

I Kings 8: (1, 6, 10-11), 22-30, 41-43

Psalm 84

Ephesians 6: 10-20

St. John 6: 56-69

Pentecost 14 2024.

“Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”
Ephesians 6: 11

Sometimes we need to get rid of obstacles, in order to move forward. Sometimes we need to get rid of obstacles, in order to move forward...

An obvious example of this is sin... Sin can become addictive quality; it can impede our spiritual progress, even when we are people of faith. If we struggle with envy and resentment against people who seem to have it better than we do, we will not carry God’s peace... If we make money our god, our idol, then we never have enough; we are never satisfied... We need to recognize the sin we carry and repent, if we want to grow beautifully for God...

There can be theological obstacles in our Christian walks too. For example, if we were taught when we were young that God’s nature is to hate people who are different from us, then we are more likely to be suspicious of different religions (or different expressions of Christianity than ourselves). A devout Baptist might doubt that a devout Roman Catholic will be in heaven. An Orthodox believer might doubt if heaven can accommodate Pentecostals, and so forth... In contrast, let’s recall Ephesians 2: 14:

Christ can “reconcile both groups [Jews and non-Jews] to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

God is the perfect judge. It’s not our place to say who cannot belong within God’s embrace through Jesus Christ...

There has been a lot of soul-searching recently among Canadian Anglicans about residential schools... If the only lens through which indigenous children experienced the Church is the mistreatment they received in residential schools, no wonder some say, “If this is the gospel, I want no part of it!...” We at St. Brice’s want to say, “There are other experiences of the Church in action which far better show the gentle love of Jesus.” But there is much pain to be healed; there is repentance which needs to be offered; there is the beauty of Jesus Christ which needs to be shared...

So we see that there are sometimes *misconceptions* about God, about the Son of God Jesus Christ, or about God’s people, which we need to *get rid of*, in order to walk more deeply with the Lord Jesus...

Let's look at 2 more examples where there can be confusion which we ought to correct. Christians often address God as "our heavenly Father," and rightfully so. In prayer, Jesus Christ himself addressed his *Abba*, his dear heavenly Father, this way. By being brought into fellowship with God through Jesus, it is appropriate that we can address God as our heavenly Father...

Yet, some of us have had painful relationships with our biological fathers. This can make it difficult to call God "our heavenly Father," because it might remind us of childhood experiences in which our own fathers fell far short!... This is important: God is not a projection of our earthly fathers, like a big man in the sky. Instead, people – both men and women – are dim reflections of Love himself, Almighty God... If we happen to have had painful experiences with our earthly fathers, we might have to keep in mind especially that God is not a projection from humanity. We are made *by God*, in the image of God...

The last example is Satan – who also goes by names like Lucifer, the Adversary, the devil, the serpent, and so on... There have been many silly misconceptions of the devil in popular culture – that he sits on our shoulder, that we don't have free will, that he wears a red suit, and so forth. Nonsense!... No wonder that some people either deny the existence of evil, or become enthralled with it. They have in mind a cartoon character! This too is a theological misconception that we need to get rid of, in order to grow in the Christian life...

Here is a short video, which illustrates the misconceptions that some people have about our heavenly Father, or about the devil... [2:30-3:07]

So, let's get rid of theological *misconceptions* about the nature of evil. Instead, let's see what scripture actually reads, as well as Church history, Church tradition. We see that our primary focus ought to be on God through the Lord Jesus, but we also need to be matter-of-fact and wise about the reality of evil, and how to resist it...

Let's briefly consider passages in the Bible which describe the work of the devil. First, let's consider Luke 4, when Jesus himself is tempted... The context is that Jesus was recently baptized by John, but he is lonely and hungry. Verses 2-3: "For forty days [Jesus] was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'" (Presumably, Jesus told his disciples what happened later.) So, Jesus Christ himself believed in the reality of spiritual evil, and experienced temptation by the devil. Notice that the devil tries to sow doubt, "*If you are the Son of God...*"

Now let's go back to the beginning of the Bible. Adam and Eve represent all humanity. We remember there is one tree they were supposed to leave alone. Genesis 3: 1: "Now the

serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' " Here is doubt being planted again: "Did God *really* say...?" asks the serpent... Verses 2-3 continue,

The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' ' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die'

The serpent suggests, "It doesn't really matter if we give in to temptation." There are no consequences! The serpent tells them. Adam and Eve won't die!... But in fact there are terrible consequences for Adam and Eve's disobedience, and God banishes them from the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and gave into temptation, they experienced shame, and their deep fellowship with God was broken. That's what sin does to us...

Now let's skip briefly to the New Testament. First Peter 5: 8-9: "Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith."

The metaphor, the picture, is that the Adversary seeks to destroy what is good. But Peter is telling the Church that we can resist temptation, with God's help. God won't tell us to do what we can't do! We can overcome the inclination to disobey. "Greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world..."

Lastly, let's consider today's second reading, from Ephesians 6. Paul writes, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil..." We can, and ought to, stand firm...

Other *people* are not our enemies. We resist evil, devilish works, however they show themselves. Verse 11: "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but [our struggle is] against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Other people are not our enemies. It's when people do evil things that we oppose their behaviour...

Then Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier, dressed for battle. We are called to stand firm in the faith:

Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench 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.

There is a kind of battle going on, not primarily with guns and weapons, but spiritual evil which tries to undermine the good. God always triumphs. That's the story of the resurrection. But evil is a reality which we need to resist. Once again, First John 4: 4: "Little children, you are from God, and have conquered [the forces of evil]; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world..."

Let's remember, when we are Christians, the Spirit of Christ Jesus dwells within us. We carry the Holy Spirit. (Not every Christian is *full* of the Holy Spirit, but the presence of the Holy Spirit is within each of us.) With God's help, we have the capacity to recognize temptation of any kind, and to overcome it. "Wait! Don't speak rashly;" "Come on; do the right thing;" "Be gone, greedy thought! Dear Lord Jesus, help me to be a little more loving right now. The price was paid on Good Friday..." If we struggle with a habitual sin, we sometimes think that we are weak, and the sin is huge. That's theologically backwards: We are strong in Christ, and the sin is trivial. If we mess up, get up; ask forgiveness; start again; we aren't to wallow in the muck!... We carry the authority of the light of the risen Jesus...

Let's put aside whatever distorts or prevents us from walking closely with the Lord. Let's leave behind childish, cartoon images of the forces of evil in this world. Evil is poisonous by its nature, and we're called to put on the spiritual armour, to stand up for Christ Jesus and his kingdom. We can resist, with the help of the Lord... Positively, may the light of Jesus Christ shine in us and through us; all for God's glory, and so we are embraced by Christ's love; now and for ever.

Amen.