

Are We Built to Withstand?
Ephesians 6
November 6, 2011
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Paul is in prison. We're not exactly sure why. Most likely it has something to do with his preaching. Oh, Paul doesn't deliberately try to stir up trouble, but when you preach that Jesus—and not Caesar—is Lord, you're bound to ruffle a few feathers. An Anglican bishop once put it like this, "Wherever Paul went, he started a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea."

As Paul sits in prison, he has a lot of time to think. He, like many of the early Christians, believes that the end is near and Jesus is coming soon. But the longer Paul waits, the more he begins to wonder, Maybe we're going to be around for awhile. So Paul turns his attention to building up the church. Paul wants the Christians in his churches to run the race faithfully, and to withstand the trials that are sure to come, and, above all else, to finish their time on this earth well.

Letters like Ephesians often have a matter-of-fact quality to them: if we're going to be around for awhile, we better learn to deal with the problems we're facing because we want to run this race well. In Paul's day, the main problem is between Jew and Gentile: they need to find a way to be in the church together. This might be the most divisive issue the church has ever faced. Paul has the courage to stick to his guns, even though a faction of Jewish Christian opposes him at every turn. These Jews don't want Gentiles in their church, at least not Gentiles that won't change their ways and live like Jews. Paul speaks an emphatic *no* to them: *Gentiles can come in as they are—by faith alone; and by the way, it's not your church, says Paul, it's Christ's church.* As Paul makes this claim, he turns their church—and their world—upside down.

Paul is a radical. He proclaims a new humanity in Jesus Christ. He says: Once you've gotten baptized, there's neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, neither rich nor poor, neither black nor white, you are all one in Christ. Paul is challenging them to go beyond all the tired, worn out labels that society has given them and instead to live into the new identity they have in Jesus.

So, what do you suppose that new identity looks like? Paul does his best to spell it out. He says: *Wives* need to continue to be subject to their husbands, but—Paul adds a twist—husbands need to love their wives every bit as much as Christ loves the church. *Children* need to continue to obey their parents. That's nothing new. But Paul adds a twist: "Fathers, you better not provoke your children to anger." *Slaves* need to continue to obey their earthly masters. Nothing new here either. Paul can no more imagine a world without slavery than we can imagine a world without electricity. But again Paul adds a twist: "Masters, treat your slaves with respect. And remember, God is keeping an eye on you. You have the same Master in heaven, and God doesn't play favorites."

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He's not giving us a new set of laws. He's not codifying certain behaviors—such as slavery—and saying they're supposed to last till the end of time. No, he's giving us a snapshot of what this new humanity might look like. And, in the process, we learn something of what it means to be led by the Spirit. You see, if the end is not coming soon, the Spirit will need to help us figure these things out as we go.

A passage like Ephesians 6 is an important reminder to read the Bible in context. It's so easy to take these words at face value and to assume that they apply to all times and places. We assume Paul is saying that women must always be in submission, and that children are ours to do with as we please, and that it's perfectly acceptable for people to own slaves. But that's not Paul's point.

If we read this passage in context, we discover that Paul is attempting to straddle two worlds. As believers we have a new identity in Christ, but we still have to live beside our next-door neighbors. It's a balancing act. Here's the key: we will need to listen for God's Spirit along the way. Who knows what we might hear. Someday we may come to understand that women should be treated as equals and that marriage can be a full partnership; someday we may come to understand that a child is deserving of our utmost care and that we should never do to a child what we would not do to an adult; someday we may come to understand that slaves are human beings and they are made in the image of God and they deserve to be free.

Do you see what I'm saying? Paul, in his down-to-earth advice to the Ephesians, is not quite able to say these things, not yet, but he points us in this direction. And he demonstrates how the Spirit continues to speak. And that's critically important, because new issues come up all the time, tough issues, and we need to be able to deal with them. Remember, we want to run the race faithfully, and to withstand the trials that are sure to come, and above all else, to finish our time on this earth well.

Paul is in prison. He's not as sure as he once was about when the end will come. He tells the faithful that, while they wait, they need to be ready for whatever trials may come their way.

One day Paul looks at a Roman soldier and gets an idea. Like soldiers, he says, Christians need to be prepared to engage in spiritual battle. This battle will be against powers both seen and unseen. Sometimes those powers are the authorities in towns and cities who put up roadblocks for Christians. Sometimes those powers are false teachers who try to persuade Christians to invest their energy in irrelevant issues. Sometimes that power is simply the temptation to return to old and sinful patterns of living. Whatever those powers happen to be, one thing is clear: there are forces of evil at work in this world. And we need to ask: are we built to withstand them?

Rolf and Nancy Olson live in Cottage Grove. Rolf is a pastor friend of mine. Four years ago the unthinkable happened in the Olson household. Their daughter, Katherine, was murdered. You may remember the story. Katherine was looking for a job. She

answered an ad on Craig's List for a nanny. She made the mistake of going to the home to meet with the person. It turned out to be a trap. Instead of finding a young mother, she came face to face with a 19-year-old man named Michael Anderson. He had a gun. A struggle ensued. Katherine was shot and killed. Her body was stuffed into the trunk of her car at a nearby park.

Weeks and months of agony followed. Katherine's parents and family were left to pick up the pieces. There were lots and lots of questions: How could Michael Anderson do something so horrific? Was it bad parenting? Did he play too many violent video games? Were his friends a bad influence? Did he have any kind of moral compass?

As you might imagine, there were very few answers to these questions. Then at the funeral, Pastor Tom Koelin provided yet another perspective. He said: "What we have seen in the death of Katherine is undisguised, uncensored, unmasked evil. Whatever caused the trigger to be pulled and the bullet fired was the work of the Evil One...."

In a world where evil has a strong foothold, we don't always find out *why* things turn out the way they do. Thankfully, most of us will never face anything quite as heinous as Katherine. But we are left to wonder: when the trials come, will be able to stand firm? Paul wants us to be prepared. We are to put on the *belt of truth* which holds everything firmly in place. We are to put on the *armor of righteousness*, Christ's righteousness, which shields us from attack. We are to put on the *shoes of peace* which give us a message to share. We are to put on the *shield of faith* which protects us from the fiery darts of the Evil One. We are to put on the *helmet of salvation* which assures us that the final victory has already been won. We are to carry the *sword of the Spirit*, the word of God, which gives us the power we need. And finally, we are to employ the "weapon" of *prayer*, which assures us that we do not face these trials alone.

Even with all this protection, there are no guarantees. Katherine had a strong faith. Paul did too. They both died an untimely death. We do not know what's coming our way. We need to be prepared...so we can keep running faithfully and withstand the trials that are sure to come, and above all else, so we can finish our time on this earth well.

Today is All Saints Sunday. We remember those who have run the race and kept the faith, and now gone on before us. My wife Brenda lost her grandmother this past July. Her name was Viola. Viola was the matriarch of the family. She was 12 days short of 100-years-old. Brenda admired and loved her grandmother greatly. As the end drew near, she spent as much time with her as she possibly could.

This is how Brenda describes one of their last times together: "I was sitting by Grandma's bed watching her sleep. She woke up after a bit and was looking up at the ceiling. I asked her what she was thinking about. She looked at me and said, "Kid—that's what she used to call me—Kid, what do you think it's like when you get the call?" I said, "I don't know." She said, "Well, I'm going to find out before you do...but I won't be able to come back and tell you." I said, "No, you won't. But I don't think it's scary. You're not scared are you, Grandma?" "On no, I'm not scared, but I'm sure some are." I

told her I thought it would feel like a release of sorts, that the weight of living would be gone and she would feel a sense of peace. And then I told her how much I was going to miss her.”

This day we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. People like Viola and Katherine and the Apostle Paul. We miss them. They ran the race faithfully, and withstood the trials that came their way, and finished their time on this earth well. And then, when the call came, Christ was there to welcome them home. .

That great cloud of witnesses is with us here today. While we work out our problems and deal with our trials, they’re cheering us on. They’re encouraging us to run the race as faithfully as we can, every step of the way. Amen.