what I do recall is a feeling of sickening terror and evil thoughts, that were seeking to stop me reading the Bible and putting faith in Jesus. For Christians, Satan mainly operates by “oppression” – seeking influence on our minds by **temptation, accusation or deception**. Even the oldest Christian faces his attacks. He aims to neutralise us as workers for the kingdom, or even so we hinder God’s work, particularly by damaging the church and he’s too often successful. Here’s a little summary called “Satan’s beatitudes”!

Blessed are those who are too tired, too busy, too distracted to spend an hour once a week with their fellow Christians in Church ~ they are my best workers.

Blessed are those who wait to be asked and expect to be thanked ~ I can use them in my business.

Blessed are those who are touchy. Soon they will stop going to church ~ verily, they shall be my missionaries.

Blessed are those who sow trouble ~ they are my beloved children.

Blessed are those who have no time to pray ~ for they MY prey.

Blessed are those who gossip ~ for they are my secret agents.

Blessed are you when you hear this and think it has everything to do with other people, and nothing to do with you. ~ I've got room for YOU at my inn.

Victory in God's strength

How can we protect ourselves from this cunning and powerful foe, who in Peter's words "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"? This is where Ephesians 6 comes into play; line by line it shows that we have nothing to fear and much to rejoice for:

"Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" – we must not stand in our own strength but in that of Christ and his victory, and praise him. In our own strength, we will surely fail. Guy Chevreau in his excellent book "Spiritual Warfare Sideways" highlights that we should be like King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 when attacked by the men of Ammon and Moab. He heard from God's Spirit "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem.....after consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendour of his holiness.....as they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated." God gave them victory; they focused on God and not their enemy, and their might was in worship and not battle!

"Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" – God has provided us with all we need to protect ourselves; note that the root word for "schemes" is to "defraud" or lie, Satan's key operating method.

“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” – we must be aware of these powers in the spiritual realm, and mustn’t assume problems are always due to ill-will of other people. Remember God loves all “flesh and blood” and longs for all mankind to come to him.

“Therefore put on the full armour 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” – be prepared in advance for temptation, oppression, deceit, accusation.

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist” – we stand in God’s truth in the Bible against Satan’s lies.

“with the breastplate of righteousness in place” – we rely on Jesus’ righteousness and not our own, remembering God’s grace that forgives us as we put faith in him.

“and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” – the good news of Jesus neutralises Satan and spreads the kingdom.

“In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” – we can by faith prevent ourselves hearing or acting upon evil thoughts. This is a communal enterprise, as a Roman soldier needed to lock his shield with his neighbour for protection – too often we are casualties due to “going it alone”; we need solidarity as a church.

“Take the helmet of salvation” – as Wayne told us last week, Jesus’ sacrifice was to make us a new creation, so we might have the mind of Christ, living in accordance with the Spirit and having our minds protected and set on what the Spirit desires, like with a helmet.

“and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” – like Jesus in the desert, we can resist temptation by the might of Scripture. When we expose Satan’s lies to God’s truth, it is like turning on the light, and darkness flees away, as Jesus said “whoever lives by the truth comes into the light”.

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints”. Satan fears most a church on its knees, where people pray in the Spirit to God, for themselves and for others.

To me the 24/7 is one of the most significant advances this church has ever made; let's build on it every Friday and Saturday!

See throughout this passage how when we are at peace with God, we are at war with Satan. In general, the armour of God is defensive – there's no spear. We needn't seek out Satan, nor are we called to, as Jesus has already defeated him, rather we wrestle, standing our ground. But if evil manifests itself, we do have God's power to deal with it. Did Jesus not urge his followers to "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons", out of love for others. And is that not still true today? This is a story some of you know already, in praying round a friend's house, a group of us encountered an evil spirit who gave harrowing nightmares to adults and children, gave rise to an oppressive atmosphere, and was real enough to push me against a wall. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, one of us the group was led to proclaim with great authority "in the name of Jesus, begone..." and the spirit left the house immediately. Shortly afterwards a group of us experienced a pillar of fire and incredible love coming through the ceiling, thereby reclaiming the ground for God.

Let me sum up. Satan exists – we only need to look at the evil of human history – and the temptations we face - to see that. He accuses, he tempts and he lies. Taking advantage of our weaknesses, he seeks to hinder the progress of God's kingdom and destroy the church. But we as Christians are strong in Christ. As James advocates "resist the devil and he will flee from you". We resist Satan by putting on God's armour, praying, focusing on Jesus, and worshipping him! Filling our minds with light remembering Jesus "was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it."

Ministry

Feelings of accusation and temptation.

Footholds: such as Unforgiveness, Anger.

Any kind of fears, to be reassured of protection and Jesus' victory.