

## Against Cosmic Powers

**Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69; I Kings 8:22-24, 27-30, 41-43**

### **I Kings 8:22-24, 27-30, 41-43**

<sup>22</sup>Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. <sup>23</sup>He said,

“O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, <sup>24</sup>the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand.

<sup>27</sup>“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

<sup>28</sup>Regard your servant’s prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; <sup>29</sup>that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you said, ‘My name shall be there,’ that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place.

<sup>30</sup>Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

<sup>41</sup>“Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name <sup>42</sup>—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, <sup>43</sup>then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.”

## **John 6:56-69**

[Jesus said,] <sup>56</sup>“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

<sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me,  
and I live because of the Father,  
so whoever eats me will live because of me.

<sup>58</sup>This is the bread that came down from heaven,  
not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died.  
But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

<sup>59</sup>He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup>When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept this?”

<sup>61</sup>But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you?”

<sup>62</sup>Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup>It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup>But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him.

<sup>65</sup>And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

<sup>66</sup>Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

<sup>67</sup>So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”

<sup>68</sup>Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup>We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

<sup>10</sup>Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

<sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

<sup>12</sup>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.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore 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.

<sup>14</sup>Stand therefore,  
and fasten the belt of truth around your waist,  
and put on the breastplate of righteousness.

<sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet  
put on whatever will make you ready  
to proclaim the gospel of peace.

<sup>16</sup>With all of these,  
take the shield of faith,  
with which you will be able  
to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

<sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation,  
and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

<sup>18</sup>Pray 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.

<sup>19</sup>Pray 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,  
<sup>20</sup>for which I am an ambassador in chains.  
Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

### Prayer

O God, in the lonely, lonely night,  
I rely on you.

When I am lost and alone and afraid,  
you are a refuge for me;  
I know I can go to you and find safety,  
that you will comfort me in my wailing,  
or listen patiently as I unspool my tangled thoughts to you,  
or let me sit in silence while I think some things through.

When I need your attention,  
though you watch over the swirling of the galaxies  
and attend to the prayers of seven billion human lives,  
you give me welcome.

Christ our Savior,  
in the lonely and isolating night,  
when I feel sure that I am lost to my loneliness  
and without a friend, you knock on my door.

You don't let me off the hook for the decisions I make or the life I live.  
But even as you make your righteous demands  
and I know I am found wanting,  
you tell me I'm accepted, you remind me that I belong to you—  
and you don't give up on the possibility that I can be and do better,  
for you and for the people of this world.

Spirit of Holiness, you assign and equip me to take risks.

Like a kindergartner heading off to her first day of school,  
you wrap me in truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation,  
and send me out into the world,  
safe with the light and strength  
of your comforting, challenging,  
love-building, barrier-crashing word.

Let me never forget, O God,

that I have that most precious gift at my disposal:  
a light to shine in dark places,  
a full canteen in dry and waterless deserts,  
an endless supply of fresh and nourishing bread for the journey.

Hold us all close, O God; we trust, we rely on you.

And with those lonely fishermen of old times, we pray simply:  
O God, watch over us;  
for your ocean is so vast  
and our vessel so small. Amen.

### The Sermon

Late one starlit night, centuries before electricity obscured the night skies, somewhere in the Mediterranean world, a Jewish Christian stood under the glowing celestial dome of the heavens.

Weary from the beatings and the expulsions and the death threats and the imprisonments, none of which were unknown to the first generations of Christians, that one person stood under the night sky and contemplated how small, how fragile, how absolutely susceptible we are to whatever an unknowably endless universe might throw at us. And that early Christian contemplated how we got here.

*In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth,  
the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,*

*while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

*Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.  
And God saw that the light was good;  
and God separated the light from the darkness.*

The astronomer Carl Sagan once said that the first step in making an apple pie from scratch is that somebody has to invent the universe.<sup>i</sup>

*God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Genesis 1:1ff).*

That’s the Biblical way to talk about how God invented the universe.

The scientific way is called the Big Bang, the idea that all the mass in the whole universe—every one of the hundreds of billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars, many home to untold numbers of planets; comets, asteroids, the Starship Enterprise... Everything in the known physical universe was once, at its conception, for the tiniest fragment of an instant, compressed into a tiny speck, according to the predominant theory, and exploded outward to form what we in the present lifetime call the cosmos.

For that matter, that one original speck didn’t just show up in the middle of a vast emptiness. As Robert M. Hazen has written, “Our universe did not suddenly appear where there was only vacuum before... Before the Big Bang, there was nothing to be empty in.”<sup>ii</sup> There was no space—or, for that matter, time. There was absolutely nothing; then, suddenly, there was something; then there was what you and I know as everything.

*And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”*

(So the idea was that the world is like a bubble in a universe of wild, endless water.) *So God made the dome and separated the waters that*

*were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day (Genesis 1:1-8).*

And now we're on our way to somebody making that apple pie from scratch.

The point is: something cosmic is happening. And we are in it, and it's all around us. We brush our teeth, check our messages, put gas in the car, decide what to have for dinner—the daily stuff of being a functioning human—

while a vast cosmos looms,  
over our heads and far beyond where we can see or imagine.

David Christian talks about relatively recent, scientifically measurable findings that the universe is not only expanding, but doing so, bafflingly, at an accelerating rate. In fact the galaxies are moving further out, and for some reason going faster and faster.<sup>iii</sup>

That's the scientific way to talk about it.

The human way to talk about it sounds much more like the letter to the Ephesians, which starts off:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing  
in the heavenly places,  
just as he chose us in Christ  
before the foundation of the world  
to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph 1:3-4).*

Under those heavenly places, where God is blessing us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, we live our lives. We make decisions on what to do, and who we want to be, and how we want to be remembered, and

what we will want to be able to say when we are united face to face with our creator.

We set the course of our lives, and map out where we want to go, and if we have enough freedom and opportunity to do so, we set out on the way.

But that Jewish Christian, writing just one or two or three decades after Jesus went to the cross and came back to commission the disciples, knew what it was like to be waylaid, repeatedly; and to suffer for one's beliefs and practices, even if those beliefs were that God is love and we are made in God's image to love and serve the world; and even if those practices were to remember Jesus healing and feeding and teaching and saying, "go and do likewise"<sup>iv</sup>—"feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep."<sup>v</sup>

But with all the suffering and pain that a follower of Christ could run into for doing that mission, that early Christian, somewhere in the Mediterranean, didn't launch into a militant crusade against the people who rejected that message, but wrote to other Christians facing the same daunting challenges, and reminded them:

"Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh,  
but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,  
against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."

In that Christian's mind, something cosmic is going on, and its ramifications are impacting our lives and decisions.

For some reason, I'm reminded of that part of the Don Quixote story, where with just himself and his sidekick, he sees monsters, thirty or forty "hulking giants," waving their arms wildly, and decides bravely to charge after them, "and," he says to Sancho Panza, "the removal of so foul a brood from off the face of the earth is a service God will bless."

And Sancho Panza says to Don Quixote, “Yeah, um...those are windmills.”<sup>vi</sup>

It’s not that this person who wrote what we call the Letter to the Ephesians is tilting at windmills by looking to the cosmic powers of this present darkness.

It’s that they have the courage to get up, and get dressed, and go out to face them.

“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.

Put on the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. For shoes, put on whatever will help you proclaim the gospel of peace. Take the shield of faith, by which you will quench anything the evil one can throw at you. And the helmet to protect your head is salvation.

A long time ago I was, for reasons I forget, sitting in a fundamentalist church somewhere listening to a fundamentalist preacher. And I was sitting there thinking, “Come on, what am I gonna get from this guy,” and he was preaching about the whole armor of God, and I just thought, “Aw, come on.”

And then he pointed something out that maybe everybody else already realized, but I hadn’t thought about it before. He said that all of that armor—breastplate, shield, helmet—all of that is defensive.

The one and only offensive tool—think about that word; remember the disciples were *offended* by Jesus’ teaching—the only implement to go forward with in the whole armor is just one thing: the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

All of those other parts of the armor are for defending against the vast, mysterious, awesome, terrifying might of whatever cosmic powers were

out there in a vast, untameable universe that just keeps going faster and faster.

But the one thing to go charging into the world with is the word of God:

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?”

“Love one another, just as I have loved you.”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

It turns out there is yet another way to talk about the very beginning of the universe.

*In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.*

*He was in the beginning with God.*

*All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.*

*What has come into being in him was life,  
and the life was the light of all people.*

*The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness did not overcome it.*

(John 1:1-5)

The catastrophes of this world—your world—sometimes seem like they could only be the workings of a great cosmic force that’s out to get you.

They can dishearten even the most dedicated and faithful Christian.

Today, we're being invited, by that solitary Christian under the Mediterranean night sky, to make the decisions about how we're going to live in this world, not in fear, but in faith, hope, and love.

We're being invited to trust that in Christ we have been given what we need in order to do what we're here for, which is to take God's truth and beauty into the world.

Underneath those cosmic heavenly places, we go out into this regular, everyday, broken, beautiful, terrifying world, and do what we are sent and equipped to do.

Her name was Anna Coleman Ladd; she was a noted portrait artist and sculptor born in the late 1800s. During World War I, she found out about the work of an English sculptor named Francis Derwent Wood who had gone to volunteer in a war hospital and seen the facial injuries of the young people coming back from the trenches.

After meeting with Wood, Anna Coleman Ladd founded the American Red Cross Studio for Portrait-Masks, taking young men disfigured by war, studying photographs of each one from before the war, painstakingly making molds of their faces, creating a mask for each one, painting it the exact hue of the man's face, adding real facial hair, just like theirs.

She said she wanted to give them their lives back.

When they came home from the front, their faces mangled by shrapnel, fire and bullets, even after they had healed, they didn't want to be seen by their mothers and fathers, their spouses, their children, their friends and hometown neighbors.<sup>vii</sup>

With skill and persistence and care and what can only be called love,

she touched the faces of people who had been sent into the appalling meat grinder of World War I and worked to give them something of their lives back: their dignity, their presence, their faces.

She looked at people who for all intents and purposes no longer had what you and I would recognize as faces, and rather than turn away in revulsion—do you also wish to go away?—she saw the person behind the face, and helped to give them back what had been taken from them by the cruelest machinations of the world.

It was a singular skill that she had, put to the use of compassion.

And the difference that she made in a few people's lives resonated through the universe with cosmic implications.

“O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you  
in heaven above or on earth beneath.  
Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you.  
Regard your servant's prayer and plea,  
that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house.  
O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.”

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Montreat, NC  
August 26, 2018

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<sup>i</sup> The actual quote is: “To make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*, quoted in David Christian, *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything* (p. 17). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert M. Hazen, *The Story of Earth: The First 4.5 Billion Years* (New York: Viking, 2012), 7

<sup>iii</sup> David Christian, *Origin Story: A Big History of Everything* (pp. 31-32). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

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<sup>iv</sup> Luke 10:37

<sup>v</sup> John 21:15-17

<sup>vi</sup> Cervantes, Don Quixote, Part 1, Chapter VIII. “Of the valourous Don Quixote's success in the dreadful and never before imagined Adventure of the Windmills, with other events worthy of happy record”

<sup>vii</sup> <https://nowthisnews.com/videos/news/anna-coleman-ladd-made-masks-for-wounded-world-war-i-veterans>