

“Who’s against you?”
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Psalm 84 and Ephesians 6:10-20

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What do you feel when you hear this passage about spiritual warfare? I imagine some of us feel inspired. *Yeah, let’s go get ‘em! I’m ready to fight me some evil!* We might feel comforted, safe, behind this armor of God. Or, Paul’s words might make us afraid. *Um, what do you mean by “cosmic powers of present darkness”?* *This is not reassuring me.* Others of us hear this and think: *What nonsense and superstition, devils and spirits.*

Maybe you’re just thinking, *Ugh, Why did I come on this Sunday? Should have come for the Communion sermon, not the evil one.* Or, you’re wondering, *Um, am I sure I came to the Presbyterian church? We don’t usually talk about these things. Where am I?*

Maybe, you’re disappointed: *Um, can I maybe have, like, a real sword? I mean truth is great and all, but if there really is evil out there, I might like, you know, a cutting sword, a knife, a spork, something.*

Or, perhaps, you read this passage and you feel seen, like Paul has spoken to something very real in your life: *Yeah, I don’t know about cosmic forces and all that, but there is evil. I mean we see it every day: murders, racism, betrayal, corruption, the Taliban, not to mention cancer, earthquakes, hurricanes. And it’s not just on the news. I struggle with it everyday, the little and big things of life that hurt me, make me want to give up or become not a very nice person. It feels like there is something pulling me into incremental compromises, things I know aren’t right, but I do them anyway. This is true to me. I feel like life is a struggle.*

Which one are you? The doubter, the believer, the one who’s just struggling?

C.S. Lewis, in his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, writes, “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.”

Paul, of course, is neither. He spends most of his Letter to the Ephesians proclaiming good news: God’s grace has prevailed, uniting all things and all people, creating a new humanity, in which old divisions and hatreds are ended. God has put everything under the authority of Christ, and even we are seated with him. Love wins!

The problem, and Paul knew this, was that the reality of daily life didn’t match up. Paul himself is in prison. The Christians in Ephesus are a religious minority in an empire in which Christianity is illegal. They face daily harassment and discrimination. They’re surrounded by temptation. The

government may be demanding they worship the emperor at the new temple built in Ephesus. If they refuse, they could suffer, or even be killed.¹

Despite the triumph of Christ, we must acknowledge that evil and suffering still exist. So where does it come from? Who's against us?

Is it God? Because this is what a lot of people say, or at least imply. They say God controls everything; everything happens for a reason. By that logic, God *is* the one hurting you, but don't worry, it's for a good reason. Which sounds a lot like an abuser, and actually bears no resemblance to Scripture or Christian theology. Christianity believes that things happen which are contrary to the will of God. God did not give you cancer. God did not cause that shooting. God did not break up your marriage. God did not want you bullied at school. God did not will an earthquake. God does not traffic in evil. Period.

So, if not God, then who? Are we to blame? Certainly, there are times we suffer because of the choices we've made, or because of the choices others have made. Paul speaks about this extensively, and encourages us to make righteous choices. But if humanity is the sole originator of evil, then humanity should be able to overcome evil: you broke it, you fix it.

Thousands of years of human history say otherwise. We can make improvements, but we are not capable alone of winning this battle. Don't forget that it was at humanity's peak of Enlightenment, morality, and scientific achievement that we murdered six million Jews, obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, lynched black men in trees, and saw the rise of fascism. This is the whole premise of the gospel: Christ came because we couldn't achieve salvation alone.

Paul is very careful to say to the Ephesians: your enemies are not flesh and blood. They want someone to blame. And that is a very dangerous time, Paul knows. When we start thinking that we are each other's enemies, that's when gas chambers are built, and Asian Americans attacked in our streets, and Vietnam veterans spat upon as they return home. You are not each other's enemies, Paul says. You are called to love each other, to work together, not fight.

So, if God's not to blame, and if people aren't either, then who is?

Paul concludes that, just as there is something bigger than us that inspires us to do good, there is also something bigger than us that inspires evil.

Elsewhere, Paul calls it sin: the fundamentally broken state of existence. Here, Paul calls it "the devil" and "spiritual forces of evil." Today, many of us talk about white supremacy, patriarchy, poverty, and other systems that are bigger than us and shape us, often in ways we are unaware. We talk about evolution, and genetics, and biological determinism. We talk about psychology and the power of the unconscious. We also just experience bad things: tragedy, like the people of Haiti being hit with an earthquake and a hurricane all in the same week.

¹ Haruko Nawata Ward

However we label it, most of us fundamentally acknowledge that there are forces at work here that are bigger than us.

When I served as a prison chaplain, a lot of the men spoke of demons and spiritual warfare. At first, I just wanted to tell them they were wrong. No, it wasn't a demon that caused you to commit that act of violence; it was your history of trauma, the violence that was done to you, combined with an environment that offered no hope, no dignity, that led you to dehumanize another as you yourself had been dehumanized, and now you need your humanity restored, under the love of God, so that you can repent and restore the humanity of the one you hurt. But as I listened to these men, I realized we were talking about the same thing. What did it matter how we labeled it? And who's to say some force of evil wasn't at work?

They needed to know that, while they held responsibility for their actions, they were not monsters. There was good in them, God in them. And this evil, it came from something not them. Because if this was just who they were, what hope was there?

Are there demons? Is there a devil? I don't know. Paul never bothers to define what he means by cosmic powers. Are we talking spirits with personalities and conscious choices? Are we talking impersonal forces? Are we talking collective sin? Paul never says, and he doesn't seem to care. Because his point is that there's something bigger here. There are things in this world (whatever you call them, however you understand them) that would make us believe we are monsters and thus make us behave as such.

The good news, Paul says, is that we are not monsters. We are born of God. We sit with Christ on the right hand of God. We are the stuff of love and holy power.

Be strong in God, Paul says. Resist evil.

This is not solitary combat. The English translation conceals this, but in the Greek, all his verbs and pronouns are plural. He isn't speaking to the individual; he's asking the church community to stand together. He says: rely on the strength of God's power, not your own. Wear God entirely; put on the armor of God. Your weapons are truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and the Spirit and Word of God. Pay attention. Notice where evil grows, in the world and in you, and answer it with the love of God.

In the face of evil, we must remember who we are—the children of God—and as the children of God, stand together, holding each other up, God holding us up, not because we will avoid suffering or evil, but because it will allow us not to lose ourselves to that evil. The real good news is that, as Christ suffered, he remained steadfastly the Son of God. And the hope is that we can too. In the face of suffering and evil, we can remain the children of God, a people of love and peace, truth and righteousness.

When God makes us a church like that, says Martin Luther, the devil's "doom is sure."

I know that doesn't answer every question, and in fact, we'll be returning to this problem of evil in our fall sermon series.

But for now, let it suffice to say: Yes, there is something against you. But there is also, and even more so, Someone for you. So do not be afraid. But live your life, in joy, and in faith, and in kindness, and in everything real and good, for that is the best way you withstand evil. You don't have to win this war; you can't. God will do that. God, in the fullness of time, has done that. All you have to do is stand. Stand as the children of God. Stand for peace. Stand for truth. Stand for love. **Amen.**