

The Opposition Ephesians 6 v 10 – 20

On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus Christ said to His disciples, 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart. I have overcome the world.'

Followers of Jesus should expect trouble in the here and now but rest assured. He overcame it, we can too with His powerful help.

Everyone has trouble sooner or later. Welcome to the real world! Created beautiful and filled with wonderful potential but temporarily spoilt by human sin and its consequences. We all get our share of difficulty and sorrow, but the Apostle Paul is echoing Jesus here as he writes to his old parish in Ephesus when he says Christians can expect a measure of extra hassle.

Paul is writing this from prison where he has been falsely incarcerated as a troublemaker. It's about thirty years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and in cities all over the empire churches have been planted by preachers like Paul. Growing communities of happy people are welcoming Christ as the 'good news' that He is. People are finding forgiveness and new life, reconciled to God AND to each other. Men, women, people of all ages and backgrounds, different nationalities and social status are uniting in the love of the Spirit as followers together of one Saviour King.

Yet even as the 1st century Church grows, crosses borders, overcomes fear and prejudice, celebrates and shares grace and freedom, other feel threatened and resentful.

Some folk don't like it if we seem too happy so they slander us. Some people just don't like change. Some of Paul's fellow Jews didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah and disapproved of Paul's open association with non-Jewish people. This social unrest is what got him in prison.

But here in Ephesians 6 the Apostle insists our real enemy is not his Jewish opponents or his Roman captors, not religious hardliners or secular sceptics. The real source of our opposition comes from a spiritual origin, from that part of reality that for now is usually unseen. He refers to the 'heavenly realms' where a war is raging. There are angels and there are demons and their influence can be seen all around us in the world.

The real enemy, according to Paul, is the deceiver who hates truth, the murderer who hates life, the devil who hates God and Christ and the Church. He and his crew are destined to suffer in eternal fire and he's trying to take as many there with him as he can!

So the powers of evil without mercy try to bring all kinds of harm on the human race. They want most of all to keep us away from God and His grace and the love of Jesus so they will attempt to intimidate, deceive or corrupt us in a variety of ways. For some of us evil will get in with unimaginative classics such as greed, immoral sex or various addictions. Other people may become just as bound with habitual self-pity, bitterness, hopelessness.

Christ and His apostles warn us to expect and prepare for evil attack but how?

Paul instructs his Christian readers to 'be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power'.

We discover spiritual strength in the face of trial and temptation when we remember who we are in Christ. The earlier chapters of Ephesians tell us we are children of God, chosen before the creation of the world. We are citizens of heaven, our seats reserved at our Master's table. Christ is the Good Shepherd Who protects and provides for His flock. He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth so the devil has no authority over us unless we hand it to him. We are helpless only if we choose to be. Christ came to set us free from bondage. In Him we are declared free.

However, Paul is a realist, his theology does not encourage complacency but spurs to action. He speaks here of 'struggle' as in wrestling or hand to hand combat. We are to consciously take to ourselves the 'armour', the protective clothing God provides. No good leaving our equipment behind when there's a battle brewing! We should be constantly thanking God for the truth of the Gospel, the covering righteousness of Christ, the peace He brings to our hearts, the faith His Spirit is growing in our minds, the crowning glory of salvation. We are to claim these gifts of God and work them out in daily living, practising honesty, integrity and so on. Not neglecting the most potent weapon we've been given, the Spirit inspired Word of God – the Bible.

Our defences stand as we pray in Jesus' name. More, darkness is pierced and banished by the light of the Gospel as we declare the truth of God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Not that we should be full of ourselves about this. Notice how humbly this great Apostle asks his students to pray for him! The Ephesians had witnessed God doing mighty miracles through Paul and yet here was this great church leader requesting his congregation to pray he would find courage.

The devil is a formidable enemy and this side of heaven we are very fallible human beings. Any of us can fall. Our confidence must be in Someone stronger, in Christ. On one occasion the disciples had driven out some evil spirits in Jesus' name and were feeling quite pleased with themselves whereupon the Lord advised them, 'do not rejoice that the demons submit to you. Rather, rejoice that your names are written in heaven'.

In other words success in this struggle – in life – is not taking pride in our achievements but living out His amazing grace.

So here's today's choice: You can do nothing and let evil walk all over you and your family and your community. Or you can kneel in penitent faith and enlist as a soldier and overcome evil with good in the name and power of our commanding officer – Jesus.

Amen.