



Spiritual Strength

Ephesians 6:10-24

Grace Church | 2.27.22

You are most likely familiar with the Biblical story of Joshua, the successor of Moses who led the people of Israel across finally out of the wilderness of Sinai and into the promised land. The people had been wandering for 40 years due to their lack of belief in God's provision. Most of the generation who had first been given the opportunity to enter into the land God promised to be "flowing with milk and honey" were dead and gone. Their children were perhaps less grumpy, as they had been taught to obey God's law in the wilderness period. But that does not mean the task ahead was easy. God brought them out of Egypt, through the desert, and right up to the gates of their promised place of rest. But before them stood the river Jordan, the great walls of Jericho, and the Cannanite armies. Great blessing is promised, but the battle is not over. So how does the book of Joshua begin? It begins with God speaking directly to his servant Joshua whom he has chosen, a message to be given to the people that is crystal clear: *be strong and courageous*. Five times that exhortation is repeated in Joshua 1: from the mouth of God, from the mouth of Joshua, and from the mouth of Israel.

Today we come to the end of the book of Ephesians. When we began our time in Ephesians last fall, we compared it's expansiveness to the entering into a whole new world of blessing. We have been promised a new land flowing with milk and honey. In chapter 1, we saw that God the Father chose us from eternity past to be his holy heirs, that we've been redeemed by God in Christ and welcomed into a new reality that is much more stable and secure than before, since we have been sealed with God's own spirit for the final day where we inherit all of God's riches. All of this, chapter 2 taught us, is ours in Christ even though our spiritual state apart from him is not just needy but entirely dead. God gets the credit for our great salvation, from beginning to end—not only for saving us from sin but for tearing down our own hostility with one another and making us into one new body, the church, a place for his spirit to dwell. This new reality, as we saw, take some getting used to—but once we learn how to operate in Christ's kingdom by enrolling in Christ's school, we begin to expose the darkness of our own hearts and the world around us, and our whole society changes: our marriages are lived in light of the gospel, our family relationships, our economic relationships.

That is the new land we are looking forward to. And today, we are on the banks of the Jordan, and take a look at the final exhortation of the apostle in **verse 10**. We are coming into the new world of Christ, and here is our final charge summarized in **verse 10**. *Be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might*.



You are headed for a world of blessing, a new world which will swallow up this shadowy one forever. But you are not there yet. So for all of us who bear the weary weight of the world, this is the encouragement: be strong. So I have three ways this morning to be strong, three ways to develop spiritual strength.

Know the Tactic and the Enemy (10-12)

Now, I will admit I am typically not one for militaristic imagery. Perhaps because it can sound at times like the encouragement is simply to “man up” or something like that. But whether today you are a man, woman, or child—here is the realization we must come to: the exhortation to be strong in **verse 10** is not about testosterone. It’s not a challenge to channel your inner Spartan. What is the call? Be strong *in the Lord* and in the strength of *his* might. This is a completely different tactic than what we are used to. God’s ways are not our ways. God’s battles are not our battles (Jericho should have taught us that). So this is actually the first step in being prepared to go out into a dark world with strength.

Dependence on God, not self-dependence, is the true strength of the Christian life. This principle is made very clear when we think about the call of **verse 11**. How often do you tell an army of fortified soldiers to “stand”? Wouldn’t courage demand that the call to Christian faithfulness is a call to “fight”, to “charge”, to “stop standing and start doing?” The reality is, in our culture, even as Christians, we have put so much emphasis on productivity and relevance, on action and importance, we are not quite sure what to do with a command that calls us not to work but to stand.

We just mentioned the example of Joshua, and his call to be strong. The difference between you and Joshua is that his mission he needed strength for was a militaristic takeover, an establishment of a new theocracy that he brought about at the edge of a sword. But we are “under orders from the Prince of Peace, [whose] offensive weapon for conquest in the world us the glad tidings of peace.”¹ We follow a Christ who has already conquered, who God has put “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.” In other words, the call to be strong is not to rely on your strength, but the strength of your conquering king who you have been united to by faith. We only receive the command to be strong and courageous when we have a reason to be strong: God himself is with us. Christ went up to the cross to put evil in its place—to be the conquering warrior that you could never be. So again, do you feel spiritually weak? Does the call to be strong feel impossible? Good—you have taken the first step. Come now to Christ for strength. That is the gospel that Ephesians is preaching. That is the tactic used by the people of God who are walking with God into the promised land. Listen to John Newton as he discovered this secret:

Upon the whole, I am satisfied, and see it best, that I should be absolutely poor and penniless in myself, and forced to depend upon the Lord for the smallest things as well as

¹ S.M. Baugh, *Ephesians*



the greatest. And if, by His blessing, my experience should at length tally with my judgment in this point, that without Him I can do nothing, then I know I shall find it easy, through Him, to do all things; for the door of His mercy is always open, and it is but ask and have.²

When we find that without God we can do nothing, then we are most able to do all things. We are strongest when in our weakness we find our strength in him. This is the great paradox of the gospel: that God would strengthen us with his own hands, and give us his own righteous acts, and then proceed to reward us as if they were our own and carried out by our own strength.

Why the command for strength? What are we standing up to? Here he calls it plainly in **verse 11**, we need strength to stand up against the *schemes* of the devil. We are always apt to fall into two traps in regards to the spiritual realm:

1. **Hyper Realization.** We attribute everything to the work of Satan. Nothing is our fault, or the fault of the fallen world. We see Satan as omnipresent, his schemes as nearly impenetrable. He rejoices in that he steals attention and glory for God in the gospel.
2. **Under Realization.** We are ignorant to the lies and deceit of the enemy of God's people. We dismiss the supernatural world as realism or naturalism, and we underestimate or have no explanation for pure evil.

So the real reason for strength is because there is a real enemy. No, his power is not absolute. He is already now, in this age, under the foot of Christ. But his schemes are real. He wants to trick you into believing that all the gospel truth in Ephesians is untrue. Satan and his demons cannot create out of nothing—they cannot truly offer spiritual blessings. All they can do is twist and distort what God has made to be good. So the Devil's schemes are the opposite of God's "predestination" for you. God's plan is to adopt you into his eternal family—Satan would love nothing more than to orphan you for eternity. God tears down the walls of hostility and disunity in the church—Satan would love nothing more than for those walls to remain social projects but never be destroyed by union with Christ. Satan has a plan for your life. In Christ, his plan is not your destiny—but don't be naive. Stand up against those schemes.

Verse 12 tells us like it is: "We wrestle not with flesh and blood." This does not mean that the real physical problems of the world are not evil. Unjust war is certainly "flesh and blood". Real innocent men and women are dying as a result of terror attacks, religious persecution, or the sheer pride of nationalism every day. So it's not that evil doesn't take physical form. Rather, behind the physical there are always spiritual forces at work in some way. That word there for "wrestle" is hand-to-hand combat. Recently I watched a historical drama about Henry V, and this language makes me think of the battle of Agincourt. Henry V's forces were greatly outnumbered, but they set themselves up at the long end of a plain. When the French advanced, they were slowed by excessive mud from days of rain. And so the king and his men charge in after taking off most of

² John Newton, Letters, Jan. 1776



their armor—and although they have long swords and shields, the English prevail primarily because they are lighter and more agile. So the image is of knights not in regal, stately, sword fight, but it's wrestling in the mud. It's bloody, violent, and close quarters. This is Paul's image with the fight against sin, darkness, and the spiritual realm. Jesus himself, before leading us into the promised land of his resurrection, wrestled in this way with Satan. He went into the desert and was tempted, and again in the garden of Gethsemane before his death—he wrestled not against the flesh and blood of the men who wanted them dead, but by Satan working through Judas, through the crowds, stirring and tempting.

Let me be very clear for you. I cannot answer all your questions about the schemes of Satan. I do not know them all. But here is what I must say: we cannot let our guard down. We don't graduate out of this. Today we handed out childrens' version of *Pilgrims Progress*, and I have been reading that non-stop with my son because he loves it and asks for it every night. There is a place in the story where the pilgrims are about to reach the celestial city, right on the banks of the Jordan as it were, and they can see it. But before they get there they come to a place Bunyan calls "Enchanted Ground." And it's there that they are tempted to fall asleep, to drift into apathy, to think they've come far enough, to give up right before the end. But the reason Christian doesn't fall for that temptation is simple: the shepherds warned him about it. He was ready to stand strong when it came.

Church, Jesus is coming back soon. You are close to the end. You can see the Celestial City. He has promised to take you there: be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might, so that you can stand up against the schemes of the devil. Hear this warning as the grace of God: the enemy is real, but he won't win. Don't fall asleep now, don't let your guard down now. Your tactic is simple: rely on God's strength in Christ. Let's see what that looks like now.

Make Use of the Armory (13-20)

Here is where it actually gets vivid for you. Now, maybe in some strange medieval roleplay you have worn armor, but most of us do not have that experience. Football pads, maybe. But here is a strikingly vivid, and quite famous picture of what it means to stand firm spiritually. Again, it's this posture of Christ having already won the battle, so we stand against attack. But we don't do it alone. The imagery of a warrior equipped for battle is actually not new to the Bible here either. In Isaiah 59:17, God is described in this way:

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.

So the picture that Paul has in mind here again is not of a Christian who fights with his own weapons, who shields himself with his own cleverness or alertness or upright morality. No, God is



the one who puts on his own righteousness as a breastplate, his own salvation as a helmet. We don't forge our own equipment: we step into God's armory and take his. What a blessing of the gospel—to be dependent again on God, needing to be outfitted by him alone! Let's walk through these images one by one.

Belt of Truth

Belts are used to *fasten*, they are an instrument of strength because they keep everything else together. There is even evidence that for Roman soldiers, their belt has a defensive mechanism—it protected them against severe cuts by holding their flesh together. Why does Paul compare truth to a belt? It's quite evident what he has in mind in Ephesians. In **4:21** he said that the truth is “in Jesus” and when we are formed by the gospel we “speak the truth” in love to one another. The truth of the gospel is right teaching that points us to Jesus, it's all the gospel blessings just taught to us in Ephesians 1-3—it holds us together.

When Satan tempts you to believe a lie, or when he accuses with a falsehood, the truth of the gospel keeps you from unraveling. Take for instance the lie of the garden: “did God really say”? Satan is tempting Adam and Eve, wanting them to ask: “Can I trust God?” Now here comes the truth of the gospel of Christ. How could we not trust a God who has proven himself totally in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? When we speak the truth to one another, we fight against the lies and schemes of the enemy. For as weird as it sounds, you act as a “belt”, holding your brother or sister in Christ together, whenever you point out all the false things they are believing. Whenever they say “I am unworthy of God's love”, and you can sense their joy unraveling, what is the remedy? It's the truth of the gospel: that you are far more sinful than you can imagine, but infinitely more loved in Christ than you can fathom. That truth is what steadies you, holds you together, in any storm or fight.

Breastplate of Righteousness

The breastplate might be the most important piece of armor, since it guards your vital organs. Spiritually speaking, your heart is also called the vital organ of your life. Proverbs reminds us that the heart is the wellspring of life, so it must be guarded at all costs. When we let our heart be vulnerable, we are given over to attacks in our emotions: we are full of guilt, insecurity, doubt. Oftentimes we are more aware of our mind and our hands than our heart. We recognize when we are tired physically, or when we are having trouble focusing. We can be diligent about *thinking* the right things or *eating* the right things, without paying attention to *feeling* the right things. Of course, we can't always control our emotions—often we should listen to what they are saying. But our emotions will tell us how guarded our heart is. If we are given over to anger, to guilt, to anxiousness constantly, if those are the emotions bubbling up, we should be aware: I am letting my heart come under constant attack. So where does our strength come from?

The breastplate of the armor of God that protects our heart is made of *righteousness*. Since it is God who fashions it, this means the righteousness the text has in mind here is the perfect *righteousness* of Christ. In his death and resurrection, when Christ makes himself home with you by the Spirit, he gives you his perfect righteousness. It is imputed to you. Imputed righteousness is the



protection for our heart. Stress, lust, anxiety—all of it pollutes our heart. But if we are guarded by Christ’s righteousness, we are the pure in heart, and we will see God.

Next time the scheme of the devil is to accuse you of an impure heart, don’t buy in. Christ’s righteousness protects you.

Shoes of the readiness of the gospel of peace

Although the translation from the Greek is a bit difficult, the idea here is that we put on our feet a “gospel readiness”. The gospel, being a message of peace, provides our feet with a “preparation” for whatever the enemy throws our way. Roman military sandals were both protective and meant for agility. Good shoes were indispensable for soldiers that needed to move and adapt at a moment’s notice. The correlation for us is fairly simple: Satan’s devices are always changing. It’s hard to notice them at times. Sin is always crouching at the door. We can go to sleep praising God and wake up cursing him, and all we did was turn off for a few hours. But since the gospel is a gospel of peace, a gospel that says: “Jesus Christ conquers and he has won the battle”, we don’t have to carry the stress and burden of the fight. We don’t have to lie awake at night anxious about what temptation tomorrow will bring. We instead can be at peace: Jesus has got us! And he will make us ready and agile. So for those who are always worried about tomorrow, this is for you. God has equipped you with a gospel that makes every heart stand still. Remember Jesus, always in control, and your Father, always providing, be at peace, and then you will be ready for tomorrow’s faithfulness.

Shield of Faith

There were several kinds of shields common in the ancient world. One was a smaller, round shield. The other, which is in view here in the original language, was a large, sturdy, square shield. The purpose of these kinds of shields was that when used correctly, they could completely block the body from any missile attack, like arrows or rocks, head to toe. Often they would drench the leather covering the shield in water in order to extinguish flaming arrows, which were typical in that time period as a way to quickly decimate any wooden protection. After a while though, the shield would be far less effective against flaming arrows. But here Paul says we have a shield that can extinguish *all* the flaming arrows of Satan. What is that shield? It’s faith.

Attack from Satan most often comes in the form of accusation, like we have said. Accusations against us break down our confidence in God and bring doubt. One way to combat that is the truth of the gospel. Another way is to allow the truth of the gospel to bring you to the point of the gospel, which is God himself. Faith always has an object, and this example is no different. Scripture calls God our shield, because faith in nothing else will save—it must be faith in God. When we are hit with accusation, we must turn directly to God. He must become our shield and our help. We can cry out to him as not only a transcendent God capable of saving but a personal God who is ready to save those who trust in him. Faith in God lays hold of the promises of God and applies them in Christ. Faith is the gift of God that looks out at all the blessings in Christ and says: “I believe all of these are mine in him”. The willingness to throw all of our fears and insecurities to God, casting our



anxieties on him, laying at his feet for protection—that is faith. And God has proven in Jesus he is faithful, he can be trusted. Take up the shield and trust him.

Helmet of Salvation

If your heart is the seat of your emotions, the head is the seat of your thoughts. Thoughts are driven by desires, and when we entertain thoughts for too long, they come out in the way we feel and act. So our thoughts are incredibly important to guard. It is obvious that one of the ways Satan will attack us is by getting into our heads. What protection is a helmet of salvation? Well, something incredible happens when you are saved. Ephesians 2 told us that before Christ we were “darkened in mind”. But now, saved from sin and given new life in Christ, our minds are full of light. Salvation is the opening up of our futility of mind to a head full of hope. How often are you tempted to think so negatively, in futility, when the world doesn’t go as you’d like? That is an attack on your mind. But remember your great salvation: God has rescued you, and is coming again to get you. Your life is redeemed now in Christ, and will be redeemed forever. You are not given over to futility, but living hope and continual renewal! Jesus Christ our head is our great salvation, and he will project you from a life spent for nothing. You have purpose: bring that truth of the gospel to mind when an attack on your thoughts comes.

Sword of the Spirit, which is the word

The word for sword here has in mind a short sword used by Romans for fighting in close quarters. It’s used for both defense and offense, but I think with the context Paul has in mind here more of a defensive posture. This is a different context than Hebrews 4:12, which when warning about unbelief the author calls the word of God “sharper than a two edged sword”. What Paul has in mind here is not conviction but protection. Think of Jesus in the desert. When tempted, filled with the spirit, how did he respond to Satan’s attacks? By defending himself with the word of God, the promises of God. He knew God not only because he was God, but because he knew the words of God. This is what Paul means when just before in chapter 5 he said to let “the word of Christ dwell in you richly”. The word of God, given to us through the prophets and the patriarchs and the apostles in the Bible, which shows us Jesus the living Word of God, can be the water our hearts swim in. And when it is, there is no attack we cannot face with strength.

Prayer, mentioned in **verse 18**, is not an extra image of spiritual armor, but rather the underlying principle of all of it. We get this armor from God, so we must pray for him to give it to us at all times. It never comes from our own strength. In the same way, in **verses 19-20** Paul asks that the Ephesians would pray for him. Although he is the apostle, he too needs strength and boldness. He doesn’t have the strength in himself—he needs to be strengthened by God.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood, and thank God our great warrior is one whose great joy was not to deliver you from physical or political strife, to fight with sword and shield and raise an army. Our great warrior Jesus was meek, gentle, humble, and kind. He healed, prayed, and forgave. Why? So that he could show he was the answer to your greatest need: your spiritual state. He defeated sin, even in the depths of your heart, so that you don’t have to give in anymore. He put to task your enemy, the Devil, so that you can be free forever. Our battle is not against flesh and



blood. He overcame evil with the great armor of truth, righteousness, salvation, and peace. He is the sword, the Word, who swung his final blow against the enemy by laying down his life.

Receive the Blessing Of Strength from Christ (21-24)

This segways well into our last point. Let's go back to our image of Joshua and the people of Israel entering into the promised land. There is a world beyond this one: a marvelous world of blessing in Christ. The gospel is that Jesus is taking us there together with him. We need each other—which is why Paul sends Tychicus in **verses 21-22**. We are all going there with Jesus together. But it's not easy. Our hearts are easily discouraged. Many of us may think we will die right on the banks of the Jordan, and fail to make it in. We need courage. We need strength. We are fighting not only what we see, but even the unseen. Who is sufficient for these things? Who is strong enough?

Church, here is my final exhortation from Ephesians. We are not strong enough to carry one another into the promised land of eternity in Christ. We are called to peace, but our peace is often fragile at best. We won't stir up trouble as long as no one offends us or hurts us. We are called to grace, but our grace is often conditional at best. We will forgive and honor one another as long as we have the patience to sustain it. We are called to love one another, but our love is often temporary at best. We will love and sacrifice for one another as long as it doesn't cost us too much. How can we be strong? Is it by buckling down until we reach the blessings of God in Christ? Is it by clearing our schedules and committing all our time and energy to mustering up peace, grace, and love? What will make us a church worthy of the calling of the gospel? What will make us a church strong enough to resist the schemes of the Devil? How can we make sure Satan's dreams do not come true, and none of us die on the banks of the Jordan?

There is only one answer to that question, and it comes in **verses 23-24**. We must receive the blessings of strength directly and only from the Triune God: from the Father, in Christ, by the Spirit. Without God as our goal, without God as the one blessing us, we will fail. Only his peace is secure, his grace inexhaustible, and his love incorruptible. But this is the good news: God has blessed us in Christ. Can you do something for me? Stretch out your hands to receive this blessing. As you do, think of all the ways you feel weak and in need of spiritual strength. Think about all the temptations and accusations coming your way from Satan and his demons. Think of your need for help from God's hands, your need of blessing from God's mouth. Now here this, from the mouth of God who has blessed you with all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly realm in Christ:

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.

