

Stand Firm Against the Powers - Part 1

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[0 : 00] Since last January, with a break in the summer, when we looked at the Psalms, helping us pray, we've been making our way through this life-transforming letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers of Jesus in the first century city of Ephesus.

And the title I have given for our series of studies is Navigating an Alternative Reading of Reality. Navigating an Alternative Reading of Reality. Every culture in every era of history, every people group around the world, every corporation, every institution, every family, every individual has a reading of reality.

N.T. Wright calls our readings of reality the lenses through which we look out 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 presuppositions about the makeup of the world and our lives within it.

[1 : 27] Our sets of glasses determine the degree to which we understand what is going on in the world around us, and they determine the degree to how well we function in all that is going on around us.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul, whose own reading of reality was radically transformed by an encounter with Jesus Christ, now develops this wonderfully expansive reading of reality centered in Jesus Christ and saturated with Jesus Christ.

An alternative reading. An alternative reading. A revolutionary alternative reading.

As we have experienced throughout our journey in Ephesians. Perhaps the most so recently in the weeks when we looked at the text where Paul is opening up the dynamics of the revolution that are being worked out in the relationship between husbands and wives and children and parents and slaves and masters.

But nowhere for me is this phrase, alternative reading of reality, more apropos than in the text before us today.

[2 : 49] Our struggle, says Paul. Our battle, says Paul. The word actually means our wrestling. It refers to up-close personal combat.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Other human beings. But our struggle is against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Our battle, our struggle, our wrestling to live in this alternative reality brought about and shaped by Jesus Christ is not a struggle or a battle or a wrestling with other human beings.

It does involve other human beings. But the struggle, the battle, the wrestling is finally not against other human beings.

Alternative reading. A very 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.

[4 : 21] Speaking before an audience of some 2,500 people who had gathered to talk about the conditions necessary for making 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 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 a distant object seen only dimly through the storms and turmoils of our present difficulties?

Well, the answer depends on what set of glasses you are using to read the world. Our struggle, says the apostle of the light of the world, our battle, says the apostle of the prince of peace, is not

against flesh and blood.

But it's against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Now, let me set this in context.

[5 : 48] Let me review where we have come from. We have come to see that the apostle Paul's letter is written in two halves. Chapters 1 to 3 and chapters 4 to 6.

Chapters 1 to 3, what we could call the what of the gospel. Chapters 4 to 6, what we could call the so what of the gospel.

Chapters 1 to 3, the good news. The massively good, good news. Chapters 4 to 6, the good advice in light of the good news.

Or chapters 1 to 3, reality as it is because of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension to the throne of the universe.

Chapters 4 to 6, the implications of living in this reality as it is because of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension to the throne of the universe.

[6 : 54] Therefore, chapters 4 to 6 are built around a series of therefore's. It begins at chapter 4, verse 1. Therefore, I exhort you to walk in a manner worthy, chapters 4 to 6, of the calling, chapters 1 to 3, to which you've been called.

4, verse 17, therefore. 4, verse 25, therefore. 5, verse 1, therefore. 5, verse 15, therefore.

And then 6, verse 10, finally. Finally. But not finally as in conclusion. It's not that Paul is saying, okay, we're getting to the end of the letter, I'm wrapping things up.

But the word that Paul uses is better rendered as henceforth. Or better yet, henceforward. Meaning, from now on.

Meaning, this is the way it is going to be for the rest of the journey. We are going to find ourselves in tension, in struggle, in a battle, the rest of our lives.

[8 : 04] Therefore, therefore, therefore, therefore, therefore. Finally, henceforth, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his mind. Be strong in the Lord.

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 in himself for this battle. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

As Martin Luther had us sing, Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing. As just about every one of us can testify to.

And as many people throughout the world today are discovering. Be strong in the Lord. Literally, it is. Grow in the strength of the Lord.

[9 : 07] You're going to need strength for this battle. Grow in the strength of the Lord. How? Put on the full armor of God, says Paul. So that, says Paul, You will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

A different kind of armor. Because we are engaged in a very different kind of battle.

Alternative reading. Now, I think we realize how important this other armor is. This armor of God is. When we begin to understand the opposition.

Or the host of opponents, as is the case. So, today, let us simply focus on one verse of this text.

Verse 12. Ephesians 6, 12.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood. But against the rulers. Against the powers. Against the world forces of this darkness.

[10 : 12] Against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Now, to what is Paul referring? He has already used this language earlier in his letter.

He used it in chapter 1 in the first prayer that he prays for us. He prays that we might know the power that God exercised. When God raised Christ from the dead.

And seated Christ at his right hand on the throne of the universe. In the heavenly places. Far above all rule, authority, and dominion. He uses this language in chapter 3.

When he speaks of one of the roles the church has in the world. Chapter 3, verse 10. In order that the manifold wisdom of God may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Now, what does Paul mean by this language? The church has struggled with this for thousands of years. Some argue that what Paul is referring to is visible, material, essentially human powers and forces.

[11:27] Visible, material, essentially human powers and forces. Some argue that Paul is referring to human structures which somehow govern the world.

Structures like traditions, cultural traditions, the state, courts, laws and regulations, corporate alliances, political parties, banking policies, and even religion.

All of this can become very oppressive. All of this can slowly begin to work against God's purposes in the world, as we know.

And it can all feel very overwhelming. Others argue that what Paul is referring to is invisible, non-material, but still essentially human powers and forces.

They argue that what Paul is referring to is the fact that human structures can begin to take on a life of their own.

[12:43] As we know, any grouping of human beings can slowly develop a spirit, an ethos, a power, a force, a corporate identity, which is more than the sum of its parts.

It's more than any individual's spirit or ethos. And it's more than the bond between individuals. That spirit or force can then influence convictions and behaviors.

Causing people to believe things while they're with the group that they would never believe outside of the group. Causing people to act in ways that they would never act.

Act in ways with the group that they would never act with if they were not in the group. IBM takes on a life of its own. And everybody who works for IBM starts to live that life.

Apple Computer takes on a life of its own. And that life goes on, even after Stephen Jobs leaves.

City Hall takes on a life of its own.

[13:50] And it seldom changes, no matter who's elected. It's taken on a life of its own. Being conservative takes on a life of its own. Being liberal takes on a life of its own.

Being NDP takes on a life of its own. Churches take on a life of their own. I've served five churches.

And I've 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 it is 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 those devised by humans. It seems Paul is referring to a spirit other than any human spirit or the combination of human spirits.

[14:57] Note in the text that Paul 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 these powers as spiritual.

Verse 12. The spiritual forces of wickedness.

Which or whom 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 and with the human. The powers influence the human spirit and collective human spirit.

But the powers are other than the human and the humanly generated. The powers work on the earth. But they are not earthly.

[16:02] Rulers. Powers. Forces. In the heavenly places. We meet that phrase elsewhere in the letter to the Ephesians. Chapter 1 verse 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. 2.

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.

Seems to be another dimension of reality. Very close at hand. Another dimension of reality. That intersects with the dimensions. We can see and hear.

[17:00] And touch. And smell. A dimension of reality. Where Christ is. And. Where we. Somehow.

Are with Christ. Christ. And. Where the opponents. Of Christ. Are. And from where they operate. Alternative.

Reading. Like. Big time. As I've said in other contexts. And you'll hear me say. Years to come. As I said in other contexts.

Most of us. Especially most of us. Under the influence. Of the so-called enlightenment. Live with. And from. And out of. A two-dimensional.

Reading of reality. For most. Of the people. Of our city. Life can be reduced. To two dimensions. The human self. And the physical environment.

[17:57] Everything that happens. Can. Supposedly. Be traced to. And explained by. These two dimensions. It's a powerful reading of reality.

A reading of reality. To which we. Who believe there is more. Regularly. Succumb. But the biblical. Reading of reality.

Is at least. Four-dimensional. The human person. Who is more glorious. Than any two-dimensional reading.

Realizes. The physical environment. Which is also. More glorious. Than any two-dimensional.

Reading of reality. Realizes. The living God.

Who is more glorious. Than any of us. Will ever realize. And. These heavenly places. Where the non-material. Superhuman.

[18:51] Powers and forces. Exist. Influencing. The material. And human. More than we realize. Paul calls them. Rulers.

Powers. World forces. Cosmocratas. Cosmocratas. Spiritual beings. Created. Mark that. Please mark that.

Whatever. These powers. Rulers. And forces are. They are created. By God. For God's purposes. Some obey. Some do not. Created.

Not eternal. Thank God. God. And not God's equal. Mark that too. Although some of them. Rebel. And assert their power.

Against God's. And his purposes. In the world. They are not. God's equal. They are powerful. And dark. And dirty. And wicked. As Paul says. In the text. But they are not. God's equal.

[19:47] 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 day of evil. What is Paul.

Wanting us to know. What is this language. Principalities. And powers. All about. As you see. I'm. I'm trying to struggle.

To say. To understand and say. So. Let's step back. For a moment. And let's go down. To the basics. Let's start at the basics. And build back up. And here.

We get help. From C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis. Lewis. Was often asked. If he believed. In the devil. And in the rulers. And the powers. At work.

And 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's no.

[20:44] Uncreated being. Except God. God has no opposite. The proper question. Is whether I believe. In devils. And I do. It. That is to say.

I believe in angels. Whom the uncreated. God created. And I believe. That some of these angels. By the abuse of their free will. Have become enemies to God. Then he writes this.

Satan. The leader. Or dictator. Of the devils. Is the opposite. Not of God. But of Michael. Angels.

Satan. An angel. Fallen angel. Is the opposite. Is the opposite. Of Michael. An angel. He's not the opposite. Of God. Angels.

Created by God. To work. With God. Now. We meet this reading. Of reality. Throughout the Bible. It's not just here. In this text. We read of a number.

[21:40] Of places. Where God. Holds this. Heavenly. Assembly. Where God. Interacts them. With these. Angels. Sometimes.

They're called gods. Sometimes. They're called. Sons of God. Sometimes. The host of heaven. Or the heavenly host. One of the names. The living God. Has. Is. Yahweh. Sabaoth.

Yahweh. Of the hosts. Lord. Of the host. Lord. Sabaoth. His name. The prophet. Zachariah. Who lives. In this.

Reading. Of reality. Uses. That name. For God. A lot. We read. Of the prophet. Micaiah. Saying. In 1 Kings. 22. 19.

I saw. The Lord. On his throne. And all. The host. Of heaven. Standing. By him. On his right. And on his left. The book. Of Job. Opens.

[22:35] 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 King Uzziah. Died. Isaiah. 6. 1. I saw the Lord. Sitting on the throne. And seraphim. Stood above him. Some kind. Of exalted. Power. Creature. At one point.

In the worship service. The Lord. Asked. Whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Isaiah says. Here I am. Send me. Now. That's a bold thing.

Because. The Lord's question. Was not addressed to Isaiah. It was not addressed to any human being. It was addressed to the heavenly host. Who will go for us? Isaiah 6.

8. Us. This heavenly court. And then there's. Psalm 82. It's tucked right in the middle of the book. [23 : 30] Right in the middle of the prayer book. And. It seems to me. It opens up this alternative understanding. Of the universe. The psalmist. Asaph. This time. Tells of God. Taking his stand.

In the congregation of God. And then. Tells of God. Then judging. In the midst of the rulers. Literally. In the midst. Of the gods.

God. Takes his place. In the congregation of God. And begins to judge. In the midst of the gods. Are there other gods. Beside Yahweh? No. The psalmist.

Is referring. To these angelic. Spiritual powers. And forces. Around Yahweh. Then God. Speaks to the powers. And the forces. Verse 2. 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's the role.

[24 : 25] God created. The principalities. And powers. To do in the world. Then the psalmist. Laments. That the rulers. The gods. Have not done.

This job assigned to them. And as a result. Verse 5. All the foundations. Of the earth. Are shaken. The foundations. The foundations. Of the earth. Are shaken. When the heavenly host. Do not do justice.

The foundations. Of the earth. Are shaken. Now we see this alternative. Reading. Being lived out. In the 5th century.

Before the birth of Christ. In the experience. Of the prophet. Daniel. In Daniel 9 and 10. Daniel says. That during the third year.

Of the reign of Cyrus. King of Persia. Human king of Persia. A message. Was revealed to him. Daniel said. He had been praying. And fasting. For 21 days.

[25 : 20] When this experience. Happened. And the messenger. Who turns out. To be an angel. Tells Daniel. That God had been aware. Of his praying. For all 21 days. But the angel.

Could only now come. Because. Verse 13. Of chapter 10. The prince. Of the kingdom of Persia. Was withstanding me. For 21 days.

The heavenly messenger. Goes on. Then behold. Michael. One of the chief princes. Came to help me. For I have been left there. With the kings of Persia. The kings of Persia.

Are clearly. Human leaders. The prince of Persia. Appears to not. To be a non-human leader. Just as Michael. The chief of the princes.

Is a non-human being. Then the heavenly messenger. Says. It's time for him to leave. Saying to Daniel. Daniel 10 20. I shall return. To fight against.

[26 : 17] The prince of Persia. For I'm going forth. And behold. The prince of Greece. Is about to come to me. Prince. It's this word prince. That leads to the language. Of principalities. And powers. There's more to the movement.

Of nations. More to the movement. Of corporations. And institutions. Than we realize. History is not just. About what humans. And human institutions do.

It's about what the living God does. And it's about. What these princes. These rulers. These powers. Do. On the earth. Alternative.

Reading. Like big time. God has created. Angelic. Spiritual powers. And forces. To be part. Of his work.

In the world. Some of these powers. Cooperate. Some do not. Some do not. Accept their place. Before God. And so they seek. To subvert. God's purposes. Some do not like God.

[27 : 13] That's putting it mildly. Some hate the living God. And therefore. Hate. Jesus Christ. I cannot. Get myself. Into a place. Where I can understand. How anything. In the universe.

Would hate. The savior. Of the world. But they do. The principalities. And powers. Hate. Jesus Christ. Because they know. That Jesus Christ. Has come to defeat.

The powers. That rebel. Against God. Which he did. In his cross. And through the empty tomb. And they therefore. Hate him. They will not surrender. To the very truth.

They know. I think Paul would say. The powers. Know. The gospel. They know. Jesus is Lord. It's just that they won't surrender. So. They do everything. They can. To blind human beings. To the truth of Jesus. They do everything. They can. To hinder the progress. Of the gospel. They do everything. They can. To lead. Those whom Jesus has rescued. Back into slavery of sin. They do everything.

[28 : 06] They can. To divide. Jesus. Follow. To divide. Jesus followers. To discourage. And to destroy. The church. They do everything. They can. To ruin. What Jesus redeems. Jesus. Which is why.

Although. We who follow. Jesus Christ. Get caught up in this battle. We ourselves. Are not the point of the battle. Canadian psychiatrist.

John White. Put it best in his little book. The fight. Satan's supreme object. Is to hurt Christ. And Christ's cause. You personally. Are of no interest to him. It's 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 seducing you. Further into his terrain. But this was not because.

Of your personal importance. He only uses you. To get back at God. So don't take all of this. Personally. But do take it seriously.

[29 : 07] Once more. Our struggle. Says Paul. Is not against. Flesh and blood. If it were against. Flesh and blood. We could stand. On our own. And we could fight. With human.

And earthly means. But our fight. As J.B. Phillips. Renders Paul. Is against organizations. And powers. That are spiritual. We're up against. The unseen powers. That control this dark world. And this fight. Requires. A very different posture. Church historian. Richard Lovelace. Sadly. Points out.

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. We ain't the enemy.

[30 : 03] We ain't the enemy. No human beings. When we first met this reading of reality. And Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I turned for help to Walter Wink. Who has fought and written about this a lot. I don't agree with everything Walter Wink developed. But I do agree with this little formula.

Little equation he's given us. P equals O plus I. P equals O plus I. Remember this simple formula.

He says. And you can avoid the confusion of the centuries. About the principalities and the powers. The powers P. Are not spiritual spoofs. Inhabiting the air. And leaping on us.

Unwary. Unwary. That's an earlier way of putting it. That's a Halloween movie. Putting. Way of putting it. Nor are they merely institutions. Political or economic systems.

[30 : 59] Ideologies or social structures. That is a modern way of coming at it. Neither is adequate. Though both contain some truth. The powers it consists. It turns out.

Consist of an outer manifestation. O. And an inner spirituality. I. O. King. Of Persia. I.

Prince. Of Persia. O. King. Of Libya. I. Prince. Of Libya. You can take Gaddafi down. But you've got another problem to deal with.

That God. Gaddafi. Wink continues. And the inner aspect. As the inner aspect of material reality. The spiritual forces are everywhere around us.

Their presence is real and inescapable. The issue is not whether we believe in them. But whether we learn to identify our actual everyday encounters with them. What Paul calls discerning the spirits. The powers.

[31 : 56] 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. And then he writes this line. To us who live 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 incapacity. To recognize the spirituality of institutions.

Has left us tinkering with the parts. While ignoring the essence. P equals O plus I. This means. Says 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.

[32 : 54] Thus. Paul's. Finally. Henceforth. Henceforward. Our struggle. Is not against flesh and blood. Humans are not our enemy. Our struggle. Is against the superhuman forces.

And we struggle. With that enemy. Using very different weapons. Placards. And bullhorns. Rocks. And fists. Handguns. And assault rifles. Have no. Lasting. Effect. Against. The real enemy. What finally affects the real opposition. Is buckling truth. Around our guts. And wearing righteousness. And justice. On our chest.

And putting on shoes. That are made of peace. And holding up this. The shield. Of faith. And putting on our heads. Salvation.

[33 : 52] And speaking the word of God. And praying. At all times. In spirit. Which we will unpack. The next time. We look at this test. On the mornings.

When it does not rain. I like to walk. To the office. I like to come. Into the downtown core. Walking across. The Canby Bridge. I.

I. I. I. I never. Tire. Seeing. Seeing. This guy. The Canby. Van Poole. Now. If you come. Into the downtown core. Along that route. You know.

That just past. The BC place. There is a building. With the words. Vision. Critical. On it. Many of you. Seen that. Just one word. Vision.

Critical. It's the name. Of a company. Which on its website. Says. We. See the world. Differently. Vision.

[34 : 49] Critical. As I walked. Across that bridge. Last Tuesday morning. And saw the sign again. I said to myself. Yes. When I walked.

Across the bridge. On Friday morning. I said. Yes. Out loud. If we are going. To understand. The city. And if we are going.

To navigate. Life in the city. Rightly. Vision. Vision. Is critical. It's critical. That we have. An accurate. Vision. Of what is going on.

It's critical. That we see. The true nature. Of the struggle. For the well-being. Of the city. And it's critical. That we realize. Who wins.

The battle. Did we. In our own. Strength. Confide. Our striving. Would be losing. Sings. Luther. But he goes on. We're not. The right man.

[35 : 44] On our side. The man. Of God's own choosing. Dost ask. Who that may be. Christ Jesus. It is he. Lord. Sabaoth. The Lord.

Of the hosts. Is his name. And he. Must. Win the battle. And he has. The future.

Well-being. Of the city. Is not. Up for grass. He's strong. He's strong. In the Lord. Take up. And put on. The farmer. Of God. The farmer. The