

Beyond Flesh and Blood

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesian 6:10-20

Most preachers, myself definitely included, will tell you that we preach our sermons as much to ourselves as to the congregation. If we are passionate about the message we are bringing to you, it's because we feel the weight of it pressing on our own hearts. When we preach against fear, the words are partly aimed at our own fears. When we call you to compassion for their neighbor, we do it because we know that our compassion sometimes fails.

This week I wondered if, in the passage we just read, Paul is preaching to himself. Most of the passage is a message of strength and confidence. "Be strong in the Lord and his mighty power! Stand firm!" But this week for the first time I thought I heard a note of anxiety, a little whisper of vulnerability, at the end. Did you hear it too? Paul calls the Ephesians to pray in the Spirit on all occasions, but then he asks for prayers for himself. "*Pray for me!*" He says. "*Pray for me also! Pray that I might speak fearlessly. Pray that I might preach the gospel fearlessly as I should.*" As I should. Should is a word we use when we preach to ourselves. It's like Paul is saying, "*I shouldn't be afraid when I preach, but sometimes I am, so pray for me.*"

It would not surprise me if Paul felt this way. Think about where he is at that moment. He's in prison. He is an ambassador in chains. Not only is he in prison, he's in prison because of issues surrounding his preaching of the gospel. If you were in prison, and they put you in prison because of your preaching, wouldn't you be anxious about speaking? Wouldn't you pray for the courage to preach? There's something wonderful about this. It's so honest, so vulnerable, so human. And it's nice to know that Paul knows what the struggle feels like.

And what does Paul have to say to himself and to the rest of us who are in the middle of the struggle? What words of encouragement does he have for himself and for us? Three things. He says something about our foe, he says something about our fight, and he says something about the almighty power. First, he says something about the foe: "*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*" Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. It's not hard to imagine these words coming right out of Paul's own struggle. As Paul sits in his prison he deals with mean-spirited guards and iron-fisted jailers every day. And you can imagine him telling himself, "*My enemies are not these guards, my enemy is not the jailer who put me here, my enemy is not the governor who ordered my imprisonment. No matter how nasty these people have been, they are made in the image of God, and I am called to love them. No matter how damaged they are, my job is to love them and show them the good news of Jesus.*" Such an important word, because the sinful part of us always wants to make it about a person. Paul says here, it's never just about people; there is something going on in every human being that is deeper than flesh and blood.

In his latest book, *The Second Mountain*, David Brooks talks about a spiritual moment he had on the New York Subway. He was sitting in Penn station when all of a sudden the people around him seemed different. They weren't just fleshy creatures running around trying to satisfy their fleshy appetites, all of a sudden they seemed like souls. Creatures with deep spiritual hungers, people with eternal longings in their hearts, people of infinite dignity and worth. All of a sudden he didn't just see flesh and blood, he saw souls. Do you ever have moments like that?

Maybe you are walking down the street full of people and suddenly you have a sense of the eternal depth of people, that even the most broken and miserable person you pass has eternity in her heart? That's how the Bible sees people. Paul says it here, he also says it in 2 Corinthians 5:16. Paul says that since the Holy Spirit got a hold of him, from now on, he regards no one from an earthly point of view. 'I can't just look at another human being like they are just flesh and blood.' Our fight is not against flesh and blood. We are all Spiritual creatures. We are souls. And in every human soul there is a spiritual struggle going on between the Lord of Creation and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.

It's so important that we learn to look more deeply at people. If we only see them as flesh and blood, our fights will be fearful and angry and we will find ourselves drawn towards hate. Here's why, if you think our struggle is against flesh and blood, chances are your hope for change depends on flesh and blood. If you think the enemy in this fight are people, chances are you think that people are our only hope for a solution. And if you think our hope rests on the goodness and initiative of people, you are in a desperate place.

Here's something congressman (and former LaGrave member) Paul Henry put in a book he wrote way back in 1974 about how politics can go bad, how politics can become angry and desperate. It has everything to do with not being able to see beyond the flesh and blood to the Spiritual level. *"The principal issues of the moment are not political. They are seen as such: That is the essential clue to their nature. But the crisis of the time is not political, it is in essence religious. It is a religious crisis of large numbers of intensely moral, even Godly, people who no longer hope for God. Hence, the quest for divinity assumes a secular form, but with an intensity of conviction that is genuinely new to our politics."* If you don't see the Spiritual dimension of reality, then politics and political solutions are your only hope for change. And if people are your only hope you will be fearful, you will be strident, you will have a frightening 'intensity of conviction. That's why getting the foe right is so important. Our struggle is not with flesh and blood; it is with spiritual forces in the heavenly realms.

So that's the foe. Paul also says something about the fight. If our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, that's pretty intimidating. How do we fight the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms!? How do we fight against the powers of the dark world? To understand Paul's answer to that question, you've got to understand what Paul has said in the letter to the Ephesians up to this point. Paul starts the letter in the heavenly realms. Only he doesn't start with the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms; he starts with the rule of Jesus in the heavenly realms. In chapters one, two and three, Paul joyfully proclaims that Jesus is Lord of all creation and all time and all people. *"God has placed everything under his feet and appointed him to be head of everything (1:22)."* And we have been *"raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms (2:6)."* So the book starts with that cosmic perspective.

But then in chapters 4 and 5 and 6 Paul goes on to how we live out God's cosmic authority in the world. What does Paul describe? If our struggle is on this grand, cosmic scale, does that mean we have to do grand, cosmic acts of righteousness? Does Paul describe epic deeds of faith? Does Paul call us to be superheroes of righteousness? No. When Paul describes our fight against the spiritual forces of evil, he talks about husbands loving their wives well and making sacrifices for them. Good Mother's day advice. Paul talks about children respecting and obeying their parents, and parents not exasperating their children. Paul talks about not letting your anger simmer, but dealing with it before the sun goes down. Paul talks about telling the truth, even when others don't. Paul talks about guarding your language, not letting unwholesome talk come out of your mouth – no obscenity and foolish talk. Instead use your words to build up. Paul talks about bosses treating their

employees fairly. When Paul talks about the grand cosmic struggle against the powers of evil, he sees that struggle taking place in the ordinary places of life. Practicing kindness in the kitchen, compassion in the office, forgiveness in the living room. When we do these small things in small places, the living God who is able to do more than we ask or imagine can win great cosmic victories over the forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

This is such good news. Do you see how that gives significance to your daily life? The caregiver spending long days with her dementia-ridden spouse. She practices extraordinary patience. She feels her work is pointless. Paul says no. You are winning victories against the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The Mother of a difficult child prayerfully and lovingly gives her child boundaries and structure, despite his protests. She feels like nothing is happening. Paul says no. You are winning a great victory over the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The volunteer mentor at Degage finds out that his mentee has once again fallen off the wagon. He shakes his head. Paul says, don't give up, you are winning a victory over the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. There is a great cosmic struggle going on in this world, and it works itself out in the most ordinary places.

So the foe is the forces of evil in the heavenly realms. The fight is carried out in our everyday place. Now a word about the mighty power. Stand firm in the Lord and in his mighty power! How do you do that? You do that by putting on the armor of God. What is this armor? Where did it come from? Most of you know about the armor of God. Most of you have heard sermons calling you to put on this armor, the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit. Those sermons are mostly calls for us to grow in Christian discipline. That's fine.

But to really understand what this almighty power is about, you need to know where this armor came from. Listen to me now as I read Isaiah 59:17. Because I promise you that when Paul writes these words he's thinking about Isaiah 59:17. And if you don't know Isaiah 59:17 you can't fully understand the armor. *"The Lord looked up and he was displeased that there was no justice....so he put on righteousness as his breastplate and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal like a cloak."* Whose armor is this? Who's wearing the armor in Isaiah? It's God. It's not our armor; it's God's. God's armor to win his victory over the forces of evil, God's armor to bring justice and righteousness in his world.

How is it that we can now wear God's armor? How is it that sinful people like us could be allowed to wear this magnificent clothing? The breastplate of righteousness?! The helmet of salvation?! Us?! We get to wear it because, even though it was his, God let himself be stripped of his armor. At Bethlehem, he let himself be stripped and he came into this world not in armor, but wrapped in bands of cloth. And on Good Friday, instead of the helmet of salvation he put on the crown of thorns. Instead of the breastplate of righteousness, a purple robe. On Good Friday, instead of taking vengeance on the unjust and the sinners, he takes the judgment upon himself. *We weak and sinful people can wear this glorious armor because Jesus was stripped and crucified for us.* And now, even though we don't deserve it, the breastplate of his righteousness is wrapped around our chests, and the helmet of his salvation sits on our head. What wondrous love is this, O my Soul! In Christ, you are so much stronger than you know. In Christ you are so much deeper than you know. In Christ, you are so much more beloved than you can possibly know. In Christ you can stand against the Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms because, my friends, you have the armor. So be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.