

HOW TO TRIUMPH OVER TERRORISM Ephesians 6:10-18

Dr. J. Howard Olds
September 8, 2002

A year has now gone by and those of us who live and work outside the Northeast have gotten on with our lives. After all, isn't that what you are supposed to do when you face a tragedy or a great loss—go on! But will we ever be able to simply go on? Something changed that September day that will never simply go away.

We now know that we are vulnerable. We now know that the threats of terror are no longer a half a world away. We now know things change — and not always for the better. Will the stock market ever recover? We now know that evil exists. Can that person sitting next to us on the plane be trusted? Things are different now.

So the question is, how can we live triumphantly in a terror stricken world? Perhaps a prisoner of war by the name of Paul can help us. In the last chapter of Ephesians this old soldier of the cross declares war on evil. He advises Christians to get dressed for battle. His military metaphors sound offensive to those of us who no longer sing "Onward Christian Soldiers." To be perfectly honest, I would much rather preach a sermon that invites you to a party than to talk today about preparing for battle. But like I said, things are different now. And after we have done it all, we still must find a way to stand and to carry on. So let us listen to the instructions of this prisoner of ancient times.

THERE ARE FOES TO FACE

Verse 12. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers, against authorities, against the powers of this dark world.

All of us have flesh and blood problems. We have bosses to please, people to manage, families to facilitate, burdens to bear, sorrows to share. Such is the nature of life. Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours or mine. One way or another we learn to get along with it and adapt to it because, as we like to say, that's life.

One Halloween a guy dressed up as the devil for a masquerade ball complete with red suit, horns, and pitch fork. Unfortunately, the man mistakenly walked through the door of a church instead of the hotel door to the masquerade ball. A worship service was in progress. When the worshippers realized that the devil in person was there, they scattered. They ran in every direction. All except one elderly lady who was sitting about midway in the sanctuary. She stayed put. Feeling especially empowered now by his new role as the devil, the young man walked up to the lady and said, "Aren't you afraid of me?" "Why should I be," snapped the woman, "I've been living with your brother for 50 years."

We know what it is to fight against flesh and blood. We have been there. But the

darkness surrounding us now seems so much more. Men flying loaded airplanes into office buildings, killing 3,000 people from 30 countries representing every religion of the world, and then laughing about it. That is a darkness of a different dimension. It is like Hitler trying to destroy a race of people. It is like Nero feeding Christians to the lions. It is like Timothy McVey blowing up a day care center in order to get at a federal building.

Paul reminds us that evil is even more prevalent than any single person. “*We wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,*” he said. Find Osama bin Laden and evil is not eliminated. Invade Iraq and evil will surface someplace else.

We do not live on a playground. We live on a battlefield. We are soldiers in a great cosmic war between good and evil. Our physical enemies pale in comparison to the spiritual forces that we face.

One reporter covering the Oklahoma City bombing asked, “From what universe beyond the one that most of us inhabit does this kind of evil rise?” That’s a theological question. We have seen the enemy. The enemy is awful.

So the question is, what shall we do? How will we go on? How do we live triumphantly in this new reality that has come among us? Paul gives some suggestions. Here he is, a prisoner in a Roman jail, attached daily to a Roman soldier. Suddenly, he looks at the uniform of the Roman soldier and begins to compare Christian life to it. *Put on the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation and the shoes of the gospel of peace.* He gets a vision of how to live in a hostile, hard world.

I’m just a singer of simple songs. I’m not a real political man, says Alan Jackson. *I watch CNN but I’m still not sure I know the difference between Iraq and Iran. But I know Jesus, and I talk to God. And I remember this from when I was young. Faith, hope and love are some pretty good things, and the greatest of these is love.* Since Alan’s list is shorter than Paul’s, let’s use his.

PUT ON FAITH.

According to George Barna, the faith of Americans has not changed much in the last year. Church attendance spiked as much as 50% the first Sunday after 9/11/2001, but then returned to normal by November. The percentage of unchurched American adults has stayed at about 33%. “It says something about the spiritual complacency of America,” writes church sociologist, George Barna.

Statistics, however, do not tell the whole story. A person in this church sent me this e-mail this week. “My ties to September 11 are very real. My employer was located in the World Trade Center. I lost 300 colleagues. More than 35 were personal friends. Last September 11, I walked into Brentwood United Methodist Church for the very first time in my life. I needed a place to pray. That day I started to rebuild my faith in God. After many hours of thought, prayer,

memories and resolutions, I have come to the awareness that we have a role in this world that goes far beyond us simply taking care of ourselves. I thank God for leading me to a new church home. Thank you and thank this congregation for opening their arms and giving me a home for my new faith.” Put on the armor of faith.

PUT ON HOPE.

An elderly parent disturbed by many problems, real and some imaginary, went through a battery of physical tests and evaluations. Finally her daughter said to her, “Mom, we’ve done all we can do for you. You’ll just have to trust God for the rest.” With a despairing look on her face the mother replied, “Oh dear, has it come to that?” Is that the nature of your hope? Some sort of last-ditch effort when everything else has failed and all else is gone. Well, at least we have hope in God.

Hope is something much more than that. Hope is to the soul what oxygen is to the body — absolutely essential for survival. People of hope, those who believe in God’s tomorrow, can live better today. Those who expect joy to come out of sadness, strength to come from weakness, new life to arise out of the ashes of the old, are the people who discover God to be a present help in times of trouble.

Martin Luther put it this way:

And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear for God has willed,
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

Put on the armor of hope.

AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE.

On the Sunday after the bombings last September we had a whole Sunday School class visiting us from a previous pastorate. They are dear friends of ours. We played golf in the afternoon and then had dinner together on Saturday night. They know me well enough to be intensely honest with me. They also know what’s always on my mind on Saturday night. So after dinner, they began to work on my sermon. They know I desperately need help on Saturday night. They joked about it. “Howard, what are you going to say tomorrow?” We were trying to laugh off the tenseness of the moment. Then one person in that group became intensely serious. She looked me in the eye and said, “Howard, let me tell you something. If you stand up tomorrow and tell us to love our enemies, I’m going to get up and walk right out of church.”

To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. I understand that speedy lovers are not usually very lasting lovers. I understand

that quick forgivers are not usually quality forgivers. I understand that it takes time and space, but I need to say to you today, a year later, my friends, sooner or later in the troubles of life, you and I are going to decide.

Will we get bitter or will we get better?
Will we get even, or will we get on?
Will we live by hate, or will we fill our lives with love?

Day by day, person by person, individual by individual, we decide what we will do with what is. Loving people are healthier people, happier people, and more helpful people than those who allow themselves to sink into the deep pits of rage, revenge, and hate.

I'm just a singer of simple songs, I'm not a real political man but I believe in God and Jesus and I remember from Sunday School class that there are some core things in life that you ought to put on and wear like a Roman soldier would wear his uniform. They are faith and hope and love.

Then Paul says something else. *Having armed ourselves in the Spirit, let us focus ourselves through prayer.* Verse 18. *Pray always, on all occasions, in all situations, pray.* Prayer does not save all our loved ones. It does not cure all our cancers; it does not make all our kids perfect. Prayer does put us in the presence of God.

Joseph Griesediek is an Episcopal priest in New York City. He said on a public broadcasting special last week, "I came to the point that I couldn't sit in the cozy sanctuary of my parish with such suffering going on down the street. I walked down to ground zero and I volunteered. Not long after I got there, a rescue worker came up to me and said, 'Father, we need you over here. We need you to bless the buckets.' I didn't know what he was talking about until the first bucket was under my nose. Suddenly I saw the unspeakable. The whole of humanity was represented in that bucket. Here I was being asked to pray."

I ask you, where else do we have to go in those moments of horror but to the Lord? Where else do we have to go in the moments of pain but to the Lord? *Pray on all occasions*, says Paul. *Pray. Pray on full alert*, he says. Listen. *With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.*

Thomas Merton said, "Our real hope is not in something we think we can do, but in God, who is making something good out of it in some ways we cannot see."

I know absolutely nothing about the military. While my friends were in Vietnam, I was in seminary. As a civilian, I know that when the military is put on "Full Alert" things start happening. Officers start planning, planes start flying, ships start sailing, soldiers start moving, reserves get called to active duty. In a matter of minutes, all of that which would defend us from the enemy is brought to attention and ready for action.

George Barna says that last September when the Church needed to be on “High Alert,” it got caught sleeping. Thousands who never or seldom pray suddenly found a need for spiritual enlightenment, enrichment, and guidance and the Church was not ready to respond to their needs. I don’t know if the sociologist is right or wrong, but I do know this: I don’t want to ever be caught slacking on my prayers again.

It is time to stop making prayer a political game and start making it a daily practice. Let’s get over this political nonsense and start making prayer a deep, vital part of our daily lives. There is no law against that.

So how do we go on in the years to come? Maybe that old hymn says it best:

Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armor on.
Stand strong in the strength which God supplies
through his eternal Son.
From strength to strength go on,
Wrestle and fight and pray.
Tread all the powers of darkness down,
and win the well fought day!

Amen.

