

The author J. Alistair Brown once wrote of walking through a park in a large city and coming face to face with a massive oak tree. The oak tree was not the only thing that was massive; so was the great mass of vines that had grown up all around its trunk. Though the vine had started small, over the years the vine had gotten larger and taller, along with the tree. By the time Alistair had gotten there the entire lower half of this huge tree was covered by the vine's creepers. The accumulation of tiny feeder vines was so thick that you literally could not see the trunk of the tree anymore. It was also quite clear that the tree was in danger; the huge, solid oak was being taken over by the vines drawing life out of the great oak. But the gardeners in that park had seen that danger. They had taken a saw and severed the main trunk of the vine with one neat cut across the middle. While the tangled mass of the vine's branches still clung to the oak, the vine itself was now dead. It was apparent that as the weeks would pass, the vine's creepers would eventually die and fall away from the tree.

A huge oak tree being squeezed to death by a mass of vines is often the same picture we see in many whom claim the Christian faith - their professed receiving of the resurrected power of Jesus Christ into their lives slowly but surely gets squeezed out by the growing creeping vines of sin. How easy it is for sin - which begins so small and seemingly insignificant - can grow until it has a strangling grip on our hearts. But the truth is that if the risen Jesus Christ truly dwells within us, the power of sin can be cut from our lives like gardeners who cut a main vine that was killing the massive oak. While the creeping vine of sin will always seek to cling and grow and have detrimental effect in our hearts - there is a means by which we can tap into a power that is greater than the power of sin - so that deliberately and gradually sin will dry up and will fall away from our souls.

All throughout Ephesians the apostle Paul has been exhorting us to *"walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called"* (Ephesians 4:1) *because* God has sovereignly accomplished great and glorious things for us *in the past through Jesus Christ* - and God has also great and glorious things planned for us *in the future through Jesus Christ*. We have heard God call us to walk in unity, walk in purity, walk in love, and walk in harmony. Now in our text for this morning, Paul ends his letter by challenging us now to walk in victory as we walk from our past on into our glorious future.

It is also true that sadly - the victorious Christian life seems to be strangely absent in our day. We live at a time where so many who claim to be following Jesus are so busy battling the issues of this world and the struggles of their own lives - that the real battles of the most essential issues of our lives in the deadly war all around us and in us goes unnoticed. These battles and issues have nothing to do with things like deadly viruses nor racial equality nor gender identity nor of some of kind of organized covert deception to control and destroy. The real battles and issues are about the Kingdom of God.

In Ephesians Paul has been stressing the victorious life in Christ. He has laid before us our need to submit to the authority of God so we would then know the resultant power of unity, purity, love, and harmony. But now the rubber meets the road. As he closes, Paul tells us that our walk will not match up with our talk - *if our walk is focused on our struggles rather than our victory in Christ*. You see, beneath the surface of our lives there is a great-unseen spiritual battle. Though Christ has risen from the dead to defeat sin, evil and death - the battle still continues, and it will until our Lord rides in on a cloud to take us home for good. Through the cross the dividing walls of hate and prejudice and bitterness have been broken down; but the devil and his agents are currently at work building them back up. Jesus rose from the dead so that those who receive him would that live in purity and harmony; but there are powers today busy sowing seeds of discord and conflict among God's people. As Cotton Mather once said "God indeed has the Devil on a chain, but it is a horribly long chain."

Paul both warns us and pleads with us today to walk in the victory we have in Jesus Christ. Sadly, many who know Christ do not even know that they have victory in him. Remember this was Paul's prayer for us back in Ephesians 1:18-23: *"having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."*

Friends, our walk on this earth is through the battleground of the great war for our souls. As long as we live, we will be in the midst of the fight of Satan against God, evil against righteousness, hell against heaven, death against life. As we walk in unity, purity, love, and harmony we will constantly be confronted with the contradictions of division, immorality, hate and conflict – because the devil and his forces of darkness are at work to take as many of us down with him as possible before the that great day when Jesus rises out of the clouds and returns to take those who love him back home.

Paul confronts us with that reality here as he brings his letter to Ephesus to a close. He proclaims to us this morning the two great truths about what it means to follow Jesus. First, Paul explains that our lives will be embattled because we do have enemies who are out to defeat us. Second, he tells us that we do have the weapons we need to win that battle. We read today that we have been given the power overcome the enemies of our souls so we can live the victorious life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

I. The first truth is - if we are following Jesus our lives will be embattled because we do have enemies who are out to defeat us: *"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6:10-12).

Contrary to the way many people think and act towards each these days - our enemies are not human but demonic: *"We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers. . . the authorities . . . the cosmic powers over this present darkness . . . the spiritual forces of evil."* The *"forces of evil"* will seldom attack openly but prefers to work in the darkness of the back rooms through prejudice, bitterness, gossip, and criticism. The devil is a dangerous wolf, but often enters the flock as just another sheep. Though he roars like a lion, the devil is apt so speak with the gentle voice of a dove. In order to deceive us he will use compromise and tolerance rather than conflict and confrontation.

My friends, we must take care to neither *fear* nor *be ignorant* of the devil because both positions are dangerous. Satan is like the hog nosed snake, which is an evil looking reptile that responds to the threat of danger in one of two ways: it either impersonates a pit viper, coiling, striking and hissing viciously - or if that fails the hog nosed snake will turn belly up, opens its mouth, lays out its tongue, and plays dead. If it is picked up and placed right side up it simply turns over and resumes the death position again. The snake realizes that if it cannot bluff the power of death, it will then mimic death itself. The evil one, like a hog nosed snake, will take on whatever appearance he needs to deceive us.

We read in John 8:44 that satan is the father of lies; *the greatest lie of which is that he doesn't even exist.* When we deny or ignore the reality of evil one, we are exposed to more of his cleverness. And the greatest failure we suffer at the devil's hands is in believing the lie that we can defeat him on our own. We cannot win on our own; just as Jesus said Mark 14:38: *"the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak."* Way too often those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior are defeated by the devil because they forsake the power of God in their lives by their self-confidence in their own strength.

That is why Paul says: *“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his (Jesus) might.”* By the power of the cross of Jesus Christ the enemy was defeated and now must stand under our feet. Remember in Ephesians 1:22-23 we read that *“he (God) put all things under his (Jesus) feet and gave him (Jesus) as head over all things to the church (to us), which is his body, the fullness of him (Jesus) who fills all in all.”* God gave Jesus His power and authority, and then Jesus gave us His (God’s) power and authority. The invisible world of the spirit in which we are constantly being attacked is the very world in which Christ won the victory and reigns. We are called to reign with him, so it says in 2 Timothy 2:11-12: *“For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; if we endure, we shall also reign with Him.”*

Brothers and sisters, we must not allow Satan a foothold in our hearts, in our lives, in our families, or in our church. He would love to get in here and stop what God is doing at Arrowsmith. He will do whatever he needs to do, with whomever he can, to create conflict and divide us. The devil knows each one of us. He knows our weaknesses and our soft spots very well. Yes, in Christ we do have the power to overcome the evil one; but we cannot overcome if we allow ourselves to be deceived by him. A Haitian pastor tells of a man in his country who wanted to sell his house for \$2,000. Another man wanted very badly to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the original price with just one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. The house was sold. A few years later, the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house was filled with the smell of rotting flesh, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail. The point, said the pastor: *“If we leave the devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ to live in.”*

In an article in Moody Monthly, a man wrote of watching a wildcat in a zoo. *“As I stood there,”* he said, *“an attendant entered the cage through a door on the opposite side. He had nothing in his hands but a broom. Carefully closing the door, he proceeded to sweep the floor of the cage.”* He observed that the worker had no weapon to ward off an attack by the beast. In fact, when he got to the corner of the cage where the wildcat was lying, he poked the animal with his broom. The wildcat hissed at him and then lay down in another corner. The writer then said to the attendant: *“You certainly are a brave man.”* *“No, I ain't brave,”* he replied as he continued to sweep. *“Well, then that cat must be tame.”* *“No,”* came the reply, *“he ain't tame.”* *“If you aren't brave and the wildcat isn't tame, then I can't understand why he doesn't attack you.”* The attendant chuckled, then replied with an air of confidence: *“Mister, I ain't brave and that cat ain't tame - he just ain't got no teeth.”*

Brothers and sisters, we were created by God in the image of God. In Christ we are children of the King, bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus. As we wait for the risen Christ to return and take us home, be encouraged that Satan has no teeth - *unless we give him his teeth by leaving nails of sin up in our lives for him to hang his garbage on.* It's time we wake up and live the victory that is ours. In Colossians 2:9-10 we read: *“For in him (Jesus) the whole fullness of deity (God) dwells bodily, and you (we) have been filled in him (Jesus), who is the head of all rule and authority.”* Brothers and sisters, the *“schemes of the devil, the rulers . . . the authorities . . . the cosmic powers over this present darkness . . . the spiritual forces of evil”* are no match for the resurrected power of Jesus. No, we are not brave. No, the devil has not been tamed. But his teeth cannot hurt those are fully surrendered to Jesus.

The Old Testament tells us God allowed Satan to take away everything Job possessed in this world that was dear to him. Yet in the darkness of his worst moments Job saw Jesus: *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”* (Job 19:25-27). Following Jesus will mean embattled lives because we do have enemies who are out to defeat us. But Satan has no teeth against those who truly know Jesus Christ.

II. We will have victory because followers of Jesus we have been given the weapons to win the battle against the enemies who are out to defeat us: *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak"* (Ephesians 6:13-20).

Imprisonment in Ephesus meant Paul was literally chained to a Roman soldier in order to ensure that he would not escape. In writing this letter he no doubt compared the armor of the Roman soldiers with whom he was constantly constrained, to the armor of God that we as born again followers of Jesus Christ are to wear if we are to win the battle for our souls. *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm."*

First we read we are to: *"Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth."* A "belt" was worn by soldiers to both hold their clothes together and carry the sheath for their swords. In a culture where the people wore long loose fitting robes, belts were used to tie their clothing close to the body when quick action was required. God's Word here is telling us that we must clothe ourselves with God's standards of truth and "fasten" or tie or buckle those things tightly to ourselves. All things that are a hindrance must be untied and eliminated - for unnecessary burdens will cause us defeat in the battle before us. When truth is tied tightly to our lives, we can and will overcome sin and evil.

"Put on the breastplate of righteousness." We are to cover our hearts with the spiritual protection of *righteousness*. The arrows of this life will find their mark if we do not cover the center of our lives with the righteousness of God. Brothers and sisters, our life in Christ should be our protection; for a Christian's breastplate *is their relationship with God*. Regardless of the sharpness or force of the attack, a life that is righteous in Jesus will win the battle because righteousness is the breastplate that protects the heart. In Christ, we are clothed in his righteousness, even death has no power over us.

"As shoes for your feet . . . put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace." In Paul's day, when you put your sandals on, it meant that you were ready to move. There is a sense of urgency among soldiers who are engaged in battle; they are in the midst of a life and death struggle. We face that same urgency; all of life is a battle between good and evil for the cause of eternal life or eternal death. Brothers and sisters, most people in our realm of influence are going to hell. But we are called to move into battle and proclaim the good news, *"the gospel of peace,"* because Jesus Christ has defeated the evil forces of darkness and brings life to those who are facing death. Isaiah 52:7 says: *"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"*

"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one." The word Paul uses here for "shield" denotes not the small round shield, which we often see in movies, but a full body shield to cover the whole person. One of the most dangerous weapons in ancient warfare was a "flaming dart" which was a large arrow tipped in pitch and set aflame. A fiery dart that hit any part of the body was extremely painful and most of the time fatal; a full body shield was a soldier's most effective protection. The shield of "faith" is our greatest protection against the "flaming darts" that the devil will target towards us. Faith is fully trusting in God. The closer we walk with Christ, the safer we are from the flaming arrows of the evil one.

“Take the helmet of salvation.” Nothing short of a full sized axe could penetrate the helmet of a warrior in Paul’s day. A soldier’s helmet protected his head, the center of his very life. In the same way, our salvation in Jesus Christ protects us from the hardest blows to the deepest cores of our being. Struggles and pains and sufferings may come upon us - but in Jesus we are still saved! That is why Paul tells us in Romans 8:38-39: *“For I am sure 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.”* In the worst of the battles of life, when all may seem lost, our salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord is our victory!

“And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Of the six pieces of armor mentioned here, the *“sword”* is the only one, which is not only defensive but also offensive. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that, *“the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* The truth of the Word of God is sharp and cuts deep into the heart of the soul. When Jesus faced the devil in the desert of temptation, he drew forth the sword of the Spirit and won his battle with the evil one by the power of the Word of God. In our battle with the forces about us and the sin within us, victory is ours in the truth of God’s Word, the sword of the Spirit. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the sandals of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation - and the sword of the Spirit are all weapons we have been given by God to defeat and claim victory over the enemy of our souls, the evil one himself, Satan. But armor means nothing if we don’t use the greatest weapon with the greatest power of all – which is prayer: *“Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.”*

In her great battle against John Knox, Mary the Queen of Scotland said: “I fear John Knox's *prayers* more than an army of ten thousand men.” The embattled Thomas Lye once wrote: “I would rather stand against the cannons of the wicked than against the *prayers* of the righteous.” Thomas Watson was quoted as once saying “an angel fetched Peter out of prison, but it was *prayer* that fetched the angel.” Just before his death Abraham Lincoln wrote: “There have been many days that in my own wisdom, all that was about me seemed insufficient for the day. At those times I have been driven to my knees in *prayer* by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.”

Brothers and sisters, God has given us a number of powerful weapons to win the battle in the spiritual realms all around us. But if we don’t pray, we will lose. We read here we are to pray:

- 1) *“at all times”* – both regularly and constantly
- 2) *“in the Spirit”* – under the guidance and direction and in the power of the Holy Spirit
- 3) with *“all prayer and supplication”* – in as many ways and in as many forms as possible
- 4) *“keep alert with all perseverance”* – always ready and willing to pray
- 5) *“making supplication for all the saints”* – praying *for* one another
- 6) *“and also for me,”* – asking for prayers *from* one another

History records that the early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in their prayer lives. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the bush where he or she would pour out their hearts to God. Over time the paths to these prayer places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect their prayer life, it was soon apparent to the others, for they would kindly remind the negligent one: “Brother (or sister) there is grass growing on your path.” Friends, how much grass is growing on your prayer path? Do you even have a prayer path? Do you have a path that leads to the throne of God in the Kingdom of God, where you are pouring out your heart to Him? Without tapping in the heart of God through the power of prayer, you will never fully know victory over the presence of sin in your own life or over the forces of evil that abound in this world.

General Dwight Eisenhower once said: “There are no victories at discount prices.” Nothing less will than praying in the power of God that raised Jesus Christ from the dead will bring victory in the our lives over the darkness of sin and evil and death in us and around us. Jesus is our hope and our victory. Prayer is our power to overcome. That victory is ours when we pray. Though prayer may not rescue us *from* our circumstances, prayer will give us the power *over* our circumstances - because the power of the risen Christ will lift us above any and all circumstances, even death itself.

Three hundred years before the birth of Christ, there lived a king whose name of Pyrrhus. King Pyrrhus is famous because he was the first to test the long established power of Greece against the newly invasive power of Rome. As a first test, he led his armies against the Roman army at a place called Heracleia, where he won a great victory. But his victory came at a great price; so crippled where his men from battle, that they were unable to establish a foothold and he was forced to retreat. Thereafter, King Pyrrhus led his armies to a number of victories, but each time his men were so badly wounded, so severely crippled that they were unable to follow up on their advantage. At last, King Pyrrus was forced to abandon his attempts at battle and Rome ultimately won the war.

The difference between us and King Pyrrhus brothers and sisters, is that in Christ we have already won the war - so let us not continue to be wearied by the battle! Yes, life can sometimes be tough; the arrows of sin and the fiery darts of the evil one are painful. But Jesus has risen - we have won! Put on the armor, claim the power of God. Pray, and then shout the joy of victory! Amen? We have a place in heaven waiting for us at the great wedding feast, set aside by Jesus Himself. We are God’s chosen people, in Him we cannot lose. Jesus has risen, he is on the throne, he reigns today, and we reign with him. We are a people of victory, and so let’s pray like it and let’s live like it. Amen?

At the end of the Civil War in the United States, a poem was found written by unknown Confederate soldier whose body was found in the middle of a battlefield. In the midst of the dark and bloody war between the North and the South, the soldier opened his heart before God in prayer, seeking God’s power in his life when he felt overwhelmed by his struggles with the battles of this world.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked God for health that I might do greater things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.
I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for--but everything I had hoped for...
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.
I am among all men most richly blessed.

We, among all people, are most richly blessed - because in Christ we have won our battle with sin, evil and death – and the infection and effects of coronavirus. We are to walk in victory as Jesus walked in victory from the cross to the grave and then rose into heaven. In John 16:33 Jesus said: *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* May our prayers be filled with his power and his victory!