

“Be Strong in the Lord”

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Ephesians 6:10-20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

AN AMBASSADOR IN CHAINS

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he was an ambassador for Christ,
but he was also an “ambassador in chains”. (20)

What good is an ambassador if he is in chains?
An ambassador in chains has no influence at all.
At least that’s what you would think.

But, according to Paul, an ambassador for Christ still has an opportunity to speak effectively, even in prison. (19)

An ambassador for Christ is empowered by God. (10)

And what seems to be weak and foolish can prove to be, in the long run, the strength and wisdom of God.

How can this be?

How can an ambassador in chains effectively proclaim the gospel?

Paul reminds the Ephesians that it's not all up to us.

In difficult circumstances, power and strength come from the Lord.

In verse 10 we read,

“... be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.”

Paul was in the firm grip of Roman power.

He was in chains.

No doubt a Roman soldier was stationed to guard him.

One commentator suggested that maybe the apostle was even chained to a Roman soldier as he wrote this letter to the Ephesians.

How could Paul possibly write about God's grace while being chained to a Roman soldier?

“Be strong in the Lord.”

That's the message Paul wanted to preach to a tiny beleaguered church.

But, how?

How could they be strong in the Lord when it looked like Rome was winning the battle?

THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

Well, actually,
that soldier to whom Paul was chained,
that person who represented the power
and might of Rome,

...became one of Paul's most effective sermon illustrations!

Looking at the armor worn by his Roman guard, Paul wrote,

“Put on the whole armor of God,
so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”

This armor is not something that we fashion for ourselves.

The armor comes from God.

Notice that Paul doesn't underestimate the power of evil. All of us are in a
spiritual struggle,
whether we know it or not.

And we struggle against more than flesh and blood.

We struggle against “the rulers,
against the authorities,
against the cosmic powers of this present darkness,
against the spiritual forces of evil...”

Paul makes it plain.

On our own we cannot stand against evil.

Left to our own devices evil will knock us down every time.

But, by the grace of God,
we can stand when evil tries to knock us down

We can stand because we trust in what God has already done for us in
Christ Jesus.

“Be strong in the Lord.”

Stand on the promises of God in Christ.
“Put on the whole armor of God.”

THE BELT OF TRUTH

So how do we dress for this spiritual battle?
First, we fasten the “belt of truth” around our waste.

The first tool of the evil one is to suggest
that truth is relative.
Something may be true for you,
but maybe it’s not true for me.

When Pontus Pilate interviewed Jesus,
the One who was the very essence of truth,
Pilate made it plain that he didn’t believe in truth.

He asked,
“What is truth?”

I hear echoes of Pilate in the world today.
People still ask, “What is truth?”

Evil gains a foothold when people deny the truth.
And this is especially true in the church.

Sometimes a truth is hard to hear.
It’s been in the news.
Religious leaders failed to confront a hard truth.

And that has proved to be very destructive to everyone involved.
It has allowed evil to get a foothold.

The answer is this:
When you get dressed in the morning,
make sure you put on the belt of truth.

Truth is not an illusion.
Truth, God’s truth is the foundation of the church.

Jesus had a lot to say about the truth.
He said that the “truth shall make you free”.
(John 8:32)

God’s Spirit is the Spirit of Truth. (John 14:17)

But, how can we know the truth in a world of competing claims?
Truth is defined by Jesus.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life...”

We dedicate ourselves to this Truth.
We dedicate ourselves to the love and justice of God
as revealed in the life of Jesus.

Indeed this is how we measure truth.
How does a particular belief or action square
with what we know about God in the life of Christ?

That’s truth.

BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

And we live accordingly.
This is what it means to put on the breastplate of righteousness.

One definition of righteousness is to put the truth of God into practice.

There’s another way that righteousness is defined in the New Testament.
In Paul’s letter to the Romans,
he talks about the righteousness
that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

In other words, even though we all sin and fall short of God’s glory, we are
saved by grace.

We have a righteousness that is born out of forgiveness instead of moral
uprightness.

(Romans 3:21-26)

Both kinds of righteousness defend us against spiritual attack.

We strive to follow in the footsteps of Jesus,
to make his righteousness our own.

But, we are also encouraged by the fact that, in the end, in Jesus Christ we
are forgiven.

Evil often gets a foothold when people are overwhelmed by guilt.
The righteousness of God as revealed in Jesus allows us to live with a
clear conscience.

It's like the declaration of pardon that we often use after the confession of
sin.

Paraphrased from a promise
made in Romans 8:34 it goes,

“Who is in a position to condemn?

Only Christ.

And Christ died for us.

Christ rose for us.

Christ reigns in power for us.

Christ prays for us.”

So, each day, after we put on the belt of truth,
we also put on this breastplate of righteousness,

This is a righteousness born of forgiveness,
and a righteousness born of a desire to be more like Jesus.

THE SHOES OF PEACE

The next items in our wardrobe are the shoes of peace.

Verse 15 reads,

“As shoes for your feet,
put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.”

Though Paul is using the armor of a Roman soldier as a sermon illustration,
he wants to remind us that the goal of the gospel is peace, not war.

One of the terrible ironies is that historically this passage has often been
used as justification for a holy war against the enemy.

In order to interpret this passage that way, this verse about the shoes of peace must be ignored or radically reinterpreted.

Usually this tragic reinterpretation of the message goes something like this:

Peace doesn't come through the preaching of the gospel but through conquest.

Truth and righteousness are not gifts from God but possessions of the state

And so the state decides that not only is the enemy an adversary, they are also agents of the devil. Adversaries are evil incarnate.

As you can imagine, when you do this, you flip the passage on its head. And the results are always tragic.

This is sometimes referred to as the "demonizing" of the enemy. We say that our enemies are not human, that they are agents of the evil one.

We say that our enemies are "animals".

This passage will not allow us to do that.

The genius of this passage, if we understand it correctly, is this: Paul is taking the armor of war and reinterpreting it through the lens of the gospel.

We stand firm against our enemies, spiritual enemies and the flesh and blood kind as well. But, we don't do that by harming people. We don't do that by demonizing the enemy.

We stand firm against the enemy

by preaching and living the gospel,
the gospel of forgiveness,
and the gospel of peace.

The ancient Roman soldiers wore hobnailed sandals
so that they could stand their ground in the thick of combat.

The gospel of peace enables us to do the same.
We stand our ground
when angry voices surround us
because we know that the gospel
is the gospel of peace.

As Paul put it earlier in his letter to the Ephesians,
the purpose of the gospel is to preach peace to those who are near,
and to those who are far off. (Ephesians 2:17)

When we preach peace,
we don't erect dividing walls built on hostility.
We tear those walls down. (Ephesians 2:14)

Paul reminded the Ephesians that at one time,
they had been far from God's salvation.
If it were not for the grace of God,
they would still be lost. (Ephesians 2:12-13)

I think all of us should
reflect upon this each day of our lives.
If it were not for the grace of God revealed in Jesus,
we too would be lost.

We say it each week in the Lord's prayer.
We ask the Lord to forgive our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.

That's the gospel of peace.
That's what enables us to peacefully stand firm
in a world that is literally hell bent on revenge.

But, practically speaking, how can we do that?

Reflecting on God's grace gives us inner peace.
Elsewhere Paul calls it the peace that passes all understanding. (Philippians 4:7)

Anxiety is reduced in our life when we truly trust in the Lord.

This is what Paul means when he encourages us to be "strong in the Lord".

We place all our cares on Him.
We don't take our fears to heart.

Instead, we trust in God to guard our hearts.
And this is at the heart of what it means to have faith.

THE SHIELD OF FAITH

How can we stand firm,
when not only the "slings and arrows" of outrageous fortune but also the arrows of enemies threaten us?

According to our lesson,
we defend against those flaming arrows from the evil one, with the shield of faith.

In the ancient world the wooden shield covered almost the whole body,
and a piece of leather soaked in water covered the shield.

This was done for the express purpose of quenching those flaming arrows that were sure to come their way.

In the same way, in our spiritual battle,
the shield of faith is the ultimate piece of armor.
Without that shield we are at the mercy of the evil one.

But, with that shield we are protected.
The flaming arrows of the evil one are quenched.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,
"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

The answer to that question is the shield of faith.
This is the hope that covers us in times of despair.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”
The question is a leading one.
If God is for us, no one can be against us.

I suggest you memorize that question
and ask it of yourself at least once every day.
“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

For me, that question
serves as a wonderful reminder.

The grace of God is greater than all my sin,
and the grace of God will enable us to bring peace not only to those who
are near
but also to those who are far away.

THE HELMET OF SALVATION

Related to the shield of faith
is the helmet of salvation.
This is the most important piece of defensive armor in the spiritual battle.

From Adam and Eve on,
the greatest danger to our souls
is to doubt the goodness of God.

The helmet of salvation is protection for our head.
You see, sometimes the greatest enemy of faith
is in our own head.
Doubts can be very destructive to faith.

And that’s how the evil one attacks us
...by sowing doubt.

The questions of the evil one
in the Garden of Eden were basically:

“Did God really say that?
Is God holding out on you?

Maybe there’s no God at all?
Maybe it’s all up to you?

Maybe you need to decide for yourself what is right and wrong and what you need to do?”

And of course, if we accept that line, all our defensive armor is disabled.

If we do not believe in the salvation of God,
then truth is relative,
righteousness is what we declare it to be,
and we find peace not through forgiveness but at the point of a sword.

Think about what happened after Adam and Eve doubted the goodness of God
and were expelled from the garden.

The story of Cain and Able is the inevitable result when people doubt the goodness of God.

When we take salvation into our own hands,
it results in violence.

Remember how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness?
The temptation was the same.
The ploys of the evil one do not change.

The devil tempted Jesus to forget that God was with Him.

Instead of waiting on God’s plan,
maybe he should forge ahead with his own plan.

He was tempted to live on the “bread” that he could make rather than the bread of heaven.
He was tempted to do the spectacular things that would get him elected Messiah by the people.

He was tempted to settle for the kingdoms that he could conquer instead of waiting for God's kingdom.

According to the devil,
this would be so much easier
than the way of forgiveness and the cross.

But, of course we know that Jesus rejected this.
The way of Satan would not lead to salvation.
The way of Satan would lead to destruction.

The story of temptation never changes.

It's in the newspaper
and in the trending stories on your news feed.

The devil is in the details,
and the devil is in the headlines as well.

We just have to recognize him and name his ploys for what they are.

In a materialistic and violent world,
our first line of defense is the helmet of salvation

....trusting totally in the goodness of God.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Finally, this outfit designed for spiritual combat is made complete.

Paul urged the Ephesians to take up the "sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God."

Once again I refer
to the temptation stories in the gospels.

How did Jesus respond to the temptation of the devil? By quoting Scripture.

"One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

“Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.”

Jesus was able to banish the attacks of the evil one by using the sword of the Spirit.

God’s Word reminds us
of what is really important in life.

We look at the world through the lens of Scripture.
Scripture gives us a counter narrative to the story that the world tells.

The Word of God, separates the false from the true. (Hebrews 4:12)

Some commentators suggest
that the sword of the Spirit
is the only offensive weapon described in this passage about the armor of God.

But, as I reflected on this passage, I came to the conclusion that the sword of the Spirit,
at least as described in Ephesians,
is not an offensive weapon at all.

As it was for Jesus in the temptation stories,
the sword of the Spirit is also a defensive weapon used to ward off the attacks of the evil one.

We do not use God’s Word
to harm other people or put them down.
We use God’s Word to ward off the evil one,
to bolster our own faith in the time of testing.

This is why it’s important for us to know the story of the Bible by heart.

It’s protection against the temptation that can come at any time.

PRAY AND KEEP WATCH

How can we protect our home
from those who would harm us?
We keep watch.

We have neighborhood watches.
We report any suspicious activity to the police.

In a more profound way,
we also resist temptation by keeping watch.

That's where prayer comes in.
In the Garden of Gethsemane,
Jesus told his disciples to "Pray and keep watch..."

Prayer is a way of staying alert
to what is really important.
Paul wrote, "Pray in the Spirit at all times ..."

This means being spiritually aware.
We take notice of and reflect upon what is going on around us.

Why do we pray for ourselves and for others?

One reason is to be alert,
to be on guard against temptation.

And to be aware of opportunities to proclaim the gospel of peace in a world
that needs peace so desperately.

According to our passage, prayer helps us persevere during the tough
times.

Prayer helps us believe that God will make a way where there seems to be
no way.

And so I conclude my sermon this week
with a prayer.

"Lord help us be strong in you.

Help us learn what it means to put on your armor and keep watch during the time of peril.”

Amen.