

SIX FEET BACK, SATAN

*4 Weeks in the
Book of Ephesians*

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Introduction

A few weeks ago, I collapsed from physical and emotional exhaustion. In the wake of a global pandemic and economic recession, my life veered off-road and I wandered into uncharted territory. My husband, Leif, was thrust into 70-hour work weeks pastoring our congregation. Six months of my speaking events were postponed or canceled. People we loved fell ill, and some died. An eight-hour work day now felt like fourteen, and quarantine left me feeling severed from society. I'd pushed and pivoted until my fatigued body screamed, "Enough!"

I climbed into bed for a nap—and slept for two and a half days.

Maybe you're feeling weary and longing for rest too. What once felt like a sprint now seems like an ultramarathon. The unending uncertainty continues to take a toll on your friendships, mental health, marriage, and your confused kiddos. Perhaps the virus scorched your wedding plans, graduation party, job promotion, income, or your dreams for 2020.

Maybe you're among the immunocompromised like me. Taking a simple step through your front door is now an activity fraught with fear. Lifelong friends now look like threats that you are forced to avoid, despite longing for their touch. Each new governmental strategy to safely reengage in life forces you to take carefully calculated risks, adding exhaustion to exhaustion.

The principles God offers us for flourishing in the midst of terrible oppression and difficulty are, thankfully, still alive and well and always will be. Even when the threat of the virus has disappeared, devastating side effects from the pandemic may linger or new challenges will creep in. Either way, if there's one principle I've learned in more than two decades of ministry, it's this: Whenever we encounter adversity, the adversary comes out to play.

We're all facing physical and emotional challenges during this time, but we're naïve to overlook the accompanying spiritual challenges. The adversary of God is known as the evil one, the devil, or *ha-satan* in Hebrew. This malicious entity appears in the book of Job asking God if he can test a faithful man through suffering, loss, and pain. All four Gospels recount stories of spiritual attack. Jesus faces off against God's adversary in the wilderness and wins, and on the cross, he defeats the destruction monger.

Even though the war has been won, the battle continues until Jesus' return.

Cartoons often depict the devil with horns and flame-red pitchfork, but Jesus describes "the father of lies" (John 8:44) as a swindler, assassin, and arsonist who schemes to burn everything to the ground. One of the adversary's chief aims is to distort the truth of who God is and who you're called to be. He hopes to derail your relationship with God and render you unfruitful.

The adversary represents everything that's against Christ and the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to deliver abundant life—more and better than you ever dreamed (John 10:10). God's blueprint for your life abounds in peace and patience, goodness and gentleness, joy and hope. God adorns you with grace, guards you through self-control, and surrounds you with boundless reservoirs of divine affection.

In this spiritual battle with the accuser, God counters by sending the Advocate. The Holy Spirit empowers us to overcome the enemy's lies and walk in God's provision and power—even during a global pandemic, even in seasons of uncertainty, even in times of suffering.

Penned from a prison cell, Paul's letter to the Ephesian church reorients our thinking. Our battle has never been against flesh and blood, he says, but against darkness and evil in all its forms. Ephesians unveils the depths of our spiritual blessings and illuminates God's marvelous plan to make us alive through Christ.

This study is designed to empower you to overcome the wily ways of the enemy. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you'll be attuned and equipped so every time the accuser draws near, you'll declare, "Six feet back, Satan!" and send him back where he belongs.

Margaret

Your Vast Arsenal in Christ

I

EPHESIANS 1:1 (NIV)

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will: to the faithful saints in Christ Jesus at Ephesus.

If you've ever second-guessed whether the Bible remains relevant, look no further than Ephesians. This timeless writing speaks to humanity's deepest struggles and longings.

Author Frederick Buechner describes the apostle Paul's ministry this way: "Jesus exploded on the scene like a bomb and blew the world in general and the world of Judaism in particular sky-high. It was left to Paul to try to sort out the pieces."

A vehement opposer to the church, Paul's spiritual encounter with Jesus wiped the crust from his blind eyes and flipped his world right-side up. He became a spiritual papa to churches throughout the Middle East, Europe, and parts of Asia.

When he finds himself in a Roman prison for making bold Jesus proclamations, he refuses to allow thick, dingy walls or rusty chains to hold him back. He pens letters to the beloved church he's been raising up.

The opening verse reveals the author, Paul, along with the receiver, believers in Ephesus. This wealthy port city was an ancient Greek city under Roman rule that boasted the famous temple of Artemis. Pilgrims still visit the ancient remains of the city today in modern day Turkey.

If you enjoy a pinch of academic debater, it's worth noting some early manuscripts don't mention "in Ephesus" leading some to believe that the letter was meant to be circulated among all churches.

You can divide the six-chapter book of Ephesians into two halves like a two-act play. The first three chapters center on our purpose and identity in Christ. The final three address how we should live in light of these truths. The sharp transition between the two sections is difficult to miss: "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1).

Like the culture Paul addresses, ours wrestles with divisiveness and polarization. (Have you watched any news lately?) Like Ephesus, we must live on high alert for every form of elitism, exceptionalism, and racism that creeps into our hearts. We need God and each other as much as ever before. Ephesians draws us together in divisive times by reminding us that we're hand-fashioned for belonging, connection, and unity. Without it, we cannot inhale, and even worse, we cannot exhale the Spirit within us.

When it comes to the enemy and spiritual warfare, it's tempting to read Ephesians waiting for the stockpile of battle armor in the final chapter. That's when we're told to gird up with the splendid six:

the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, boots of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and sword of scripture.

But what if Paul is equipping us with a vast arsenal throughout *all* the chapters of Ephesians? What if through Christ you're being made battle-ready with so much more? The enemy is wily, but God has made you wieldy. You can march forward radiating grace, practicing forgiveness, demonstrating sacrificial love.

You can scorch the enemy's plans through prayer and worship. You can demolish the enemy's lies by declaring your true identity in Christ. You can abolish the enemy's thievery by reciting your inheritance from God.

When the enemy tries to invade your space, you can thrust out your open palm and declare, "Six feet back, Satan. I am Christ's, and he is mine."

1. How does knowing that Paul wrote this letter from a dank, dingy cell affect the way you read his words? Why does someone speaking life out of pain seem more impactful?
2. Read Acts 9:1-22. What does this passage reveal about Paul's transformation? What kinds of experiences have been the most transformational in your life?
3. When it comes to overcoming the wily ways of the enemy, what are your go-to tactics?
4. In what ways has Christ been making you holy and faithful (v. 1)?

Can You Snub God's Provision?

2

EPHESIANS 1:2-10 (NIV)

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

"You should apply for unemployment."

I balked at our accountant's advice. I'd never applied for unemployment in my life, and didn't think I'd

qualify. He explained that with all speaking events canceled for the foreseeable future, a large chunk of my income was about to vanish. Under the new rules of the pandemic, this meant I qualified for unemployment benefits, which could help carry us through until we secured small business loans and future writing contracts.

As I considered and prayed about the decision, I sensed Holy Spirit whisper, “Why do you despise my provision?”

Ouch! My mind recalled the image of Jacob sprinkling in the final ingredients of his famous spicy stew. When his brother Esau arrives with a growling belly and begs for a taste, Jacob eyes the opportunity of a lifetime. He offers to trade a scoop of soup for his elder brother’s birthright worth a double portion of the inheritance. It’s not exactly a fair trade.

A few satisfying slurps later, Esau shrugs off the grand provision that comes with being a firstborn and “despised his birthright” (Genesis 25:34).

Much like Esau, I was snubbing God’s provision. I only wanted God’s provision if it arrived in familiar packaging, the same dimensions and shapes he’d used in the past. Though I claimed God as my provider, I despised the new wrappings of the provision.

We can turn our noses up to divine promises and provision. We can slap on a “return to sender” label through our attitudes and actions. When the Waymaker makes a way, we can foolishly shout, “No way!”, and go our own way.

I followed the accountant’s advice and thanked God for his provision, and more importantly, for revealing himself as my provider in the ways he sees fit.

Paul launches his letter to the church at Ephesus by opening our eyes to the bounty of God’s promises and blessings. While the world says you can be filthy rich, God makes you flawlessly rich in everything money can’t buy. You are lavished with every spiritual blessing. You’re called, chosen, adopted, adored, renewed and redeemed. You’re flush with favor and forgiveness.

You’re even given a destination, a holy destiny, that God has hand-selected with delight. Paul avows, “This is who you are. This is where you’re headed. This is your birthright. In Christ, you have it all, all, all.”

The enemy wants us to look down on our spiritual bounty and turn up our noses. He wants to convince you that you’re a pauper begging for every crumb unsure if it will come. That’s when the accuser murmurs, “You’re forgotten and neglected. God has abandoned you.” We must silence that voice with the truths found in this passage.

So often we are able to celebrate the redemption in others’ lives, but not our own. We accept that others are chosen or forgiven, but we can’t believe the same for ourselves. Instead of living like God’s prized possession, we sit in spiritual alleyways shaking tin cups and begging for blessings like despised outcasts.

The enemy’s lies are always there for the taking, but you can thwart him. As you reread through today’s passage, invite the Holy Spirit to search your heart for the spiritual bounty and blessings

you've subtly snubbed or coolly dismissed. Then enter anew into the celebration of the riches of God's grace.

1. What unusual or unexpected ways has God provided for you during the pandemic?
2. Did you embrace his provision or turn up your nose to it? Explain.
3. Read Genesis 25:24-34. Why do you think Esau gave up his birthright? What tempts you most to give up your birthright as a child of God?
4. Which of the promises or blessings of God in Ephesians 1:2-10 do you need to cling to extra tight right now?

How to Overcome Purposelessness

3

EPHESIANS 1:11-14 (THE MESSAGE)

¹¹⁻¹² It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone.

¹³⁻¹⁴ It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free—signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

Shortly after the pandemic struck America, many of my friends and I wrestled with purposelessness. Fulfilling jobs and ministries were suddenly snatched away from so many of us. We were once certain God had given us those assignments for kingdom purposes, but we now felt unsure. New tasks for which we weren't trained were thrust on us (homeschooling, anyone?) and left us feeling exhausted. Meanwhile, those with too much time were left feeling useless.

Extroverts and caregivers were separated from those they poured their lives into, and they felt impotent. Introverts were quarantined with others and now lacked privacy. They struggled to find solitude for the work and hobbies that once helped them flourish.

Businesses that took a lifetime to build shuttered. Beloved employees were laid off. Families were devastated.

Amid increasing job insecurity, health challenges, financial pressures, and friends falling sick and passing away, many of us felt the thick fog of sadness descend. If there's one atmosphere the enemy loves, it's gloom. In the thick haze of heaviness and the mire of murkiness, he can lead us to believe that our prized and precious lives lack purpose.