

TO STAND FIRM

Self-reliance is out of the question. You understand that this passage in Ephesians flies in the face not only of Ralph Waldo Emerson, but of the major mindset of most of America. Not America in its formative days – not America at its foundations – but America in its secular pride and short-sighted prosperity and prowess. The “principalities and powers” of evil overmatch us, and may only be fought with the aid and power of God. That is what this letter to the Ephesians thinks. That is what Christianity believes. Self-reliance is out of the question. We can be more than we ever dreamed – with the presence and help of the Holy Spirit. We are far less than we try to pretend – if we go it alone, or do it our own way, or live for ourselves alone. Self-reliance is out of the question. But God-reliance is still a possibility – if we should care to try it before we die.

Never mind what you think or what I think, for just a moment. This is what the Apostle Paul is trying to tell us, is it not? This is in essential agreement with the major attitude and message of the New Testament, is it not? This is certainly the keynote of the sixth chapter of Ephesians. We can at least be clear that this is the truth, or part of the truth, as held by our tradition. Christianity does claim that there is Satan – that there are satanic powers, messengers, servants, agents. There are spiritual as well as physical realities. The spiritual dimensions contain powers of darkness as well as powers of light. And both have profound effect and impact on the physical realm, and on what is happening inside and all around us. I know some of you do not believe this. But the evidence is everywhere. Some of you are afraid such ideas will be turned into excuses – as if without them the world is free from excuses? You can go on watching *Star Wars* without a “Dark Side” if you want to, but it gets pretty boring. There is no way to learn – and no way to help either. Nothing is wrong; we are all supposed to be the way we already are? No wonder so many people are depressed!

At the very core of the Gospel is the proclamation that Jesus Christ has overcome the power of Satan. “*Death could not hold Him.*” The confrontation we see in the Crucifixion and Resurrection was not just a matter of Jesus running afoul of the Jewish authorities, or of the way the Roman government executed Him. This was happening on the surface of life, to be sure; it was the way it was working in the outer world. It clarifies some ghastly, but nevertheless familiar, things about how

structure and authority often operate in our world. But this was *merely* the outer surface of what was happening. None of the New Testament writers, teachers, preachers, or believers thought this was the only dimension to the story. It was the physically “seeable” details of an incredible confrontation going on between the powers of darkness and the powers of light. That is the backdrop, the context, the assertion of the New Testament. Jesus, on the Cross and in the Resurrection, was overcoming sin, death, and the Devil. “Conquered” is the best translation of the word they used. For the first time in earth history, it came clear that the powers of light and love were not as hopelessly overmatched as we all tended secretly to believe. For the first time in earth history, a light shined in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it. It even made us realize that some of the light we had seen before had not been as “overcome” as we had supposed. (Jesus also made it very clear that Abraham, Moses, and Elijah were still alive.)

Those who noticed, those who saw, those who believed what happened – were stunned, shocked, and incredulous. They were joyful, but they were also stunned, shocked, and incredulous. It was not just the story they were seeing on the surface, powerful as that was. It was also the implications – like endless peals of thunder after a great lighting bolt, or the aftershocks of a giant earthquake. They kept clearing their ears, blinking and rubbing their eyes, trying to clear their heads and hang on to their pulses and still manage, somehow, to keep breathing. “My God,” they said. “This means the forces of light and truth have more power than we ever dared dream or hope! What else *could* it mean? Did we miss something? Is it just another ruse or trick of the Enemy? But NO! My God, it is true ... we can trust it and go for it.” And with great shouts of joy – and the deep resolve of a wonderful new anguish – they began throwing away all old life-patterns and all the heavy trappings that went with them. And they did whatever they had to do to spend their time and life with Jesus – or, more accurately, with the Holy Spirit. (*“Dwell in me.”*)

However, the ancient enemy is not gone. Satan and all of Satan’s messengers, servants, ruses, and traps are still operable everywhere in the world. Self-reliance is out of the question! No human is a match for such a subtle, powerful, intelligent, well-organized foe. The only difference is that we have an Advocate – a Companion who is able to stand against the foe, and who can and will show up at any time of the day or night to fight with and for us – a Spirit Being greater than Satan who can and will “stoop to our weakness” on a daily basis, at any time

we have sense enough to cry for help ... or gratitude enough to want to serve His Kingdom. And after all, who wants to go on living in darkness or serving the dark powers, as long as Light has any chance at all?

To which a friend of mine says, “You’ve been reading too much science fiction.” And I reply, “Is it science fiction that you are divorced, and lost custody of your kids; that you claim to be worried sick about how they are being raised; that you are more than concerned about the influence of the culture at school and all around them? And what about the stories you just told me about what’s going on at work? Maybe you don’t read *enough* science fiction! For sure you don’t read enough Bible.”

So maybe I don’t put it the way the great philosophers would have put it. But I put it approximately the way the early Christians thought about it and felt about it. It was not the philosophers, it was the everyday, humble Christians – with trust and faith in Jesus – who carried the light, and who shaped the fellowship of believers that has carried the Gospel of love and hope down the centuries to our present day.

Self-reliance is out of the question. Evil – especially true inner evil – can only be fought with the aid and power of Jesus Christ. That is what Paul knows and is trying to describe. And this is not five minutes after his conversion, either. The first blush of naiveté has long since worn off. The zeal and enthusiasm of that first taste of the acceptance and love of God in Christ Jesus have now been through at least twenty years of tempering and testing. Paul has wrestled with the fevers of malaria, and he has been beaten and stoned and shipwrecked and left for dead. He has made friends and lost friends, and he has lived through the pain of church councils at Antioch and Jerusalem that wrenched and divided believers from each other and sidetracked the work of the Gospel itself. I am simply saying there is not a whole lot more that could have happened to Paul to weaken his faith – to make him discouraged, downhearted, and cynical. If we are looking for reasons or excuses to defect, it does not help to match hard knocks, failures, or bitter experiences with the apostles.

Satan misses no tricks, leaves no love-bonds untested, allows neither single child nor full army of light to pass by or accomplish anything constructive if he can help it. Paul is no neophyte. His hope of Heaven is undiminished, and his joy in the companionship of Christ is obviously greater than ever. But he also knows he is in a fight. He has been for years. Do you know you are in a fight? People sometimes say to me, as if somehow surprised: “This isn’t easy. I thought I’d be much

closer to perfect by now. If I'm following Jesus, aren't most of my serious problems supposed to be over by now?" Do you know you are in a fight? You think Satan is an easy opponent?

Self-reliance is out of the question! Without Jesus by his side, Paul knows he wouldn't last very long. Without the full armor of God, he has no chance. Of course, for Paul it may have been far worse than for us. Satan has had a seven-level alarm out on Paul for years. Paul cannot make a move without every ranking demon in the territory looking for some way to stop or undo him. The opposition keeps mounting all through his life. Do we not know the patterns with those who serve too well? Luther, Cotton, Washington, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Tyndale, Chrysostom, John Husse, Thomas Cranmer, Ignatius, Hugh Latimer, Girolamo Savonarola, Thomas More, Augustine, Thomas à Becket, Origen, Polycarp, Raymond Lull, and on and on. But, of course, there is no Satan; it's just an accident that it happens every time. Pattern does not imply meaning, or intelligence – as all the “intelligent” people of our day keep trying to tell us ...

So here is Paul, chained to a Roman soldier (or at least with a constant guard), awaiting trial for the grave crime of allegiance to Jesus Christ. He is not upset, except that he hopes to speak boldly and fearlessly and tellingly for the cause of Christ. But he also knows and feels the drama that is going on around him and within him – the one that is deeper than the overt details make clear. And he knows that all his fellow Christians are also engaged in this greater, unseen warfare in some way. Wanting to make that clear in a helpful way, and hoping to encourage his friends, Paul searches for an analogy. There beside him is a Roman soldier, and the images of warfare come to mind. Some of us might wish Paul had been in a more poetic mood. We suspect that the imagery of warfare is unfortunate because it's so easy for us to get hooked back into the feelings of anger and harm that undo the very points he is trying to make.

Nevertheless, Paul muses. I would not be a bit surprised to learn that Paul was engaging in conversation the soldiers who guarded him (he always did, and more than a few times converted them). And this letter about a different kind of warfare may have been one way he tried to reach them, before sending it with Tychicus to Ephesus. But these are only my own musings.

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And please, the scenario of this analogy is not that of a lone, valiant hero type. This passage is about a “soldier of the line” whose task – along with that of all the soldiers around him – is to hold the line. Paul’s imagery is of a common soldier doing his part in the midst of an army, where if every individual does his part, the battle will be won. It was the genius of the Roman legions. It was what made them the most effective battle machine the world had ever seen. Every individual soldier knew his task, his position. And his job was never to break rank, never to run – not in fear, and not to take advantage either. No matter what happened: stand firm; hold your position; keep your place in line; move together on command, but always in your place. They trained and trained to obey this principle. There was no glory, no grandstanding, no bid for fame or acclaim as was standard in all other armies. Stand firm, hold your position, and we will win in the end.

When you fight evil according to the Spirit’s orders, few are likely to notice in this realm. (Maybe afterward, looking back, a few will. But not at the time.) And the issue is to stand firm! Hold your place! Keep your position! God – the Holy Spirit – knows what he is doing and will take care of the strategy. Our part is to obey orders and stand firm. Christ is the head of the church – the brains of the outfit. Who still remembers that in our time?

So hear the passage in this light. *“Put on the full armor which God provides, so that you may be able to stand firm against the devices of the devil (verse 11) ... then you will be able to stand your ground when things are at their worst (verse 13) ... to complete every task and still to stand” (verse 13b).* (“We will fight in the streets; we will fight on the beaches ...” oops, wrong guy. Well, Churchill got it from Paul, not the other way around.) *“Stand firm, I say” (verse 14).*

And why wear the shoes of the gospel of peace? *“To give you firm footing” (verse 15).* *“Keep watch and persevere” (verse 18).* So the mood and tone are clear. This is not a special or heroic moment. This is the soldier’s basic function – the thing for which he is trained, his reason for existing. Be ready, be watchful, be steady and consistent ... and when each onslaught comes, stand your ground. Withstand the attack no matter how fierce. Patient endurance is always the second highest-ranking virtue of the Christian Life. Stand firm.

So how do we respond? Run off and do this; run off and do that. If this doesn’t please me, try that; if this doesn’t work right away,

change tactics: change wives or jobs or houses or goals or gods. There is mayhem out there – have you noticed? And whether he exists or not, Satan loves it!

Self-reliance is out of the question. It will absolutely require the armor that God provides. Nevertheless, once properly armed – stand firm!

Paul now lists the necessary items in the order a soldier would normally put them on. FASTEN ON THE BELT OF TRUTH. The first reaction, since this is such a powerful passage, is to make this the biggest definition of truth we can find. So we think things like: Encircle yourself with all the philosophical knowledge of the ages; or with all the scientific comprehension of the universe; or with all the theological awareness of God’s nature and plan and purpose. That is a bit grand, don’t you think? Grandiose is Satan’s armor, not Christ’s. Seeking knowledge is a high endeavor, but that is not the kind of truth that helps us to stand firm.

The girdle or belt keeps us strong and quick. Pants had not yet been invented. A man did not want a lot of loose-flowing cloth flapping around and getting in the way when he needed to go into action. To run, to work – especially to fight – you “girded up your loins,” as the old language said. Pull all the loose stuff together, tuck it in, and pull the belt tight. A few still know. You can lift twice the weight without injury, or work for hours with far less fatigue, if you have a nice wide belt cinched tight around your middle. If you mean business, you need the belt.

Only, the belt of truth is not high knowledge of the eternal verities, but the down-to-earth choice of honesty. In a fight with the powers of evil, we need to have few illusions, few exaggerations, few excuses, few fantasies about our prowess or our weakness. Put on the belt of honesty (close relative of humility) so you do not become entangled with false postures, pride, or unnecessary guilt or fear. Know yourself. Get the belt cinched up and be who you are, no more and no less. Hard for Satan to play games with you if you have an inner honesty. No need to color things up; no secrets to hide; no need to pretend. With God present, who you really are will do just fine, thank you very much. Keep it clear and do not try to change it. The belt of truth: “Yes, I really did make that mistake. I am sorry.” “No, I did not intend to hurt you, but if you wish to stay hurt, that’s your decision.” “Yes, I would love to.” “No, I have no interest in that.”

“Rarely have we seen a person fail who had the capacity to be honest.” Fasten on the belt of truth.

PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. Again it is easy to get the meaning too high. We will hit all the high meanings we need when we get to the shield and the helmet. The breastplate, or coat of mail, covers the upper torso, and especially protects the heart. I suspect that Paul is not thinking so much about the final righteousness of God as about our own desires for goodness. Remember that Paul is talking about our war with satanic powers. If they can make us cynical about goodness, or persuade us that we don't really care about doing good, then such wounds will indeed cripple us for any meaningful struggle against evil. I know it's embarrassing, especially in public – but you *do* love the right! You love to see justice done. You love to do deeds that genuinely help others. However tarnished it seems to get at times, you carry a great nobility within your breast. And one of Satan's first tricks is to make you think that is not true, or to convince you that you have lost it beyond repair.

We are vulnerable in the heart region. Put on the breastplate of righteousness so Satan cannot convince you that you have no nobility of soul – that you do not really love the good, or care about what happens to others. Goodness is God's armor against evil. This is not self-reliance; it is armor that God provides, and God is the source of all genuine goodness. So take a guess: Who would rather have you cynical – God, or Satan? We need to claim and protect our personal awareness of our own love of the good, our own personal hunger for righteousness. The breastplate protects the heart – protects what you really value and care about.

LET THE SHOES ON YOUR FEET BE THE GOSPEL OF PEACE, TO GIVE YOU FIRM FOOTING. In the fight against the forces of darkness, if you remember your Message and if you are ever-ready to speak of Christ's deliverance to any person you find still in bondage, then your feet are on firm ground. Satan will not be able to unbalance you – to knock you off your feet. If we take our stand on any other message or see our purpose in any other light, then Paul believes that Satan or his servants will be able to throw us fast and hard. What are we going to save people with? Money, food, yoga, land, diplomas, our friendship, Bible knowledge? Lots of things are wonderful in their own place and way, but do not forget the real Message. Do not forget what we are really about.

The gospel of peace (need I remind you?) is *not* peace in this world, or peace *with* this world. It does not mean we are going to be super-nice to everybody, or really polite and ingratiating to Satan or his servants. The gospel of peace is about *peace between us and God* – and the peace other people can have with God if they want it. It is about the reconciliation between us and God that Jesus has made possible. Because of the death and resurrection – and because of the love of God for us that Jesus has revealed – we are no longer in a fight against God, God’s wrath, or God’s judgment against us. Be done with all of that – and all the fear that goes with it. We have changed sides, and the fight is now against Satan and his minions. That is what the gospel of peace is about: peace between us and God. No other peace is guaranteed, and peace with Satan (which some of us know about) is definitely repealed!

That’s the shoes. The feet symbolize the foundation, the understanding. Keep a firm footing. Stand on the gospel of your peace with God. And if you are not afraid to mention the same good news to others, it may happen that some of Satan’s warriors may switch sides and end up fighting along with you. In any case, that is what the fight is about: peace with God ... reconciliation with God ... friendship with God ... loving God. That is what the fight is about and what Satan is always trying to break up or undo in any way he can. Peace with God is the issue. Depend on it. Stand on it. Bet your life on it.

We did not get to the whole armor yet. That leaves us in a precarious position, theoretically. Except you can finish up the passage on your own, and I will no doubt want to talk more about it next Sunday. But maybe at least we know we are in a fight, and maybe we even know which side we are on. And are you remembering? This armor is not about our struggles with other humans. It is not a fight against human foes. That is why self-reliance is out of the question. The fight is too big, too important, and too deadly for that. But what is truly wonderful is that we do not have to make this armor. It is God’s armor. It is there waiting for us. All we have to do is put it on.

Of course, nobody is going to put on armor if they do not think they are in a fight ...