

If you've been here over the previous few weeks, you might remember that we've been following the lectionary through the readings taken from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. And our little series on Ephesians concludes today as we get to the sixth and final chapter. And there's one word in our reading which I think stands out. You might have noticed it popped out for me because it comes three times, the word stand. Three times St. Paul encourages his readers to stand. He says, "We're to stand against the wiles of the devil." And then he goes on to say, "After you've put on the armor of God, stand firm." And then the next sentence begins, "Stand therefore." So he's laboring the point here. He wants us to stand, but what does that mean? Well, that's what I hope to explain in the course of this sermon.

And it's been pointed out that the message of this Book of Ephesians can be summed up in three words. And one of them is this word stand. And I want to tell you about the other two because I think that will help us understand what's going on in this final chapter. So, the first word of this threefold scheme to understand Ephesians is the word sit. In chapter two, Paul says this, "God who is rich in mercy, out of His great love for us, saved us by grace and seated us with Christ Jesus." In the early chapters of the Book of Ephesians, Paul is concerned to explain to his readers how we are put right with God. "Grace," he says, "is how we are saved." We are saved by grace. So, he says this, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God and not the result of your own works." Which is why the Christian life begins as we cease striving and rest and open ourselves up to receive God's grace. His salvation comes to us as gift. And sitting is a position of rest, we're to enjoy fellowship with God, not by rushing around so much and doing good works but resting and being open to receive from Him. So, the call on us isn't to strive to earn God's favor, it's rather to sit in His presence. God in Christ has done all that is necessary for our salvation. In Him, all strivings cease. We are to sit, not strive.

The second keyword is walk. Now I'm aware that this makes the Book of Ephesians sound like a dog training manual. So, bear with me. I still think it's helpful. Ephesians begins with Paul's setting out his theology. Then in the middle of the book around chapter four, which we were looking at a couple of weeks ago, he gets more practical, and he tells his readers how they should live. So, chapter four begins thus, "I beseech you, walk worthy of your vocation." The key thing to notice here is that Paul is encouraging his readers to walk God's way after they've come to sit in His presence, after they've rested and enjoy God's favor. It's important to note that it's not the other way around. We don't aim to walk God's ways and live a certain godly life to earn His favor. No, we walk His ways in response to receiving His grace and love and mercy, which he has shown us in Christ Jesus. So, we sit, we walk, and then we stand. We are called to stand against the wiles of the devil. Paul says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

That's quite a comprehensive list of enemies. I think he covers all the bases there. St. Paul is clear that there is a spiritual force of evil in the world, which as his list makes clear, can take many forms. And the church over the years has had to strive to avoid the extremes of either becoming obsessed in an unhealthy way with the power of evil or going the other way entirely and ignoring it. There must be a sensible middle way. And personally, I have no problem believing just as I believe in a spiritual force for good of a divine love in the world, so evil too, I think, has a spiritual source beyond the material world. In Britain, we're mercifully spared of mass shootings, which are all too common over here. But there was a very famous shooting in a place called Dunblane in Scotland in the late '90s when a gunman walked into a school and just killed 16 kindergarten children. And the headmaster, Mr. Ron Taylor when he was talking on the news afterwards just said this. He said, "Evil visited us yesterday and we don't know why. We don't understand it and we never will." And I think he

was right to label what happened in that context as evil, evil visiting us.

But before I say anymore, I should point out that evil will never win. The forces of evil have been defeated. They'll never have the last word because on the cross we can be assured that Jesus won a victory over the forces of evil and even death. Paul says in Colossians, "Jesus triumphed over the forces of evil on the cross. And by rising to new life, he overcame death, which is the forces of evil's strongest weapon, but Jesus won that victory even over death." And we as Christians share in that victory. We don't need so much to fight to obtain that victory, we simply need to hold it to stand against all the challenges that we face. Our task is one of holding, not attacking. Paul says that in Christ we are more than conquerors. In Him, we stand. We don't fight for victory, we fight from victory, His victory.

Now this is an important point. Those of us who have sat in Christ's presence, who've walked His ways, can stand against the evil one. Evil has no hold over us. In Christ, we are more than conquerors, and His power is greater than any other power, even the power of death. Because Jesus has won the victory. Paul says we're called to stand against the enemy. Not fight, stand. We're to adopt a defensive position because our enemy is already defeated. It's the same kind of standing as we might encourage our children if there's a bully in the class. We say, well, stand up to them. We don't say, go and pick a fight with them. We say, look, if they bother you, just stand firm. Stand up to them. Don't go looking for trouble. Don't seek it out but stand against it.

And this Paul's saying is how we handle the evil one. We're called to stand our ground. There's a difference between the warfare waged by Jesus and the warfare waged by us. His was offensive, ours is essentially defensive. That's why the armor that's described in this chapter is almost entirely defensive. Paul's describing the Christian army here, not their weaponry. So, I won't go into detail about the armor, but I do want to point out one thing that the first thing that Paul refers to in

reference to the armor that we are to put on is the belt of truth. The old versions of the Bible said that we are to gird our loins with the truth. And a girdle is what the Roman soldier that Paul's, the image he's conjuring up here, they put that girdle on first because every other part of the armor is in some way connected to or hangs off the girdle. It's what holds everything in place. "It's a girdle of truth for us," Paul says. It reminds us that this gospel message that we celebrate each week in church, the gospel message of Jesus is true. It's what we can hang everything else off. It is a starting point from which we can understand ourselves and the rest of the world. We have that strong belt of truth which holds everything together. It's a fixed point from which we can begin to understand our crazy world.

So, three words that sum up the five or six sermons that we've had on the Book of Ephesians. Three words, sit, walk, stand. And together they sum up the whole of Paul's teaching in this Book of Ephesians. And I think in many ways they sum up much of what's important about the Christian life. Amen.