“IN IT TOGETHER – 16”

Dark Powers

Ephesians 6:10-20

When I was a child, the word with which Paul starts this section would strike fear into my heart on a Sunday as I sat listening to the visiting preacher. He (always a he) would have been droning on for a good forty minutes or so and then we’d hear the word “Finally”. The first time I’d heard it, in my naivety I had foolishly assumed that this was a sign that the end was approaching, but, sadly, it simply indicated that he was pausing for breath before another major point and several subsections – probably another twenty minutes’ worth of talking.

Paul is not quite that bad, but there is still a little way to go before the end of this little letter and the Greek word he uses here hints towards that. The word translated “Finally” here is “toι loipou”, which literally means “the remaining things” and it is plural, so you know there’s a bit more to come. And what is to come is in some ways the most important bit of the letter in terms of what Paul’s first readers needed to know after all that he has so far told them.

It’s been a few weeks since we last looked at this letter, so let’s very briefly re-cap what’s happened so far. This letter was written by Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome, to a group of churches which had been planted in the west of what is now Turkey. Paul’s friend and co-worker Tychicus has taken this letter and is reading it out to the new Christians who gathered each week in their little churches, beginning with the church in Ephesus, hence the name that we’ve given to this letter in our Bible. The Apostle begins by telling them about the amazing way in which God has been at work, fulfilling his will through the work of his Son Jesus, and putting the stamp of his Holy Spirit on the lives of those who had committed to following him.

The followers of Jesus in such churches were a ground-breakingly diverse lot – men and women, adults and children, masters and slaves, rich and poor, and, very importantly, Jewish people who now recognised Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah and Gentiles who realised that they were now included in God’s plan to renew and restore his broken and fragmented creation to what he originally intended.

Paul has come along to proclaim this astounding message, to make known this mystery, and he also insists that it needs to make a distinctive and positive difference in the lives of those who accept it, who want to follow Jesus and live as his disciples. That means that the old way of living has got to go – you cannot abuse God’s grace by continuing to do those things that are completely at odds with what God wants: everything from sexual immorality to greed. And he gives just three examples of how the lives of these new disciples should be lived out in particular situations – in marriage, family life and the
workplace. The whole lot underpinned by a willingness to “submit to one another”, to put others’ interest before your own.

That all seems pretty clear, on the whole. As people who have been drawn into the fellowship of Jesus’ followers, we are to live differently – according to God’s ways, not according to the shifting culture around us. But Paul draws this letter to its conclusion by warning his readers that it isn’t easy. Living as God wants us to in the context of a world that is fundamentally opposed to him is a struggle, a constant battle. Why on earth should that be? After all, Jesus, as we say again and again, has won the victory over evil on the cross. He is *Christus Victor*, Christ the Champion. Paul himself has written many times in his letters that Christ has conquered all things and we can share in that victory if we ally ourselves to him.

Well, let me suggest a way in which we can get a handle on this. (I’ve used this illustration before, so forgive me if you’re already familiar with it.) Erik, my son, used to play hockey for Lichfield. The side he played in were pretty good and regularly won competitions. One year, though, they were outstanding. They went an entire season without losing a game, and they won some games by pretty big margins. By the beginning of February it was clear that no-one could catch them – they’d amassed so many points and had such a huge goal difference that it was mathematically impossible for anyone to overtake them. They were champions. But they still had the rest of the season to play. Other teams would try even harder to beat them and would go in even harder to stop them. They still ran the risk of injury and other such things. It was still difficult trying to win week after week, but they knew that champions’ medals were waiting for them.

On the cross Jesus won the league: he became champion. But the season is not over until he comes back, and we still have to get involved with the remaining games, as it were. The forces of evil are still doing their best to get back at Jesus, still trying to do as much damage as possible in the limited time left, still working hard to damage as many of his team as they can. That’s what Paul is warning about here at the end of this letter. It is, he writes, “a struggle” (v12). In Greek, that’s the word that actually means “wrestle”, which is all about hand to hand, one on one combat. It brings home the idea that all those who want to follow Jesus are engaged in an individual tussle with evil. The heading to this section in one Bible commentary is “Into Battle”. Day by day we find ourselves grappling with things that we discover are trying to undermine our commitment to Jesus – illness, temptation, difficult decisions, strained relationships: all sorts of stuff that makes life difficult. We think that we ought to be immune from them because of our relationship with Jesus, but it’s that very relationship which is the cause of our problems. If we want to enjoy the winners’ banquet at the end of the season – that eternal feast in the Kingdom of God when Jesus finally returns – then we have to stick with the team, with Jesus and his followers.
And Paul tells us that this is not a battle with physical beings, a struggle to overcome other people or other concrete situations. This is a struggle with the very forces of evil themselves. It’s not against “flesh and blood”, but against all kinds of dark powers. The devil is at work in all manner of insidious and eternally dangerous ways. Paul mentions the “rulers”, the cosmic powers who are trying to exercise “authority” over us, trying to drive us down their paths of sin and wrongdoing which will spoil our relationship with Jesus. He talks of the “powers” – the “kosmocrator” in Greek – a word that was attached to the saviour gods of the pagan religions, that spoke of those who aspired to world control: almost like the evil villains in spy films and superhero comics, like some of the unhinged world leaders who appear on our news bulletins, even. And he speaks of the “spiritual forces of wickedness”, using the language of contemporary astrology in which most people in Paul’s day looked at the heavenly bodies as the homes of demons who held the fate of humans in their grasp.

Now that’s a pretty mean bunch of opponents. And for the people to whom Paul was writing, that was very much part of their worldview. They believed in this array of supernatural forces that were beyond the physical, that were invisible and untouchable themselves, but which exercised such a huge influence over their lives. We, of course, being far more sophisticated and educated, dismiss all that as superstition. We have been educated in that scientific, empirical, rational way that consigns all that kind of mumbo-jumbo to the dustbin of history and would say that our comparatively ignorant forbears were just too stupid to see the truth.

But if we take what God is saying here through Paul seriously, then we are the stupid ones for ignoring this whole realm of powers and influences which can have such a powerful effect on our lives as they thrash around trying to do as much damage as possible in the limited time they have left before Jesus returns and they are destroyed for ever. These forces are real. Please do not ignore them. I have seen them at work, sitting in the home of another local church leader as we tried to deal with a man whose superhuman strength and detailed spiritual knowledge were enormously frightening. Others of you may have encountered these forces at work in people or situations. Tom Wright – not by any measure a man whom you would call superstitious – writes in his commentary on these verses that every time he wanted to start writing about this things went wrong: his computer broke down, there were domestic emergencies, the power went off and so on. I remember a big outreach event we were doing once in London when, just as we were ready to start all the lights came crashing down. John Widdas, whom some of you may recall was the rector of St Chad’s, has written a book entitled Lightning from Heaven about his experiences here in Lichfield and then in Tamworth. Michael Green’s book, I Believe in Satan’s Downfall, examines these kinds of thing and concludes that, yes, the powers of evil are still very much at work.
The great C S Lewis, in the introduction to his book *The Screwtape Letters*, writes that there are two equally wrong ways to go over all this. Firstly, some people try and ascribe everything to the devil and all his works, which leads to two errors. It means many people then try to avoid responsibility for their own actions – as when we were kids and had kicked the heads off Mum’s daffodils playing football and tried to excuse ourselves by saying “The devil made me do it!”. And also that we see everything as having a spiritual cause. I’ve come across people trying to drive out the spirit of the common cold from someone, putting their obvious laziness down to a “spirit of laziness” and, sadly and more seriously, trying to exorcise someone whose problems were very clearly mental and needed proper medical help.

But the other wrong way to approach this, says Lewis, is to ignore the devil completely – which is what he wants. If you don’t accept that he and his forces exist, then you won’t be looking out for him, nor will you do anything to counteract him. As many of you will know, I’m not a great one for overplaying this particular spiritual side of things, but let me tell you, as Paul does here, this is a clear and present danger. We do need to be very aware of the ways in which these dark powers attempt to undermine what God is doing in our lives. And the more we are doing stuff for God, the more they try to oppose it. I think we have seen some of that here recently as God moves in power among us in worship and witness: so many of us have experienced all kinds of opposition, from serious health problems to fracturing relationships.

Now I’m not saying all this to scare or impress or shock, but just as Paul does in this letter, to warn you and alert you to this. As Peter says in his First Letter, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8,9). After all that Paul has written in this letter, now this is all that remains – “keep strong in the Lord and in his mighty power”. You have to withstand all this, to face it down. Keep reminding yourself that you are on the winning side, that the Champion’s medal and a seat at the eternal victory banquet are assured, even if you do encounter the odd defeat and sustain the odd injury.

This idea of “being strong”, of withstanding attack because of your identification with Jesus, is one which is pervasive in the Bible. From God’s word to Joshua as he led the people of Israel into a land of hostile tribes – “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9) – to Paul’s words to the Corinthians Christians – “Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13) – there is this theme which runs through Scripture. As Eugene Peterson puts it in The Message translation of these verses, “God is strong and wants you strong”, because “You’re up against more than you can handle on your own.” And that’s the great thing – God is there to help.
You see, God doesn’t leave us on our own, vulnerable and exposed. He brings us his help. He offers us his protection. Paul was under house arrest, constantly chained to a couple of Roman guards (whom he was, no doubt, trying to convert), but he could see their armour. And with that thought in mind, he comes up with this analogy to help and encourage his listeners and readers: “the full armour of God” as God’s way of helping us. This is what you need, he says: this will help you to stay strong and take your stand “against the devil’s schemes”. Now we’ll look at that in more detail next time, but if you were listening to the reading this morning, you may have been struck by the number of times Paul mentions prayer here. That is very much at the heart of our defence against these forces of evil, these dark powers. As I say, we’ll go into all this a bit more deeply next time, but as I start to finish (no “Finally” for me!), I just want to encourage you to pray, to keep communicating with God and asking for his help.

Pray for **deliverance** from the things in the **past** that still hold you. There may be things that the devil is using to spoil your relationship with Jesus and hold you back from serving him as he wants you to. It may be bitterness or regret or fear or even guilt. Pray that God will deal with that and free you from it.

Pray for **strength** in the **present** as you try to stand firm against the ways the devil tries to tempt you. There may be weaknesses that you are aware of – chinks in your armour, to extend the metaphor – things you do that, like Paul himself, you wish you didn’t; patterns of behaviour that are unhelpful and holding you back. Pray that God will remind you of his presence and strengthen your resolve.

Pray for **protection** in the **future** as you become aware of ways in which you may struggle with stuff that you see lurking on the horizon, be it health issues, family circumstances, situations at work or whatever. Pray that God will surround you and guide you.

And let’s pray for each other, too. That’s what Paul majors on at the end of this section – “be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints”. That is certainly a good first step towards making sure that you and all in this fellowship continue to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”
Paul draws this letter to its conclusion by warning his readers that it isn’t easy living as God wants us to in the context of a world that is fundamentally opposed to him: it is a struggle, a constant battle. Why on earth should that be? After all, Jesus has won the victory over evil on the cross. He is Christus Victor, Christ the Champion. Paul himself has written many times in his letters that Christ has conquered all things and we can share in that victory if we ally ourselves to him.

On the cross Jesus won the league. But the season is not over until he comes back, and we still have to get involved with the remaining games, as it were. The forces of evil are still doing their best to get back at Jesus, still trying to do as much damage as possible in the limited time left, and that’s what Paul is warning about here at the end of this letter. It is, he writes, “a struggle” (v12). Day by day we find ourselves grappling with things that we discover are trying to undermine our commitment to Jesus – illness, temptation, difficult decisions, strained relationships: all sorts of stuff that makes life difficult.

And Paul tells us that this is a struggle with the very forces of evil themselves. It’s not against “flesh and blood”, but against all kinds of dark powers. Paul mentions the “rulers”, the cosmic powers who are trying to exercise “authority” over us: the “powers” a word that was attached to the gods of the pagan religions: and the "spiritual forces of wickedness", using the language of contemporary astrology in which most people in Paul’s day looked at the heavenly bodies as the homes of demons who held the fate of humans in their grasp.

For the people to whom Paul was writing, that was very much part of their worldview. We, of course, being far more sophisticated and educated, would say that our comparatively ignorant forbears were just too stupid to see the truth. But if we take what God is saying here through Paul seriously, then we are the stupid ones for ignoring this whole realm of powers and influences which can have such a powerful effect on our lives as they thrash around trying to do as much damage as possible in the limited time they have left before Jesus returns and they are destroyed for ever. These forces are real.

Paul wants to warn us and alert us to this. (Look at 1 Peter 5:8,9). And we need to be strong, to withstand – look at Joshua 1:9 and 1 Corinthians 16:13. And God is there to help. We can take on "the full armour of God” as his way of helping us. And look at the number of times Paul mentions prayer here. That is very much at the heart of our defence against these forces of evil, these dark powers.

- Pray for deliverance from the things in the past that still hold you.
- Pray for strength in the present as you stand firm against the ways the devil tries to tempt you.
- Pray for protection in the future as you become aware of ways in which you may struggle.
- Pray for each other – “be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints”.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1) Do you find living for Jesus a struggle? Do you wonder why?

2) Belief in a devil, demons and forces of evil is considered rather backward today. Why do you think that is so?

3) Do you think such forces exist? Why/why not?

4) Have you ever encountered these forces? What was your reaction?

5) How can we be strong in this area?

6) Why is prayer so important? Why do you think it is often neglected in our Christian lives?