Our Enemy (Ephesians 6:12)
Ephesians [Red Button Series] (Colin Hughes)
Sunday Evening 12 July 2009

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Ephesians 6:12

Preparing for this sermon has been extremely challenging. At times it has felt as if I have been crawling reluctantly towards the edge of a great, bottomless dark pit, which has threatened to swallow me up. It is certainly not a journey I would choose to repeat any time soon. So it is my prayer this evening that the journey has not been in vain and I am able to convey some of the wisdom which God in His Grace has deemed to shine on me.

Of course, this difficulty is to be expected. In the same way that the government of a world super-power would go to any lengths to stop an "outsider" from discovering any of their secrets and revealing them to the rest of the world, demonic forces will guard any truth that might threaten to undermine the stronghold they have, especially over Christian minds.

In the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis 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 (that is, the devils) are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist (someone who denies the existence of anything beyond the real, physical, material world) or magician (someone who attempts to harness spiritual powers for their own end) with the same delight."

This is as much a remarkable insight as it is a stark and terrifying warning. Like so much of our Christian walk we are always to obtain balance and avoid slipping from the pathway into the perils on either side. On one side is the danger of underestimating the power, or even the existence, of the dark forces at work in this world. On the other side is the danger of recognising the existence of supernatural powers, but naively thinking that we can somehow tap into them. We delude ourselves into believing that as long as we don't explicitly call on the name of some demonic being then there can be no harm in dabbling with the forces of the spiritual domain: using clairvoyants, tarot, astrology, and even allowing superstitious beliefs to affect our lives. This includes the terrible error that well meaning Christians make in assigning far greater freedom of power to the dark forces than they actually possess.

As you might imagine *The Screwtape Letters* attracted much attention and criticism at the time it was written. Perhaps most surprising, though, was the response from supposed Christians. The most common question that C. S. Lewis received was whether or not a man of his remarkable intellect could possibly believe in the Devil.

He responded, "Now, if by 'the Devil' you mean a power opposite 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, No being could attain a 'perfect badness' opposite to the perfect goodness of God; for when you have taken away every kind of good thing (intelligence, will, memory, energy, and existence itself), there would be none of him left.

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 and, as a corollary, to us. These we may call devils. They do not differ in nature from good

angels, but their nature is depraved. Devil is the opposite of angel only as Bad Man is the opposite of Good Man. Satan, the leader or dictator of devils, is the opposite, not of God, but of Michael."

This is a very important point. Satan would like nothing more than for us to think of him as some kind of nemesis of God: an equal and opposite force. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Although Satan may be the most powerful of all the devils, or fallen angels, he is still only a created being with no more power than God would allow.

Many of us mistakenly attribute more power to Satan than he deserves. We often talk about being tempted by the Devil. Satan is not omnipotent (all powerful), neither is he omniscient (all knowing), and he certainly is not omnipresent (in all places at once). Of the billions of people on this planet right now Satan can only ever be in one place and with one person at any one time. The chances of any of us in our life-time ever receiving a special visit from him is highly unlikely. Apart from anything else his arrogance and pride would not allow him to stoop to such simple people of faith as us. He reserves his visits for those that he considers the greatest threat in bringing God's Kingdom here on earth.

But make no mistake. Satan and the demonic forces are very real and every Christian is under threat from these forces. In the twenty-second chapter of Luke's gospel, just after the account of the Last Supper, we read Jesus warning Peter that before the rooster crows Peter would deny knowing Him three times. Only moments before this warning Jesus spoke these words to Peter: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32). Unlike us, Peter was destined to be a big player in the birth of the New Testament Church. So Jesus was saying to Peter that an attack from Satan himself was not only inevitable, but that it would be powerful and effective. Jesus' words to Peter should remind us of our utter dependence on God. When Jesus said, "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat," He was indicating that Satan had sought permission to challenge Peter. This is an essential truth to hold on to: Every demonic attack is under the authority of God and no evil being can act without God ordaining it. But never forget that Satan knows human nature better we know ourselves. Just like he did with Job, Satan was mocking the depth of Peter's faith. In making his request to God he was suggesting that as useless chaff is separated from the good wheat, so too would he be able to expose Peter as the useless disciple he was.

Satan, or Lucifer as he was called, was one of the most beautiful angels in Heaven. However, his own foolish pride led him to believe that he could operate entirely in his own strength and apart from God. It was this act of cosmic treason and rebellion that resulted in his expulsion from Heaven. God spoke the following words through the prophet Ezekiel: "You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." (Ezekiel 28:12) And a little later God declares, "Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings." (Ezekiel 28:17) In the book of Revelation, John receives a vision of a great battle in Heaven between Michael and an enormous red dragon. We read in the twelfth chapter of Revelation, "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him." (Revelation 12:9) And since then Satan and the devils that fell with him – one third of the angels in heaven – have continued to lure mankind into the same folly of pride and rebellion, not that we need much encouragement. For how often do we hear the cry, "I don't need God in my life; I can get along just fine by myself!" Listen to the words Satan whispered to Eve in the Garden of Eden: "For God knows that when you eat of *the fruit* your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." (Genesis 3:5a) There is no doubt that Satan is so powerful that he would have been able to serve a fatal blow to Peter's faith, but Jesus went on to say to Peter, "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."

What wonderful news! Not only does Jesus first rescue us from darkness, but He promises to preserve us. Even in our darkest hour we can have confidence that Jesus is interceding for us. Although we might often feel that we can plunge no lower, we can be sure that we will experience no more torment than God will allow. We might be experiencing some degree of spiritual darkness this evening, or even a sense of separation from God, and the demonic forces will do everything to reinforce that sense of hopelessness. They will feed our minds with lies, such as, "Ah, but that was Peter. You're a nobody. Why should God rescue you?"

I have really good news for you. I would like us to prayerfully meditate on the words written by Saint Paul to the Church in Rome.

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:28-39

Everything we have heard recently in our study of Ephesians has reinforced an incredible truth: For those that God has chosen He also loves, and nothing can separate us from that love of God. Shortly after His resurrection, Jesus found Peter and asked him, "Do you truly love me?" (cf. John 21:15-19) The most important command that Jesus gave to us is to, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30) The essential mark of having received saving faith is that our hearts and minds are changed. We move from a state of hating God to loving Him. So it is no coincidence that all the wonderful promises we just heard in that passage from Romans begin with, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

We should never lose sight of the fact that outside of the safe harbour of God's love we risk being tossed and turned by the devastating waves of demonic forces. Apart from God we would be sifted like chaff. This is why Paul exhorts us to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power," (Ephesians 6:10) and this is why it is essential that we are properly prepared. For attacks from the spiritual domain are not only unavoidable, but there are no guarantees that they may not also result in physical suffering. As humans choose to fulfil their own evil desires they can serve as instruments of suffering. Yet despite the assaults we likely face we can be sure that if we are properly prepared then no blow the enemy lands can penetrate the shield which is our faith; and forget not also that even faith is not of our own doing, but it is a gift from God. We might never know fully why God allows us to be attacked in this way, but we do know with confidence that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) Peter experienced a truly

devastating attack from Satan and he was left feeling almost beyond consolation after his denial of Jesus. But God knew exactly what He was doing when He permitted Satan to attack Peter. God had chosen Peter before all time to be a key player in the formation of the early Church, and He knew that for such a role there was no room for arrogance and self-dependence. Listen to the words of Peter after Christ warned him that he would be sifted like wheat: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Peter still believed in his own strength. So we can be sure that some useless chaff was sifted from the life of Peter. God used Satan's attack for a greater good: to refine Peter's faith. Peter had a hard lesson to learn, in which he would discover more of where his true dependence should always lie.

Listen carefully to the words that Peter writes many years later in his first letter: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. 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 your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings." (1 Peter 5:5b-9) It is so easy to ignore the surrounding verses and focus on Peter's warning about a 'prowling lion'. Peter's warning here is not so much about the danger of the devil as it is about our own pride and its destructive effect on our faith. He quotes from Proverbs when he says that God opposes the proud (cf. Proverbs 3:34). Peter had learned first hand the danger of putting confidence in himself and this is a lesson for us that is far better to be learned from the wisdom of scripture rather than through a hard lesson in life.

I would like to finish this evening with the passage from which our opening verse came. Once again I ask that we might prayerfully meditate on each part and allow it to become both a source of great encouragement to us and a part of our regular prayers. Note carefully how everything we are encouraged to use to stand firm is not of ourselves but a gift from God. However, there is a part for us to play which is found in the conclusion of this passage. By being equipped to stand firm with a proper sense of humility we are able to offer our prayers with a confidence that they will be answered, for they will be truly rooted in a love for God and in bringing glory to His name.

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Ephesians 6:10-18

Amen.