

## “Be Strong in the Lord”

### The Fifteenth and Last in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

*Texts: Ephesians 6:10-24; Joshua 1:1-9*

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One of the most distinctive features of Paul’s letters is that he opens them with doctrinal instruction and closes them with the application of that doctrine to the Christian life. As we come to the end of Ephesians, we see Paul engage in this characteristic practice yet again—only this time with a bit of a twist. In Ephesians 5:15, Paul directs us to “*Look carefully then how you walk,*” which is one of the ways Paul exhorts us to give attention to how we live our lives as Christians. But as he often does, Paul quickly moves from generalities to specifics, as the apostle spells out how believers are to walk. All Christians are to submit to Christ, wives are to submit to their husbands, husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, children are to obey their parents, and slaves are to obey their earthly masters. Having discussed the order of things within the Christian household, Paul now issues a stirring call for Christians to stand firm against the spirit of the age by clothing themselves in the spiritual armor given them by God. As Paul sees it, the Christian life is a life of spiritual warfare. Therefore, Paul summons us to battle. Believers must put on God’s armor all the while praying for God’s strength so that we might stand.

We wrap up our series on the Book of Ephesians as we make our way through the concluding verses of chapter six. This section of Ephesians includes one of the most familiar and vivid images in all of Paul’s writings—Christians are to put on the whole armor of God and do combat with the forces of darkness around us. Paul’s depiction of the Christian life as one of spiritual warfare is an apt conclusion to a letter such as this one in which Paul has spoken in big picture terms about God’s eternal purpose being worked out in history through the saving work of Jesus Christ, specifically our Lord’s sacrificial death for our sins, and his triumphant resurrection from the dead. Since those Christians in the churches in Asia Minor to whom Paul is writing were living in a very hostile and pagan environment, the image of warfare is appropriate. Being part of a Christian minority in a city such as Ephesus which is dominated by paganism necessitates a form of combat between two very different ways of thinking and doing.

Unfortunately, in much of contemporary evangelicalism and Pentecostalism “spiritual warfare” has become a category for talking about spiritual combat with the unseen forces of Satan in an unseen world. While Paul does indeed speak of combating the Devil and the spirit of the age, Paul’s focus is on the objective truth of the gospel and those who deny that truth. His focus is not on the invisible world of demons and angels, where the real action supposedly takes place. Paul is deeply concerned about those struggling Christians in these churches who must live out their faith in daily life in the presence of those who see nothing wrong with sexual immorality, debauchery, with worshiping a pantheon of pagan “gods,” and who practice all those things which go with paganism—fertility rites, spells and incantations, divination, secret ceremonies, and the worship of creatures (the Roman emperor) rather than the creator.

Having set forth how the Christian home ought to be ordered—submission to Christ, always keeping the example of Christ’s humility and sacrifice before us, and in submitting to divinely-established authority—Paul closes the letter by once again exhorting us to live out those doctrines he has set forth in chapters 1-3. And as is characteristic of his letters, Paul’s call for believers to stand firm in the face of the paganism all around them is grounded in the promise of the gospel.

**A**s we turn to our text in Ephesians 6:10-24, we begin by taking up Paul's exhortation to be "strong in the Lord" in verses 10-17.

In verse 10, Paul issues a stirring call to battle before exhorting us to stand firm once the inevitable battle begins. "*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*" Although Paul's Gentile readers may easily miss the many loud echoes from the Old Testament found in Paul's exhortation, Paul's Jewish readers couldn't have missed them. In 1 Samuel 30:6, we read that at a difficult point in the on-going battle with the Amelkites, David "*strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*" In Zechariah 10:12, YHWH gives the following promise to Israel in the difficult days of the exile. "*I will make them strong in the Lord, and they shall walk in his name,' declares the Lord.*" And anyone who was familiar with the Old Testament would have a difficult time missing the connection between Paul's call to battle here in Ephesians 6 and those words of Joshua—"only be strong and very courageous"—given to God's people before Israel entered the land of promise (part of our Old Testament lesson this morning).<sup>1</sup>

But Paul not only issues a call to battle, he reminds us that God has not left us on our own in such combat. We are to be strong, "*in the strength of [God's] might.*" Paul has already informed us of this truth in the opening words of this epistle when he prayed for his reader, "*having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come*" (Ephesians 1:18-21). Having prayed that we would know this wonderful hope, Paul is now reminding us that God does not summon us to spiritual battle without at the same time equipping us for that battle through his own great might. Pagans will dismiss the truth of the gospel and even persecute those who are saved by it. But God's power always prevails and God's people are never left on their own. If God calls us to do battle, he will give us every weapon we need to engage the enemy and stand.

In verse 11, Paul moves from the call to battle to the specifics regarding spiritual warfare, when he speaks of how the mighty power of God actually equips us to do combat. "*Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*" Paul knows full well that there is no way we can stand up in our own strength to those individuals and institutions which do the bidding of Satan. Since we are called to battle, we must, as Paul says, put on the armor which God himself gives to us, precisely so that we may withstand the scheming of Satan. This is not an obscure point for Paul. In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Paul describes the Christian life as one of combat in strikingly similar terms. "*For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*"

Although many of our contemporaries read this language of combat with Satan in terms of some sort of battle with demons in an invisible realm over which we must take authority, Paul says no such thing. Paul's point is really very simple—that Satan is a dangerous foe and we must be prepared to do combat with him. But it certainly helps to know that Satan works through a very predictable plan of attack—he attacks the truth of the gospel. Here in Ephesians 6, Paul's speaks of the devil's schemes so we might take up God's armor so as to stand against them, while in 2 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of opposing

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Ephesians, 403.

those who deny the knowledge of God by arguing for the truth—taking every thought captive.

This means that Paul is not describing some sort of weird mystical battle between angels and demons in an invisible dimension we cannot see. Rather, Paul is talking about the inevitable collision between two completely different ways of thinking and doing. Paganism (which is the epitome of the Devil’s scheming) is absolutely incompatible with Christianity. Indeed, pagan ways of thinking and doing are diametrically opposed to God’s revelation of himself in nature (natural law) and in Scripture, where we learn that God saves sinners who cannot save themselves, by calling them to faith, making them alive in Christ, and then filling our hearts with gratitude so that we seek to obey God’s commandments. The reason why Paul places this discussion in the application section of the epistle is because *if* we seek to obey God, then we will come up against the scheming of the Devil. It is really that simple.

But if this is simple conceptually—this is a battle between the truth of Christianity and the errors of paganism—we must realize that this is not an easy fight in terms of the actual strength and power of those who oppose the gospel. In fact, according to Paul, the entire Graeco-Roman world—steeped in paganism, as it was—stood in direct opposition to the gospel. In verse 13, Paul writes, *“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.”*

While it is commonplace to read this verse through an occult lens—as though Paul were pointing us to an invisible spirit world where angels and demons duke it out—instead Paul is speaking of the fact that the basic world-view of the first century Greco-Roman world was overtly hostile to Christianity, especially to the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> This becomes clear when we look at parallel passages. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul states *“the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* Notice what Satan actually does—he blinds people to the truth of the gospel. He does this by obscuring God’s truth through the introduction and propagation of various doctrinal errors—heresy and false religion.

Therefore, when Paul speaks of spiritual forces and cosmic powers, he means much the same as John does in Revelation 13, when the dragon (Satan) is said to empower the beast (the Roman empire) to persecute the people of God. The legal, social, and religious world of the first century was often times very hostile toward those things God has established in the created order to be good, true and righteous. As we have seen, Paul’s teaching about the Christian household was completely counter-cultural in a world in which men had the authority to determine whether or not their own children lived or died, and in which a man could beat his wife and children with impunity. In Ephesians 5-6, Paul grants a dignity and social status to women, children and servants not found elsewhere in the Roman world.

The notion that Christians must engage the powers that be is a major theme in Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians 2:6, 8, Paul writes about the “rulers” of the age, *“Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”* It was a Roman governor who put Jesus to death. It was Roman official who put Paul in jail—remember, Paul himself is in prison when he writes this very letter which he sends on to the churches who are worried about his health and condition. This is not a mere intellectual debate for Paul. It is a matter of life and death—literally. Paul has seen the handiwork of these rulers first hand. He writes from

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Ephesians, 404.

a Roman jail, bound in Roman chains.

So, on the one hand, Paul is referring to a collision between Christianity and paganism, and a collision between Christianity and a pagan government in which the emperors had declared themselves to be deities and demanded worship. Yet, on the other, while those who arrested Paul and killed Jesus are men of flesh and blood, these earthly rulers are, in effect, doing the Devil's bidding. Paul knows that anyone who names the name of Christ will be subject to persecution and hardship, possibly even arrest and execution. Paul knows that it is easy for Christians to see their immediate circumstances and lash out at those flesh and blood individuals who oppose them. But Paul also knows that the reason why this is happening is because people live in darkness (and prefer to do so, Jesus says, because their deeds are evil). And so when Paul sees the darkness of paganism, he knows its source: Satan. The struggle isn't against those individuals who happen to be pagans, but the struggle occurs because of opposition to the truth of the gospel is deeply imbedded in the pagan view of the world and firmly held by those political leaders who were currently running the show and wielding the sword.

This is why no Christian can oppose this form of Satanic opposition in his or her own strength. It is too much to find ourselves up against so many of the institutions of society and a pagan culture which glorifies that which is sinful, and which at the same renounces that which is good, true and holy. But in the midst of such hostility, God does not leave us on our own. He has promised his mighty strength which prepares us for spiritual combat, just as armor enables a soldier to withstand the blows of the enemy on the field of battle. Paul's point is that given what we are up against, we need to stand strong and take avail of that which God has given us—the whole armor of God.

This brings Paul to offer the exhortation found in verse 13. *“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.”* Knowing the great strength of our enemy, these weapons given us by God are essential. But these weapons are absolutely useless to us unless we take them up and put them on. Paul warns us that believers need not live in fear of the power of Satan because Satan has already been defeated by Jesus through our Lord's death upon the cross. Nevertheless an “evil day” is coming when these weapons will be necessary. The “evil day” is taken by some to be a reference to a particular time of difficult trial for the individual Christian, or to the final outburst of evil in those days immediately before the return of Christ.<sup>3</sup> While I take this to be a reference to the latter, no matter when this time of trial comes, believers will endure and even stand firm until the end. We will stand because God is stronger than any threat we may face, and the armor he gives us will protect us from our enemies during battle.

In verse 14, Paul now sets out a rather specific list of the armor God gives to us to engage in spiritual warfare. The items on the list are typical of the armor used by a Roman soldier of the period, although there are definite allusions to Isaiah's prophecy throughout Paul's discussion. *“Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness.”* The command to “stand” is immediately followed by a mention of the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness which is an echo of Isaiah 59:17, where we read, *“He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.”* In the Isaiah text, YHWH is displeased because no one in Israel will stand for the truth. Therefore, YHWH arms himself as a warrior for battle. The point is that no one can defeat YHWH, nor thwart his purposes when he prepares himself for war. The same holds true for those Christians who put

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<sup>3</sup> A. T. Lincoln, Ephesians, 445-446.

on the very same armor which YHWH himself is said to wear. We will stand, because the same spiritual weapons YHWH himself puts on, he in turn, gives to us.

The belt of truth is a reference to a soldier's leather undergarment (like breeches), worn under the pieces of armor. The breastplate, which protected the chest, lungs and heart, was worn directly over the leather undergarment. The Psalmist speaks of YHWH girded with might (Psalm 65:6) and Isaiah speaks of him as clothed with the truth (Isaiah 11:5). Paul's focus here seems to be an ethical one since truth is linked to righteousness.<sup>4</sup> This means that a Christian does battle truthfully (or with the truth), while wearing the breast plate of righteousness. Christians engaging in spiritual warfare must act justly (i.e., "righteously") when we engage those around us who—intentionally or not—are doing the Devil's bidding.

Continuing to work his way through his list of armor, in verse 15, Paul gets to a soldier's shoes, but doesn't mention a specific type of shoe (the Roman sandal or boot). Paul speaks merely of the wearing of shoes.<sup>5</sup> *"And, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace."* Paul is obviously alluding to Isaiah 52:7—*"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"* Those who are called to stand, need to have secure footing. The Roman soldier relied on a boot with nails embedded in the soles (like cleats). The Christian is to take their stand on the gospel, the only truly firm foundation from which to engage in spiritual combat. The gospel, of course, is that declaration of what Jesus did in history to save us from our sins. It is truth itself. This is the foundation upon which we stand whenever we engage the unbelief all around us.

In verse 16, Paul moves on to the next item on his list, when he writes, *"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one."* A Roman soldier wore both a breastplate on his chest and a large shield on his left arm, with which he could protect himself from archers, who would often lob arrows (often times dipped in pitch and set on fire) high into the air so they would come down at a steep angle, catching soldiers where they were vulnerable. As a Roman soldier could deflect these arrows with his shield, Christians are exhorted to turn aside the flaming barbs sent their way by Satan (the evil one). Faith is trust in the promises of God, specifically trust in Christ's promise to save us from our sins. Paul is reminding us that whenever Satan lies about God (through heresy or false religion) our defense against these "flaming arrows" is to consider the promises of God. Has God ever broken a single promise? Has God ever failed us? Has the Lord ever let us down? This is how we turn aside the flaming arrows (the lies) of the Devil.

Next, we are to *"take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."* A Roman soldier (and USC band members) wore a bronze helmet with cheek and jaw protection. While Paul mentions the helmet (which, no doubt invokes the image of that which a Roman soldier wore to protect his head), he is again alluding to Isaiah 59:17 in which YHWH puts *"a helmet of salvation on his head"* before he does battle. Paul's point is that just as a Roman warrior protects his noggin with a helmet, so too Christians must protect their most vital parts by living in the confident assurance that God saves sinners from his own wrath which is coming upon the world. And if Christians are confident that they need never fear the day of judgment (because Christ has turned aside God's wrath toward us through his suffering and dying on the cross), then why fear paganism or even the civil government, when that

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<sup>4</sup> See the discussions in: A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 447-448; and Bruce, *Ephesians*, 407-408.

<sup>5</sup> A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 448.

government does the Devil's bidding. It was once said of Calvinists that they do not fear men because they fear God. And I think that is pretty much Paul's point here. Why should we fear men, when God has sparred us, but not them, from the day of judgment?

When Paul mentions the sword of the Spirit (the only offensive weapon on his list), he's speaking of a feared weapon which the Romans used for close-in combat. No doubt, Paul also has in mind Isaiah 11:4 which tells us that God destroys the wicked with the rod of his mouth, as well as Deuteronomy 8:3, where Moses tells us that we live by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God. Paul's point is that the Word of God is that through which the Holy Spirit works, and preaching (and the proclamation of the Word) becomes the offensive weapon of Christ's church and its members. While we are equipped for defense (so as to stand), our weapon of choice is the proclamation of the truth. When we preach the gospel, or share that gospel with our neighbors, we are on the offensive.

Since we've been called to engage in spiritual warfare, and take a stand against the spirit of the age, it is imperative that we not only take up the weapons which God has given us, but that we seek the power and strength of God through prayer. In verses 18-20, Paul writes, that we are to *"pray 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."* For Paul, putting on spiritual armor so that we might stand strong, and then seeking God's strength through prayer, go hand in hand. Praying at all times in the Spirit indicates that the Holy Spirit assists us when we pray, and that Spirit directs our prayers on behalf of the saints (our brothers and sisters in Christ), who benefit from the knowledge that God's people are thinking of them and praying for them when they are going through the various trials of life.

We must not miss Paul's appeal to his Ephesians readers to pray for him. Paul is in chains in a Roman prison for doing the very thing he calls us to do—to stand firm. As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul asks the saints to pray for him, that he might have the courage to continue to preach the gospel. He not only asks for prayer, he ends this epistle by telling his reader that the saints who have visited him in prison, will bring news to them of how he is doing. So, after asking for prayer, Paul informs us in verses 21-22, *"So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts."* Paul then closes this letter with a wonderful benediction upon all those reading this letter. *"Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible."* And with that, our study of Ephesians comes to a close.

**W**hat application should we draw from this final section of Ephesians?

The City of Ephesus was dominated by the Temple of Diana and was a hot bed for all sorts of pagan religion. Knowing the difficult historical circumstances facing those Christians living in Asia Minor about A.D. 60 when Paul writes this letter, it makes perfect sense that Paul would speak of the Christian life in terms of spiritual warfare. Christians—including Paul himself—were up against a pagan culture, as well as a pagan government, both of which opposed the spread of Christianity. The pagan culture was threatened by the light of the gospel, while Caesar was threatened by the Christian's confession that Jesus is Lord—which means that Caesar isn't.

Paul's call to stand firm and take up the armor of God so as to engage in spiritual warfare is not limited

to the churches of the Asia Minor in the first century. Paul issues that same call to us, *be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might*. Beloved, put on the whole armor of God—by standing on the truth of the gospel and in the assurance of your salvation. Prepare to do combat with pagan ways of thinking and doing that surround us in Southern California every bit as much as they did the Christians in Ephesus. Pray in the Spirit, fervently and often and trust that whenever we preach or share the gospel, we are armed with the same weapons with which YHWH arms himself. Our struggle is not with flesh and blood (with our non-Christian friends and neighbors), but our struggle is with the darkness in which they are trapped.

The surest way to liberate troubled souls (Christian and non-Christian alike) is that glorious declaration that Jesus has died for our sins and was raised from the dead for our justification. The surest way to send the darkness fleeing, is to bring to bear the light of the gospel. It is the gospel which sets people free and breaks the power of sin.

Beloved, make no mistake about it, we are in a war. But it is a war we will win because YHWH is the mighty warrior and Jesus has already defeated our enemies at the cross and in the empty tomb. Therefore, stand firm. Be strong in the Lord. God has given us every we need to stand in the gospel of his beloved son.