

LOVED INDEED

*Reassurance for the
Doubting and Suspicious*

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PART 1

*Our Battle and
Our Strength*

OUR BATTLE

One of the darkest nights of my soul began on a late-night flight home from Ethiopia in January 2008. I was returning from visiting an orphanage in Shashamane, a town about five hours south of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

I have visited many countries and encountered much spiritual darkness. But never have I felt what I can only describe as demonic oppression as intensely as I experienced it on that trip.

On every one of the six flights that it took to get home, I struggled profoundly with what I have just shared in the Introduction: personally experiencing God's love. With great ease, it seemed, the Evil One was building against me what seemed like an ironclad case.¹ Or, to change the metaphor, it almost felt as if he had me in his jaws and would not let me go.

1 Scripture identifies the "Evil One" as Satan or the devil (Matt. 13:19; John 17:15; Eph. 6:16). He is an adversary who relentlessly labors to deceive and ravage us as God's image bearers (John 8:44; 1 Pet. 5:8).

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I was already familiar with my vulnerability in this area, yet every time I attempted to rehearse the gospel to myself, quoting text after text of Scripture as I flew over the darkness of Africa, I found no help, no encouragement.² I had been robbed of every vestige of comfort, and I felt utterly powerless to do anything about it. During those many lonely hours in the black sky, my powerlessness felt increasingly like hopelessness.

Six flights of physically debilitating doubt would have been bad enough, but each also included something I had never experienced before: a panic attack. It was as though my physical symptoms were matching my internal sense of hopelessness. Adrenaline pumped through my body almost the entire thirty-six hours it took to travel home. And the day after I landed, I came down with a 102-degree fever. This went on for seven days, with the fever hovering between 101 and 103.

David's words eloquently describe the kind of effect that the intensity of this struggle had upon me: "I am in distress; my eye is *wasted* from grief; *my soul and my body also*" (Ps. 31:9, emphasis added). That trip was a battle. Not only in the sense that it was a terrible struggle to endure, but in that evil spiritual forces seemed to have aligned themselves against me in a coordinated and sustained attack. I was not merely wrestling against my own sin, weakness, and unbelief, but against a spiritual enemy determined to devour me.

Sabotaged versus seeing and savouring

This battle that waged against me was, in short, a battle for love.

² I share more detail about this experience and how God met me in it in chapter 3 of Dan Cruver, ed., *Reclaiming Adoption: Missional Living through the Rediscovery of Abba Father* (Minneapolis, MN: Cruciform Press, 2011), 33–48.

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Not so much for my love for God, either to win or to steal it, but a ruthless battle *against* the Father's love for me: with the aim that I would never again know it, enjoy it, or rest in it.

As I have shared my experience with other believers over the years, I have come to realize that this type of struggle is all too common among Christians (1 Cor. 10:13). Yet the adversary who wages this war against us seeks to isolate us and make us feel like we are fighting all alone: he wants us to believe that our struggles are unique and that no one else can understand what we are going through.

This couldn't be further from the truth. Others suffer too, as we know. And no matter what we are facing, we can take comfort in the fact that God is with us always (Deut. 31:6). It is therefore absolutely crucial that we resist the enemy's lies and cling to the truth of God's Word.

As the great Puritan John Owen wrote, our enemy knows that "God must be revealed unto us as lovely and desirable, as a fit and suitable object unto the soul to set up its rest upon, *before we can bear any love unto him.*"³ If Satan can prevent us from seeing and savouring the desirable and wonderful love of the Father for us,⁴ he knows he will sabotage any expression of our love for our Father in return. So, if you are convinced the Father doesn't love you, then, naturally, there is no way you will ever love him back. If you don't actively run from him, then you will at least avoid him.

Have you ever found yourself avoiding God, even when you

3 John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 120, emphasis added.

4 To understand the importance of seeing and savouring, read John Piper's *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

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knew you really should seek him out? Perhaps you were convinced that God didn't love you, and as a result you kept your distance. The truth is that God loves you with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3), and he desires to reveal himself to you as a lovely and desirable object for your soul to rest upon.

No book in the Bible speaks more directly about the battle for love, as I like to call it, than Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This book is unique in its ability to shed light on the importance of understanding and experiencing the transformative love of the Father. In the first three chapters, Paul emphasizes the Father's love for us and the significance of our relationship with him. This understanding is crucial to our ability to love him in return, a topic Paul addresses in the final three chapters. This teaching has been a lifeline to me.

Unfortunately, our enemy understands all too well the significance of this battle, so much so that he will do anything in his power to prevent us from experiencing the Father's transformative love. He knows that if he can rob us of the realities detailed in the first half of Ephesians, we will be unable to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called" (4:1). In other words, if the enemy can prevent us from understanding and experiencing the Father's love, then he can prevent us from living a life of Christian purpose and fulfillment. It's that serious!

Are you tired of feeling that resting in the Father's love is a constant battle? You don't have to fight alone, for in this letter to the Ephesians, Paul provides us with the tools we need to overcome the struggle and experience true, transformative love. By immersing ourselves in God's Word and meditating on the Father's unconditional love for us, we can equip ourselves

to love him back and live lives of purpose and joy. Trust me, this journey is worth taking, and I'll be there to cheer you on!

A battle—really?

At this point, you may be wondering if a battle is really being waged against you. *Of course it's a battle*, you may think, *in that I often find myself struggling to believe that the Father loves me. But is it really a battle against me by some cosmic power? That seems too ... well, too cosmically fantastical to be true. Isn't my struggle due more to my own sin and weakness than to the schemes of the devil? Isn't blaming the Evil One just a way to make excuses?*

I'm certainly not saying here that our sin and unbelief have nothing to do with our struggle. And, speaking personally, my sin and unbelief do indeed work against me in this battle. They are not my allies any more than your sin and unbelief are yours. Your spiritual failures are problems—big ones, as are mine.

But there is much more going on in this struggle than just what is wrong with you. Paul's point at the end of Ephesians is that there are evil spiritual forces ever working to use your spiritual failures against you:

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,*

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and having done all, to stand firm. 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, 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, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Eph. 6:10–20, emphasis added)

So, as you can see, the war for your soul isn't just an internal struggle between your passions and God's truth. There is a much bigger spiritual battle being waged by the devil and his minions. Paul speaks of cosmic powers that seek to undermine your relationship with God. The devil is a cunning adversary, always ready to exploit your weaknesses and sins to keep you from experiencing the fullness of the Father's love for you.

We noted earlier John Owen's appreciation of the significance of the battle for love. He was not ignorant of the Evil One's hellish schemes against you, schemes designed to make you doubt God:

Flesh and blood is apt to have very hard thoughts of [the Father]—to think he is always angry, yea, implacable; that

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it is not for poor creatures to draw nigh to him ... Now, there is not anything ... more subservient to the design of Satan upon the soul, than such thoughts as these. Satan claps his hands (if I may say so) when he can take up the soul with such thoughts of God: he has enough—all that he does desire.

Satan sows the seeds of fear and tricks you into thinking it is presumptuous to believe what God himself has told you:

Men are afraid to have good thoughts of God. They think it a boldness to eye God as good, gracious, tender, kind, loving ... Is this not soul-deceit from Satan? Was it not his design from the beginning to inject such thoughts of God?

And what response to such deceit does Owen propose?

Assure thyself, then, there is nothing more acceptable unto the Father than for us to keep our hearts unto him as the eternal fountain of all that rich grace which flows out to sinners in the blood of Jesus.⁵

Hope in your battle

Encouragingly, in the midst of this, Paul's main concern for us in Ephesians is to enable us to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might" (6:10).

By now, you may be starting to realize more fully that many

5 John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 126–28.

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of your doubts and suspicions about the Father's loving disposition towards you owe their existence to "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (v. 12). Once I began to realize that myself, I began to feel hope again, for if the devil is ever working to make us doubt the Father's love for us, and if God has already provided a way for us to defeat those doubts, then we have every reason to feel hope again. Right now. At this very moment.

As we delve deeper into the topic of spiritual warfare and the doubts that may arise in our minds, note the rich words from the opening of Ephesians reminding us of the incredible spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ. Allow these truths to sink in and renew your hope and confidence in the Father's unending love for you:

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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace*, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been

predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, *to the praise of his glory*. (Eph. 1:3–14, emphasis added)

Everything your Father has done for you was done “to the praise of his glorious grace” (v. 6) or “to the praise of his glory” (vv. 12, 14). The Father’s ultimate purpose was to bring glory and honor to his name—that was his intention in lavishing all the riches of his grace upon you (v. 8).

But you may be wondering at this point what “to the praise of his glorious grace” actually looks like in your experience. How do you know when you are praising the Father’s great grace, as he intends for you to do?

Awe and wonder

As he shares what the Father has done to reveal his lavish love for you, Paul intends this opening section of Ephesians to cause your heart to go, “Father, the fact that you have loved me in Christ before the foundation of the world is astounding news. What love! You did all this for *me*?”

When that happens in your heart, you are praising the Father’s glorious grace: *What, Father, you love me like that? How can it be? What lavish grace!*

The letter to the Ephesians begins with the Father’s inten-

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tions (ch. 1) and concludes with the devil's (ch. 6). Your Father intends you to enjoy the worship-filled and joy-overflowing assurance of his love for you. He wants you to rest and rejoice in his love. By contrast, your enemy intends that you live in doubt and suspicion. He wants you to crumble under the weight of it all.

One of my favourite singer-songwriters is Laura Story. She is able to write songs that are at the same time theologically rooted and deeply personal. Many of these are inspired by her own experiences and struggles, and they draw you in with their strong focus on faith, hope, and joy in the good news of the gospel.

I attended one of Laura's concerts some time ago, and she told us the moving story of her husband Martin's battle with a brain tumour about a year or so after they got married. Before surgery, the neurosurgeon told them that Martin might wake up after surgery not remembering anything about his life. Not his parents. Not her. Not anyone. Terrifying!

The day of Martin's surgery arrives. After long hours of waiting and wondering, he is finally taken to recovery. When Laura walks in, she wonders if Martin will remember her. But to her great surprise, as she later recalls, "As soon as our eyes met, he said, 'You're Laura Story.' And I thought, 'Oh, good; he remembers me.' And then I could tell he was a little confused, and he said, 'What are you doing here?'"⁶

Yes, Martin remembered her, but not as his wife. He knew she was the well-known singer-songwriter and childhood friend, but he had no idea that they were married. "Laura," he

6 Laura and Martin Story share this account in a two-part podcast hosted by Focus on the Family Broadcast, "Finding Unexpected Blessings in Marriage" (April 11 and 12, 2017).

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exclaimed, “you came to see *me*?” The thought that such a special person had come to visit him filled him with awe and wonder.

That’s something of what we are to feel as we meditate upon Paul’s opening words in Ephesians. God, who made us, loves us. God, who owns all things (Deut. 10:14–15), chose us. And he sent his Son to save us and his Spirit to indwell us. God, who rules the universe, came to see us. He came to see *you*. Laura’s song “O Love of God” seeks to evoke that same kind of awe and wonder within us by inviting us to contemplate the fact that God does indeed love us—not because we deserve it, but because he gives us his love as a free gift:

O love of God, strong and true,
In my barren soul a river running through.
O love of God, swift and straight,
You have washed away my sin and leave no trace.
River, rise and carry me away
I see You in the stars above
I feel You in the earth below
In waves that swell, in winds that blow
I marvel at the mystery
That One so great could love someone like me
Undeserved and free
O love of God
O love of God⁷

7 “O Love of God.” Writer credits: Cindy Morgan, Ian Cron, and Laura Story. © 2013 Checkpointchicky Music (BMI) / Seems Like Music (BMI) / Brownie Hawkeye Music (BMI) (all admin. by BMG Rights Mgmt. c/o Music Services) / New Spring Publishing (ASCAP) / Laura Stories (ASCAP). All rights for the world on behalf of Laura Stories admin. by New Spring Publishing. All rights reserved.

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This is the great truth that the Evil One wants you to doubt. Resist him! How very kind and gracious of the Father to give you a letter like Ephesians so that you are strengthened for those times when this struggle rages. You are *loved indeed*.

So, how do you prepare yourself for those dark times in your life? That's what we will now consider.