

When I was growing up as a young boy I would often hear different voices roaming around in my head. I hadn't yet recognised at that early age that it was my conscience working its way through the daily decision-making process, so it's amazing how influential those voices would have been. There would be occasions where I was about to do something, and then I would hear a voice challenging me about what I was doing, and then I'd go into a bit of a spin deciding what to do. Should I just carry on or should I listen to the voice in my head that was directing me in a different path – sometimes in a very risky direction.

As I've grown up I've realised the sinful nature of humanity, and the power that sin can have over the decisions that I make every day. I am very aware that the thoughts in my mind are not just my own, but there are influences pulling me one way and the other. Scripture refers to the spiritual realm where dark forces are at work. I am very aware that there are powers at work in the world that do not come from God and have a huge influence on every day life.

Paul in our reading today says, "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"

I'd say that everyone of us, no exceptions have struggles going on that are definitely linked to the spiritual. One example is the porn industry. 5 years ago it was worth a global \$97 billion dollars. That is not being fed and grown as a result of anything that is healthy. It originates from a human desire for self gratification. It totally disfigures the pure image of love that God represents. 1 John 2:16 says 'For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world'. This is just one example and there are many others.

All of this and all the ways in which Satan will try to pull us away from God's love lead to destruction. James understood the ultimate end to all of this when he said, (James 1:15) "desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death".

So we are in a battle every day – through our minds, in what we see, in what we read, in what we think, in what we say and in what we invest in.

Today we are going to briefly look at this last section of Ephesians and talk about how to stand strong in the Lord in this battle that we are in, and I'm going to highlight 4 observations

### **First, acknowledge there is an enemy.**

I often wonder why my role in serving God is the most difficult calling I can imagine. It is filled with multiple challenges. But then I remind myself that when I gave my life to Jesus, I immediately made myself an enemy of Satan, and therefore I should expect attack. John 10:10 reminds us that our enemy comes to kill, steal and destroy.

And so from the very point of creation, we see the influence that the Enemy Satan has on God's children. Here's 4 to consider :

- People became hostile to one another – Adam blamed Eve
- People became hostile to nature – Nature becomes a source of labour

- People became hostile to themselves – Adam felt ashamed and hid from his loving God
- People became hostile to God – Adam blamed God by saying the “The woman you gave me made me do it”

Satan exploits these separations today. He seeks to push our flesh in a direction towards a battle between each other, nature, ourselves and God. Where God unifies, Satan tries to divide. So ultimately Satan wants to separate us from the love of the Father. He is very real.

## **Second, The enemy is not people.**

Look what Paul says in 6:12

<sup>12</sup> 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.

So often when things happen in life, we are so quick to fight back against another person that we believe has hurt us, and yet the scripture here says that the struggle isn't with those things – it's with something far bigger. When we see horrible things happen in our world, it is in my view the spiritual powers at work causing a collective influence to take place. It's a bit like the formation of an avalanche. One tiny snow drop falls on top of another and over time the weight and pressure begins to build a momentum until eventually that collective weight becomes something dangerous and destructive – a force that cannot be stopped. And for me the power and influence behind many things in our world comes from Satan's work on individuals who then collectively joined together can cause chaos. Just look at the environmental issues in our seas – that comes from the issues of greed, self-centredness, lack of care, no consideration for preservation. When a piece of plastic washes up on a beach, that comes from one person deciding to throw their litter down, and so as everyone collectively does this it becomes a massive issue.

Paul confronted collective issues in his day.

His world was a male dominated power structure. Men were supreme. Women were only good for producing a male heir. Children were property. And slaves were like animals.

Chapter five is all about flattening that power structure. Paul challenges the status quo in chapter 5 verse 21. He says,

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Husbands and wives, fathers and children, slave masters and slaves...all equally respecting and submitting to each other. Those were culturally revolutionary words.

Can you imagine the radically collective and global change that could be made if we all became subject to one another out of reverence to Christ, rather than this attitude of looking after ourselves and not caring about anyone else. Can you imagine if instead of fighting against each other, we collectively stood against the power of Satan who tries to destroy any aspect of love in our world.

So folks it is not people that are the enemy. It is the forces that drive people to do what they do that is the enemy.

There is a third thing I observe in this passage.

### **The Victory is already won.**

Today I'm not going to look specifically at each piece of armour in our reading, because I've previously done that. But what I want to say is that God has given us armour to protect us against the enemy. He's given us the truth, salvation, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, and the word of God.

The interesting thing about the armour is what Paul tells us to do with it. He doesn't tell us to go and start the fight. No he says, Stand Strong.

Why?

Because Jesus has already won the victory. So often we feel we need to go into battle for God. But remember that we need to first stand on the promise that Jesus has already claimed the victory through his death and resurrection. So when you go into any situation with all your armour on, remember that you have this on to remind you to stand on the promise of the victory that has already been won. So when we go out to work on compassion ministries, the most important thing is not the food or the baby clothes – it's the promise of hope that comes from a loving God. Poverty will always be there, but our fight is standing on God's promises that he loves and cherishes every one.

### **Finally,**

Paul finishes this whole section by saying in verse 18,

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.”

Prayer reminds us that we are connected with God. We are not people who should panic, we are people who should pray. I wonder why our prayer gatherings are so low at times in many churches – well I think that people don't understand the power that comes in praying against the powers of darkness. That's why I believe it is so important at the beginning of each term in church to bring everything before God in prayer. Think about it like this. If a soldier with all his ammunition went into battle without first knowing what the plan was, you can be pretty certain that he's going to lose. He needs to know what the plan is from his commanding officer. And for us, instead of facing situations full-on, it is essential that we sit in the place of prayer. Paul knew where the battle would be won, so let's learn from that as a church family as we gather to pray in different ways.

So folks, stand firm today with the full armour of God around you. Recognise today that we can stand against the forces of evil that seek to divide and destroy us. Remember your enemy is not the people around you. The victory has been won through Jesus and we are at peace with God and each other. May we stand on that promise as we enter into this new season together.