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Text: Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14-18, Ephesians 6:10-20

Brand New Shoes

Excitement was in the air during the run-up to school at my house. As the oppressive August humidity neared its end, the time for school shopping began. My mother—never turning down an opportunity to keep us busy—typically stretched suiting my brothers and me up for a new school year over several days. There was the stop at Walmart to get pencils, paper, and notebooks. If she determined our backpacks from the year before were too tattered, there was a trip to L.L. Bean in Freeport. Then there was the trip to the Auburn Mall where I would pick out a new outfit or two: a pair of jeans, khaki pants, a t-shirt, a polo.

My absolute favorite part of getting ready for school was picking out a new pair of shoes. I wanted a pair that were sporty enough to run and play in but not so flashy that they would clash too much with any particular outfit. I would agonize over the decision trying on several pair and strutting around the store before finally settling on a pair. Once I picked them out, my mother reminded me that I was not to wear them until the first day. The waiting bred excitement.

When school finally started, I was lucky to have everything I needed and more: new clothes, backpack, supplies, and my beloved new shoes. These gifts were my parents' way of conveying to me that school was serious business. Knowing that I was properly equipped outwardly gave me the inward confidence to face the challenges of a new year.

Knowing how important education is to children's future, parents do their best to equip their kids with all they need to thrive. The risk of doing otherwise is simply too great with all we know about how quality education is connected to achievement, confidence, and good citizenship among countless other things. Parents are generous because they want to give their kids a chance to succeed.

The author of Ephesians depicts God as exceedingly generous from the very beginning of the letter. Just as a mother equips her child for school, God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing" and "the riches" of a "glorious inheritance." God's generosity overflows to equip the Christian for the challenges of life in the world. God entrusts us with the supplies we need to "stand firm" against evil.

To emphasize the gravity of the challenge, the text likens the struggle with the forces of evil to battle. It is a matter of life and death seriousness. It reads, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." The first-century soldier would be foolish to run out onto the battlefield without his belt, breastplate, shield, helmet, and sword. Since the enemy does not fight with conventional weapons, each piece of the panoply God supplies points to a greater virtue. In the face of our daily struggles with evil, we ignore at our own peril God's gifts to us. While they may not serve well in a traditional pitched battle, there is nothing that quite frightens evil like truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and God's Word.

Making sense of the challenge presented by the personification of evil is tricky. The devil is not an equal to God. Evil is a lesser force that seeks to separate us from right relationship with God and one another. To keep us from recognizing our collective power, evil seeks to build up the wall of division Christ has broken down.

In the early 1940s, C.S. Lewis published a playful book, *The Screwtape Letters*, about the very serious topic of evil. It is a series of letters from an elder demon, Screwtape, to his less experienced nephew, Wormwood. The flipped script of referring to God as "the enemy" and the devil as their leader is certainly amusing. Both demons are assigned to an individual, and Screwtape advises Wormwood on how to change small habits in his assigned young man, such as speaking unkindly to his mother and thinking himself superior to others at church. The implication, of course, is that the smaller details of our lives shape our larger character, and doctrine and life should cohere together.

Although most of his focus is on the effects of evil on an individual, evil still works towards a larger goal. In fact, Lewis presents each demon as a deputy in a sprawling bureaucracy whose foremost goal is to deprive humanity of its joy and to feast on its despair. Lewis lays the perfect foundation to show how evil is an organized system that oppresses entire groups, and yet he remains content to focus on how it effects the life of an individual. Perhaps it was his experience serving in World War One and watching World War Two unfold before his eyes that prioritized his focus on rooting out evil in one's personal life. The strength of institutionalized evil in two wars was overwhelming, but how a person could undermine evil's power in his daily life likely seemed more attainable.

The challenges we face today are a complex mix of individual and systemic issues. The news is full of evil playing out on a personal level and systemically, typically at the same time. It just so happens that too often the people who are best at analyzing institutionalized evil are inept when it comes to the personal. Likewise, those who can clearly articulate ethics of personal behavior are lacking in their awareness of institutions. This creates a fertile environment for evil to thrive on both fronts while onlookers debate the true character of the problem.

To focus on one approach, either the personal or institutional, would be to our own peril. The text reads, "For 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." In short, the problem is far more complex than we thought. We are dealing with more than just a few bad apples; we are engaging a disease that is keeping the joy of all of creation from coming into fruition.

With all of this talk of evil, my goal is not to scare you or to leave you depressed. In his preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors." He encourages a healthy balance of taking evil in the world seriously but refusing to let it overwhelm. After all, God has not abandoned us. God is always present as a loving parent making sure we have what we need. The gifts of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and God's Word still hold power.

Trusting in God's ability to equip and protect us from the forces of evil is at the heart of our reading from Joshua. Joshua recounts the story of God's people escaping slavery in Egypt, making a way out of no way in the wilderness, before defeating a hostile enemy to reclaim the land promised to their ancestors. When Joshua proclaims, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord," he puts his faith in God for the future because of what God has already done.

For the rest of us, God has shown us the magnitude of his generous love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Following Christ's footsteps, we will have both clashes with evil and holy encounters with life-giving goodness before we finally reside in God's love. God has equipped us with everything we need for the battles along the journey.

To face the challenge, we are best prepared when we envision the measured excitement of a child with everything she needs to go off to school. Backpack. Check. New shoes. Check. The loving support of a parent. Check.

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