

**“Standing against Evil” – August 25, 2018 – Ephesians 6:10-20**

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I have enjoyed reading dystopian fiction long before dystopian fiction became the “in thing.” My favorite novel of all time is *The Stand*, by Stephen King. It portrays a frightening vision of an end-of-the-world type scenario.

The book starts with a devastating accident. A biological weapon in the form of a trumped up influenza virus is released into the atmosphere. In short order the virus spreads across the world, creating a deadly pandemic, killing nearly everyone. A small fraction of people are immune to the virus. These survivors are plagued by similar vivid dreams of two individuals calling to them. One is of an elderly African American Christian woman named Mother Abigail, who bids them to come to her to find peace and solace. The other is demon, who has taken the form of a man named Flagg, who torments and frightens them, and bids them to come to him, where he promises lust and power. Unable to resist the summons, the survivors go either to the kind woman or the demon. Flagg, the demon, cannot tolerate the existence of a group of do-gooders, so he continues to torment them with fear and temptations. Mother Abigail tells the people who have come to her that a small group must go out to face Flagg. They ask her how they can possibly defeat him, since he is powerful and has his own army of lowlifes. She tells them, go and make your stand. That’s it. Go and stand. So a group of four men travel to the Nevada desert, find Flagg, and stand in opposition to him, even though he tortures and murders two of them. And their stand is successful. The power of God comes to them, and Flagg the demon is defeated.

The writer of Ephesians writes of a struggle between the members of Christ’s church and the powers of darkness. But we have no reason to fear because, we are told, God has given us the ability to stand against those powers. We believe that through Christ’s resurrection, the powers of death were ultimately defeated, yet as we live in this world, we recognize the ongoing presence of evil.

The passage in Ephesians assures us that when we allow ourselves to be empowered by God’s spirit and rely on God’s strength, the powers of this world can be defeated. In order to claim this power, the writer of Ephesians urges us to put on the whole armor of God. This armor equips us to face the evil we encounter in the world. The writer refers to a personification of evil, as in “to stand against the wiles of the devil” – but it also means to stand, to not be overwhelmed by the temptations we encounter in life. To be able to face and overcome the forces that threaten to lead us from the path of following Christ. Verse 12 reads, “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.” Evil can be found anywhere and in many forms. In our social structures. In our governments. In our economics. In our institutions and systems. Our battle isn’t with people, with blood and flesh, but in the evil that supports and encourages people to hate and discriminate against one another. The evil that sustains and promotes oppression and domination. The evil that allows one race or gender or sexuality or nationality to feel superior to another. The evil that encourages us to follow through on our temptations and selfish desires to satisfy the wants of lust and power.

Many of us feel uncomfortable when we personify evil, as in the devil or demons or spiritual powers. The popular author C.S. Lewis, had this to say on the topic. “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.” Whatever specific form evil might take is perhaps debatable, yet we certainly cannot deny its existence.

The good news is that God has given us the ability to stand firm when we are face to face with evil. Verse 13 sums it up for us, “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, stand firm.” If we put on this metaphorical armor that God has provided for us, when we face these evil days, these days of trials, we will be able to stand firm. You have probably already experienced them in your life. Days of such tragedy it seems your world is caving in around you. Days when you are faced with a choice where right and wrong are not always evident. Chaotic days where the path forward is hidden. This might have been yesterday. Perhaps it will be today. No doubt you will face this day in the coming tomorrows. The point is God has given us the provision, the panoply, the whole armor, to be prepared for that day when it comes. Because it will come.

Putting on this armor of God will give us what we need to stand against those days. The first is the belt of truth – this refers to one’s personal character. We are to be sincere people, people of integrity. It means to be genuine and reliable. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to be people of truth. Our words and our actions should reflect our embracing of a life lived in integrity.

Next we are told to put on the breastplate of righteousness. In Christ we have been made righteous, in that our sins have been forgiven. But also, we are called to live righteously, or rightly – live lives of moral decency. In Christ we learn to turn away from sin – to follow the life that Jesus modeled for his disciples. But also, when we do turn away and sin, we can

repent and seek forgiveness. The goal is to live in obedience to the life God has called us to. But our moral failure is never the end if we are willing to repent and seek forgiveness.

The shoes of proclaiming the gospel of peace is the next item of armor. In Christ we have found peace – peace doesn't always mean the absence of trouble – but refers to the peace of Christ that comforts us and allows us to face the tragic parts of life. But additionally these shoes of peace call us to tell others of the good news of the peace of Christ – the peace that stands opposed to violence and struggle and turmoil in all their forms.

The next piece of armor listed is the shield of faith. The word faith does not mean simple mental assent or mere acceptance of some doctrine. Instead it refers to the complete and utter reliance on God to provide for us in all circumstances. Many Christians rely on their own moral strength when faced with temptation, and sometimes that works. But over time our moral strength wears down. We need the strength of Christ to overcome – to stand firm in faith against any and all temptation.

The helmet symbolizes God's power and readiness to save others. We are secure in our salvation, in that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. We can take comfort and find peace in the fact that in our salvation we have been put right with God. Not only is salvation the forgiveness of past sins, but also here it shows the strength we are given to overcome and conquer future sins.

The final item listed is "the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God." Here the word of God not only refers to the word of God given to us, but also to our proclamation of the that word. In both cases the spirit of God is vital, because the Spirit helps us to discern what God is teaching us, such as when we study Scripture, and the Spirit is present when the word is proclaimed. As one biblical scholar stated, "It may be a word of comfort for one's emotional turmoil, a word of hope for one's quivering soul, a word of courage for trembling knees, a word of challenge to one's apathy, a word of condemnation for one's sin, a word of prophetic judgment for one's uninvolvedness and insensitivity. It may also be the word which the Christian is to speak – witness to be made, judgment to be shouted, prophecy to be uttered, teaching to be shared."

With these items, the whole armor of God, we are able to stand firm in the face of evil. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. But the writer of Ephesians reminds us of one more thing. The passage concludes with an admonition to prayer, "Pray in the spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in

supplication for all the saints.” In a way, if we put on the whole armor of God, if we take each of these items listed and make them a part of who we are, it seems to me, that our very lives will become a prayer. For isn’t prayer communication with God? And if it all times we are wearing the whole armor, then our lives will be in constant communion with God. If we keep alert, if we persevere, if we continually pray for one another, if we actually live the lives that Jesus Christ modeled for us, and called us to live, we not only could face and endure all the trials that come to us, but we would actually understand what it means to be a part of God’s kingdom.

It isn’t easy, is it? The very things we are called to stand against. The temptations, the failures, our own fallen human natures, the corrupt structures of our societal institutions. These are the things that draw us away from God. So we pray. With the assurance that God hears and answers our prayers, we pray for ourselves and we pray for each other. And we pray that we would put on the whole armor of God, to freely receive the strength that God gives us. And we pray, that God would help us to stand.