

Stand Firm Against the Powers - Part 2

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[0 : 00] Our struggle, says the Apostle Paul in his brilliant letter to the church at Ephesus, our struggle, says the disciple of Jesus who experienced firsthand the full force of the reality of which he writes, our struggle, he says, is not what we tend to think it is.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our struggle is not against other human beings. Alternative reading of reality. Alternative understanding of life in the city.

I invite you to once again give attention to the closing paragraph of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. I invite you to once again give attention to Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10 through 20.

If you are able, would you please stand for the reading of God's word? Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

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.

[1 : 40] Therefore, take up the full armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day. And having done everything to stand firm.

Stand firm, therefore, having girded your loins with truth. Having put on the breastplate of righteousness. Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.

In all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. And with all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the spirit. With this in view, be on alert with all perseverance and petition for all things.

Pray on my behalf that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth. To make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel. For which I am an ambassador in chains.

[2 : 42] That in proclaiming it, I may speak boldly as I ought to speak. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you enable the Apostle Paul to think these thoughts and write these words.

And I pray that in your mercy and grace, you would help us understand them and live their truth. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. You can tell we're having a little trouble with the sound system.

And I have two options, three options at this point. One is not... The other, second one is for me to use a handheld that's a little dicey with my notes.

The other is for me to eliminate the sound system altogether and just do it. What's your vote? Turn the sound up, just a second. Can you hear me in the back row?

Hear me. Can you notice? Everyone can hear me. Carolyn? Not here. George Whitfield. You know what I'm going to do, Mark?

[3 : 57] Can we take this one over here? And somehow put that in front of the pulpit in some way. Or right in front of me. Like so.

Try that. How's that work? Thanks, man. How does this work?

Okay. Okay. I'd rather do this, Mark. If you don't mind. Then I don't have to hold this. All right.

You've likely heard the name N.T. Wright.

He's one of the leading Christian thinkers of our time. He's read and quoted across the theological spectrum. He's one of the go-to scholars for the media. I was much encouraged by him last week, early in the week, as I was doing more reading on this text.

In his little Paul for Everyone series, Tom, as he likes to be addressed, shares his experience with the text we just read. He writes this.

[5 : 13] For some reason, almost whenever I write about passages like this one, dealing with spiritual warfare, I run into problems.

He says that over the years, he's noticed that writing on spiritual warfare is spiritual warfare. I was relieved.

I'm not alone. I'm not going nuts. It even happens to Tom Wright, one of the most clear-headed thinkers God ever created.

You see, whenever I study and then try to teach or preach this text and others like it, life, which can be difficult enough on its own, gets significantly more difficult.

All kinds of things go wrong. You should have seen the first service. I feel this pressure all around me, seeking to knock me off balance.

[6 : 29] I have a hard time concentrating on anything. My mind gets bombarded by all kinds of negative thoughts. You're not working hard enough, Daryl.

If you don't work harder, this church is going to collapse. All kinds of sinful inclinations are aroused in my heart. I feel irritated and agitated.

I have to fight to keep any sense of balance, and I hate it. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, says Paul, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

And as difficult as it is to grapple with this alternative reading of reality, we have to. We have to press through in order to be able to stand.

A man I looked to as a kind of mentor when I was a young pastor, a man named Richard Halverson. After he had served a large congregation in Washington, D.C., he became the chaplain of the United States Senate.

[7 : 43] And one of his responsibilities as the chaplain was to give the daily devotion and lead in public prayer before any formal gathering of the Senate. In one of his devotions on the floor of the Senate of the United States, he makes this observation.

No adequate understanding of history can be had without taking into account that behind and around and through history, a personal, diabolical, satanic, spiritual force is bent on destroying all good and its author, Jesus Christ.

In fact, none of us will understand ourselves and our troubles until we recognize that evil is more than the mere absence of good, that evil is dynamic and personal, working to possess our mind and heart to coerce us to reject God's love and rule.

Floor of the United States Senate. Therefore, says the Apostle Paul, therefore, take up and put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Two weeks ago, I tried to lay out a mini-biblical theology of the devil and the principalities and powers. I will not review that today. If you weren't here, you can access that at our website in the October 30 sermon.

[9 : 14] Let me today simply make a number of qualifying statements that I think can help us live out Paul's exhortation in the closing paragraph of his letter. First observation.

The powers of darkness and wickedness are not our only enemies. Thank you, Daryl. I needed that. The Bible tells us that we also battle with sin, the flesh, and the world.

Sin, we all know. We do not take it seriously enough, but we all know the struggle with sin. The flesh, we also know. The flesh is the human self centered in itself and empowered by itself.

The favorite song of the flesh is, I did it my way. The world refers not to God's good creation. The world refers to human society organizing itself without God.

The world is where we live every day. The world has no interest in God and God's purposes. Indeed, the world rejects God and God's claim upon creation and civilizations.

[10 : 24] So we also battle these other enemies. Now, the devil and the principalities and powers mess with those other enemies. The devil and the principalities and powers love to fan the flames of sin and fuel the desires of the flesh and give energy to this quest to live without God.

Second, we humans are responsible for our own choices and actions. Although we come under great pressure from the powers, we are still responsible for our attitudes and behaviors.

Some of you are old enough to remember the comedian Flip Wilson. Flip Wilson would have these routines in which he did something stupid or obnoxious, and then he would squeal, the devil made me do it.

The devil made me do it. That's never true. Never true. The devil may entice us to do it. The devil may pressure us to do it.

But he does not make us do it. We make us do it. Third, as I emphasized two weeks ago, this battle is not between equals.

[11:41] This devil is not God's equal. Martin Luther can say of the devil, on earth is not his equal, meaning we are no match.

But the devil is not God's equal. He and his powers are no match for God, thank God. Evil is not equal and opposite to good. The devil is not an equal and opposite to Jesus Christ.

Which leads us to the fourth qualifying statement. The outcome of this struggle, this battle, has already been settled. The outcome has already been settled.

Jesus Christ wins. He already has won in his crucifixion and resurrection. Missionary Amy Carmichael used to say, in our struggle, in our battle, we work from the victory, not toward the victory.

From the victory, not toward the victory. This realization sets the whole tone and posture of our battling. We know the final outcome.

[12:53] We work from the victory, not toward the victory. Ephesians 1, 20 and 21. God has raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand, on his throne, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion.

Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne already. This then explains why writing and speaking on spiritual warfare is spiritual warfare.

The principalities and powers are threatened by texts like these. Tom Wright again. The powers are now positively panic-stricken at the thought that the message of this Jesus is everywhere challenging their power and authority, that communities loyal to Jesus as Lord and King are springing up, bringing together peoples and communities in a new unity, a new humanity, that shows evidence of the Creator's sovereign power and hence of their own imminent destruction.

And this is why Paul simply calls us to stand. He uses the verb four times. Verse 11, that you may be able to stand firm.

Verse 13, that you may be able to resist. It's another form of the verb stand. Verse 13, having done everything to stand firm. And then verse 14, stand firm, therefore.

[14:22] The implication being that since Jesus Christ has already won, since he is already Lord of all, hold the ground, he has already won.

That's why he does not say, now march on the ground, now advance and take the ground. Instead he says, stand firm, stand firm on ground already taken by Jesus Christ.

Now how do we do this? That's the question. How? How do we stand firm? How do we stand firm in the true nature of the struggle? How do we stand firm in the evil day, as Paul says?

Verse 10, be strong in the Lord. Take careful note. We are not exhorted, be strong.

Come on gang, be strong. Paul does not challenge us to pull apart bootstraps and get on with the fight. He exhorts us to be strong in the Lord.

[15:28] And that's a big difference. Even if his enemy is defeated, we are no match for his powers. We are not strong enough in and of ourselves. We are strong when in our weakness we throw ourselves on the strength of the Lord.

As Jesus said the night before he went to the cross, apart from me you can do nothing. Abide in me and I in you. For apart from me you can do nothing. Apart from him we cannot stand against the powers.

New Testament scholar William Lane puts it this way. It is tactical suicide to underestimate the strength of the enemy. And I would add it's tactical suicide to overestimate our ability to stand on our own.

Be strong in the Lord. And then verses 11 and 13. Take up and put on the full armor of God.

Not only does God give us his strength for this struggle he gives us the appropriate equipment.

Because we are engaged with spiritual powers we need spiritual armor.

[16:39] Take up and put on the full armor of God. Gird your loins with truth. Put on the breastplate of righteousness. Shod your feet with the gospel of peace.

Take up the shield of faith. Put on the helmet of salvation. Exercise the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. And pray at all times in the spirit.

Now where did Paul get this imagery? Where did he get the material to construct this metaphor of armor? From two sources. From the Roman soldier guarding him in jail.

As we will see Paul names the pieces of this armor in the order in which a Roman soldier would put them on. And he gets the imagery from the Old Testament description of God the warrior.

Of Messiah the warrior. Of the coming Messiah Isaiah says righteousness will be the belt around his loins. Faithfulness will be the belt about his waist.

[17 : 44] And of God who comes to judge and then rescue his people Isaiah says he put on righteousness like a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. This is why Paul calls the armor the armor of God.

It is the very armor God wears in the battle. It's the armor Jesus used in his battle with the powers of darkness in the desert. The full armor the word is panoplia that Paul uses here the full suit of armor. We need every piece one piece protects the head but not the feet another the feet but not the head. We need this whole panoplia in order to stand.

Now you may have seen as we read the text that there are both defensive and offensive pieces of this armor. There are five defensive the belt of truth the breastplate of righteousness the gospel shoes the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation.

And then there are two offensive pieces the sword of the spirit which is the word of God and praying at all times in the spirit. How do we stand? Put on the full armor of God that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

[19 : 11] Take up the full armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day. So let's do it. First defensive piece the belt of truth.

Stand firm having girded your loins with truth. Verse 14 Roman soldiers in Paul's day wore skirts much like Scottish kilts and over these skirts they wore a cloak a tunic as it was called.

When they were off duty they wore this tunic ungirded hanging loosely around their bodies but when they were about to go into battle they would gather the tunic around their waist and hold all the material together with a belt.

They would tuck up the tunic under the belt thus leaving their legs free to move. To gird up your loins therefore is to prepare for action.

which is why Paul begins with this piece of armor. We will not be able to stand in this spiritual warfare until and unless we put on this belt unless and until we buckle around the belt that buckle the belt around that holds everything else together and lets our legs be free.

[20 : 32] The belt is truth. We gird up our loins with truth. Now in what sense is Paul using this word truth? Does he mean that we prepare for action by grasping the truth?

By grasping the truth of the gospel? That Jesus Christ is God's final self-revelation? That he is the savior and lord of the world? Or does Paul say we prepare for action by actually living the truth? By doing the truth? Or does Paul mean both? the belt that holds everything together and frees our legs is both truth as doctrine and truth as character.

I think it's both. We stand by being gripped by the truth that is in Jesus. Ephesians 4:21.

By being gripped by the truth that is Jesus. I'm the truth, he says. We stand by letting Jesus shape our vision of life. We stand by seeing life the way Jesus does.

[21 : 39] You shall know the truth, he says, and the truth will make you free. And then we stand by having this truth grab hold of us at every level of our being, especially in the loins, in the guts, where we make the decisions about life.

Behold, you desire truth in the inward parts, King David prays in Psalm 51. We stand when we live truthful lives. We stand when we live sincerely and with integrity.

Earlier in the letter, Paul exhorts us to speak the truth in love and lay aside falsehood, but speak truth to one another because you are members of one another. As John Stott says, commenting on that verse, to be deceitful, to lapse into hypocrisy, to resort to intrigue and scheming, to play with the truth in any way, is to play the devil's game.

And we shall not be able to beat him at his own game. Jesus tells us that the enemy loves the darkness. There's no truth in him, says Jesus. He's the father of lies, and he does everything he can to keep us from walking in the truth, walking in the light.

And we stand firm by committing ourselves to know the truth, to speak the truth, to live the truth. Second defensive piece of armor, the breast plate of righteousness.

[23 : 10] Stand firm having put on the breast plate of righteousness. Verse 14. The purpose of the soldier's breast plate was to guard the most vital parts of his body.

It was made of metal, worn on the front and the back, and it protected his heart and lung and stomach. We stand protected when we as individuals and a community put on righteousness. Now, what does Paul mean by this highfalutin word righteousness? Does he mean the righteousness which God gives us in Jesus Christ? Does he mean that what protects us is the assurance that God has made us right with himself even though we ourselves are not righteous? Or does he mean that what protects our vital parts is actually living righteousness, living right relationships, living God's good order as it is in his law?

Or does Paul mean both? I think it's both. What guards us in the struggle and enables us to stand is both. having been made right with God through the work of Jesus Christ and then actually living out that righteousness, becoming new people with new attitudes and behaviors.

[24 : 37] We put on righteousness by saying to ourselves and to the powers, I have been made right with God. not on the basis of anything I have done with my life, but on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done with his life.

There is great freedom in being able to say to the deceiver, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There's great freedom to be able to say to Satan, the accuser, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, made right with God by grace.

You see, this enemy loves to point out our sins to us and to others. He loves to accuse our conscience.

He loves to suggest that because of our sin and especially our most recent sins, God rejects us and no longer loves us. And then he loves to get us to think that if only we work harder at being holy, we can make ourselves acceptable to God and we will have his favor.

Put on the breastplate of righteousness. I am accepted. I am acquitted by God on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

[26 : 03] And then, by grace, actually live righteousness. Live right relationships. By grace, actually seek to live a life that pleases the holy God of grace.

Conscious, willful, habitual sin creates a crack in this breastplate. It gives the destroyer a foothold. And what covers up that crack is then confession. For what is the promise? 1 John 1 9, if we confess our sins, he is faithful to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We stand firm by seeking a righteous life, by confessing any known sin and receiving God's cleansing. sin. Now, it's important to remember that Paul here is speaking not only to individuals, but to the whole church.

Unconfessed sin, though unknown to the whole church, creates a crack in the church's armor. David Watson of England was so bold to say, personal sin is not a private matter.

[27 : 29] personal sin is not a private matter. My sin makes the whole church vulnerable to the devil's attack. The whole congregation of Israel suffered because of the secret sin of Achan.

And the whole congregation of any of God's people can suffer because some unconfessed sin is festering somewhere in the church. church. That's sobering to realize, is it not?

Especially when we gather for worship. Our unconfessed sin, notice, I didn't say sin, we're never going to be sinless until the day comes, but our unconfessed sin grieves the Holy Spirit, it quenches the Holy Spirit, says Paul, particularly unconfessed bitterness, resentment, and judgmentalism.

That unconfessed stuff will affect a whole worship service. Which is why we need to take time in public worship to bring that garbage to the cross and be clean.

Rats only go where there's garbage. And the powers can work only when there's garbage to lack onto. Confess anything you know that is displeasing to God.

[29 : 01] Claim again the cleansing power of grace. We stand by putting on as individuals and as a community the breastplate of righteousness.

We need to hurry. Third defensive piece of armor. the gospel shoes. Stand for having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.

Verse 15. Shoes were a crucial piece of the armor for Roman soldiers. They needed good shoes in order to march across rough ground. And the shoes Paul has in mind were made of leather and then they had these nails pounded in the bottom of them.

Tied to their ankles and shins with decorative straps. shoes kept the soldiers feet from sliding, those nails there, and gave them greater mobility.

They can move. A number of historians have observed that it was the attention the Romans paid to their shoes that gave them victory in so many battles.

[30 : 08] Those of you who do a lot of hiking know how important footwear is. the boots we need in order to stand firm in this battle Paul calls the preparation of the gospel of peace.

Now here again the phrase can be taken in two different but related senses. The gospel of peace prepares us to walk on the rough road and then we carry the gospel of peace as we walk the rough road.

That is the gospel of peace both gives us firmness and readiness. God has made peace with us through Jesus Christ.

That's what Paul develops in the second chapter of Ephesians. And when we experience that peace we are standing on solid ground and cannot be moved.

Hassled, buffeted, about, but not moved. The opposite is true. when we are not at peace with God we are very vulnerable.

[31 : 15] Wrap your feet with the peace of God. Once that peace then gives us firm footing then we are able to move out and make peace.

Thus driving back the powers of darkness and wickedness. Satan does not tremble at soldiers with weapons of destruction but he does tremble at soldiers who know and speak the peace God won for the world at the cross.

I've often wondered if Paul did not have in mind that text in Isaiah 52 verse 7. How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news announcing peace saying to Zion your God reigns.

stand firm having shod your feet with the gospel of peace. Confess any lack of peace and ask the prince of peace to give you peace. Fourth defensive piece of the armor the shield of faith.

In all take up the shield of faith verse 16 with which you are able to extinguish the fiery missiles of the evil one. Now the kind of shield Paul has in mind was made of two layers of wood wrapped in linen and then wrapped in leather.

[32 : 38] It was long and oblong covered most of the soldier's body. Now it was especially designed to defend against the most terrible weapon of the day arrows dipped in pitch and lit on fire.

Thus Paul's phrase the flaming missiles of the evil one. It's a sobering metaphor. the reality of which we have all experienced. Jesus' enemy is bent on destroying anything Jesus has created and redeemed.

And so he's always shooting these fiery darts at us. And most of the time we don't realize their source. Darts of lustful, hurtful, judgmental thoughts and imagination.

Darts of accusation and slander. Darts of doubt and the goodness of God. And what extinguishes those darts is faith, this shield of faith. Back off.

Faith as trust, not just mere mental assent to truth. The Apostle James tells us that the demons believe that God exists. Mere affirmation of gospel truth is not enough.

[33 : 52] It's trusting the truth. It's putting your weight on the truth that extinguishes the missiles. it's in actually trusting God with the truth that extinguishes and constitutes this shield.

Now, we see Jesus using this shield in his battle in the wilderness. He stood firm by faith, by trusting his father in the face of evil.

Turn these stones into bread, the tempter says. No, I will obey my father even if it means more days without food. Jump off the cliff, the tempter says, and see whether or not God will keep his promise. No, I will trust him even if I cannot see the fulfillment of his promises. Bow down and worship me and I will give you the kingdoms of this earth. No, I will worship and serve my father only even if it means I go to the cross.

No fiery missile can penetrate that kind of faith. again, Paul is speaking to the whole church, not just to individuals, which means that this shield of faith is something that we need to help each other put on.

[35 : 06] We need help to trust and obey. Am I right? We need help to trust and obey. I need help to trust and obey.

We need each other to keep pointing to Jesus Christ. We need each other to keep reminding us that he is always available, that he is adequate for any crisis in life.

We need each other. And I think what Paul has in picture is these Roman soldiers all together in a line, each of them with their shield of faith, tucked together, impenetrable.

And then the fifth defensive piece of the armor, the helmet of salvation. take up and put on the helmet of salvation, verse 17. Paul here is referring to the soldiers' helmets that were made of very tough metal, like iron or bronze.

And they were lined with felt or sponge inside so that the soldier could bear that heavy weight. And as one commentator says, nothing short of an axe or hammer could pierce a heavy helmet.

[36 : 10] what Paul is saying to us is that what protects our head is salvation. The salvation God accomplishes in Jesus Christ.

Salvation in all three tenses, past, present, and future. In Jesus we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. We stand firm against the powers by declaring to ourselves and to the powers.

In Jesus I am saved. I'm forgiven by God through grace. I'm reconciled to God by grace. I'm adopted by God through grace.

I'm filled with the Holy Spirit by God through grace. I am being saved. The Spirit is working in me to transform me into the image of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit is cleansing me, making me a fit dwelling place for glory. The Spirit is using every circumstance in my life to mold me into a new creation. And in Jesus I will be saved.

[37 : 17] Along with the whole creation I will be freed from sin and death. History has a goal, a new heaven and a new earth. Terrorism and greed, violence and oppression, disease and injustice will all come to an end.

Jesus commands my destiny. Put on the helmet of salvation. salvation. I am saved. I am being saved. I will be saved.

Next Sunday we'll take up the two offensive pieces of the armor. I think you can see that this full armor of God turns out to be Jesus.

be strong in the Lord Jesus. Take up and put on the Lord Jesus. The belt of truth?

Jesus. The breastplate of righteousness? Jesus. The shoes of peace? Jesus. The shield of faith? Jesus.

[38 : 24] Faith in Jesus and the faith of Jesus. Helmet of salvation? Jesus. How appropriate therefore that St. Patrick of Ireland should put together what's called the St.

Patrick's breastplate. Christ be with me. Christ within me. Christ behind me. Christ before me. Christ beside me.

Christ to win me. Christ to win comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me. Christ above me. Christ in quiet. Christ in danger. Christ in hearts of all that love me.

Christ in mouths of friend and stranger. The full armor of God is Jesus Christ. Once more, our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

Our struggle is against spiritual powers and forces. Therefore, take up and put on the full armor of God every morning, every noon, every evening.

[39 : 32] Put on Jesus Christ. Amen.