

October 30, 2011  
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Ephesians 6:10-20

Title: "Standing Firm Against the Powers"

(Series: Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality)

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Since early last January –with a break in the summer to learn how to better pray the Psalms - we have been making our way through the life-transforming letter the apostle Paul wrote in 62 AD to the followers of Jesus living in the 1<sup>st</sup> century city of Ephesus, on the land mass now called Turkey.

The title I have given to this series of studies is: "Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality." Every culture in every era of history, every people group around the globe, every institution, every organization, every family, every individual operates out of a "reading of reality." NT Wright calls our "readings of reality," the "lenses" through which we look at the world, the grid on which are plotted the multiple experiences of life." Put more simply: we all wear a set of glasses. We all have deeply ingrained pre-suppositions about the make-up of the universe and our lives within it. Our sets of glasses determine the degree to which we understand what is going on in the world; and they determine how well we function in all that is going on in the world. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul, whose "reading of reality" was radically transformed by an encounter with Jesus Christ, develops a new, expansive "reading of reality" centered in and saturated with Jesus Christ. An alternative reading. A revolutionary, alternative reading. As we have experienced throughout our journey through the letter. Perhaps most practically the last few Sundays, as we listened to Paul develop the dynamics of the revolution taking place in the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children and masters and servants. But no where, for me, is the phrase "alternative reading of reality" more apropos than for the text before us today. "Our struggle," says Paul ... "Our battle," ... the word refers to a wrestling match, a struggle up-close and personal. "Our struggle," actually "is not against flesh and blood" – other human beings – "but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." Our struggle, our battle, our wrestling to live the

alternative reality shaped by Jesus Christ and His Gospel, is not a struggle, a battle, a wrestling against other human beings. It involves human beings. But the struggle, the battle, the wrestling is not finally with or against other human beings. Alternative reading. A different set of glasses. While serving as the Secretary General of the United Nations, from 1961 to 1971, Burmese diplomat U Thant expressed his bewilderment over the state of human existence on the planet. Speaking before an audience of some 2,500 people, who had gathered to talk about the conditions necessary for world peace, U Thant asked a number of searching questions:

“What element is lacking so that with all our skill and all our knowledge we still find ourselves in the dark valley of discord and enmity? What is it that inhibits us from going forward together to enjoy the fruits of human endeavor and reap the harvest of human experience? Why is it, that for all our professed ideals, our hopes, and our skills, peace on earth is still a distant objective seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?” (Spiritual Warfare, Stedman, 20-21) It depends on what set of glasses you are wearing.

“Our struggle,” says the apostle of the Light of the world, the Prince of Peace, “is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Let me review. We have come to see that Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is written in two halves. Chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. Chapters 1-3 – what we could call **The What** of the Gospel. Chapters 4-6 – what we could call **The So What** of the Gospel. Or, chapters 1-3 – the good news. Chapters 4-6 – the good advice. Or, chapters 1-3 – reality as it is because of Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne of the universe. Then, chapters 4-6 – the everyday implications of living in reality as it is because of Jesus’ birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the throne of the universe. Though, chapter 4-6 are built around a series of “therefores.” Chapter 4, verse 1 – “Therefore, I exhort you to walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” 4:17 – “Therefore.” 4:25 – “Therefore.” 5:1 – “Therefore.” 5:15 – “Therefore.” And then 6:10 – “Finally.”

“Finally.” Not as, “in conclusion.” Not as, “I have now reached the end of the matter.” The word Paul uses is better rendered, “henceforth,” or even, “henceforward.” Meaning, “from now on” or “this is the way it is going to be for the rest of the journey.” We are going to find ourselves in tension, in a struggle, in a battle, the rest of our lives. John Stott helps us ‘feel’ the impact of Paul’s ‘henceforward.’

But now Paul brings us down to earth, and to realities harsher than dreams. He reminds us of the opposition. Beneath surface appearances and unseen spiritual battle is raging. He introduces us to the devil (already mentioned in 2:2 and 4:27) and to certain “principalities and powers” and his command. He supplies us with no biography of the devils, and no account of the origin of the forces of darkness. He assumes their existence as common ground between himself and his readers. In any case, his purpose is not to satisfy our curiosity, but to warn us of their hostility and teach us how to overcome them. Is God’s plan to create a new society? Then they will do their utmost to destroy. Has God through Jesus Christ broken down the walls dividing human beings of different races and cultures from each other? Then the devil through his emissaries will strive to build them. Does God intend his reconciled and redeemed people to live together in harmony and purity? Then the powers of hell will scatter among them the seeds of discord and sin. It is with these powers that we are told to wage war, or – to be more precise – to ‘wrestle’ (verse 12 AV). This metaphor is not necessarily incompatible with that of the armed soldier which Paul goes on to develop, as if he ‘changed the scenery from that of the battlefield to that of the gymnasium.’ He is simply wanting to emphasize the reality of our engagement with the powers of evil, and the grim necessity of hand-to-hand combat.” (262)

“Therefore,” “Henceforward,” “Finally,” be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might.” We have no other choice. For we are no match for the true opposition. We are no match for the real enemy of the Gospel. Only our Lord is strong enough to stand on His own. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might.” The terms Paul uses are the same terms he uses in his first prayer for the Ephesians. There he prays that we might know the surpassing greatness of God’s power toward us who believe. 1:19 – “power in accordance with the working of the strength of His might.”

Which, says Paul, God exercised when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand “in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” “Henceforward,” be strong in the strength of God’s mighty might. As Martin Luther has us sing: “Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing.” As we have all experienced. And as so much of the world is experiencing right now. “Be strong in the Lord.” More literally, “grow strong in the Lord.” How? “Put on the full armor of God,” says Paul. “So that,” says Paul, “you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.” A different kind of armor because we are battling a different kind of opponent. Alternative reading.

We realize how important this armor, God’s armor, is when we begin to understand the opponent, or host of opponents as is the case. So let us today focus on verse 12 of the text. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.” To what is Paul referring? He has already used this language earlier in the letter. In his first prayer, penned in chapter 1 - that we may know the power that God exercised when He raised Christ from the dead, and when God seated Christ at His right hand, in the heavenly places, -1:21 - “far above all rule and authority and dominion.” And he used this language when speaking of one of the roles of the church in the world; 3:10 – “in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

What does Paul mean by this language? The church has grappled with this for centuries! Some argue that what Paul is referring to is visible, material, human powers and forces. Some argue Paul is referring to the human “structures” that seemingly order the world. Structures like tradition, the state, courts, laws and regulations, corporate alliances, political parties, banking policies, even religions. All of it can become very oppressive. All of it can begin to work against God’s purposes. As we know. And it can “feel” very overwhelming.

Others argue that what Paul is referring to is invisible, non-material, but still essentially human powers and forces. They argue Paul is referring to the fact that human structures can begin to “take on a life of their own.” As we know, a grouping of humans can develop a “spirit,” an “ethos,” a “force,” a “corporate identity.” More than the sum of its parts: more than any individual’s “spirit” or “ethos;” more than the bond between individuals.

That “spirit” or “force” can then begin to influence convictions and behaviors; causing people to believe things in the group they would never believe if not in the group; causing people to act in ways in and with the group they would never adopt if not in the group. IBM takes on a life of its own. Apple Computer takes on a life of its own that goes on even after Steven Jobs. “City Hall” takes on a life of its own. Being “Conservative” takes on a life of its own. Being “Liberal” takes on a life of its own. Churches take on a life of their own. I have served five churches. And preached in many more. And each of them has “a life of its own.” Some of that life is congruous with the Kingdom of God; some of it is not. Some of that life is very liberating and healing. Some of it is oppressive and hurtful. But it seems to me that Paul is referring to something more and other. It seems Paul is referring to “structures” other than anything humans devise. It seems Paul is referring to a “spirit” other than any human spirit or combination of human spirits. Note that he explicitly refers to a personal being, whom he calls “the devil” – verse 11 – “the schemes of the devil.” And whom he calls “the evil one” – verse 16 – “the flaming missiles of the evil one.” And note that he refers to the “powers” as “spiritual” – verse 12 – “the spiritual forces of wickedness.” Which, or whom, he says, are located – verse 12 – “in the heavenly places.”

It seems Paul is referring to non-material, non-human, supra-human powers. The powers interact with the material, the human. The powers influence and interact with the human “spirit,” “ethos.” But the powers are other than the human and humanly generated. The powers work in the earth. But they are not “earthly.” Rulers, powers, forces ... “in the heavenly places.”

We meet the phrase elsewhere in the letter to the Ephesians. 1:3 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing **in the heavenly places** in Christ.” 1:20 – Christ is seated “**in the heavenly places.**” 2:6 – God has raised us up and seated us with Christ “**in the heavenly places.**” 3:10 – the manifold wisdom of God is made known through the church “to the rulers and authorities **in the heavenly places.**” “Heavenly places” is another dimension of reality ... very close at hand. Another dimension of reality interacting between the dimension we can see and hear and touch and smell. Where Christ is. Where we somehow are seated with Christ. And where the opponents of Christ are, and from where they operate. “Alternative reading” – big time.

As I have said in other contexts, most of us, especially us under the spell of the so-called “Enlightenment,” live with and from and out of a two-dimensional “reading of reality.” For most of us in this city, all of life can be reduced to two dimensions: 1. the human self, 2. and the physical environment. Everything that happens in life can, supposedly, be traced to, and explained by, these two-dimensions. It is a powerful reading of reality, to which even we who believe “there is more” regularly succumb.

But the Biblical reading is at least four-dimensional.

1. The human self, who is more glorious than the two-dimensional reading knows!
2. The physical environment, which is also more glorious than the two-dimensional reading knows!
3. The Living God, Who is more glorious than any of us have yet to realize!
4. The heavenly places, where non-material, supra-human powers and forces exist, influencing the material and the human more than we realize.

Paul calls them Rulers – *archai*. Powers – *exousiai*. World-forces – *kosmokrators*. Spiritual beings – *pneumatika*. Created. Mark that. Please mark that fact. Whatever these rulers powers and forces are they are created. By God. For God’s purposes. Some obey; some rebel. Created. Not eternal. And not God’s equal! Mark that too. Although some rebel and assert their power against God and God’s purposes, they are not God’s equal. They are powerful, and dark, and wicked as Paul tells us in Ephesians. But they are not God’s equal. If that were not the case Paul could not say, “Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day ... to stand firm.”

What is Paul wanting us to know? Let us drill down to the basics. And here is where C.S. Lewis helps us. He said he was often asked if he believed in the devil and the rulers, powers and forces? He would answer,

*“If by 'the Devil' you mean a power opposite to God and, like God, self-existent from all eternity, the answer is certainly No. There is no uncreated being except God. God has no opposite. . . . The proper question is whether I believe in devils. I do. That is to say, I believe in angels, and I believe*

*that some of these, by the abuse of their free will, have become enemies to God. . . .*

Then this.

*Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael."*

Angels. Satan the angel is the opposite of Michael the angel, not the opposite of the holy God. Angels created to work with God. We meet this reading of reality all over the Bible. We read in a number of places of God meeting in a "heavenly assembly," interacting with the angels. Sometimes they are called "gods," sometimes they are called "sons of God," sometimes "the hosts of heaven," or "the heavenly hosts." One of the Living God's names is "Yahweh sabaoth," "Yahweh of the hosts," "Lord of hosts, Lord sabaoth." The prophet Zechariah, who especially works with this alternative reading of reality, especially, uses this name throughout his prophecy. We read of the prophet Micaiah saying, "I saw the LORD on His throne, and all the hosts of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left." I Kings 22:19. The book of Job opens "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and the satan also came among them." Job 1:6. The prophet Isaiah tells of the day, when after King Uzziah died, "I saw the LORD sitting on a throne . . . Seraphim stood above Him . . ." Some kind of exalted being. At one point in the worship service, the Lord asks: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Isaiah says, "Here I am, send me." A bold thing to say, because the Lord's question was not addressed to Isaiah; it was not addressed to any human being. It was addressed to the hosts of heaven. "Who will go for us" Isaiah 6:8. "us" – the heavenly assembly. Then there is Psalm 82. Tucked in the middle of the Prayer Book. Opening up the alternative understanding of the universe. The Psalmist, Aseph, tells of God taking "His stand in the congregation of God." He tells of God then judging "in the midst of the rulers," literally, "in the midst of the gods." Are there other "gods" alongside Yahweh? No. The Psalmist is referring to the angelic/ spiritual powers and forces around Yahweh. God speaks to the powers and forces:

"How long will you judge unjustly?"

Vindicate the weak and fatherless;  
 Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.  
 Rescue the weak and needy;  
 Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.”

That is the role God created the powers for exercises – make justice happen. Then the Psalmist laments that the “rulers,” the “gods,” have not done their assigned jobs. And as a result, quote, “All the foundations of the earth are shaken.” When the heavenly hosts do not do justice, the foundations of the earth are shaken.

We see this alternative reading being lived out in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, before the birth of Jesus in the experience of the prophet Daniel. Daniel 9 and 10. Daniel says that during in the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, the human king of Persia, a message was revealed to him. Daniel had been praying and fasting for 21 days when this happened. The messenger, who turns out to be an angel, tells Daniel that God has been aware of his praying the whole 21 days. But the angel could only now come because, quote, “the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for 21 days.” The heavenly messenger goes on: “then behold, Michael, of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia” (10:13). The kings of Persia are clearly human kings. But the prince of Persia appears to be a non-human force. As does Michael the chief of princes. Then the heavenly messenger says it is time for him to leave, saying, quote, “I shall return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and, behold, the prince of Greece is about to come” (10:20). “Prince” ... hence the term “principalities,” “powers.” There is more to the movements of nations ... and institutions ... than we realize. History is not just about what humans and human organizations do. History is also about what the Holy God does. And about what the “princes”, “rulers”, “powers” and “forces” do. Alternative reading of reality. God has created angelic, spiritual powers and forces, to be part of His running of the universe. Some cooperate; some do not. Some do not accept their place before God, and then seek to subvert God’s purposes. Some do not like God. That is putting it mildly. Some hate God. And, therefore, hate Jesus Christ. How in the world can anyone hate the Saviour of the world? The powers hate Jesus because they know that He came to defeat those who have rebelled. Which Jesus did on the cross and through the empty tomb. And they, therefore, hate Him. They will not



surrender to the very truth they know - Jesus is Lord. They know the Gospel. But will not surrender.

So they do everything they can to blind human beings to the truth about Jesus, to hinder the progress of God's good news, to lead those Jesus rescues back into slavery to sin; they do everything they can to divide Jesus' followers, and to destroy the church, to ruin what Jesus redeems. Which is why although we who follow Jesus Christ are caught up in the battle, we ourselves are not the point of the battle.

Canadian psychiatrist John White put it best in his book "The Fight." "Satan's supreme object is to hurt Christ and Christ's cause. You, personally, are of no interest to him. It is only as you relate to Christ that you assume significance in his eyes. Before you became a Christian he was mainly interested in blinding you to the truth of Christ or perhaps in seducing you further into his terrain. But this was not because of your personal importance. He only uses you to get back at God" (78). Do not take the battle personally! But do take it seriously.

Once more: "Our struggle," says Paul, "is not against flesh and blood." If it were we might be able to stand on our own. And we could fight with human, earthly means. But our fight, as JB Phillips translates Paul, "is against organizations and powers that are spiritual. We are up against the unseen powers that control this dark world, and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil." And this fight requires a very different posture.

Church historian Richard Lovelace sadly notes that "much of the church's warfare today is fought by blindfolded soldiers who cannot see the forces ranged against them, who are buffeted by invisible opponents, and respond by striking one another" (*Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 18).

When we first met this reading of reality in our study of Ephesians, I turned for help to Walter Wink, who has thought and written a lot about it. Although I do not agree with everything he teaches, I do think he is on the mark in using a little equation to help us in the battle.

$$\mathbf{P = O + I.}$$

"P = O + I," he writes. "Remember that simple formula and you can avoid the confusion of the centuries about the principalities and the powers. The

powers (P) are not spiritual spooks inhabiting the air and leaping on the unwary. That was an earlier way of putting it. Nor are they merely institutions, political or economics systems, ideologies, or social structures. That has been the modern way of coming at it. Neither is adequate, though both contain some truth. The powers consist, it turns out, of an outer manifestation (O) and an inner spirituality (I). O – King of Persia. I – prince of Persia. “As the inner aspect of material reality, the spiritual powers are everywhere around us. Their presence is real and inescapable. The issue is not whether we believe in them but whether we can learn to identify our actual, everyday encounters with them – what Paul calls ‘discerning the spirits.’” The powers, whether benign or satanic, always consist of an outer, visible form (constitutions, judges, armies, leaders, buildings) and an inner, invisible spirit that provides its legitimacy, credibility, and clout.”

Then he writes this, a word to us in this part of the world. “We in the West are so individualistic that we have ceased to regard corporate entities as anything more than the mere aggregates of their parts. But an institution is more than the sum of its visible parts. Our capacity to recognize the spirituality of institutions has left us tinkering with their parts while ignoring their essence.”  $P = O + I$ . “This means,” says Walter Wink, “that the church cannot be content with addressing the material aspects of unjust institutions. It must speak **to the spiritual reality** of the institution as well.” [“The Powers,” *Sojourners*, summer 1984]

Thus Paul’s “henceforth,” “henceforward.” Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Humans are not the enemy. Our struggle is against supra-human forces. And we struggle with them using very different means. Placards and bull-horns, rocks and fists, hand guns and assault rifles, have no longer term effect against the real opposition. What finally affects the real opposition is buckling *truth* around our guts, and wearing *righteousness and justice* across our chests, and putting on the shoes of *peace*, and holding up the shield of *faith*, and covering our head with *salvation*, and speaking the *Word of God*, and *praying at all times in the Spirit* of God. Which we will unpack next time.

On the mornings when it is not raining, I like to walk to the office. I like to come into the downtown core, walking across the Cambie Street bridge. I never get tired of the view. If you come into downtown along that route, you know that just pass BC Place, there is a building with the word, VISIONCRITICAL. One word: VISIONCRITICAL. It is the name of a

business that likes to say, “We see the world differently.”

VISIONCRITICAL. As I walked across the bridge last Tuesday morning, and saw the sign again, I said to myself, “Yes!” On Friday morning I said it out-loud! “Yes!” If we are going to understand the city rightly; if we are going to navigate life in the city rightly, vision is critical. It is critical that we embrace an accurate vision of reality. To see the true nature of the struggle for the well-being of the city. And to see Who wins the struggle. “Did we in our own strength confide our striving would be losing. Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God’s own choosing. Doth ask Who that may be? Christ Jesus it is He. Lord Sabaoth His name, and age to age the same. And **He** must win the battle.” He already has. The future of the city is not up for grabs.

Be strong. Be strong in the strength of the Lord. Take up and put on the full armor of God. One way to do so, is to sing. Songs like, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” And songs like, “Be Thou My Vision.”

