

1 Thessalonians 5:6-11
Armor for Battle
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9-6-15

This week, we are concluding our journey through 1 Thessalonians. Throughout this journey, the red thread Paul weaves through his letter is that this community would be formed together in Faith, Love, and Hope. But Paul does not want them to be naïve or uninformed about what they will face now that Jesus has come and the future is ultimately decided and has its direction. Paul wants these people to see that at every step of the way, they will encounter resistance, and that resistance does not always come in the form of physical opposition.

The opposition we face comes also from the spiritual realm. There will be forces that come from outside ourselves, that are not found within the physical and observable world. This is something that I have become aware of through my wife Amy's calling to be the Chaplain at White's Residential.

Last week, Amy traveled to a new facility that White's recently obtained in Wheatfield, Indiana. It was a struggling residential care facility that housed some of the roughest, most threatened youths from "the region." She traveled there with her boss, Jay Driscoll, and while she was leading the group of young men and women in a game, all of a sudden one of the students was overtaken by something or someone that was not her. The next thing everyone knew, she was on top of another student physically dominating her, yelling, swinging, gnashing, groaning. This young lady, who had come into chapel like every other, now appeared not only to be oppressing this other student, but was herself oppressed by something from outside her.

Once the two were separated and the young girl was taken to another part of the room, Jay Driscoll – who, if you know Jay, know that he is at once cool as a cucumber and at the same time physically intimidating – calmly walked up to her, put his hand on her shoulder, and said, "Peace, daughter." And it was as if the weight that was upon her had now been lifted and a look of calm swept over her and her behavior changed.

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, Paul addresses the fact that Jesus Christ is the one who has conquered the powers of evil and sin. He has said that one day soon, and without warning, Jesus will return and set all that is wrong in the world to right. In light of that hope, how are we to live now, in this present age?

So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath

but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

There are three metaphors that Paul uses in this passage to illustrate, as well as three imperatives that he gives for us. The first is stay awake, the second is sober up, and third is get ready for a fight. In his day, Paul recognized that there were teachers traveling around spouting off all sorts of nonsense. And there were people who would indulge these ideas blindly, with their eyes shut. It was as if they were sleepwalking their way through life. Others, with their wild, irrational, and idiotic ways of thinking, would spout off things that made it sound as if they were drunk.

And if you are paying any attention to the political media these days, you might be saying to yourself, I have no idea what that's all about. Of course not. Messages like these draw tremendous attention, because of the uncertainty about what they will say next. Sometimes their thinking sounds as if the person is literally intoxicated.

What Paul is saying to this congregation is, it is time to wake up and it's time to sober up, because there are forces at work behind them that will use that opening to dig their claws into your hearts and minds. Don't let this happen.

Finally, Paul says to them, because these voices and present messengers are out there, you need to gear up for a battle. Paul says it is time for us to wake up, it is time for us to sober up, it is time for us to prepare our minds and our hearts for the fight. What is the fight? He doesn't say it here in Thessalonians, but in Ephesians 6, which I've read already, Paul says the enemy is the powers of darkness and the devil.

I know that some may be skeptical of this type of thinking. You might say that reality is what we are able to see and measure, what is quantifiable and rational. This spiritual talk is just your way of giving an answer to the mysterious around us. But for every one of us, I bet if we thought long enough, could come up with something that happened to us that we could not explain, other than by recognizing a spiritual presence in our midst. What Amy saw in that young woman and the diagnosis that Jay Driscoll offered is as true for us today as it was for the people of Thessalonica. The battle that we face is not against flesh and blood, but it is against spiritual forces that are real.

What is the nature of the enemy that we find ourselves up against? This is an important question. In Ephesians 6, Paul says that we as Christians are in a battle not with flesh and blood; that means our battle is not one that will require us to take up physical weapons. It is a battle against the spiritual forces of the devil (in some places, he is called Beelzebul; in others, the prince of darkness; and in still others, Satan).

The image we often have for this enemy is a man in red leotard with horns and a pitchfork. It's hard to believe this if that is the image we have in our heads. In fact, we're meant to reject them. The truth is, that's what the enemy wants. If we are convinced that there is no spiritual reality going on around us, that wants to steal and destroy and tear

down everything around us that is good and beautiful and godly, then the devil has done his job.

What Paul is saying is that if our minds have been convinced that it's all made up and hocus pocus, then it is as if we are asleep or drunk, and we are in serious danger. Paul says to them, "Wake up, open your eyes, and prepare yourself, because there is all around us a spiritual reality, a conflict waging that involves the powers and principalities of this present darkness." Jesus knew this. He faced it even before his ministry began when he was taken into the wilderness of temptation. Paul knows it, and he wants us to know it, too.

But before we go any further, I want to qualify everything that I say here with three points:

1. The enemy's power is not equal and opposite to God's power. If we have the idea that on one side is God who is all powerful for good, and over here is the enemy who is all powerful for evil, then we've got it wrong. The Bible says that there is only one who is powerful and He is good. When Jesus rose from the dead, all powers of evil and darkness were ultimately subdued and trampled underfoot. The devil is weak and puny. There is no struggle with God. He always and forever will be all powerful and His power is ultimately good.

The power of Satan may feel strong, but it is nothing compared to the armament that God has given to you and me. There's a story I heard once about Martin Luther. One night, he awoke from a horrific nightmare, and there at the foot of his bed was none other than Beelzebul himself, and do you know what Luther did? He looked up and said, "Oh, it's just you" and went back to sleep. The power of the enemy is NOTHING in comparison to the strength and power God gives to us in Faith, Love, and Hope.

2. Second qualifier: any power that the devil has is completely relative to God's complete authority and power in the world. This is one that often raises questions about why there's still bad in the world. And those questions are good and right for us to ask, even if we may not have a great answer. But what we do have an answer to is ultimately all of the powers of evil in the world are subservient to God's ultimate and good power.

3. The days for evil and wickedness and cruelty are completely numbered. They may have sway over the present, but in the end, the Good Shepherd, who is filled with mercy and love and grace and might, will ultimately win the day. And so though they may have the power to discourage now, they do not stand a chance against the one Savior, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

With these three qualifiers in mind of what this power is in relation to God, and what it is not, I want to move one step further: how does this power operate? We get a look into the devil's game plan when Paul gives us the armor detail: The breastplate of love and faith, and the helmet of hope.

Paul arms us with a breastplate because the enemy sends his attacks at our hearts. His attempts to harm us by discouraging us, shaming us, making us depressed by making you feel like you're the only one who is facing the struggle you're in; and the enemy attacks our brains, our minds, how we think, the voices we choose to listen to, the narratives we accept as true in our thinking.

Some of the poisons the devil uses against us:

- You don't know what I've done.
- My value is built upon what I do, and I don't get into the program or get the job, then what?
- Your addiction is too mundane, or too strong, to kick.

The breastplate is not a strategy; it's not a better defense of self-motivation and positive thinking. The breastplate that protects our hearts is faith and love. Faith is you choosing to entrust yourself into the ever loving arms and strength of Jesus Christ who is all together good and all together mighty to save. And what Jesus says to us in that moment when we finally entrust ourselves to Him is, "Daughter, Son, you are free from all the other voices telling you who you are. You are free to hear my voice and hear my word to you. You are chosen. You are loved. You are redeemed. Because I love you and I died for you."

The helmet of hope is the hope of salvation. One of the most dangerous things a mind can experience is the thought of hopelessness. Maybe you haven't, but many have. That thought that says that life is not worth living because the devil has convinced them it's true. The hope of salvation tells us that this present suffering is not worth comparing to the hope of glory that is set before you. No matter how bleak it might seem, morning is coming, a new dawn, the hope of salvation and life everlasting in the presence of the God who loves you and formed you and who cares for you even still. Let me ask you this devil, do you have anything more powerful, more convincing, more discouraging that can take that hope away from us? My prayer for everyone within earshot is that your answer is, "NO, because my rock is Jesus Christ the Savior."

There's a story about a man who finds his way into a catholic church, literally evading the law, and goes into confession. And as he's confessing, he lays it all out. The priest responds, "My son, I stopped listening after your first confession, because what I have to tell to you, know it is more important than any of those things you told me about, and that is that Jesus loves you, God's power is stronger than any of those things, and God's word to you is that I love you. You can be new, those old weights are no longer yours to carry, because Jesus has taken them from you. You are forgiven and you are free."

Wake up, sober up, and get ready for the battle before us with the knowledge that victory is already won in Jesus Christ.