

"Be Strong in the Lord"

The Scripture reading this morning is a wake-up call. It seems especially timely. **Ephesians 6:10-11**, *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹ Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.* Do we think about this enough? What if in the upheavals we see in the world and the struggles we face personally, there are unseen spiritual forces at work to harm us? What if there was an approach to those struggles that would help us, but it is an approach that's easily overlooked? This passage is a word from God that is much needed.

Our ongoing goal is to bring the series, *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life to a close this Easter*. We began it in September of 2018 – over three years ago. So we want to bring it to a close. It was designed to cover the whole of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation relating major milestones in the storyline to the issues of our lives today. We divided it into different seasons of Bible history. The individual messages are the different episodes in each season.

1. **How it all Began:** From the Creation to the tower of Babel
2. **The Journey of Faith:** Abraham's calling and tested faith.
3. **The Struggle to be Free:** The call of Moses, the Exodus, and wandering in the wilderness.
4. **The Call for Courage:** The conquest of the Promised Land followed by the chaotic era of the judges.
5. **Longing for the True King:** The rise and fall of King David.
6. **Waiting for God's Savior.** The decline of Israel, the exile in Babylon, and the prophets foretelling the coming of Christ.
7. **The Coming of the Christ:** The birth and early ministry of Jesus.
8. **The Road to the Cross:** The later ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.
9. **The Birth of Something New:** The beginning of the church, the conversion of Paul, and the first gentiles coming to faith.

10. The Spreading Flame: The missionary journeys of Paul and his early letters to the churches ending with Romans.

11. How to Face The Future. This picked up at the end of Acts and takes through the other New Testament epistles, the imprisonment of Paul, and the prison epistles, which is where we end today and then in the weeks leading to Easter, we will look at what are called the pastoral epistles, the epistles of John and Revelation.

So we're in season 11 and episode 8. We've come to an important teaching on Spiritual Warfare from a letter Paul wrote from prison in the latter part of his life. It's a teaching mentioned in all of the prison epistles. This passage is the most in-depth. It teaches us that...

I. WE NEED TO BE STRONG IN THE LORD BECAUSE LIFE IS A BATTLE AGAINST POWERFUL SPIRITUAL FORCES.

Verse 11 speaks of the devil. **Verse 12** says we are not just up against flesh and blood, human enemies, 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.* So....

A. There are multiple dimensions to the battles we're facing.

Some people say the Bible's view of life is simplistic. For example, if someone messes up, they can just say the devil made them do it. That *would* be simplistic. But the Bible's view is actually the most developed, complex, and complete view of the issues of life. The Bible recognizes sociological issues, psychological issues, and physical issues. Those are all aspects of our "*struggle with flesh and blood*," but Scripture also acknowledges the spiritual dimension: the spiritual forces of darkness.

I heard about two little boys who were talking, and one asked the other: "Do you believe all this Satan stuff?" The other one said, "*Well, you know how Santa turned out. It's probably just your Dad.*" This Scripture tells us the Satan's stuff is real and serious. Interestingly, a Harris poll taken back in 2008 revealed that 71% of Americans claim to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but only 59% believe in the devil. What is interesting is how inconsistent that is because there are 29 references to Satan or the devil in the four gospels that tell the story of Jesus. In 25 of those references, *Jesus is the one talking about Satan.*

There are a lot of things I believe because I accept the authority of the best experts. Well, there is no better expert on spiritual life and relationship with God than Jesus. He took the devil and the spiritual forces of evil seriously. Jesus said Satan is a tempter who works to destroy us. Jesus said that Satan, the devil, is a liar and the father of lies. He told Peter it was Satan who was going to tempt him to deny Jesus, and he would give in to that temptation, but he would *not* be destroyed. He would be restored because Jesus would pray for him. Well, the thing is, you, like Peter, are not just up against your own weaknesses. You are not just up against other people and their weakness and sin, either. There is more to the battles of life than meets the eye.

There are multiple dimensions to the battles of life.

B. We need to see the spiritual dimension of our struggle so that we can stand firm in the battles we face.

In a global and political sense, this is true. The words Paul uses in **verse 12: rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces of evil,** describe evil at work, not only in personal attacks on individuals but also on the global, national, and geopolitical level. From war in Ukraine to political chaos, the loss of integrity on the left and on the right, divisions in the churches, all this has an impact on the people of God, the cause of Christ, and the spread of the gospel in this world. If you ask many Christians today, *Why is the world so messed up?* A lot of people might immediately think of the fact that humanity has fallen and is in rebellion against God and full of sin, selfishness, greed, and violence. That's all true, but most people in the ancient world would have also talked seriously about the devil and his evil spiritual forces at play in the unseen world, having an impact on the world we see.

In addition to the larger issues in the world there are also very personal issues in our lives. Because we are up against the schemes of the devil personally, we shouldn't always be mad at people as if they are the enemy. *And* while we cannot blame the devil for our bad behavior, we need to realize there is more to our struggle than just *our* weaknesses. The bitterness, the anger, the insecurity, discouragement, despair, doubt, laziness, and selfishness is not just only always you and your weaknesses but a spiritual attack that needs

to be identified and resisted. This calls for clarity as well as humility, for patience as well as prayer.

Notice also we are attacked by the “schemes” of the devil. The word *schemes* (*methodeia*) stresses the devil's methodical machinations. His systematically crafty and deceptive evil strategies. Our most dangerous temptations will probably not be obvious or repulsive but hidden and seductive. I once heard a Seminary Professor say: *“Right now, the sin that is most destructive to your soul is most likely one you do not clearly see. Maybe people have tried to talk to you about it. Your spouse, maybe your parents, but you’ve always been defensive about it. You’ve always blamed others and said they are making too big a deal over it. You can’t clearly see it because it is so close and so subtle.”* Evil is often complicated and sophisticated. There is always a rationale. There is always a justification. We need to see the spiritual dimension of our struggle. ***We need to be strong in the Lord because life is a battle against powerful forces.*** Now, look at what happens in **verse 13**. *He begins to talk about the armor of God.*

II. WE NEED TO PUT ON THE ARMOR OF GOD BECAUSE THAT IS HOW WE CAN STAND STRONG IN THE LORD.

The word “*stand*” appears four times. First, in **verse 11**: *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.* Then twice 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.* Then a fourth time in **verse 14**: *Stand, therefore.* Scholars say the “evil day” simply means a day of especially intense pressure. God wants us to stand firm in all of life, even in a crisis and under pressure. He uses the imagery of armor to describe what we need in order to stand in our spiritual struggles.

First,

A. We need the belt of truth.

In **verse 14**, he says, *Stand, therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth.* In the ancient world, soldiers wore loose clothing, but a wide leather belt pulled it all together and kept it from getting in the way. We

need truth to move freely and unencumbered. The word "devil" is *diabolos*. It means slanderer. The devil works through slander, lies, half-truths, and deception. The first story of temptation in the Bible is full of questions, insinuations, and half-truths. *Did God really say what you think he said? Is it really true?* There are lies that significant people in our lives have told us and lies we tell ourselves and lies and half-truths others spread about us, and lies the culture speaks. The cynical lie that, *"Nothing really matters," "No one cares,"* There are lies that a lot of people don't even think of as lies: *"all men are jerks," "all women are controlling."* These are lies, and they affect us more than we recognize. *"What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas."* Not true. In **John 8:31-32**, there is a famous passage in which Jesus speaks about the devil as the father of lies, but before he does that, *he turns to his followers and says: "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

We need truth, and we also need righteousness

B. We need the breastplate of righteousness.

Verse 14 says we stand, *having put on the breastplate of righteousness*. What is this talking about? Paul gives us the answer. In **2 Corinthians 5:21**, He writes, *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. The righteousness that protects our hearts is not our own righteousness, which Isaiah says is like filthy rags, but the righteousness of Jesus. *He made him to be sin who knew no sin* means the reason Jesus is our Savior is because he became our substitute paying for our sins in our place. Why did he do this? Look at what this Scripture says, *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. When we trust in Him, not only are our sins placed on him but His righteousness is given to us. The value, the status of *his* righteous life, is given to us. The only way to be truthful about your sins and remain standing in the face of the spiritual onslaught of accusation and shame is to put on the breastplate of righteousness, to stand strong, humbly trusting in the righteousness of Jesus. Yes, we need to live righteous lives, but our righteousness will not protect our hearts. We need the righteousness of Jesus.

We need to the truth of God and the righteousness of Jesus. We also need the peace that comes from believing the gospel.

C. We need the shoes that come from the gospel of peace.

Verse 15 says, *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.* Romans soldiers wore a kind of half boot that laced up and had thick soles with studs attached for firm footing. We are to have *our* feet fitted with the *readiness* given by the gospel of peace. Through faith in Jesus, you have peace with God. That peace with God makes you ready to face whatever comes. We stand firm when we stand in the peace the gospel gives.

Verse 16 says, *In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;*

D. We need the shield of faith.

He says you are up against the spiritual equivalent of flaming arrows. Unhealthy and unwelcome thoughts, temptations, accusations, and emotions pierce, burn, and wound. For every attack, the shield that protects us is faith. Over and over and over again, we choose faith in God, faith in the grace of the gospel, prayer and the promises of God.

We need the shield of faith, and fifth...

E. We need the helmet of Salvation.

Verse 17, *Take the helmet of salvation.* The helmet protects your head, your mind, your thinking. To take the helmet of salvation is to use the reality of salvation to protect your mind from evil. Listen to what Paul wrote earlier in Ephesians: **Ephesians 1:13-14** *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, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.* Why is a verse like this given? It is given so that if you have heard the gospel of your salvation and believed in Christ as Lord and Savior, you can know you have salvation and are sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of your ultimate redemption. If you know that Christ is your Savior like that, you are going to be confident in the love of God, committed to God's causes, and courageous in the face of

difficulties. You are going to look beyond the disappointments and limitations of this earthly life, and all of that confidence in God's saving grace will enable you to stand firm. We need the helmet of salvation.

The next thing he mentions is the word of God. He says,

F. We need the sword of the Spirit.

Verse 17: *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* A particular word is used in the phrase "the word of God." The Greek word *logos* would be used of the whole Bible. But this word *rhema* is not the word for the whole Bible but for a particular saying or verse from the Bible that applies to a specific situation. There is a story in the gospels of how Jesus was tempted by the devil. With each temptation, he responded with a particular passage from Scripture that he quoted. That's the sword of the Spirit. You need a particular word or saying from Scripture that applies to your battle today. Get into Scripture memory and meditation!

A sword isn't just something to protect you. It's something you can use to fight back. I heard a true story recently about a Dad whose little boy went to a Christian summer camp. The Dad was glad it was a Christian camp because he figured his son wouldn't have to listen to a lot of ghost stories, which can give a little boy nightmares. He found out since it was a Christian camp, and they didn't tell ghost stories because they didn't believe in ghosts. They told demon stories and Satan stories instead. So when the little boy came home, he was scared. Before going to bed, he said: *"Dad, don't turn off the light. Can you stay in here with me? Will you pray for me that I will be safe?"* The Dad said something about that concerned him. He didn't want his son to crave a warm-blanket kind of Christianity, which was all about safety, safety, safety. So he said, *"I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will fear when you enter the room."* The boy said, *"All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy"*. The Sword of the Spirit equips us to fight back and makes us dangerous.

There's one more thing we need. Prayer

G. We need to be Praying Always.

Look at **verses 18-19** *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, ¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,* Our Father in heaven gives us two weapons that make us dangerous to the forces of darkness: the bold proclamation of the gospel and persistent prayer inspired and led by the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Let's close by looking once more at **verse 13**. It says, *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.* You can't wait until you're in the midst of a fight and the arrows are flying to say, *"excuse me while I slip on something more appropriate for the battle."* When depression descends, or bitterness, lust, selfishness, doubt comes, you have to be ready already. When you see war and rumors of war, political and personal division, and upheaval, you have to know we are not just up against flesh and blood so that you aren't discouraged or defeated.

You have to be living a life in which you are daily finding your strength in God. You have to be wearing this armor daily. This means you are continually applying all the benefits and promises of faith to all the thoughts, temptations, emotions that undermine the fullness of God in your life. You have to be rooted in the love of Christ, preaching the gospel to yourself. That's what the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, and the helmet of salvation describes. You have to take the truth as your belt and Scripture as your sword and with that, take up faith as your shield. Christ is the ultimate warrior who fought our battle for us on the cross and rose again as our King. He did this so that we can live in the fullness of God. But to stand firm in that fullness, we have to fight with the armor he has given us, and in the strength he supplies. Fight like that, and you will live in his fullness, standing firm and even dangerous for Him.

Amen

Confession of Faith

Roman 8;31-39

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Lord God, You are the high and holy one and there is no one like you. You gave your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross. He triumphed over sin, Satan, spiritual evil and death in his resurrection. He is my Savior. My trust is in him. I do not rely on my works or efforts but on your grace in Jesus and I thank you for the assurance of salvation and deliverance through him. In his name I pray. Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Holy Father, Help me to live a life of deep faith in the presence of Jesus and in the power of the gospel. Help me to properly discern the spiritual dimensions of life's battle and to continually find my strength in you my Lord. May the whole armor of God equip me each and every day. Help me to faithfully wield the sword of the Spirit and to consistently employ the power of prayer. May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.