What a Difference a Day Makes!

*“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 Lord’s people.” Ephesians 6:10-18*

Wow! “What a difference a day makes” is quite a true statement! The last few weeks have been full of extraordinary and unparalleled changes in our lives and in our ministries as a Church. I have talked with many pastors, community leaders, read countless articles and, along with my colleagues in ministry and Fire/Rescue chaplaincy, have struggled to minister in a period of social distancing. We try to figure out how to serve the most at-risk populations in our communities, how to conduct funerals, which are now restricted, how to minister to families in grief situations, how to respond to hospital emergencies and, in the practical, how to sustain ministries as tithes and offerings decline.

The other side of this equation may seem selfish but how do we, as pastors and community leaders, protect ourselves when our people expect us to be there for them? It is truly heart wrenching as none of us, as pastors, have been trained to do this type of ministry, if training could ever be done for something like this. It is ground-breaking, to say the least. We’ve never ministered through a pandemic like the COVID-19 before. Fear, frustration, anxiety, confusion, depression and substance abuse is everywhere as people isolate and withdraw from our societal norms. I’m sure you’re wrestling with it, too.

So, with concern in my heat, I turned to my longtime friend, mentor and powerful prayer warrior, Ellie Stampfli, a lady who prays fervently for each of you and our church daily. Miss Ellie is a 98-year-old World War II nurse from West Texas, who has walked close with the Lord since she was a child. As a girl, Miss Ellie desperately wanted to be a missionary nurse and was headed to the mission field when, as she said in her slow West Texas drawl, “God had other plans and sent me to war.” It was in the midst of carnage, chaos, extreme suffering, uncertainty and death that Miss Ellie cared for severely burned soldiers and those who lived in quarantine due to infection. She told me, “I saw so much suffering and when I got out, we continued to face the Polio Epidemic, the measles outbreak and, Oh Chuck, the list could go on all the way back through my childhood, even to the Great Depression that lingered in West Texas with momma and daddy! You know, Chuck, I never felt closer to God or heard His voice more clearly than during those times of crisis, but, “ya gotta listen!” People have got to listen to God!”

Miss Ellie went on to say, “In times like this, hang on to the truth of God’s Word, preach God’s truth, live God’s truth, listen to God speak to your heart, mind and soul, pray and don’t change, just pay attention and do what is right. Jesus is our Lord, tell them about the battle that Jesus won on the Cross. Oh Chuck, tell them that, please!”

In Philippians 4:12-13 Paul writes, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

During this time of crisis, it’s really important for us to remember the fundamentals of what God has clearly told us as we face the future. The Bible presents us with the truth and emphasizes the reality of God’s plan for our future and the future of the world.

In last week’s message, we began with a spiritual reality check. We found that Jesus had much to say prophetically about this “invisible enemy.” Jesus spoke to us about the End Times as He instructed His disciples in Luke 21:9-11 “But when you hear of wars and commotions, *do not be terrified* [frightened]; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately. Then He said to them, ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.There will be great earthquakes, famines and *pestilences* in various places, and *fearful events* and great signs from heaven.”

In John 16:33, Jesus reminded the disciples in His final hours before His suffering, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." And Jesus reminded the disciples that He was coming again (Matt. 24:36; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Thess. 5:1-2) and the Apostles extensively instructed the Church about this blessed hope (1 Thess. 4:13-18; 2 Peter 3:8-13; the Book of Revelation. Also ref. The Books of Daniel and Ezekiel).

As I mentioned last week, French Arrington writes in his book, An Expectant People, “The final outcome of God’s plan is and will be a remarkable blessing and encouragement to God’s people. They will see the Lord come in the air for His people, both living and dead. They will witness the union of Christ with his bride (the Church), and they will experience the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth [and]... Finally, everything will be made new.”

So, as we live in the light of Christ’s return and as we raise the question, “WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON?” the Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 6, provides us the answers we are looking for:

**I. The Battle is Spiritual and the Warfare is Real**

Throughout his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warns these young Christians that there are three formidable foes with which we must struggle; the world, the flesh and the devil and all three are deadly.

In his final instructions Paul writes in Ephesians 6:10-11, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength [power] of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.”

Paul gets detailed in his teaching of spiritual warfare. Notice there are two essential components (1) “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” (2) “Put on the whole armor of God.”

“Be Strong” - Before a soldier is given a gun or shown how to fire a missile, he goes through basic training. One great purpose for basic training is to build up the recruit’s physical strength. It is as if the army says, “Soldier, we are going to give you the best weapons and armor possible. But first we have to make sure that you are strong and that you can use what we give you.”

**Might** is inherent power or force – It is reserved strength. **Power** is the exercise of might; it means that the reserve of strength is actually in operation. God has vast reservoirs of **might** that can be realized as **power** in our Christian life. But His **might** does not work in us as we sit passively. His might works in us as we rely on it, and step out to do the work. We can rely on it and do no work and we can do work without relying on it. But both of these fall short. We must rely on His might *and then* do the work in His power.

**II. The Reality and Explanation of the Battle**

Ephesians 6:12, “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 [places].”

Paul, in concert with all that Jesus taught and did as we read the four Gospels is that as Dr. Shirer writes, “Everything that occurs in the visible, physical world is directly connected to the wrestling match being waged in the invisible, spiritual world. The effects of the war going on in the unseen world reveal themselves [in our physical world]” (Ref. Daniel 10:11-14 and Ezekiel 28:12-19; Isaiah 14:12-14; Luke 10:18; Jude 6; Revelation 12:7-12; Revelation 20:9-10).

Until Christ returns, spiritual warfare will rage on in this world. We are in a spiritual battle that can only be won with spiritual resources. The key principles in Spiritual Warfare are Worship, Prayer and God’s Word. God has called us to such a time as this!

Every Christian must understand that we are not fighting **for** victory but we are fighting **from** victory. The Victory over Satan and death was won at the Cross of Christ, the Atonement of Christ’s shed blood and the Power of His Resurrection. While Satan is a defeated foe, he is a powerful enemy until Christ Comes (ref. Scripture listed above). The Christian life is not a playground. Rather, it is a battlefield of spiritual warfare. The closer we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, the more we advance to the front line of the conflict. This is the sobering reality that confronts every believer. No Christian can afford to be ignorant of the threatening schemes of spiritual combat, not when so dangerous an enemy is seeking the destruction of our faith. It is critical that we be well informed regarding Satan, who prowls about as a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. The Apostle Peter warns, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:8-10).

**III. Four Enduring Truths of God to Remember in the Midst of Battle**

As we know, life does not always go as expected. As we face the uncertain and unexpected in the days before us, there are four eternal truths of God that we can trust, no matter what.

1. His Unchanging Love

God’s love is unchanging. The Bible tells us that while we were still sinners and had little knowledge of the love of God, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). When we enter a relationship with God through Jesus, learning more about what the Bible teaches about the love of God, our eyes are opened. God’s love is no longer abstract. We can expect God’s love, always. This continues to amaze me.

In Romans 8:38-39 Paul writes, “For I am convinced that 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.”

2. His Unending Presence

There will be times when life is confusing and painful, but nothing will ever cause God to abandon us. He knows us better than we know ourselves and through Christ He loves us and is for us. He created us, and He will never leave us. The author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 13:5b, “God has said, never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

God will never leave us. He’s promised that He will be with us always, no matter what, in any and every situation, whether we realize it or not. He often uses difficult circumstances to get our attention, for we may be too self-sufficient to look for God until He shows us just how dependent we are on Him. We are not promised easy lives, but we can expect the presence of God in our difficulties. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

3. Glorious Transformation

Transformation is harder to get our heads around, for it’s a process empowered by the Holy Spirit that takes effect with our cooperation.

Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Notice that “do not conform” is our part and “be transformed” is the Holy Spirit’s work in us. We renew our minds every time we immerse ourselves in God’s Word and the Holy Spirit slowly transforms us to be more like Christ.

When we learn to reject the pattern of this world, that it is not all about us but see that it is all about the Lord, the Holy Spirit will transform us to be more like Jesus. We will be humbled. We will repent. The attractions of this world will recede, and the glory of God will come into unmistakable focus.

God also uses trouble to initiate transformation. We can expect trouble at some point in our lives. The most recognizable moments of transformation in my life happened as a result of trouble.

When we were raising our children, I remember a time when I was troubled about my parenting. I was taking a walk and praying about it when the truth of God’s Word renewed my mind. I realized that His will for my children would be accomplished, that He loved them more than I did, and that He was a far better care taker than I’d ever be. In that moment, God used that trouble to transform my heart and my parenting.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory which comes from the Lord, the Holy Spirit.

(2 Corinthians 3:18)

4. Perfect Glory

Our expectations are often short-sighted in light of God’s eternity. This life is only the first step of our eternity with the Lord. Because we live in a fallen world, there’s no escaping the effects of sin. In Christ, however, we have the firm expectation of living with Him in a perfect, sinless world forever:

* Jesus said He goes to prepare a place for us (John 14:1).
* The writer of Hebrews wrote that heroes of the faith were looking forward to a heavenly country, as do we (Hebrews 11:15-16).
* Paul said, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

It is important that we keep these truths uppermost in our minds while going through the battles. Remember that the victory truly is ours even if it doesn’t seem that way. If our expectations are set on the promises of God’s unconditional love, constant presence, transformation by His Holy Spirit, and unimaginable eternity with Jesus, we will never be disappointed.

Resources

Victory in Spiritual Warfare by Tony Evans

What the Faith Is All About by Elmer Towns

Enduring Word Commentary by David Guzic

Spiritual Warfare: A Biblical and Balanced Perspective by Brian Borgman and Rob Ventura

The Expectant Christian by Alan Platt

An Expectant People by French Arrington

Unlocking the Bible – Four Things You Can Always Expect from God by Judy Allen