

See the Spiritual Struggle

"The Relationship Initiative" Series, May 16 & 17, 2026 | Ephesians 6:10-20
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A hidden enemy undermines every relationship you value.

All I have left of my best friend from seminary is a pair of saltshakers and memories.

He, his wife, Tammi, and I were inseparable in seminary. After seminary, we vacationed together for years. My oldest son is named after him. His oldest son is named after me. Then we stopped hearing from them, and we eventually discovered that they had divorced. He recently moved out of the country. Before he moved, I got a box in the mail from him. In it was this pair of saltshakers Tammi and I had given them decades ago. I don't have any answers about what happened or why, but an enemy we can't see or name has done something awful.

You may think you're looking your enemy in the eye.

This series on relationships has focused on marriages, family, and work. If you add friendships, these are our closest, most important relationships. These relationships matter deeply, but they have the most tension and conflict. Ironically, when conflict with someone we love gets heated or drags on, it's easy to start looking at them as the problem. They're the reason we're unhappy. They're the enemy. That's what we tell ourselves. But we've picked the wrong enemy.

The enemy undermining your relationships is unseen and hidden.

Paul pulls the veil back on a spiritual world we cannot see—a world where powerful enemies prefer to remain hidden. Those enemies seek to hurt God by hurting you, and the best way to do that is by tearing into your marriages, families, and friends. That's the bad news. The Good News is that in the unseen spiritual world, there is help. God does not leave us unarmed or undefended. First, we have to accept that there is more to reality than we can see.

An unseen spiritual world shapes the world you see.

Paul pulls back the veil hiding it in Ephesians 6:10-13:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

The spiritual world is "right here, just beyond what we can see".

That's different from what we usually think. Most people think of heaven as "up there" and of hell as "down there". But heaven isn't in the sky, and hell is not in the earth's fiery core. The spiritual world instead is just out of sight. There is a great deal to creation that is just beyond our sight. It's not that

different from the way that when we study the sky, infrared radiation shows us that there is more in the sky than we can see. For instance, here is a picture of a nebula in the sky, taken using a lens that sees visible light. Here is picture of that same section of sky seen in infrared. Infrared telescopes pierce through dust and obstacles revealing that there **is** more—much more—than we **can** see with our eyes; the same patch of sky suddenly explodes with stars when seen in infrared.¹ In the same way, a spiritual world is very close but unseen. After Jesus rose from the dead, He ascended into heaven. It's as if He stepped to the other side of a veil. He didn't disappear into space. He rose from the ground and then was hidden from our view. He's still there, but He's in the spiritual world.

The spiritual world teems with awe-inspiring, powerful beings.

The prophet Isaiah saw some of them. In chapter 6, the prophet saw into the Heavenly Temple where the train on the Lord's robe dominated his sight. He saw heavenly beings surrounding the Lord. In **Isaiah 6:2** we read about some of them,

Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

If earth is filled with creatures—birds, bugs, fish, wild animals, domesticated animals, and people—imagine what wonders fill heaven! But there is another side to it.

The devil commands hosts of demons.

Satan appears or is hinted at in multiple places in the Bible. But Jesus says clearly in **Luke 10:18**,

... "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."

What He said answers so many questions. Satan is not equal to God; he is a created being who rebelled and was cast out of heaven, and he lives in ongoing, active rebellion against God. In the New Testament, we see demons—evil spirits who clearly answer to Satan—at work in the physical world, but we also see Jesus and the apostles casting them out and sending them back into the spiritual realm. We also know that Satan and the demons have the same end that is prepared for everyone who resists God. In **Revelation 20:10** we read,

... and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur ...

That's his future. For now, spiritual beings—good and evil—exist in the unseen spiritual world, and that has consequences in our world.

When I was on a mission trip to Honduras, I sensed this unseen spiritual world.

I was working in a small town in the mountains. There were missionaries from another religion in the town. They were non-Christians looking to trap more people in their false religion. I recognized them instantly by their clothing. Repeatedly, I would be in town working or shopping and have a sensation that something behind me was wrong. Each time I had the sensation, I turned around, and there stood the missionaries. I became convinced that something evil, unseen, and spiritual was working through them, leaving a mark.

Unseen spiritual battles reshape our relationships.

The devil prowls around, seeking to devour you.

¹ <https://science.nasa.gov/mission/hubble/science/science-behind-the-discoveries/wavelengths/>

1 Peter 5:8 puts it succinctly,

... Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Satan (or the Devil) is the enemy of God. He seeks to hurt God by hurting us. He wages a guerilla war against God by attacking you. It's a fight for your soul, and he often attacks by turning the relationships that matter most to us into battlegrounds.

Picture how the White Witch tempted Edmund in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, four siblings crawl through a fur-filled wardrobe into Narnia—a land ruled by an evil White Witch whose power made it always winter but never Christmas. After their first visit, things soured. One of the siblings, Edmund, began to feel what we might sometimes feel—left out and overlooked. Sulking, he returned to Narnia where he met the White Witch. She praised him for being special. She offered him something to eat, and he chose Turkish Delight. He ate one piece of the enchanted candy and then wanted more and more. She promised him more and that he would be a prince if he brought his siblings to her. He agreed, effectively betraying them. Look at how she pulled the siblings apart! The White Witch is a skillful picture of the Devil. In the story, the four children together were destined to break the White Witch's power. Had she gotten all four of them, Narnia might have been hers forever!

A "simple" relationship problem may have a darker cause.

If a wife feels unloved and tempted to cheat, the temptation is probably more than a husband working late. Often the enemy has been stirring resentment and feelings of loneliness. If a son is drawn away from the faith and from the family, the enemy has probably been lurking around, placing doubts in his mind and bitterness in his heart. Even a misunderstanding that leads to a bit of anger can grow into an opportunity for the devil to destroy. **Ephesians 4:26-27** says,

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

Do you ever wonder why it happens that you seem to be drawing closer to God than ever, serving Him with your whole heart, and it is at that very moment that work erupts into conflict? The enemy is clever and determined.

Even an unseen enemy can be deadly.

In the early 1900s, after radium was discovered, someone invented a glow-in-the-dark paint using radium. They thought to use it on wristwatches and clock dials so people could see the time in the dark. U. S. Radium Corporation hired dozens of young women to paint wristwatch and clock dials with radium paint. They instructed the young women to moisten the paint brushes in their mouths to keep the tips pointed and keep the paint from drying. By the end of a workday, their hands, faces, arms, necks, and clothes all glowed in the dark. The company told the girls that it was perfectly safe. But within a few years, the women began to get sick. Their bones broke, their teeth fell out, and their spines collapsed. Many of them died.² We don't always see the thing that seeks to destroy us—but it can still be deadly.

² <https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/radium-girls/>

Paranoia isn't the point; what is?

First, awareness. We want to be wide awake to the reality of an unseen spiritual world and of beings in that world who intend to harm us. Second, preparation. We want to be ready for the attacks of the enemy, and God has provided us with protection. That's where Paul turns our attention next.

Let's suit up in our spiritual armor.

Paul lays out our spiritual armor in Ephesians 6:14-17:

Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God ...

What superhero can fight without a super-suit?

In the 2004 Disney-Pixar film, *The Incredibles*, super-powered people are trying to live ordinary lives. They're trying to hold down regular jobs and raise families. Sometimes, threats come along, and a hero has to do what a hero has to do. But a hero can't spring into action without their super-suit. That's where Edna Mode comes in. Edna designs and tailors super-suits for super-heroes. They have to stretch with stretchy heroes, not burst into flame for heroes who shoot flames, and hold together for super-fast heroes. No hero steps into a fight without their super-suit. No Christian should step into a spiritual fight without theirs.

This armor effectively protects us when the enemy strikes.

Our spiritual armor is useful for storming the gates of Hell, but it also protects us. Take the shield of faith. Paul says that it is designed to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. His description comes straight out of ancient warfare. Enemies would shoot arrows covered in flammable material into the air so they would rain down and panic an army. If you were hit by such an arrow, you would instantly panic. Even if you had a shield, if you caught a flaming arrow, you would almost certainly throw the shield down and become vulnerable. This shield is unique. It takes the flaming arrows of the evil one and instantly quenches them. That means that God is offering us sturdy, reliable protection from the attacks that hit us again and again.

This armor effectively protects our critical relationships.

When we recognize that our marriages are strained, we think first about how this might be a spiritual attack and pick up the shield of faith. When our children struggle, we turn first to truth. When we are in a conflict at work and worry about our reputation, we remember that we are sons and daughters of God, saved by Jesus Christ, and that nothing can change that; it's like a helmet protecting our minds.

How does one suit up?

This is much easier than you might think because it's not a magical process. There is no incantation involved, no special training you need. The armor that God offers us is the everyday stuff of following Jesus. What will protect us from the attacks of the enemy? Knowing God's truth. Living righteously and being filled with God's righteousness. Knowing and sharing the Gospel. Having faith. Being saved.

Knowing and applying the Bible. Simply put, Paul is telling us to live faithfully. If we put our spiritual lives on the shelf, we will never be prepared for what is coming at us. But if we take care of our spiritual lives regularly, we will be ready. No matter what. But there is one particularly important piece of armor: our spiritual family.

Let's stand with our spiritual family.

Paul summons his spiritual family to pray in Ephesians 6:18-20:

... praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, or which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Paul relied on his spiritual family.

He called his brothers and sisters reading this letter to pray for each other—and for him. He was in prison preparing for trial, and he asked them to pray that God would give him the right words to say when the time came. Paul needed their prayers, and he needed them.

Look around at your spiritual family.

The church is a spiritual family. We are brothers and sisters to one another when we are followers of Jesus and children of God. Like any family, we are here for each other. Like any family, we need each other. Alone and on our own, we are weak and exposed. Together and with God's power at work among us, we are much, much stronger—far more prepared to stand firm, no matter what the enemy sends at us.

Armed, we're like a phalanx—a formation that once conquered the world.

Alexander the Great's father perfected the phalanx. Men were armored, carried shields, and held pikes 18-20 feet long. They were put in rows up to 16 ranks deep. Enemies met a wall of spears that was almost impossible to break. It was also incredibly effective in combat. Alexander's armies used it to conquer most of the known world. Together. It's a comforting, confidence-building picture of the Church.

If we want all our relationships to thrive, let's stand together!

None of us wants to look back at the most important relationships in our lives and be left with nothing but a pair of saltshakers and memories. We want marriages, families, work relationships, and friendships that thrive. That's what we believe God has planned for us and what God makes possible. But we face an enemy determined to undermine us. So, let's put on our God-given super-suits. Let's lock arms with our spiritual family and pray like our prayers move heaven and touch earth.