

“This Present Darkness”

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¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. ¹⁸Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. (Ephesians 6:10-20)

I spent the summer before my senior year in college in London. A friend and I found a room to rent from a family who lived near Wimbledon, and then we started trying to figure out ways to pay for that room and board. Through a contact my dad had, I landed a job in the mailroom of a solicitors' firm – the English version of a corporate law office. It was not glamorous work, but it was eye-opening. I handled deliveries from floor to floor, and twice a day I would head out with a big briefcase to “the DX,” the shared document exchange office where the banks and firms and insurance agencies of London all sent paperwork back and forth free of postage.

There was a lot of downtime in the mailroom, so I spent a good amount of time listening to my Sony Walkman (it was 1990 after all) and also reading. I started out with a novel that had been recommended to me by a Christian friend at Davidson. About twenty pages in, I knew I would have never chosen this book for myself. As a pastor, I would never recommend it to you. It ended up being way too much like LaHaye's Left Behind series. I share this memory with you today because that book took its title from the portion of Ephesians 6 that we just read. It was called This Present Darkness. It was a fictional story about a tale that terrifies much of Christendom – the concern that evil forces are all around us, bent on taking over. The basic plot was that demons – not metaphorical demons, but literal, dark, shadowy demons – were conspiring to consume and turn a peaceful and unsuspecting town.

Not great literature, by any stretch, but I had started it, a friend had recommended it, so I figured I would finish it. When things were slow I would sit there in the mailroom reading this book about demons, and a lot of the time, just a few chairs down, sat Dave Boddy. Like the other men who worked in the mailroom, Dave was an East Londoner. They all talked with the same cool Cockney accent. All of them smoked, some of them thin coffin



nail cigarettes that they still rolled themselves. They were all grey – not just their suits, but their hair, skin, and teeth – grey. And they were absolutely fascinating to be around. They told amazing stories of the Blitz in WWII... how they learned to listen for the V2 rockets, and as long as you could hear the whir of their engine you were OK, but if you heard that whirring stop, you better take cover fast.

Anyway, Dave Boddy was probably the youngest of the older mailroom crew. He was certainly the strangest. He was into New Age trends like crystals and séances and stuff like that. One afternoon Dave read the title of my novel and started asking me all kinds of questions about it. Now it is important to say here that, in the novel, new age mysticism was completely demonized. It was one of the main tools that demons used to take spiritual domination over the town. So, when Dave started telling me that he was into that stuff – that he regularly attended New Age group meditation meetings... and that a lot of times in those meetings he had seen shadowy visions like black cats -- it kind of freaked me out.

I might be freaking you all out in a bit of a different way. We in the mainline church are not used to talking about demons, or the devil, or terms like “spiritual warfare.” I’m the same way. I’ve never really been into all that, or maybe I should say my proper Protestant Presbyterian experience rarely even mentioned these kinds of things, so it has never been a big part of my spiritual vocabulary. Perhaps we prefer our churchiness to be more dignified, our language to be more lofty, our perspective to be more learned. One thing is for sure – a lot of Christian people who do talk about these things seem to take it WAAAY overboard. And we still see this in big swaths of the church today. The way I see it, when your world view becomes all about labeling people as either demons or angels, you end up demonizing a lot of good people and alienate way too many angels.

For a few weeks, I steered clear of Dave Boddy. The things he talked about seemed dangerous to me, and I figured it was safer to keep my distance. But I’m glad to say that didn’t last long. Yes, Dave was into some shadowy things that I wasn’t so sure about, but Dave was no demon. He wasn’t dangerous; he was just a little odd. Over time, I found it impossible not to notice the glint in his eye, the light in his smile, the gentleness in his mannerisms, and the kindness that was often in his words. Spiritually speaking, my summer in the mailroom of Boodle Hatfield Solicitors was a complicated time for me. I felt my spirit being pulled in a number of different directions. The book I was reading seemed far-fetched and inconsistent with much of what I believed, but I also knew that there are plenty of passages in the Bible that talk openly about spiritual warfare of one kind or another. My co-worker Dave Boddy had rejected the church and found solace in basement séances and disconcerting flirtations with the darkness, but there was light in him, too.

Maybe the context and language of my own struggles are not like yours, but I expect you have had them, too. Even if we are quick to dismiss the reality of demons, it is a lot harder to deny the existence of things like darkness, and sin, and evil. The famous Christian author C.S. Lewis dealt specifically with this debate we all wage within ourselves in his book [The Screwtape Letters](#), a novel that dealt specifically with the spiritual warfare every Christian must wage. "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils," he wrote. One of those errors is to become obsessed with demons, or to use Lewis' words, "to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."¹ But the other

¹ C.S. Lewis, [The Screwtape Letters](#), quoted at http://classiclit.about.com/od/lewiscs/a/aa_cslewisquote.htm.

error, Lewis warned, is to dismiss them altogether -- to tell ourselves that demons do not exist. The foundational statement of Lewis' entire novel rested on an observation penned years earlier by Charles Baudelaire in his poem "The Generous Gambler." "My dear brethren," the poet wrote, "do not ever forget... that the loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade [us] that he does not exist!"²

Through the ages, however, some theologians have adopted that very idea. They were not convinced that demons exist. Saint Augustine, for example, was deeply troubled by the logical inconsistency of saying that a God who is good could or would create a force to contend against the good. In fact, Augustine suggested that evil has no separate reality, but is rather the absence of the good. The light is real, he would say, but darkness is nothing more than a lack of light.³

I get the logic, and I agree that it is difficult to get comfortable with the idea that a God of goodness may have created evil itself. After all, in Genesis, God clearly says "Let there be light," and God does NOT say "Let there be darkness." But it's still complicated, right? At times, it does seem like darkness is more than just the absence of the good... that it is somehow stronger than that, perhaps even more organized than that... that darkness may even be said to be contending against the light and waging battle against the good.

That's the idea that I hear expressed in this letter, with its warnings about the rulers and principalities of this world, "the cosmic powers of this present darkness." It follows the theology of Paul who believed that sin and evil are more than just mistakes we make or bad things that we do. He was convinced that sin is greater than the sum of those dark parts. Sin and evil have a presence, Paul thought, in the human systems of this world – systems that bind people in cycles of poverty... systems that keep medicine from getting to the people who need it most... systems that keep the fires of war burning, family feuds brewing, and our tendency to demonize anyone who is unlike us going strong.

I think that is why these words of Ephesians still ring true in our ears and bring comfort to our spirits. We might not fully buy into the idea of demons, and we might want to dismiss the militarism of warrior armor imagery. It seems a bit archaic to picture a knight in full regalia and adopt that as our ideal of faith. But I think we fool ourselves when we try to deny that this ancient letter describes gifts that we still seek every day...

- When lies have no bounds, when honesty is no longer cherished, do we not long for truth?
- When crooked manipulations are creeping in on us, do our arms not stretch out for righteousness?
- When menacing threats are near, do we not long for defense?
- When the cruel blows of life are falling down on us like rain, do we not cry out for salvation?
- And when intolerable injury demands a response, when injustice cannot stand and must be pushed back, do we not look for something to wield and to point against the adversary, some weapon that bears the power of heaven?

² <http://www.gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0607031h.html>

³ "Augustine: on evil," http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/modules/Philosophers/Augustine/augustine_evil.html; and also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absence_of_good, August 21, 2015.

The belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation...and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God... these images resonate through the ages, reminding us still where our real strength and shield can be found -- not in the angry weapons and broken tools of this present darkness, but in those things that have always given light to the world – those perfect gifts that are given to us from above, from the Father of lights, in whom there is no variation or shadow or change.⁴

My last day in the mailroom of Boodle Hatfield Solicitors in London was August 10, 1990. That day, Dave Boddy shook my hand. He said he had enjoyed getting to know me, that he often felt unwelcome in the mailroom, but that I had never made him feel that way – that I had always been a friend to him.

Then he gave me a little gift to take with me back across the pond. It was a little bookmark about the biblical psalms. It lists recommendations for psalms to read in certain circumstances -- when you feel unloved, read Psalm 23; when you are uncertain, pick up the words of Psalm 46; when you feel vulnerable, bind yourself up with Psalm 62; when you feel assaulted, take up the shield of Psalm 61. On the back of that bookmark, in green marker, he wrote these words: “To Peter, From David Boddy, wishing you happiness, prosperity, and peace.”

Surprising, I thought, that this guy who only seemed to want to talk about shadows and visions of darkness ended up giving me gifts that were so completely bathed in light – an affirmation of friendship, an earnest wish for a happy life, and a tool he hoped would help me in my pursuit of strength and wisdom and truth. I had been so worried about the darkness that might be present in him that I almost missed the light that was certainly within him.

All of these things continue to be cloaked in mystery, and I do not purport to understand it all. But it does seem clear to me that all of us, in one way or another, are engaged in a spiritual tug of war. And, as the passage says, it’s not really a struggle against flesh and blood. I was never really in a struggle with Dave Boddy, but against something else that was bigger than both of us. At times, we all feel like we are fumbling through the darkness, straining to see the light. And sometimes it may seem that the darkness has us on the ropes – that our defenses are weak, and our weapons are few, and evil seems to be winning.

But then again, whenever I read this passage about the armor of God, I think of David Boddy. And when I worry that the protections offered to us by God in our struggle – truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the Word of God -- seem so intangible and so very impractical, I remember the enduring strength that God can impart upon a thin piece of cardboard that I have kept for 31 years and counting. It still marks the places where I can turn to be reminded that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ James 1:17.