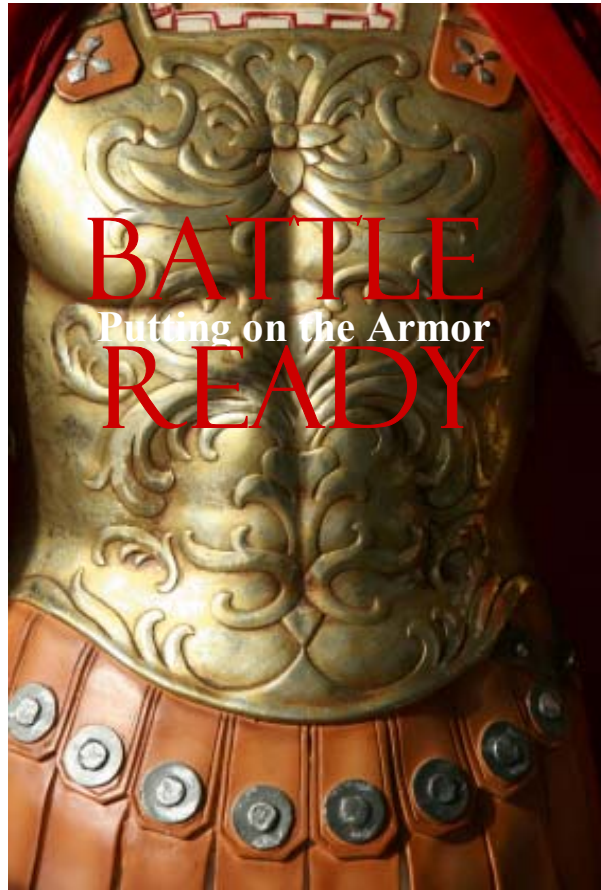


The Covenant Pulpit



"In This Together"

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Slats Grobnik sold Christmas trees somewhere in a rundown section of Chicago. Just before Christmas, when all the trees had been picked over, a ragged couple came into the lot. The man was appallingly-skinny, and his mousy little wife clung to him for dear life. Both wore faded and outdated clothes from the bottom of the bin at the Salvation Army thrift shop.

As they turned the price tag over on each tree, it was obvious that they didn't have enough money to buy one. Then she spied a discarded Scotch pine consigned to the outer darkness of the lot. It was okay on one side, but terribly scrawny on the other. Not far away stood another pitiful tree, the needles on one side half eaten away. She whispered in her husband's ear, and he asked if \$3 would be enough for both trees. Slats figured that he couldn't sell them anyway, so he agreed. Sadly, he watched the ragged couple drag the two scraggly trees away, leaving a trail of dead pine needles in their wake.

A few evenings later, Slats was walking home. In the window of a rundown apartment building, he spied a magnificent Christmas tree. The decorations weren't much, but it didn't matter because the tree was so thick and well-rounded. Then Slats saw the skinny man and his mousy wife out on the street.

"That's a beautiful tree up in that window," exclaimed Slats.

"Yep," replied the man with pride. "That's our tree. Actually it's the two trees that we bought from you."

"How can that be?" asked Slats. "I sold you the two worst trees on my lot."

"I know," he responded. "But my missus is clever. She had me work the trees together, where the branches are bare. We formed one tree out of those two, and wired them together. The branches are so thick that you can't even see the wire."

Slats Grobnik later told Mike Royko, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, that he had discovered a secret that night:

"You take two trees that aren't perfect, that have flaws, that might even be homely, that maybe nobody else would even want. If you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful."

Slats grinned at Royko and concluded, "I guess that principle even works with people." Slats was right. Even a skinny guy with a mousy wife, and only \$3 between them, can create a Christmas tree that will bring joy to the whole neighborhood. Never underestimate the force that can be created when individually-weak people band together in united action.

What makes the difference between a spotlight and a laser beam? How can the tiny shaft of a laser burn through solid steel in seconds, while the most powerful spotlight in the world can only make it warm? The difference is in unity.

A laser is created by exciting molecules with mirrors. Some of the excited molecules decay into a less agitated state. In the decaying process they release a photon (a particle of light). The photon moves along and “tickles” other molecules, inviting another photon to join him in the journey. Then those two photons excite more molecules, inviting two more photons to join the parade. Soon there is a huge army of little photons all marching in lock step, creating a concentrated laser beam that moves to its destination with steel-piercing power.

A spotlight may have more photons, but each is going its own independent way. The photons even interfere with each other. As a result, much of the spotlight’s power is wasted.

Slats Grobnik learned that two ragged people can take two scraggly trees and fill their world with beauty. Science teaches us that microscopically-minute molecules marching together can cut through the strongest steel. As he wraps up his basic training for spiritual warfare, St. Paul teaches us this final principle:

Spiritual battles are not won by solitary warriors.

Don’t forget the nature of our warfare. Verse twelve says,

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

We are up against Lucifer and his fallen angels. Adam was created from the mud of the earth. These fallen angels were the *Seraphim* or “Fire Angels” of heaven. How can mere mortals, formed out of earth’s miry clay, stand against these titans of the invisible world who were birthed in the fires of heaven?

Remember those photons. Little molecules are excited and begin to die. As they die and decay they give off a particle of light. So we are excited by the Holy Spirit and drawn to Christ. We take up his cross, and die to self. In the death and decay of our old person, the light of Jesus begins to shine out of us. And, like little photons of light, we join together with others in the Body of Christ to form a laser beam of righteousness that pierces the darkness and cuts through the power of the Evil One.

The Apostle says at the end of verse eighteen, “...With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” He continues in verse nineteen, “Pray also for me...” We desperately need each other. Solitary warriors aren’t going to survive this war. In verses 11&13, St. Paul says that each of us must put on “the whole armor of God” so that we can take our stand against “the devil’s schemes...in the day of evil.” But this is not about solitary warriors arming themselves and then going out to fight the *Lone Ranger’s* battle. It’s about an army moving in formation like a single laser beam.

You aren't going to beat your addictions alone. Nor can you bear grief by yourself. Slugging it out in secret, while pretending everything is okay in public, is a recipe for defeat. The half-brother of Jesus wrote in James 5:16, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Healing comes when we are honest enough to confess our weaknesses and join together to overcome problems as a team. With due respect to the military recruiting slogan, no person can ever be "an army of one."

Paul has been reminding us of the Roman legionnaires of his day. They were individually the finest fighting machines in history. But it was their coordinated tactics on the battlefield that made their armies masters of the earth.

For most armies in the ancient world, raw power was the key to victory. In his accounts of his Gaelic conquests, Julius Caesar wrote that barbarians would mass hundreds of thousands of warriors, sometimes outnumbering his legionnaires 20-1. They charged in massive human waves trying to crush Caesar's legions by the sheer weight of numbers. But these barbarians never fought together. It was every man for himself, screaming and running pell-mell into the fray.

The Romans marched into this avalanche of barbarian warriors in disciplined formation, massing themselves into a tight ball, piercing the heart of the enemy line like a laser beam, and causing it to disintegrate into demoralized confusion.

But their greatest military formation was called the *testudo*, which is the Latin word for turtle. A unit of Roman legionnaires would form a rectangle and lock their shields together. Those in the middle of that rectangular block would put their shields on top, so that this unit was now encased in an impenetrable wall of steel as they marched unstoppably-forward like an ancient tank. I wonder if St. Paul was thinking about the Roman *testudo* when he talked about the "shield of faith" in verse sixteen. We too must create a spiritual *testudo*, locking our faith together, as all of us move as one person into the heart of the enemy line. St. Paul tells us how to do that:

1. Pray for *all* the Saints.

Verse eighteen ends with these words: "...and always keep on praying for all the saints." Why do we need to pray unceasingly for each other in this war?

1) Through prayer I've got your back.

In verse eighteen there are two key phrases that precede the command to pray for "all the saints": the first is "...with this in mind..." It is so easy to lose sight of a fact we must never forget. And what is it that we absolutely can't forget? That second phrase in verse eighteen (actually an imperative command): "...be alert..." The enemy of our soul is lurking out there. Another Apostle warns us in 1 Peter 5:8, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."

If you study the spiritual armor in this passage you will see a disturbing thing. Each piece is designed to cover only the front of your body. The ancient Romans did everything they could to discourage their legionnaires from turning tail and running away in the heat of battle. Therefore, they issued no armor to protect a soldier's backside. Romans legionnaires were made to advance, not retreat. And so are the spiritual warriors of God's kingdom. So, who has our backside?

I saw an American soldier being interviewed in Iraq. He had participated in the capture of a terrorist stronghold. Several of his comrades had died and he was exhausted and dirty. He said to the reporter, "In urban warfare, it's house-to-house fighting. There's no front line. The enemy is everywhere, in every shadow, behind every corner, in front of you and in back of you." Without knowing it, this young soldier gave a perfect description of spiritual warfare. Forces of darkness are everywhere at all times, and in invisible places we can never see. "How did you survive?" asked the reporter. The soldier replied, "My buddies were behind me, covering my back."

When we leave this worship center, we are all going to face another week of spiritual warfare. It's a dangerous world out there for our warrior band of brothers and sisters. How do we cover each other's back? Every time we come to one another's mind, we can pray for each other. Let's hold each other accountable by regularly asking each other, "Are you praying for me whenever I come to mind?" Or to put it in military terms: "Do you have my back?"

2) Through prayer I can be wherever you are.

Remember how St. Paul describes prayer at the beginning of verse eighteen: "And pray in the *spirit*..." Prayer was designed for spiritual realms.. Let me explain what I mean. The young soldier said that he survived his battle in Iraq because his comrades had his back. But too many other soldiers have been killed and horribly maimed in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are never enough buddies to cover every soldier's back. And even when his back is covered, it won't stop an incoming missile or car bomb. There are limits to flesh-and-blood warfare.

But there are no limits or boundaries when you "pray in the *spirit*." In prayers we can go anywhere. My daughter Rachael is with us today. But she is usually far away. There hasn't been a day that her mother and I haven't prayed for her. She never went on a date that we weren't with her, protecting her with our prayers while we waited at home. Through our prayers we have gone with her into every grade school, high school, university, and law school classroom to cover her back. When she was a Peace Corps worker in the mountains of Guatemala, her mother and I were right there covering her back (even though we were hundreds of miles away). None of us will ever know how many times she has been spared from dangers and disasters because her mother and I have covered her back through prayer. Through prayer, you and I can go into the White House, the Court House, the State House, the school house, or even our friends' houses to cover the backs of those who need heaven's help. Through

prayer I can assist a team of doctors while you are on the operating table, empower a missionary in the urban slums of Brazil, or stand with a soldier on a lonely hillside in Afghanistan. Though we can never be there in the flesh, in “the spirit” there are no limits to the places we can go.

There are times when I feel so utterly alone and helpless. Paul must have felt that way when he was abandoned to that prison under Nero’s palace in Rome. But in verse nineteen he remembers that the saints, hundreds of miles away in Ephesus, were praying for him. It’s encouraging and empowering to know that, even when we are alone in the flesh, the invisible places are alive with the presence of those who are covering our backs through prayer.

3) Through prayer I recognize who the *real* shepherd is.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Prayer is the ultimate confession of our helplessness.” That’s why verse eighteen says that we have to “...always keep on praying...” I remember a time in Houston when I was wearing myself out worrying about the problems in our church, cramming as many pastoral visits and counseling sessions as possible into my schedule, while trying to fix a multitude of people. A wise elder put his arm around my shoulders and said, “Pastor, why are you working yourself into a tizzy?” In exasperation, I replied, “Because, as the shepherd of this flock, I have to take care of the sheep.” He gently responded,

“No, pastor, you aren’t the shepherd of this flock. Jesus is. They are *his* sheep. Only *he* knows them all by name and exactly what they need. He’s the *Good* Shepherd and you are the ‘only-sometimes-good’ shepherd. He’s the *Great* Shepherd and you’re the weak, little, under shepherd. Turn the flock over to him and relax a little.”

We all need to hear the timely counsel that I received from Roger. It’s so easy to forget who the *real* shepherd is. Prayer is a way of turning our flocks over to Jesus. In the end, only he can protect your children, fix your marriage, bring in the finances, break addictions, build churches, and bring your nation out of its darkest days. Prayer is the ultimate confession of our helplessness and the key to relaxing even in the midst of battles that try people’s souls.

4) If I strengthen you, then I am stronger.

When Paul says in verse eighteen, “...always keep on praying for all the saints...” there is an echo of 1 Corinthians 12:26: “If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is strong, every part rejoices with it.” If you are strong, then I am stronger; if you are weak, then I am more vulnerable. All it takes to stop the great football team is for one player to fumble the ball. I want to cover your back so that you will be strong enough to cover mine. There is a sanctified selfishness in our prayers. I don’t want you to go down, because you will drag me down with you. And you don’t want me to do the same to you. Only when we pray for each other will we win this battle together.

5) If I am stronger, then you are strengthened.

St. Paul goes on in verse nineteen, "Pray also for me..." Who is Paul? He is an Apostle, a missionary in a foreign country, a church-planter, evangelist, pastor-teacher, and elder of the Church. When Paul says, "Pray also for me..." he is reminding us that we should *especially* pray for our pastors, elders, missionaries, evangelists, and all those who are on the front lines of the spiritual wars.

Our spiritual leaders are the first target of the Enemy. Paul reminds of that in verse twenty: "...I am an ambassador in chains." He is chained to the walls of a subterranean dungeon under Nero's palace. He has seen the inside of far too many jails and faced a thousand life-threatening dangers during his ministry. He understands the first rule of military engagement: kill the enemy officers. If they fall, command structures disintegrate and armies fall into disarray. Spiritual leaders are in the most dangerous position of all. If we go down, then the church will be derailed. No wonder every month 1200 American pastors drop out of the ministry because of burnout or moral failure.

Pray for all leaders. If a missionary gives up, a country is lost. When a father messes up, children are affected for generations. If the highest office in the land is corrupted, the entire nation suffers. That's why you should pray passionately for your leaders to have the courage of their convictions. In verses 19&20 St. Paul writes, "Pray for me...that I would fearlessly make known the gospel...Pray that I may declare it fearlessly..." Paul knows that he will soon be dragged before Emperor Nero, the most powerful man on planet earth. This madman has impaled Christians on stakes, doused them with oil, and set them on fire as human torches for his garden parties. So Paul is begging his brothers and sisters in faraway Ephesus to go into this throne room of Satan with him (through their "prayers in the Spirit") and cover his back. In the same way, pray for me and every other leader in your life, that all of us will be people of strong moral courage and conviction. Only then will you become the strong warrior you need to be in the "day of evil" that will come upon you when you least expect it.

2. Encourage *all* the Saints

Not only should we pray for one another, we should encourage each other. St. Paul ends with these words in verses 21&22, "Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord will tell you everything, so that you may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and then he may *encourage* you." Paul recognizes that he is accountable to his brothers and sisters. He is sending Tychicus to give them a full report on his life. We are all accountable to one another. That's why we need to be connected to other Christians in small groups, as mentors and disciples, as prayer partners, and on ministry teams.

In the cartoon strip *Peanuts*, Charlie Brown is sitting on a bean bag enjoying a television show. Lucy shows up and orders him to change the channel. Charlie

responds, "Just what gives you the right to come in here just like that and demand that I change the channel?" Lucy replies, "See this hand. Individually these five fingers aren't much to behold. But organized into a tight fist, they are a force awesome to behold." Charlie Brown sighs and changes the channel.

Individually we are not much to behold, but coming together we are a force awesome to behold. In verse twenty-two, St. Paul says that he is sending Tychicus "...so that he may *encourage* you." The word *encourage* comes from two old words which literally mean "to put courage" into someone. In the heat of battle we sometimes lose courage. We need others to put their arms around us and whisper words of comfort and hope. We need comrades in arms who will push us forward, and remind us that we are more than conquerors in Christ. We need to be surrounded by a band of brothers and sisters who will pick us up when we fall down, and tend to our wounds when we have been shattered by enemy fire.

For me, spiritual warfare is sometimes just getting up in the morning and going on my four-mile walk. My body says, "I'm too tired. Let me skip today and get another hour of sleep." But my head says to the body, "Up and at 'em." The first half mile, the body whimpers, "I'm so stiff and sore." The joints ache and the bone spurs scream in pain. But the head pushes the body on. Halfway through the walk, legs ache and the feet are getting hot from the pavement. But the head says, "We are going to finish." So the face lifts up, shoulders rise, lungs gulp in more air, the heart pumps faster, and feet pick up their pace. With the head in command, and the rest of the body now in synchronized rhythm, the last miles are covered and the finish line crossed. Later the body will thank the head in a thousand ways because it is healthier for battling through to victory.

The Body of Christ is like that. Jesus is the head. He calls us forward into battle. Sometimes we are tired, and just want to sleep in. At other times we are weak and wounded. We want to sit down and give up. But Christ (our head) pushes us forward. So all parts of the body begin to work together and soon we are in a rhythm of all the parts working together. Some day, after we have crossed the finish line and the last battle is behind us, we will thank our Head for pushing us on to victory. And we will thank one another (each part of the body) for helping us to win the battles that we never could have won alone.

All of us at one time were like scraggly trees consigned to the outer darkness of Slat's Grobnik's tree lot. But that first Christmas Jesus came. He hung on the ugliest tree that the world has ever seen, so that we could be redeemed from the outer darkness of sin. He takes us, with all our weak and withered branches, to his home. He puts us together with all the other flawed trees. But, bound together, with all our weaknesses covered by the strengths of others, we make a complete tree that can light up a whole world of darkness.