

## 6. Our Struggle is not against flesh and blood - Spiritual Warfare

Series: Prayer

Date: 17 May 2026, 6th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Ephesians 6:10-20, (Acts 19:8-20); Mark 9:14-29

One of the things my parents did as missionaries was take groups of people for a few weeks to places like PNG to give them a taste of mission work. After one trip Dad told me about an experience he had had. The team were based in a village and were travelling to different villages each day. One day one of the team was very unwell. There were 6 doctors on the team. They all examined the woman and couldn't work out what was wrong. The local pastor came to see her and asked, "Where did you get this necklace from?" "The village we visited yesterday," she said. "And when did you start feeling sick?" "When we came back yesterday." "Well this is what is making you sick," the pastor said. "This necklace was used in our traditional ancestor worship. There is an evil spirit attached to it that is making you unwell. We need to pray and get rid of the spirit and you will be fine."

So the pastor got my Dad and the one doctor who had stayed behind that morning to join him in praying for the woman. They anointed her with oil, prayed for healing, removed the necklace and in Jesus' name commanded the spirit to leave. Dad said at that moment a dog outside started barking. The woman immediately began to feel better. The pastor asked the woman, "Who gave you the necklace?" "An old woman in the village." He said, "I think this woman didn't want to hurt you, she wanted to be free of the evil spirit. Your coming was an opportunity for her to get rid of the necklace, because she thought the spirit wouldn't harm you because you were white."

When we read the Gospels and the book of Acts, we see Jesus and the apostles healing people and casting out demons. It feels very removed from the disenchanted world of 21st century Australia with our science and technology. Culturally we have a baseline scepticism of the supernatural. We are highly unusual in world history and in the myriad of cultures across the world today, for which the supernatural or spiritual realm is an everyday experience. But even here poke around the edges and people do have strange experiences that cannot be explained in scientific terms. People seek spiritual experiences through Buddhist or Hindu meditation, ouija boards, crystals, witchcraft and so on. The Bible has lots to say about the spiritual realm that we would do well to pay attention to as followers of Christ even if it may conflict with the worldview of the culture we're a part of.

We're looking at the Bible's teaching on prayer, and in the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to

pray, “deliver us from evil”, or in some manuscripts, “the Evil One”. And the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 6:

*<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> 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.*

There is an Evil One, Satan, the Devil, who is opposed to God. And as God's people we do face opposition, ultimately from Satan. This morning we're going to look at how we can do what Paul says here, to be strong in the Lord, and to take our stand against the devil's schemes. If you're here and you're not a Christian, I invite you to listen in and examine your own life and how you see the world in light of what you're hearing.

### **What is the opposition?**

What is the opposition? In Ephesians 2 we read,

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.*

Here we see that our three opponents are the world, the flesh and the devil. The world is the culture and the structures of the society we find ourselves in. We can look at that from a global through to the micro perspective. We know the pressure we experience to “follow the ways of the world”, rather than walk in obedience to Christ.

The flesh is our own internal pull against God and his ways. It's that impulse to lash out when you get hurt, to go along with your friends or colleagues rather than standing up for what you know is right, to view people as objects for your own gratification, to serve yourself instead of caring for those around you.

Then there is the devil, who Paul calls here, “the ruler of the kingdom of the air”.

Satan's goal is to destroy us. 1 Peter 5 says, “<sup>8</sup> Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. <sup>9</sup> Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” And Jesus says in John 10, “The thief [that is Satan] comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

### **How do we resist the devil and stand firm in the faith?**

So how do we resist the devil and stand firm in the faith? Paul tells us to put on the armour of God. We'll look at how each of these help us combat the devil's schemes.

Satan is not particularly creative, and the Bible tells us clearly what his tactics are. Jesus calls him the father of lies.<sup>1</sup> He is the deceiver. He's been doing this since the garden where he sowed seeds of doubt into our first parents' hearts, twisting God's promises, making them think that God didn't love them and was holding out on them. Part of Satan's game as a liar is to disguise himself as an angel of light. In 2 Corinthians Paul says false teachers in the church are Satan's servants. They follow their master and also masquerade as servants of righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is the Truth, and his word is truth. He says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."<sup>3</sup> It's why the first piece of the armour of God is the belt of truth. We combat Satan's lies with God's truth. We always assess what we hear against the truth of God's word, the Bible, and Jesus himself the Truth of God incarnate.

In Hebrews 2 we read,

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."*

Satan enslaves people through fear, ultimately through the fear of death. He can do this through the intimidation of spiritual forces of evil - evil spirits, demons, call them what you will. More subtly he can also do this through offering people power through spiritual forces to get what we want and to stave off death. This is the promise of witchcraft and the occult. But such compacts ensnare and make people his slaves. But this text from Hebrews tells us that Jesus has come to break Satan's power and to free us from slavery to fear. It's why we take up the shield of faith, trusting in Christ's victory over death in his resurrection, his victory over sin on the cross, trusting that in Christ nothing, not even death can separate us from God's love. And we put on the helmet of salvation. It's only Jesus who saves, not anything Satan can promise us.

The word "satan" means "the accuser". And this is one of his tactics. If he can't intimidate or seduce us, he will accuse us. Guilt is a healthy emotion when it leads us to turn to God in confession and repentance. That's how we receive his forgiveness purchased by Jesus on the cross. But Satan can take that sense of guilt and send it into overdrive telling us that we're

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<sup>1</sup> John 8.44

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 11.14

<sup>3</sup> John 8.31

worthless and beyond forgiveness and that God couldn't love us. We meet these flaming darts with the shield of faith - trusting in Christ's finished work. One way to look at the helmet of salvation is to see this is how we win the battle in the mind. We believe God's word that there is no condemnation for those in Christ, rather than the lies of Satan's accusation.

Satan's final tactic is temptation. Jesus' himself was tempted and Satan tempts us too. Paul uses the example of anger in Ephesians. He says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold."<sup>4</sup> This is where Satan plays on the desires of the flesh, and if we indulge them this gives him a foothold in our lives. God uses a very vivid picture in Genesis 4 when he speaks to Cain. He says, "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."<sup>5</sup> Cain tragically opens the door and is mastered and out of resentment and envy kills his brother Abel. We meet this assault with the breastplate of righteousness - both being safe in Christ's perfect righteousness as those united to him by faith, and also in living a righteous life, that is, in living a life of repentance and obedience, saying no to sin and yes to God.

Personally I've found these vivid pictures of the devil as a monster prowling and lurking and wanting to devour me very helpful because they engage my imagination and heart when it comes to saying no to sin and yes to God. The story of the Bible unveils a vivid picture of the spiritual reality that we live in. That sweet and innocent voice that says, "it's ok to nurse resentment. It's ok to indulge the lust of the eyes. It's ok, everyone else is doing it." That voice may present as an angel of light, but it's a hungry dragon and I'm the prey. I've got to stand and fight.

And I have to say I see this pastorally when I talk to people. I can see the world, the flesh and the devil all conspiring to pull them away from Christ, from the source of life, from his church where they will be nourished by his word and at his table. I can see the sweet promises of freedom and authenticity are in fact deceptions, the desires of the flesh, amplified by the world of our culture, fanned into flame by the devil, and if indulged will destroy because you won't be loving God or your neighbour, you just be serving yourself.

The only offensive weapon Paul lists in Ephesians 6 is the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. We've already seen how God's word helps us fight back against Satan's lies. And Jesus shows this in his own temptation in the desert where he responds to each of Satan's temptations by quoting Scripture. They are not a weapon as such, but there's also

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4.26

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 4.7

“feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” This is about how the Gospel which reconciles us to God also makes us ready for action. Ready to proclaim the Gospel, and ready to serve. Ready to stand and fight, together as God’s people. But in verses 18-20 Paul also tells us to pray 5 times.

*<sup>18</sup> And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. <sup>19</sup> Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.*

### **What can we pray for?**

What can we pray for as we face spiritual opposition? Jesus tells us to pray, “Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.” The word for trial and temptation is the same in Greek, so the old translation is “lead us not into temptation.” We can pray for all three of these things. We pray for prayers of protection. We pray that God would deliver people from Satan’s power. We pray we would not fall into temptation. And Paul says that prayer is how we stay spiritually alert and aware to the devils schemes.

We can also pray for the spread of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus. Paul asks for prayer that he would declare this fearlessly. So we pray for ministry and those serving in ministry. For protection. For boldness. And to use one of St Paul’s favourite expressions, we pray for doors to be opened that the Gospel may be proclaimed.<sup>6</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 4, we read, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> People seeing and responding to Christ in repentance and faith is not something that Satan wants because it means that they are rescued from his kingdom of darkness and transferred to Jesus’ kingdom of forgiveness and light. So he blinds them so they will not see. So we pray that God would do that miracle of opening the eyes of people’s hearts so that they might see the light of Christ and turn and find life in his name.

As we read the gospels and Acts we see that Jesus gives authority to his disciples to heal and to cast out demons. So we pray for these things too. That people might be healed and freed from Satan’s power. Acts shows us how to pray specific prayers of deliverance. This is to stand in the authority of Christ and to command demons to leave in Jesus name. This was

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 16.9, 2 Corinthians 2.12, Colossians 4.3

<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 4.4

something my parents taught me from a very young age, that if I ever encountered an evil presence that I was safe in Christ, and that I could command it to leave in the name of Jesus and that it would have to obey. While Jesus' power and protection is open to all Christians, in my experience, God gives some people gifts for this kind of ministry. In 1 Corinthians 12 one of the gifts of the Spirit is distinguishing between spirits.<sup>8</sup> This is an area that a person can grow in and be trained in. The bishop has a special team of people who do this kind of intercessory prayer. If you think you may have this gift, do have a chat with me and I'll see if I can line up some mentoring for you. And if you find yourself encountering an evil presence you can pray, but also come and talk to me and I'll come and pray. We can be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

There's lots more we could say on this topic, but I wanted to finish with a few thoughts on the situation facing the diocese around redress.

First, we face this situation because of grave spiritual evil. People bearing the name of Christ opened the door to the roaring lion. They became servants of Satan masquerading as servants of God. They used lies and fear to abuse and cover up abuse. Through them Satan accomplished his purpose to steal, to kill and to destroy. In addition to the physical and emotional trauma they inflicted, they have caused God's name to be blasphemed among the people of Tasmania and have been a stumbling block for many finding the life and healing and hope that Jesus offers. We live with the legacy of their sin done in our name as the church.

Second, what can we do? We can pray. Pray for healing and hope for survivors. We can pray prayers of lament and grief for what has been done and the impact that it has had and what continues to ripple out. Pray for wisdom for the team working on how we can fund our redress obligations. Pray that God would provide for us. We can also practice our faith. We can live those lives of repentance and obedience that Jesus calls us too. We can work at being communities of love and care and holiness that are safe for all, and especially the vulnerable. We can continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. He is the one who has defeated all the powers of darkness through his cross and resurrection. He is the only hope for us and for all Tasmanians. We can trust Jesus' promise, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."<sup>9</sup>

*Morning Collect for Grace:* Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, we thank you for bringing us safely to this day: keep us by your mighty power, and grant that we

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 12.10

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16.18

fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but lead and govern us in all things, that we may always do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**