

“Stand and Pray”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

(© 2021 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)

Whatever the question, the answer is prayer.

Ephesians 6:10-24

July 11, 2021

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Change

The past two weeks have offered ample opportunity to reflect on the passage of time. Most of you know that our daughter, Jeni, and her husband, Matt, welcomed Avery Jane Huestis into their arms June 29. Jeni was born February 29 thirty-three years ago. It feels like only yesterday we were holding baby Jeni for the first time.

While Linda and I were enjoying our time with Jeni, Matt, and Avery, I had the opportunity to read the first draft of my mother’s autobiography. Mom begins her story telling of the African American midwife who delivered her at home, prophesying, “This young ‘un will cross the waters many times but never drown.” My grandmother had not wanted an eighth child, but dedicated my mother to the Lord in the same way that Mom would dedicate her unplanned fourth child (me) to the Lord’s service. Mom has crossed the Atlantic Ocean 19 times and the Pacific once.

So much has changed between my mother’s first breath in the 1920s to Avery’s in the 2020s. The world is a very different place. Mom has lived through 17 Presidents from Coolidge to Biden. She lived through the depression, multiple recessions, and now a pandemic. World War 2, the Cold War, wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The revolution of travel by car, plane, and rocket. Technological advance no one could have dreamed of in 1928. When Mom was born, her life expectancy was 58 years – but of course Mom beat those odds. Avery’s is at least twenty years more.

No one can know how much the world will change in Avery’s lifetime. But I do know what will not change. There will always be conflict between good and evil. This struggle will

take different forms, but it's not going away. I know this because we can track the ways the world has tried to eliminate evil in all its forms – through conflict, negotiation, political revolution, education, protest, medicine, religion, technology, industry, and more. If you have a hard time believing in invisible but personal evil forces, what is your explanation for the relentless onslaught of racism, poverty, greed, addiction, half-truths and bold-faced lies, and more in the world?

I also know it because Scripture tells us this conflict between good and evil will endure until the Lord returns. The close of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one of the most pointed references to this ongoing struggle. What I find interesting – and very encouraging – is that Paul offers two simple responses: stand and pray.

Stand (10-17)

In his introduction to *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis said this:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

The Apostle Paul is no materialist and he's no magician. He doesn't practice sorcery or divination and he doesn't explain every trial or problem in the church as demonic. He does tell us there is a spiritual battle constantly raging behind the scenes. In this he's consistent with the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. God created two kinds of personal beings – spirit beings, which are invisible to us and can be good or evil, and human beings, which have both spirit and body.

Much if not all of the struggle between good and evil we see can be explained by the invisible forces of evil. In verse 12 Paul labels them as "rulers," "authorities," "powers of this dark world," and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." I am not sure Paul intends us to study the hierarchy of evil. He does want us to understand they are there. It's all we need to know.

It's also not the first time in this letter that Paul has mentioned the catalogue of invisible but personal evil beings. In 1:21 he declared that when God raised Jesus from the dead, he seated him in the heavenly realms "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come." Paul wants us to know they have already lost their war for power.

He also wants us to understand that the devil's primary strategy is the lie. He refers to "the devil's schemes" (11). The evil one is primarily identified two ways in the Bible – "Satan," which means "adversary," and "the devil," which means "slanderer." In other words, he's always against us, always falsely accusing.

Paul has previously named or implied some of the devil's schemes (literally "methods") in this letter. The devil loves to divide, destroy, and discourage. As we discussed a few weeks ago, there are two kinds of sinners – "bad and proud" or "good and proud." The common element is pride. The devil either wants you to think that you're worse than everyone else – and therefore even God rejects you so you might as well hold on to your addictive destruction – or you're better than everyone else. He wants you to hold on to all of your anger – your anger at God, at others, at yourself. He wants you to be everyone's adversary as he is. That's why Paul says one of the Christian's mottos is, "I won't go to bed mad. I'm going to deal with it."

So, we have an invisible enemy who commands an entire army of invisible evil beings. What do we do about it?

Paul's answer to that question is what I love most about this passage. Paul basically has one word that summarizes our response to the devil: Stand. Don't let him get the best of you. Don't let him knock you down. Don't believe his lies. Don't let your identity be shaped by his accusations. Don't let him win. Stand.

How do we do that? Paul's answer starts in verse 11, and is detailed in verses 13-17. When I've heard this passage taught and preached, the focus is often on the various pieces of armor – belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, helmet, and sword. I simply want to point out that those are all figures of speech. The image is visual, and that makes it memorable and powerful. But the metaphor points to a deeper reality.

This section feels like a new twist in Paul's letter, but it isn't. As he closes the letter Paul wants a way for his readers to remember what he's been telling them throughout – especially in the first three chapters. Ephesians divides neatly into what God wants you to know (chapters 1-3) and what God wants you to do (chapters 4-6). Here at the end of chapter 6 what Paul wants you to *do* is to stand on what you *know*.

The point of the belt of truth is not the belt; it's the *truth*. The significance of the breastplate of righteousness is not the breastplate; it's the *righteousness*. The meaning of the feet shod with the gospel of peace is not the shoes; it's the *gospel*. The shield of faith is about *faith*. The helmet of salvation is about *salvation*. The sword is about *the word of God*. All of these themes were developed early and thoroughly in the letter.

Your power to stand against the evil one on the evil day is your identity in Christ. It is the sum of your "spiritual blessings in Christ." When the devil lies about how worthless and irredeemable you are, your armor is the *truth* about your *righteousness*. It is the *gospel* you accepted by *faith*. It is the *salvation* promised in the *word of God*. The adversary cannot successfully deceive you into thinking you don't matter and can't live a holy life – if your life is firmly established on the facts that God loves you unconditionally and permanently, that he chose you, that although you were dead in your trespasses and sins, he made you alive and seated you with Christ.

This is your power to stand against the accusations of the Great Liar. All the efforts of the hellish hierarchy will fail when you grasp the gospel. He cannot deceive, cannot destroy, cannot divide believers who stand in the truth. Our defense against the devil's schemes is to keep returning to the gospel.

Pray (18-20)

What about our offense? How do we fight back? Remember, we're fighting against an enemy that is (1) invisible and (2) powerful. He doesn't fight fair and will not give up. Is it enough just to "stand"? Don't we need to counterattack?

The answer is in verses 18-20. We fight back with prayer. Prayer may feel like a weak response – like we're doing nothing. In reality, prayer is our best response. It is active engagement with an invisible, powerful enemy. It is humility, admitting that the enemy is above and beyond us.

Whatever the question, the answer is prayer, according to Paul. There's no limit on when we pray, what we pray, and for whom we pray. Pray "on all occasions" with "all kinds of prayers and requests" for "all the Lord's people."

Your primary offensive weapon is prayer. Recently someone told me about a very strange encounter with a person who exhibited all kinds of odd behavior, from showing interest in spiritual things to saying nonsensical things to falling down on the floor. I was asked, "Do you think this is drugs or mental illness or demon possession?" My answer was, "You don't have to figure that out. The response should be the same no matter what it is. You show compassion and love. You always have someone with you when you meet with this person. And you *pray* with and for the person."

Paul says to pray "in the Spirit on all occasions." When you're sad, pray. When you're happy, pray. When you're confused, pray. When you're lonely, pray. When you're in a crowd, pray. When you're worried, pray. When you're overjoyed, pray. When you're mad, pray. When you're at peace, pray. When you think you're worthless, pray. When you think you're someone, pray. Turn every occasion vertical.

Paul says to pray "with all kinds of prayers and requests." There isn't a right or wrong way to pray. Pray out loud. Pray silently. Pray in a group. Pray by yourself. Pray a prayer somebody else wrote. Pray an extemporaneous prayer. Journal your prayer. Turn Scripture into prayer. Use the prayers in a prayer book or hymnal or devotional. Pray prayers of thanks and worship. Pray prayers of confession and repentance. Pray prayers of intercession (for others) and supplication (for yourself). All kinds of prayers.

Paul says to pray for "all the Lord's people." Pray for those you love. Pray for your enemies. Pray for fundamentalists. Pray for progressives. When there's a great political debate, pray for the Lord's people on both sides. Pray for different churches and denominations. Pray for different races and cultures. Pray for those you think are doing

ministry well and those you believe are messing it all up. Pray for your leaders. Pray for those who look to you as a leader. Pray

Paul specifically adds to pray for him as he “makes known the mystery of the gospel.” Those proclaiming the good news and advancing the kingdom of God into new territory are especially vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. Pray for their boldness, for their clarity, for their ability to stand.

Over the next few weeks as we continue to regather post-pandemic, I’m going to invite you into more fervent and regular prayer – privately and corporately. There’s nothing the devil would love more than for the church to be permanently divided over the pandemic, over politics, over methodology, over anything at all. It’s harder to hate on people you pray for. The church needs to be together, to worship together, to learn together, to serve together. I’m praying for more togetherness. I will also be sending daily “Pause for Prayer” emails over the next thirty days to our Corinth family.

Finally (21-24)

That’s all for today, all for Ephesians. There’s evil in the world and always will be. We must *stand* against the devil’s schemes, and we must *pray* because the invisible war needs God’s power. Our power is not enough.

They say that Ephesians is Paul’s most impersonal letter. That’s probably because it’s a circular letter intended for wide circulation. But even this impersonal letter is about names and faces and stories – Paul, who’s in prison, for example (20), and Tychicus, his courier and emissary (21). Paul may not name his readers, but he knows they need to be encouraged (22).

The Christian life is never intended to be lived in isolation. If you have withdrawn from active participation in church – not just Sunday morning worship, but shoulder-to-shoulder learning and encouragement and prayer – it’s time to change course. We’re all a bit more scattered over the summer. But as we move toward the fall, I hope you’re making plans to be present, in the flesh.

As Paul closes this letter (23-24), his final word of blessing is about peace, love with faith, and grace - some of his favorite words. Paul is always Trinitarian in his thinking. He was in chapter 1 and he is in chapter 6. He’s already spoken of the sword of the Spirit (17) and prayer in the Spirit (18). Now he speaks of “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” as he blesses those who love God “with an undying love.”

In one way, everything has changed since the first century when Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians. In a very real sense, nothing has really changed. We still have an invisible and powerful spiritual enemy, but we still have no reason to fear him. We stand before the great Adversary and Accuser, knowing we belong to Christ. All this is, as Paul said in chapter 1, for the praise of his glory. We are his. Amen.

We've reserved some extra time for prayer today. I will prompt these prayers as you lift them up to the Lord.

Let's start close to home. Pray for....

- ...yourself, to take your stand against the devil's schemes, and to learn to pray as your first and greatest response to spiritual warfare.
- ...those who live under your roof or next door – that they might see God's grace modeled in your words and actions.
- ...those you know who are close to the end of life, that they might fully embrace the hope of the gospel and make the transition with courage and joy.
- ...babies and children, you know, that they might come to know the truth and love early and always.
- ...those of any age who are facing a crisis of body and spirit, that they might be healed by the power of the Lord.

Let's pray for the church. Pray for...

- ...this church, as we regather and look to the future.
- ...those who used to be in community with this church family, but have drifted away for any reason at all.
- ...those who lead and serve and enable the body to function.
- ...other churches and pastors in our community, especially those in crisis and transition.
- ...our mission team serving in a sister church in Vermont this week through VBS soccer camp and service projects – for Pastor Amy, Annie Burnham, Kelly Bruley, Kerry Payne, Hamp Shuford, and Shawn Callahan.
- ...the United Church of Christ, gathering this week in the General Synod.
- ...the Church Universal, pulled and pushed by so many forces – visible and invisible.

Let's pray for the world. Pray for...

- ...the nation of Haiti, reeling from the assassination of its President, that the church will rise up and stand.
- ...the nation of Japan, as people from all over the world gather for the Olympics, that the gospel will be shared with people of every nation.
- ...for Israel and the Middle East, that there will be peace in Jerusalem and that believers will be strong.
- ...for our mission partners in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Central America, that they will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.
- ...America and our President and congress and courts – that truth and justice will prevail.