

Protection in God's Gospel

Message #6 in the series "Finding Victory in a No-Win World"

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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. [Ephesians 6:12 NSRV].



Most of us have vivid childhood memories of this scene. We remember seeing that green apparition behind the smoke, that stern-faced 'Great and Powerful Oz' and we also hear his booming, threatening, condemning voice. We can also hear and picture the flames and smoke exploding and billowing out from the floor and wafting up to the ceiling. And besides the sights and sounds, we can still feel the terror. The very memory still makes us want to quake and shiver along with the Tin Man and Cowardly Lion!

However, once Toto pulls back the curtain to expose the self-professed "humbug" whom, he explains, is "not a bad man, just not a very good wizard," our fears are dispelled as well our hopes of Dorothy returning home are dashed. He proves to be flesh and blood like us, not a scary, magical, supernatural force to be feared, opposed, nor contended with...after all.

In a very real sense, the Apostle Paul in the verses we just read, pulls back the curtain on our lives and exposes a dimension of reality that we're shielded from seeing. You see, he's **not** going on to a new topic, he is pulling back the curtain to reveal the invisible opposition that we face. He describes stratified levels of powers and authorities that we may not have even imagined existed. Because they remain 'behind the curtain' with only a

few of these indications of their existence, it's no wonder that biblical scholars guess but usually disagree on exactly who is being described. But, Paul's main point is that they're there!



As, I pointed out, Paul is not just going on to a new topic - as if to say, ".....okay, in chapter 4 I've covered relationships in the church - how a wholesome community functions - humility, gentleness, patience, unified - unity promoted amidst diversity, amidst different gifts, roles and ministries, all working together to promote maturity (Ephesians 4:1-32). Then, in chapter 5, I've spelled that out for marriage, family and workplace relationships (5:1-6:4), now let's turn to spiritual warfare (6:10-20).

No, he's **not** going on to a new topic....he's pointing out a reality that stand behind everything he's discussed so far. Now, he pulls back the curtain, so to speak, and shows that behind the scenes, in opposition to us living this new life - there is **invisible opposition** we will face when we set about to live such a gospel-birthered life. And, quite contrary to the words of the Wizard who yells the words repeatedly: "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," Paul's advice encourages us to **take special attention** to:

Know Our Enemy Stand Our Ground Trust God's Gospel

Let's read his words in full:

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. Therefore, 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, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breast-

plate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench 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."

[Ephesians 6:10-17 NSRV].

Here is a fascinating thing to observe: he just described this invisible war scene....and yet ***there is not a hint of panic or fear***. Now let's be clear, as the great hymn writer captured it, 'The prince of darkness grim; we tremble not at him.'" But, let's not kid ourselves – this is a battle scene, there is war going on. Life is dangerous, it's fraught with problems. There will be injuries. There will be casualties. However, there is no reason to fear...we are more than adequately provided for.

'It's hardly a fair fight if one side doesn't even know they're in a fight.' The naïve, immature, apathetic and self-centered will be chewed up and spit out in this battle. And, conversely, the proud, those who rely on themselves (who think they're strong, smart or wise in themselves) are in danger of a massive fall. I have to admit, for a bit of a mixture of both of those reasons (immature, self-centered AND pride) that earlier in life I made some bonehead mistakes and decisions because I underestimated the reality and the danger involved in that fight.

But, like I've said, we have no reason to panic or fear - we are more than prepared. This is the WHOLE armor of God, from head to feet. Over the past six weeks, we've looked at the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith and the sandals of peace. The final touches of the outfit (which we will look at today) involve lastly putting on the helmet and then picking up the sword or, mostly likely, dagger of the Word of God. In a very real sense, the helmet is the final item of defense (the last, but not least!) and the dagger is the main offensive weapon needed to guard your ground, stand your ground and to protect your ground. Defensive and offensive - yet they both work in tandem.

Today we'll focus on verse 17:



Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (verse 17)

The importance of the helmet is self-explanatory. There is a scene near the beginning of the movie, Saving Private Ryan where a number of American soldiers are standing shoulder to shoulder in a foxhole amidst incoming fire. One of the soldier's helmets clinks as it deflects enemy fire. The soldier, knowing it just saved his life, removes his helmet to see where the bullet ricocheted off – thankful for his good fortune and yet maybe a bit dazed from the impact. As he removes the helmet to inspect the dent, his skull is fully exposed, and the next bullet hits its desired target and takes his life. The importance of protecting the head with a helmet goes without saying.

But, what exactly does the helmet symbolize? This is hinted at in a passage in another one of Paul's letters which more specifically refers to this helmet as being synonymous with '*the hope of salvation.*' We read there:

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.
(1 Thessalonians 5:8)

The helmet here is more specifically referred to as "*the hope of salvation.*" One of the key, life-preserving elements in standing your ground, standing firm in the Lord and living the new lifestyle we're called to is to have the mindset of hopefulness in salvation.

And, here is where the sword of the Spirit works in tandem with bolstering the mindset of hope. The Word of God is most helpful in pulling back the curtain and pointing us ahead to hope.

I want to illustrate how crucial this is, and how exactly it works. Imagine with me for a minute this 'BEST CASE SCENARIO':

What if...someone were to grant you these two wishes...

1. Your life with end great.
2. When you look back on your life you'll be pleased.

In a sense, I think the older you are the more these wishes sound more desirable. If you're younger – and you're hardly thinking about the end of your life, think about what these promises offer: it's (to say the least) one less worry. However, all of us would love to know what our future holds. And, if you're being assured a great ending, you'll avoid ultimate disappointment, crashing and burning.....sure it doesn't spell out the details of your life's journey, but it gives a reassuring promise of a great ending and satisfaction. Everyone wants to know the future – but you're spared the

detail but given these wonderfully reassuring promises. Wouldn't that allow you to relax, take a load off your shoulders to know that?

With those issues out of the way, doesn't that place you on firm ground to live how you choose, not how you're pressured, not how you're expected by others, not just go with the flow – you've just been assured it all works out well – so why answer to anyone else?

SUCH IS THE POWER OF HOPE! If the END is already assured then live in light of that GREAT END. It's as if a floodlight from the future shines down on the stage of your today. Here's how this works.

We look back, we look ahead. As secure and assured is that historical event when God died on the cross – God promises the day when all that plays out is just as secure. – Phil 1:7

And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:7)

Say amidst your difficulties:

Christ is working in me to complete what he started.

But, we're forgetful people. We need to talk to ourselves. When I was growing up, people used to laugh at, look down on, or assume there was something wrong with the person who talked to themselves. However, and please hear the distinction.

Today, everyone listens to themselves. There is a radical difference. We're encouraged to listen to our hearts – they're the clue to possibly determining what we should pursue in life (regarding profession). Sometimes we have to listen to our bodies when they hurt or don't seem to work right; but it's not always clear how to interpret what we hear. But back to my point, **we need to talk to ourselves as opposed to listen to ourselves** when it comes to lifestyle. In fact, listening to our desires, wants, so called-needs or whims can be very dangerous, in fact can be spiritually crippling.

So, let me give you an example of how the helmet and dagger of the spirit work together. I think you'll see how they work together as defense and offense, as protection and deflector.

For a few years, I made it a practice that upon waking I would recite Romans 8:1 to myself, which reads: ***There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*** You see, I grew up with the approach that what you do is never good enough and can always be improved. So, when I wake up in the morning, normally and instinctively my mind is flooded with thoughts of my letdowns and failures from the day before, and the pressures and demands facing me in the coming day. I decided I needed to allow God to have the first word in my life. So, every day, I would allow his word to be the first word that addressed me. This allowed grace to be my motivation heading into each day as opposed to allowing guilt to move me.

More specifically, the way the sword of the spirit combines with the helmet, the hope of the salvation. Paul spells this out clearly in **Romans 5:1-4** which reads, ***Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character and character hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God has poured his love into our hearts by the holy spirit whom he has given us.***

We rejoice in three main things: peace with God, purpose-driven suffering, and the HOPE of the glory of God (=heaven). Heaven is secured, therefore we rejoice through the blessings Christ has won for us, and we rejoice even in the struggles we endure – because we know God works all things together for good! Hope influences everything!

The Bible is full of 'pull-back-the-curtain' moments:

Let's not forget the passage we're considering:

- Paul exposes the invisible war that we're engaged in.
- There is a story in 2 Kings 6, where Elisha and his servant awaken to find that an enemy army surrounds the house they're staying in. Elisha prays for the servant's eyes to be opened and he sees the angels of God outnumbering the enemies!
- When the disciples see Jesus in his glory when he was Transfigured among them – that exposed the reality of his true identity. How would that redefine his call to deny yourself and follow him? Instead of focusing on what you're giving up, you'd focus on doing anything to not miss out on being with this glorious Lord!

- The author to the book of Hebrews, draws back the curtain for those who feel they're all alone, when he tells us of the saints that line our life marathons (Heb. 11:1).

We all need to have the curtain pulled back to live by faith not by sight.
How?

1. COME TO CHURCH. St Paul's is a church who has pastors like David Woolverton, Matt Skillen who are Bible preachers. Week in and week out, you are reminded of what's behind the curtain – what a Christian philosopher once called the 'Really Real'.
2. IDENTIFY WHO HELPS YOU (FRIEND). Our society is heading toward individualism and isolated living to our detriment. God gave us the church as a gift; working together on improving God's world, taking care of the less fortunate, all this helps pull back the curtain before God's reality and enables us to keep that helmet of hope on to inform us and to wield God's dagger of truth.
3. BIBLE READING. The scripture gives us many examples of the curtain being pulled away. Take advantage of reading your bible to receive this vision, to receive encouragement to live in light of these invisible realities

Hear the blessing of God: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope! (Romans 15:13)*

Thank you God, that you have more than supplied for all our needs when it comes to spiritual warfare. Jesus has won for us a new identity which is secure in him, yet attacked, assaulted and minimized. Help us to stand our ground in Him, Jesus our Shield and Defender.