

“Stand”
Ephesians 6:10-20
08.22.21

Introduction

If you're not familiar with the lectionary, it is a tool used by pastors and worship leaders to plan worship services. It guides us through the Christian calendar, beginning with Advent and working all the way through the season of Pentecost.

Each week, there are multiple scripture texts to choose from. There is an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, a reading from the prophets, a Gospel reading, and an epistle reading. Some pastors try to synthesize all the different passages since they are thematically related, while others, like myself, focus on one text.

Of course, pastors can preach from anywhere in the Bible they want, but there are some benefits to following the lectionary. As already noted, it leads us through the Christian calendar and helps us preach through the majority of the Bible in just a few years. Additionally, it prevents pastors from only preaching out of the parts of the Bible they like best.

However, some weeks, the passages listed in the lectionary do not speak to us personally in that moment, or they challenge some of our own assumptions and presuppositions that we have to work through before sharing with others. Sometimes a passage really stretches us—other times we simply struggle with how to communicate a passage because it gets “lost in translation.”

If I'm honest, I felt some of these challenges as I began preparing this week's message. Paul talks about the armor of God, and that concept is kind of lost on us today in the twenty-first century. I can't imagine that anyone listening today has ever worn armor or is even very familiar with it, but it was a relevant analogy for the first century audience because Paul is describing the ensemble of a Roman soldier.

Then Paul opens a big can of worms when he starts talking about the problem of evil. Does evil exist in the world because of immaterial forces like demons and unclean spirits? Or is he talking about the decisions we make as humans and the corrupt systems we create? Or is Paul suggesting that these immaterial forces and the systems we have created are somehow fused together?

Finally, all of the virtues that Paul mentions (i.e., truth, righteousness, peace, faith, etc.) are attributes of God mentioned in the Old Testament. There is just so much to unpack from this text in a fifteen-minute sermon, and I wasn't really sure where to begin.

When I find myself puzzled and challenged I spend time in prayer and ask God what I might be missing. After all, I've heard about the armor of God all of my life. It is often used as a theme for VBS, and I remember hearing sermons about it as a young adult. Usually the problem is that I've become so familiar with a passage that I forget to look for what new perspective God might be trying to give me.

As I studied the passage carefully over the last week, I began to realize that I have always had the impression that we put on the armor of God so that we can charge headfirst into battle, but now I am discovering that the way Paul describes the armor of God, it is intended to be used for defense rather than attack.

Digging Deeper

Paul mentions five different pieces of the armor in Ephesians chapter six, and only one weapon. More specifically, he talks about the sword of the Spirit and clarifies that it is the "word of God."

Some scholars think he is talking about the "word of God" in the same way that Jesus used Scripture when he was being tempted by the evil. You might remember Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy teach time that Satan tempts him, and on one of those occasions, he says, "One does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

Other scholars see the "word of God" as referring to the good news of Jesus Christ (i.e., the death and resurrection of Jesus). Based upon the context and the way that Paul uses the expression elsewhere, this is a likely candidate. However, I like to think that the "word of God" can include both of these ideas.

Nevertheless, out of the six items mentioned, the "sword of the Spirit" is the only offensive weapon listed, and even so, it may have connotations of defense rather than "attack."

Perhaps most important is the verb "to stand" that appears four times in this passage. In v. 10 Paul says to put on the whole armor of God, "so that you might **stand** against the wiles of the devil." In v. 13 he says, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to **withstand** on that evil day, and having done everything, to **stand** firm." At the beginning of the very next verse, he says, "**Stand** therefore..."

Here "standing" conveys the idea of being grounded and having firm footing. It makes me think of a few times in my life when a situation knocked me off of my feet because I wasn't expecting it. Paul indicates that we should always expect fiery darts coming our way. We should always expect the forces of evil to be at work against us in an attempt to knock us down. Ultimately, to "stand" suggests a healthy level of preparedness for whatever comes our way.

Reflection #1

One example that comes to mind is of someone training for a marathon. There is a lot of conditioning involved to prepare for such a strenuous event. At this point in my life, I am not in my top physical shape. If someone asked me to go walk a few laps around the track at the high school I could do it with no problems. But if I tried to run a marathon this afternoon, I would be in big trouble. I would be completely unprepared.

Similarly, someone who is in the Air Force might have to train to parachute out of an aircraft. I would imagine that they pay careful attention and learn everything they need to know. Perhaps they'll never have to use it, but they will want to be completely prepared just in case.

It seems that sometimes bad things happen to us, and they take us by surprise. Almost like we are completely shocked when we suffer or go through hardships in life. And I think it's interesting that Paul spends little time explaining the problem of evil and why bad things happen to good people. Instead, he treats the trials and tribulations of life as expected and spends most of his time focusing on how to be prepared for the inevitable.

Reflection #2

I'm reminded of the story of Dorothy Day. Dorothy grew up in an anti-religious environment in the early part of the twentieth century. Her father was a journalist, along with everyone else in her family, and because of their constant investigation of the living situations of the marginalized in large urban areas, Dorothy brought with her a strong sense of social justice.

She started a newspaper called "The Catholic Worker," in which she exposed systemic greed and corruption that was causing mass poverty and poor living conditions for countless people in America. She also fed the victims in her stories and developed dozens of "hospitality houses" to shelter them.

Throughout her career, Dorothy was heavily criticized by other Christians and political groups for "enabling" people and speaking out against popular social issues. There were times that Dorothy lost the majority of her support because she fearlessly did what she believed was right regardless of the consequences.

Because she opposed warfare and spoke out against it, fifteen of her hospitality houses closed in a month and she lost two thirds of the subscribers to her newspaper. In response to those who boycotted her movement, she said, "We will print the words of Christ who is always with us...Our manifesto is the Sermon on the Mount."

As I read about her life I see a person who put on the armor of God every morning because she was actively expecting the fiery arrows to come flying her way. Dorothy

Day was standing with her feet firmly planted in the ground for whatever challenges she might face and she was unwilling to back down. Dorothy Day becomes an example for all of us to follow.

Invitation

I wonder how many of us are prepared in the sense that Paul describes in Ephesians chapter six. If you experience an unexpected blow in life will it knock you off your feet? Are you prepared for the battles of life in any given moment? Are you expecting to contend with the forces of evil that exist in the world—the forces that oppose the kingdom of God?

Aside from engaging in worship, how is your life being formed by faith, righteousness, peace, truth, and salvation? How are you preparing for the fiery darts that will inevitably come your way?

Paul concludes his section with the imperative to always pray in the Spirit. This seems like a fairly obvious way to be better prepared for the forces of evil that oppose us, but what kind of intentional conversations are you having with others who challenge you, help strengthen your heart and mind, and encourage you? What are you reading? Each day when you wake up, how are you taking a stand so that you might be ready for whatever comes your way?

Reference Tools

DeRusha, Michelle. *50 Women Every Christian Should Know*. 2014. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Keener, Craig. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*. 1994. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Martin, Ralph. *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. 1992. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Peterson, Eugene. *Practice Resurrection*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing.

Snodgrass, Klyne. *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*. 1996. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Thielman, Frank. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Ephesians*. 2010. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. This is a fun question I recently saw on Facebook: “If the last thing you ordered on Amazon was your weapon in battle, what would it be?” If you don’t do Amazon, it could simply be “the last thing you purchased.” To be clear, the answers are supposed to be fun, so don’t be afraid to say something like “an air mattress.”
2. Sometimes Christians talk about “taking a stand” against some particular idea or practice in society. Do you think that is what Paul is talking about here or is it something a little more nuanced? Either way, please offer an explanation for your opinion/impression.
3. Has there ever been a time you felt like life circumstances knocked you off your feet because you weren’t expecting it? Have you ever felt under attack? If so, what did you learn from that experience that has helped you grow?
4. In what ways are you preparing and conditioning for the battles of life? What is one practical step you can take to grow in being more intentional to “stand” daily?
5. How have you witnessed God’s strength recently?
6. How can we pray for you?