

**Date: 22.08.2021**

**Text: Ephesians 6:10-20**

### **Introduction**

In Ephesians 6:10–20, the apostle Paul penned one of the most memorable accounts of spiritual warfare for Christians. Throughout the history of interpretation, the majority of exegetes have viewed Paul’s account of the “armour of God” in relation to the spiritual struggle of individual Christians in their quests for growth in personal holiness.

Some sermon titles I found on the internet for Ephesians 6:10-20

*“Equipped for Battle”, “Spiritual Warfare”, “Stand Your Ground”, “Battle on with the Lord’s Strength”, “The Unseen Battle”, “Strong in the Lord”, “Stand Against the Devil”, “Standing Strong in the Armour of God.”*

Many biblical scholars have insisted that the armour in this passage is meant to function in a primarily defensive manner. According to them the armour exists, in this reading, to assist Christians as they “stand firm” while resisting the attacks of the evil one on their personal salvation and progressive sanctification.

Warren Wiersbe, a prolific teacher who authored more than 150 books commented on Ephesians 6:10-20: *“sooner or later every believer discovers that the Christian life is a battleground, not a playground, and that he faces an enemy who is much stronger than he is – apart from the Lord.”*

### **Let us pray...**

Open our ears, O God, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today now and always. Amen.

*<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For our<sup>[a]</sup> 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 6:10-12)*

I must confess that this is not language I often use. But that doesn’t mean it’s language that I never use, language we should dismiss as representing a world view we no longer share. For me the rage we often hear against ‘the system and system’ is precisely a contemporary manifestation of this worldview.

Individualism has often been read into New Testament material that was originally intended for the gathered church. It is important for us to keep this in mind. This morning I want to suggest to you that the individualistic exegesis of this passage by many Christians have inadvertently neglected, or outright removed the role of human structures, systems, and ideologies from the operation of the oppressive Powers, assuming that because the Powers exercise their influence from the “heavenly places,” our response to them must take place apart from any material mediation.

This individualistic interpretation of Ephesians 6 and other parallel New Testament texts on the Powers, has led to an incomplete application of the biblical concept of spiritual warfare to an individual spiritual struggle that avoids the text’s primary concern to articulate a corporate, covenantal, missional response to the Powers through and as the church, the body of Christ. The historical Jesus is said to have performed

exorcisms; however, they were understood within a prescientific first century mindset. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give us seven exorcisms. John does not record any. In Biblical encounters with the demonic there is no extended struggle or holy water. There is only the divine word of spoken truth, which is the sword that slays the demon.

Our modern scientific worldview is light years away from the worldview of the Gospel authors regarding the demonic as a cause of personal human suffering. The ancient Hebrews saw God as the cause of both good and evil. Remember the story of Job? Initially Job thought it was God who caused his tragic personal suffering, saying to his supposed comforters: *"Can't you see it is God who has done this? He has set a trap to catch me."* Clearly Job was reflecting the religious thinking of his time.

But by the Christian era, the concept of Satan as a demonic adversary to God, the father of lies and the prince of this world, comes into popular understanding.

However, much of our culture today, especially the western culture has adopted a secular worldview. This view says there is no God or devil, no heaven or hell, no spiritual world, no soul, nothing but material existence that can be known through our senses and reason. This view says there is no higher self or higher being.

We are mere complexities of matter, and when we die we cease to exist except as the chemicals and atoms that once constituted us. This worldview has also penetrated to a degree the thinking of many who identify themselves as Christians, largely because they want to escape the simplistic and literal imagery all too often assigned to the demonic by popular Christian tradition.

For me the heartbreak is that this often causes some of them to ignore the spiritual dimensions of structures in our world or the resources of faith. People are searching for a more adequate language to talk about spiritual realities of good and evil in a way more congruent with science than some current traditions provide.

In my reflection this morning I am greatly indebted to the work of the late theologian Walter Wink for influencing my views on this issue. He certainly was one of my favourite theologians. He wrote a classic three volume study on our selection from Ephesians 6 for this morning.

*"For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age."*

In one of his books entitled *'The Powers That Be'*, Walter Wink, who was a theologian of non-violent resistance, suggests and I quote:

*"The powers are not intrinsically evil, they are only fallen. Fallen does not mean depraved, as some Calvinists alleged. It simply refers to the fact that ... we are, none of us, what were meant to be. We are alienated from God, each other, nature, and our own souls, and cannot find the way back by ourselves". However, the final sentence of that paragraph is simply this: "But the situation is not without hope".*

### **So where is this hope?**

Let's hold on to that question for the moment.

Throughout the Bible, we find the common ancient view that the cosmos was a three-tiered order, consisting of three distinct realms stacked on top of each other: the skies, or heavens above; the land, surrounded by water; and the waters below.

You see, in the biblical view the cosmic powers are also both visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and individual, political and structural. Angels are these cosmic powers in their heavenly form, be they good or evil, and therefore fallen. But these powers, be they angels or demons, are not spiritual beings flapping around in the sky somewhere in a simplistic image. They are the real, essential spirituality of actual entities in our living world. They are embodied in ourselves, our structures, and our institutions.

For example, we are already familiar with the idea of power residing in an office beyond the duration of the person who occupies it. We speak of the power of the Prime ministership, no matter which political party forms the government. We use phrases like the country seat, the judges' bench, the chairperson of a committee. We refer to school spirit, team spirit, or corporate culture to indicate the presence of an environment or climate that manifests itself within such groups.

Let me speak about demons. I remember when I was at Mt Martha Uniting Church I was facilitating a Bible Study on the Gospel of Mark.

There were arguments or disagreements about demons. A few believed literally the physical existence of demons and others didn't. We couldn't find consensus. I intervened and posed a question, *"Whether we believe in the physical existence of demons or not what does demons do?"*

Some suggested demons enslave. Demons dehumanise. Demons possess. Demons control. Demons destroy. So, what powers enslave, dehumanise, possess, control, or destroy humans today?

Let's be clear that the New Testament does not limit these powers to hostile spirits in the air but sees them in the way they express or embody themselves within our world.

For me Nazi Germany illustrates a nation which was possessed by the demonic.

The demonic was certainly a part of the experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the century with the greatest amount of violence and inhumanity of any century in recorded history.

For me the massive, crushing evils of our day are found in such things as racism, ageism, and sexism, tyrannical oppression, homelessness, economic greed exhibited by Wall street vs. main street, or the pursuit of profit gained via exploitation of workers or the environment. These are ways in which the demonic manifests itself in the structures of our existence.

The authors of the New Testament insist that Christ is sovereign over these powers, even in the midst of evil. *"Neither life nor death, nor angels nor principalities, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ."*

So, the Biblical witness is that we struggle not just with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers seen not in a superstitious but a very real and existential manner in our lives and in the structures of our world. We humans can change things, but only if we address the spirit that is guiding us.

Law and regulations at their best are the ways in which ideals become operational and institutionalised.

You see, institutions can take on a momentum of their own. They have their own spirits and tend to preserve themselves. They can be changed, but a genuine change is a function of both structure and spirit.

It is not just a pious comment to suggest that to change an institution you need to touch its soul. It is insightful advice.

This is true in business, education, government, or in a church that seeks to be renewed and reformed.

In our day and age the demonic is anything that seeks to fragment community and hinder the advancement of God's coming kin-dom.

But let's take heart. Jesus said the kin-dom of heaven is at hand.

That kin-dom is near because it is actively luring and inviting individuals, groups, and structures to model the values and goals which were incarnated by Jesus Christ.

However, the goal is not merely for us to be free of the powers and principalities — to throw off that which ensnares, enslave but to free the Powers and principalities to live into their Divine purpose.

Christ is not only reconciling people to God despite the powers and principalities but Christ is also reconciling the powers and principalities to God not just breaking the idolatrous spells of the powers and principalities over people but breaking the powers' ability to enslave, control, dehumanise people.

Our hope is to have the faith that only God can save the world.

Only God can destroy the powers and principalities — and our task is to witness to that hope and participate in bringing good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

For apostle Paul: *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38,39)

Friends, as followers of Jesus, we can't remain silent or neutral We need to confront, we need to speak against the powers and principalities that enslave, dehumanise, control and destroy people. We can't do this alone by our own strength when we wrestle against the powers and principalities, oppressive structures and systems, empires and despotic governments.

And that's the reason why the author of Ephesians talks about the need to put on the whole armour of God.

Ephesians 6:18-20: *"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.*

*Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.*

*Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak."*

Friends as disciples of Jesus we must SPEAK, speak **BOLDLY** against the powers and principalities we find in our world that oppress, dehumanise, enslave people who are created in the image of God.