

How to Be Spiritually Strong Series

How to Be Spiritually Strong (Eph. 6:10-13)

By
Andy Davis

At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

How to Be Spiritually Strong

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Persecution and Plague

1. The Roman Emperor Decius gave a decree that led to the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. In 249 CE, the order was given that all people were to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. In the city of Carthage, which is in North Africa, this led to a number of members of the church lapsing back into their old ways of life and signed documents stating they had done honor to the gods. A few people in the church were executed for refusing to give in to the emperor's order. The persecution ended by the end of 250.
2. Now, the church was trying to figure out how to move forward under the leadership of Cyprian. Many of those Christians who gave in to the pressure of the emperor's decree now asked to be let back into the church after the persecution was over. Others in the church thought these individuals compromised and abandoned the rest of the church. Further, those that remained faithful were angry and had hard feelings toward their Roman neighbors who had mistreated them during the time of persecution. Some Christians even desired revenge for the physical injuries sustained at the hands of those they knew. These familiar persecutors threatened or endangered the church. How is the church supposed to treat them now? This was a very challenging time for the church.
3. A year later, beginning in 251, a plague flared up. As church leaders were trying to deal with enormous problems in the church, another major problem occurred. This plague made people violently ill with vomiting, diarrhea, fevers, and the decomposition of their flesh. Many people, both those outside the church and those inside the church died. Those who were uninfected fled the city. Diseased and dying people, a number who were thought dead, were thrown in the streets. Those still alive would beg passers-by for pity.
4. Cyprian noticed that many within the church were wobbly; they were seduced by luxury and were now standing less firmly. During this incredibly difficult time, a large number within the church were disillusioned because the power of the plague attacked the Christian equally with the pagans without distinction. Cyprian encouraged his church to love their enemies by helping not just the suffering in the church, but also those in the streets, with bread, water, and praying for the salvation of their persecutors.¹
5. How would I react if I was in such a situation?

¹ Alan Kreider, [*The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 65–67.

- B. The Christian life is not easy. Every disciple needs strength to endure a difficult season. We need the ability to respond honorably when we have been wronged, deal patiently with disappointments, face temptation without giving in, overcome habitual sin that is damaging our lives, respond well to doubts and questions, and face fears when we wonder what God is up to. These (and more) are all spiritual struggles most disciples will confront at some point in their lives. Life can become very difficult and miserable when we are spiritually weak. Our hearts yearn for the strength and resources to navigate the challenges of life well. Disciples, if they are to live obediently before God in a joyous way, need to have their souls strengthened by God. Weak Christians don't live successful and productive Christian lives.
- C. This being the reality of the Christian life, we can recognize our need to use all of the spiritual resources God provides. This is the main point the apostle Paul is making in Ephesians 6:10-13. Spiritual strength requires our constant attention. If we are to stand firm in the difficult moments of life, we need God's help.

II. Command to Toughen Up

- A. The apostle Paul is giving modern day disciples the same command God gave to Joshua as Joshua became the leader of millions; God told Joshua to lead God's army into the promised land against a stronger enemy, and to "be strong and very courageous" (Josh. 1:7). Paul puts it this way:
 - ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.
 - ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*. ¹³ Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Eph. 6:10-13)
- B. The command, "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might" (v. 10) is critical to spiritual health. A similar command is also found in another passage written by Paul: "¹³ Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." (1 Cor. 16:13). In short, Paul is telling disciples here to man up. Be tough. Get it together. Suck it up. Deal with it. The Christian life is not for wimps or the timid. Only those with strong mental determination and souls can live the way disciples are supposed to live. Weakness will not result in successful and effective Christian living. Spiritual toughness and strength is commanded by God. It is required and necessary for obedient living.
- C. The wording of this command is important: "be strong".² Paul wants the Ephesian church, and us, to be continuously and constantly strengthened by God. Disciples should always be in the process of being strengthened. Disciples should spend a lot of time at the gym for their souls. What Paul means by this is further explained in another place in this letter: "¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit

² The Greek is in the present tense passive meaning it is something that is currently happening on a continual basis. This strengthening is something being done to us even though we take an active role in it.

in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love...¹⁹ that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:16-19). Paul wants disciples to be filled with the power of the Holy spirit in our souls so that we can live in the fullness of God so Jesus will fully live in us. This is the type of strength that is being commanded here—an internal strength of the soul that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- D. Disciples should be so confident in the spiritual strength that God provides them in the Holy Spirit that they should never underestimate the life transformation God can bring about in them (“²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” Eph. 3:20).³ As disciples allow themselves to be strengthened by God through their intentional pursuit of God’s resources, they will be amazed at the life transformation that will happen in them. In fact, God will do more than they could have possibly imagined. Paul wants disciples to put their full confidence in the resources and power God makes available to them for their own personal life transformation.⁴ Disciples are empowered by the Spirit not only to do the right actions in order to live in obedience to God, but to develop the desires to want to do so.
- E. Like Samson (Judg. 13:1-16:31), we can have supernatural soul strength flowing from the Spirit of God. While Samson’s strength was physical, ours is spiritual. Samson’s source of strength was the Spirit of God (Judg. 14:5-6, 19, 15:14, 16:20, 28). The life of Samson serves as a good illustration for the principle of incredible unnatural strength being provided by God for His special purposes. In our case, God gives us the strength we need to live obedient and faithful lives as we are transformed to be like Jesus.
- F. How much confidence do you put in the power and resources of God?⁵ Do you think there is a sin in your life that is unchangeable, no matter how hard you try? Do you think there is a situation in your life that is beyond God’s transforming influence? Do you think you can mess something up so bad that God can’t fix it? Do you think you have the resources you need to live out the type of life Jesus expects from His disciples, or do you think those behaviors are beyond you? Do you confidently live as if “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3)? Disciples do have all the resources they need to do every good deed God may ask of them (2 Tim. 2:21).
- G. How much confidence do we put in the power of God when we are serving Him? Do I actually think the gospel has the power to change a person’s mind and heart (Rm. 1:16)? Do I ever anticipate God transforming a person as the gospel is shared? Do I expect the wisdom of God’s Word to be able to solve the types of problems people struggle with today? Can the Bible help my friend who struggles with gossip and has ruined a number of relationships? Can the church actually help people’s lives be transformed into God’s likeness? Is it right to expect change in people from year to year? Should Biblical instruction consistently make a difference? How much do I expect God to actually do something in my life and the lives of others?

³ Eph. 1:19

⁴ Hebrews 13:20-21

⁵ Isaiah 59:1-2

III. Need for God's Resources

- A. If we are to live in enemy territory, with powerful enemy soldiers surrounding us and seeking our harm and an enemy within who wants to hinder and lead astray, we need God's resources simply to survive, let alone thrive. Paul, knowing this, says, "in the strength of His might" (v. 10) and again, "Put on the full armor of God" (v. 11). Only when disciples are using the resources and strength of God will they be "able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (v. 11) and "able to resist in the evil day" (v. 13).⁶ Our sufficiency comes from God and not ourselves (2 Cor. 3:5). God must work in us if we are to do anything that is pleasing to Him (Phil. 2:13). We can't do the good we want to do without God's help (Rm. 7:18). God is the One who equips us so we are able to live out His will (Heb. 13:21). The Christian life is impossible for us unless God empowers us to do it. Disciples need to believe this and act accordingly if they are to be strengthened the way God desires. If we truly believe we can't do anything that is pleasing to God without Jesus, this will change the focus and activity of our Christian life. A major challenge to this attitude is the pride that says, "I am a good person and I am self-sufficient." Faithfulness is not a matter of trying harder, but redirecting our effort toward the resources of God—putting on the armor of God.
- B. It is interesting that Paul calls what follows the "armor of God". The likely background of this imagery comes from Isaiah 59:17: "He [the LORD] put on righteousness like a breastplate, And a helmet of salvation on His head; And He put on garments of vengeance for clothing And wrapped Himself with zeal as a mantle."⁷ While Isaiah is talking about a time when God is readying Himself to bring judgment as an act of goodness, the spiritual armor is the same. Disciples develop and adopt the very same qualities God possesses that make Him strong. God is sharing His very nature with us. Disciples become strong because God shares His divine nature with us (2 Pet. 1:4). Spiritual strength is a mysterious paradox: the more dependent we become, the stronger we are.
- C. The reason we need God's resources is because the opposition we face as disciples can easily outman us ("For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the power, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*." v. 12). We are facing a superior enemy. Until we understand our opponents, we will not see our need for God's help. Do you really think you are overpowered in your own spiritual struggle? When humans are compared to angelic beings, which includes these rebellious and evil angelic beings called demons, it is said of them, "¹¹ whereas angels who are greater in might and power" (2 Pet. 2:11). Our enemies, including our corrupted nature called the flesh, are all more powerful than us.⁸ Like facing a better opponent in some athletic competition, so is the Christian life.
- D. Defeat is guaranteed if the only resources we have are our own. However, the disciple has access to something others don't: the power and resources of God. Only God is sufficient to

⁶ Ephesians 6:16

⁷ Isaiah 11:5

⁸ Rm. 7:15-19, Jn. 8:34

defeat our enemies—those on the outside and the one on the inside.⁹ The fact that we face a superior opponent is the reason why disciples need the resources of God. Successful and effective Christian living is not possible without God’s help. Our enemies are smarter and more powerful than us. Demons have been causing spiritual harm in people’s lives for thousands of years; our one lifetime of wisdom is not enough to overcome them. Only when we strengthen ourselves in the Holy Spirit will we be able to live productive Christian lives with spiritual strength.

- E. If we read chapters four through six of Ephesians and strive to live according to the standards being communicated there, we will quickly discover how desperately we need the strength of God to live by the message we carry. There are a number of difficult attitudes and actions that we can’t carry out in our own power: overcoming our immoral desires, always speaking the truth, only saying words that spiritually build others up, letting go of all bitterness and anger, being kind, maintaining a tender heart, forgiving those who wrong us, husbands loving their wives as Jesus loves the church, wives submitting to their husbands with the same attitude they have toward Jesus, and children obeying their parents, to name some of them. Add to this the presence of an enemy that wants to thwart these, it is no mystery why we need the strength of God to live the way we should. There are many hindrances, obstacles, challenges, and enemies in living the life of discipleship.
- F. Do we really believe the forces that oppose us are stronger than us? Do I vainly try to hold on to the illusion that “I can handle it”? How many times have you given in to the desires of your heart that you knew were bad for you, but you couldn’t stop yourself? Do you acknowledge your inability to control your own desires? Accepting the fact that we can easily be tricked and caught up in the schemes of the enemy and easily get tangled up and wander away from the path God desires of us is an important step toward spiritual health. We are far more influenced by the schemes of the devil than we care to admit—usually coming in the form of the culture in which we live. Remember, the whole world is under the influence of the devil (1 Jn. 5:19). If we reject or deny this reality, or even the enemy’s existence, we’ve already fallen prey to one of his schemes.

IV. Need to Do Everything We Can

- A. What is the goal and objective of receiving strength from God by the Holy Spirit through the means that follow (vv. 14-18)? Paul repeats the intended outcome several times: “so that you will be able to stand firm” (v. 11), “so that you will be able to resist” (v. 13), and “to stand firm” (v. 13). Paul, and God, does not want us to give up ground to the enemy. We should not be pushed around. We are told to not be moved from our path of obedience to God. Faithful living under any set of circumstances is the intended outcome of spiritual strength. Disciples are chosen by God to be “holy and blameless before Him” (Eph. 1:4), created “for good works” (Eph. 2:10) as we “walk in a manner worthy of the calling” (Eph. 4:1) in “humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love” (Eph. 4:2) since we were,

⁹ Galatians 5:16

“created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph. 4:24).¹⁰ Not giving in to sin and the enemy is our objective in spiritual warfare.

- B. Due to how frequently and significant the strategies and attacks against those who are following Jesus are, disciples need to be in the process of “having done everything, to stand firm” (v. 13). The difficult nature of our spiritual struggle requires us to do everything that is in our power to be strengthened by God and become spiritually strong. Disciples should leave no resource or opportunity for strength unexplored or unused. If we develop and live in the power of the Holy Spirit, disciples will develop the ability to stand firm and remain faithful in the most difficult of circumstances. Disciples can’t live or act like there is no spiritual danger around them. Imagine how dangerous (and foolish) it would be for someone to go on a leisurely walk through an active war zone. Instead, with urgency and energy, we need to equip ourselves to be as spiritually strong as we can be, because we are in a fight.
- C. If disciples go through the Christian life with a relaxed and casual attitude, it is inevitable that they will be knocked down and be harmed in the process. Paul uses the imagery of a strict, disciplined, and focused lifestyle of Olympic athletes, soldiers, and farmers for good reason. If Christians think they can float through life in a spiritually relaxed way, they will ultimately find themselves not very successful in living an obedient lifestyle that is productive for the kingdom of God. They will end up grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30) by living contrary to their nature in Christ. All of our abilities and energy should be invested in loving God and becoming spiritually strong in Him. This will not happen on its own. Sacrifices need to be made. If you knew there was someone in the world who made it their goal to kill you, would you simply keep living the same way you currently are? Of course not; you’d do what you need to do to protect yourself. This is the spiritual reality we face each day as disciples. Disciples who invest themselves in the resources of God to be strengthened by Him will develop the ability “to stand firm” in the midst of the most difficult life circumstances—even offering their life to God as a martyr, if necessary. The person who wrote these words lived this message out in his own life.¹¹ Spiritual strength allows us to stand faithful despite the incredible pressure to do otherwise.
- D. The main battleground of spiritual warfare will be everyday life, and our goal is to survive—to hold our ground—standing firm in gospel convictions, character, and conduct.¹² It is the small, everyday acts of obedience or disobedience where we meet the enemy. This is the most common form of spiritual warfare: the everyday struggle. Might there be times when we are directly confronted with demonic activity and what is called a “power encounter?” Perhaps. This isn’t as common in our culture, but it still happens, especially in regard to specific types of sins or activities. However, every disciple is guaranteed to face the other forms of spiritual warfare—we confront them every day. Too often, we misunderstand the nature of spiritual warfare to our own harm.

¹⁰ This distinctly Christian way of life is sharply contrasted from the lifestyle of those who don’t know God (Eph. 4:17-24, 5:6-10). A godly and moral lifestyle is why Jesus died for the church (Eph. 5:25-27).

¹¹ 2 Cor. 4:7-11

¹² Richard Coekin, [Ephesians for You](#), ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 201.

- E. Disciples are in a spiritual fight over what their minds will dwell on, over what their values and priorities will be, over who will be in charge of their life, over the desires that motivate them, over the attitudes and moods they encourage, over the decisions they make, and over the actions they choose to engage in. This is the spiritual battlefield and the consequences are extremely important. This is our struggle and our spiritual wrestling match. This is where the power of God helps us.
- F. How do I respond to situations when I face temptation? How do I react to intruding thoughts that I know are wrong? What do I do when my emotions are strong and move me toward words and actions that aren't good? How do I react to the environment in which I live, that I know is hostile and opposed to God, which is trying to carry me away from God?

V. Conclusion

- A. Despite all the challenges and difficulties disciples face, we should never be discouraged—just realistic. There is always a firm and secure hope that can be held onto: “²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works with in, ²¹ to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” (Eph. 3:20-21).
- B. God gives us everything we need to live faithfully under whatever circumstances He places us in. We have many examples and testimonies of this throughout church history. One such example I read about recently was the strength and courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer under the darkness of Nazi Germany. God's resources work when we use them properly!

VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. Have you ever been through a time of struggle in your Christian life? What brought you strength in those moments?
- B. How does Jesus's response to temptation inform how we understand this command (Mt. 4:1-11)?
- C. In what ways do people think they don't need God's help to live the Christian life as they should?
- D. If a person has a strong soul by the Holy Spirit, what will their soul be like? Can you think of any Biblical examples?
- E. What actions might indicate a recognition of our need for God's help to be spiritually strong?