

Be Strong in the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] So we're going to go to Ephesians chapter 6 this morning. And mainly the reason that I wanted to go here instead of going back to Colossians is that I just was thinking about the year that it's been and some of the things that some of you have been through, honestly, and just thought to myself, you know, we just need some encouragement.

And I think that, and my prayer is that this will be an encouragement to you. Just a short verse in Ephesians chapter 6, verse 10, and really we're just taking a look at a couple of the words that are there.

But here's what the text says. It says, finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Let's pray together. Father, I pray that you would use your word. I pray that you would use it by your spirit in the lives and the hearts of your people. And Father, I pray that you would encourage and strengthen them in such ways that they can look back years later and see your hand.

And I pray, Father, that you would get all the glory and all the praise and all the honor. In Christ's name, amen. Amen. So I think about 2023, and I look at you, and I know some of you have been through some difficulties over this last year.

[1 : 2 8] And some of you, some of those difficulties, they vary in the kind of difficulty it is. Some of you have been through things harder than others. And some of us who have been through some difficult things, you know, maybe those things are not even over yet.

And it does make you wonder, as you look at 2024, how are we going to get through that? You know, a whole other year, how are we going to go through that?

Sometimes when difficulties face me, I often have a tendency to ask the question, how am I going to survive, rather than the question of how am I going to thrive?

And what's interesting is this passage that we have in front of us comes at the very end of Ephesians, where Paul has been hammering these Christians. He's been hammering them that they need to live the life of a Christian.

They need to walk worthy of the calling with which they've been called. He spent chapters 1 and 2 and 3 describing the greatness of their salvation.

[2 : 3 5] And then in chapters 4, 5, and 6, he challenges them to live up to that calling, up to that greatness. Look how great your salvation is, therefore live according to it.

And as he hammers them, he talks about their unity. He talks about their maturity in the stature of Christ. He talks about how they need to live without sin, that Christians need to run from sin and avoid sin.

He talks to them about how they need to love others as Christ has loved you. How they need to live as light and seek to expose sin. How they are called to purity and wisdom in daily life.

How they're supposed to live a spirit-filled life, which shows up in wives submitting to husbands, and husbands loving wives as Christ loved the church, and children obeying parents, and parents not provoking their children to wrath.

And so you have two streams that begin to flow together. And one stream is this stream of the difficulties of life, and the second stream has to do with the demands of God.

[3 : 40] That as the difficulties in life come at us, God does not soften His demands on how we ought to live. The difficulties come, the suffering comes, the sickness comes, and yet God does not say, Oh, I'm sorry, you have sickness and sorrow, therefore you are exempt from all the demands of Scripture that I have upon you.

And so how do we live in such a moment? What is God expecting us to do? That when the middle of suffering that hurts so much, and yet His demands upon me do not change, I still have to live in a way that honors Him, what is He expecting?

And that's where I think this passage comes into play. He comes in, and He says, You need to be strong in the Lord. And I think that that sounds trite.

I think it sounds trite because I don't think we really know how to talk about being strong in the Lord. And I'm not sure that I'm going to do any better than anybody else here this morning, but I'm going to try, because I think one of the things that we need is we need very clear thinking and very clear ways of talking about what it is to be strengthened in the Lord.

What does it mean that God strengthens me for something? And I just want to say at the outset, and we'll probably come back to this in a moment, but this is not a kind of strength that lets me get through something without being intimately connected to God the entire time.

[5 : 28] You understand what I'm saying? Like God is not happy with the idea that He might give us this little pill of strength that we could take one day at the end of 2023 and not have to have any more strength given to us for the rest of the year.

No, He wants us to come to Him for strength moment by moment, to depend upon Him, to rest in Him. And so I want us to think about the strength that God gives two big, huge, broad ideas.

And here we go. The first one is that spiritual strength is a work of God. Spiritual strength is a work of God. The verse says, Be strong in the Lord.

This word, be strong, is actually a passive verb. And you may not understand what that means, but basically, the way the grammar is written is that the person who is to be strong is someone who is not doing the action, but the action of strengthening is happening to them.

It is not strengthen yourself, but it is be strengthened by the Lord. It is a passive command. So it is something we have to allow to happen to us.

[6 : 50] It is not something I do to myself. But it also then says to be strong in the Lord. And to say in the Lord has this idea that there is a connection to Jesus Christ.

Because when Paul uses Lord, he means Jesus Christ. Okay? So in connection to Jesus Christ, in connection to our salvation, in connection to our union with him, which is a concept and an idea that's massive, but just think about it this way.

When he died, we died. When he rose, we rose. When he was seated at the right hand of the Father, Ephesians 2 tells us that we are seated with him.

We are united with him. So all that happens to him happens to us. All the blessings that he gets become ours. And all the power that is his then becomes ours as well.

We are to be strong in the Lord by him. It is by him that we are strong. It comes from him. It's being that vital connection we have with Jesus that the strength comes through.

[8 : 00] Now, that's what that little verb means, be strong. And that's all the explanation of the text I'm going to give you for now because I want to make application of that because I think there's some big, massive thoughts here that we really need to hang on to.

And here's the first thing. First, if it's true that we are being told here that this strengthening comes from God, then we should never do anything in our own strength.

If it's a strength that comes from God, if it's a strength that comes from being related to Christ, if it's a strength that comes from Christ, if it's a strength that comes from our relationship with Christ, we should never do anything in our own strength.

And so we should never try to pray in our own power. And I say that, and you and I both know that we all have a tendency to do things in our own strength and our own power.

But we should never try to pray in our own power. We should never try to share the gospel with somebody in our own power. We should never try to use words of tenderness and encouragement in our own power.

[9 : 14] We should never try to keep our thought life pure in our own power. We should never try to keep our mouth free from foul speech in our own power. We should never try to keep our heart from anxiety in our own power. If we try to live the Christian life on our own, it's kind of this concept that says, well, since Christ died for me, I'm going to live for him. And it's almost this sort of bold, bootstrap-pulling mentality that says that I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.

But the fact of the matter is that we cannot do this. And if we dare try to do it in our own strength, then we're dishonoring Christ and we're disobeying this passage. We are to be strong in the Lord. The second thing about this second thought of application, you could say, is that we're without hope of strength if God does not work. Be strong in the Lord. If God doesn't give us that strength, then there's no other place to go to get the strength we need. If Christ does not take it up into his mind and his heart to make you stronger, then there is no other place you can go to to get the strength you need to live. That's it. We're done. We can't be strengthened to live in the way that he's called us to live.

We can't do this for the glory of God if he doesn't give us the strength to do it. And there's so many people nowadays who are walking away from their faith because their faith was never real, because they never did things for the glory of God and Christ never gave them the strength to hold on. And because of that, they're without hope.

But I want to tell you this third thing before we close this point, and that is this, that if it's be strong in the Lord, and that's something that he does in us, and it's be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might, then we are richly supplied with strength if God works.

As a matter of fact, this strength is a strength that is superior to death. It's a strength that outdoes the demons. I want you to notice another verse in the book of Ephesians. Chapter 1.

[11 : 49] It's verse 18 through 21. Paul is explaining that he's praying for the Ephesians. He gives us a glimpse into this prayer. He talks about in verse 18, I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened. Okay, so I want you to know something, right? So that you will know what is the hope of his calling. That's the first thing to know. So that you would know what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints. I'm not going to even take time to tell you what that means. There's a whole lot there we could get into, but we're just not going to. That's not the point here, right? It's just two things he's praying for, hope and glory, right? The third thing in verse 19 says, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe? So he wants them to know that there is power, that there is a greatness of a power toward believers. And then he says, and these, these three things are in accordance with, in other words, they come about by the working of the strength of his might. That's the same phrase you find in Ephesians 6.10. It's this strength of his might. But notice this strength of his might, verse 20, which he brought about in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion in every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the age to come. In other words, Paul is saying to these Ephesians, I want your eyes opened so that you understand that the power that God is going to work in you is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. It's the same power that seated Jesus in the heavenly places. It's the same power that raises him up above all rule and authority. In other words, it's a strength and power that we get to know that outdoes the demons and is superior to death. It's a strength that is the ultimate strength. It's a magnitude of strength.

We are richly supplied with strength from the Lord. And there are rich, rich stores of strength from God for his people, for those who believe. Which means that there are some of you who've never tasted the strength of his power because you still live for yourself. You are still uppermost in your own thoughts. You eat your food daily, thankful to yourself and not really to God because you can't really understand how he put food on your table. You give your money not because of him, but because of yourself and because of what you get out of it. You plan your day with only you in mind and not Christ. You never do anything for the glory of Christ. You see, that is the point right there.

You understand what I'm saying? That if we don't do things, if we don't try to fight against our sin, if we try to, or let me say it this way, you can be a nice person and a lot of people are saying, this person's a really nice person, but why are you nice? Are you nice so that other people will see that you're nice? Are you nice so that Jesus Christ gets the praise, the glory, and the honor?

You see, that's the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian, is that a Christian wants to be nice, wants to be loving, wants to be honoring to other people, not for their own glory, but for the glory of Christ. And the strength that God provides is the strength that he gives us to continue to live that way, to stay grounded and faithful to him. But some of you have no strength because you are not in Christ. Your sin has excluded you, and unless you repent of your sin and turn to Christ, you will be under the ban of power and strength from his kingdom, wrapped up in only who you are and what you want, and the end of that kind of life is destruction. Well, we need to get to the second thing because there's a lot of unanswered questions. I don't know if I'll be able to answer them. What I'm trying to do is set a stage for us here as we get to this second thing, because the second point is that spiritual strength is a command. So catch this, if you will. The word be strong is in the command structure in the

Greek. So he's commanding you to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

[16 : 58] But it's a work that only God can do. Okay, so now the cat's out of the bag, right? So here we are.

God is telling us something that we are responsible for, yet he's the only one who can do it. Be strong in the Lord, passive. He's the one who has to do it. He's the one who has to give the strength.

But yet you're commanded. So if you don't become strong in the Lord, then you are not living the way he wants you to. You're sinning. It's your responsibility to grow in his strength. It's your responsibility to increase in power, yet it is a work of God alone.

Brady, how does this work? I'm glad you asked. I wanted to tell you how this worked. Because here's the thing. Because God has commanded us to have something that only he can supply, because he is commanding it to be done in Christ, in the Lord, because it is a strength that comes from the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Christ from the dead, then there's only one thing you and I can do in this whole strengthening process.

You've got to put yourself in the place where God can do for you what he says he's going to do. I've used this illustration. Most people, it's a very silly illustration.

[18 : 34] It's just super silly, but it just works, I think. If it's raining outside right now and it was your desire to be wet, staying inside the building doesn't help you.

If you wanted to get wet, you've got to place yourself where you can get wet. We're commanded to be strong in the Lord, and only he can do it, so we have to place ourselves in the place where he can make us strong.

And because of all we've said about this, the only recourse we have. See, the passive part is be strong. What's the active part? Brady, what's the thing that I've got to do?

What's the bottom line things that I need to do in order to be strong in the Lord? Well, here it is, right here. You want to talk about rubber meets the road?

Here it is. What you have to do is you have to take advantage of the means of grace. The means of grace.

[19 : 41] That's a fancy way of saying you've got to do those things that God has commanded you to do in order to get grace from him. I'm not talking about your salvation.

I'm talking about Christians and Christians living upon the grace of God. Now, there's a couple of different kinds of grace of God, right? There's this idea of the providential grace of God.

All of us know about the providential grace of God. If I were to ask you, well, how did you get here this morning? Especially after you told me that you almost hit a deer and you almost ran off the road. How did you get here this morning?

You'd look at me and you'd say, by the grace of God. It's like when Michelle and I were in college. We lived in Marshall, Texas, right? It's East Texas Baptist University. Five-lane road.

It's raining. It's crazy. And we've got this lane that we're in. We've got a lane to the right of us. We've got a lane to the left of us. The lane to the left of us is this turning lane.

[20 : 39] And we've got somebody who's turning out of the turning lane going across us into the parking lot that's there. And everybody's freaking out because it's raining and the road is slick.

And next thing I know is that the guy is stopped in front of us. And so I go to the brake. But I know I shouldn't really go to the brake. But I go to the brake.

And as I go to the brake, I can feel our car lift just a little bit. You know what I'm talking about? That little hydroplane in motion right there. Just whoop. Just up just a little bit.

And as we're going, I can feel the car start to slide like this. But I've got people on both sides of me. So I press it just a little bit harder. Then I throw this. It was your tracer, right?

So standard shift. None of you know what that is, right? Anyway. So I lower the gear and I punch the gas. And I spin the wheel. And I ended up coming up to that car like this and then going around it.

[21 : 43] Now you ask me how that happened. Ask me. Ask me. By the grace of God. But you know, that kind of thing happens to a lot of people.

It's providential grace. But providential grace does not come into the heart and change it. It protects our lives as we live.

But what we need is we need a different kind of grace that goes internal to the heart, to the mind, that changes the thinking, changes the heart, and makes us sanctified.

That is sanctifying grace. And we get sanctifying grace by the means of grace. God uses these things in our lives to change us by his grace.

And there's five of them. And here they are. Number one. Prayer. Shocker.

[22 : 48] Prayer. You're going to be shocked by the next one too. Reading the Bible. You're going to be shocked by the third one too.

Preaching of the Word. Fourth one. The ordinances. Lord's Supper and Baptism. And the last one.

Christian fellowship. God uses those things. Theologians for years, for centuries, have called those things the means of grace.

And as you get those things involved in your life, that is the only recourse you have for God by his grace to strengthen you.

That's your part. That's you placing yourself in the place of God bringing strength into your life. So we pray and ask, God, please strengthen me.

[23 : 54] I mean, if you're not praying for God to strengthen you, then what are you doing? Right? We should pray for God to strengthen us. We should read the Scriptures to nourish our souls so that we understand what strength is.

So that we long for strength. So we long to go in those directions. We need to be under the preaching of the Word because the preaching of the Word calls us by the Gospel to come back when we've failed to be strong in the Lord.

We need the ordinances because it reminds us of the work of Christ and what he's done to take us from being dead to being alive and what he's done by his blood to purchase for us these promises because it's grace to us that reminds us of all that he has done.

We need Christian fellowship because through it God gives grace to help us to live the way we ought to. Because we need people in our lives to look at us and say, that's not right.

Or I understand how difficult that is. Let me pray for you. So that's it.

[25 : 05] That's all we can do. Right? That's all we can do to be strengthened is just place ourselves in the position of God doing it. And so here's what we've got to then think.

We've got to think these thoughts as we see the thing we need to do and then we say to ourselves, because I guarantee you, I guarantee you, you'll go back and you'll pray, you'll read Scripture, and then some difficulty is going to come your way, some sickness is going to come your way, and you're going to walk back up to me and you're going to go like, but Brady, I don't feel strong.

You told me to read the Bible. You told me to be involved in all these things and God was strengthening me, but I don't feel strong. Good. Good. Let's talk about that.

Because there's a couple of things. This one's a little bit more hurtful. I'm sorry about this, but it's just got to be said. And that's just because you feel weak doesn't mean you're off the hook. Husbands are told to love their wives as Christ loved the church.

But I've got two problems with that. She's a sinner and I'm a sinner. And on top of that, all of our children are sinners. And on top of that, I have a job working with a bunch of sinners.

[26 : 24] And on top of that, all kinds of things can begin to just pour in. Do you understand? You guys know what I'm talking about. Some of you got more difficulties packed onto your life than I've ever thought about.

But each thing is a layer that compounds the difficulty of that. Yet in the middle of that, I must love my wife the way Christ loved the church. And no matter how weak I feel, I never get to get off the hook.

There's not a day that comes where God says, Brady, you've had a tough day today. Lots of suffering. You don't have to love Michelle the way Christ loved the church. Wives, Scripture says to be submissive to your husbands.

I think that's the harder task. Look at us. You talk about sinners. Here we are. How can you do that?

With all the pressures of everything else going on in life, God's not going to come along and say, hey, listen, by the way, it's okay if you don't. So just because we feel weak does not mean we're off the hook.

[27 : 41] Second thing I want to say is this. All of this that we're talking about, that God has this plan, this promise to make you strong. I need you to understand something. Believe it.

Believe it. Don't live like some sort of anxious teenager wondering whether or not the girl loves him or not. I dated this girl in high school and I thought to myself, you know, that I liked her and I didn't know if she liked me.

And so I became obsessive and anxious like you. I mean, you just don't even understand anxiousness until you've seen me. I mean, I would lay awake at night and I would pray something like Gideon because this whole thing with Gideon's fleece and I would say, God, if I'm supposed to date this girl, let her call me tonight.

I mean, you know, I look at it now and I can laugh at it, but I'm going to tell you something. I was earnestly, deadly serious. I was obsessed and anxious over all of this because I thought to myself, how am I ever going to meet someone?

How am I ever going to be married? How am I ever going to have anything like this? And I was so anxious about this. And sometimes I think when we hear God is going to strengthen you, we believe it like some sort of anxious teenager that says, okay, well, Lord, if you're really going to be strengthening me, if you're really going to do this, then let me lay out a fleece for you to kind of show me that you're going to do this.

[29 : 15] Years ago, after Michelle had been married for probably, I don't know, 20-something years, living in Port Lavaca, some hurricane was coming. I don't know which one. Didn't matter. Hurricane.

We went to the beach. It was a really cool moment because it was like a Category 1. The sky was gray and the wind was blowing pretty hard.

And we were sitting on the picnic table underneath the cabana about looking at the waves. And we just sat in silence. We didn't talk.

We didn't say anything. And I just knew. This is my best friend. She loves me.

I didn't need to lay out a fleece. I didn't need to get anybody to show me a sign. I didn't need to bother her and go like, so do you love me? I just knew it.

[30 : 18] And there was this deep-seated peace and calm as we're just watching all this take place. And that's what I'm saying is that he says that he will strengthen us.

It's something he commands and something he provides. And I'm just saying to you, believe it. Believe that he's going to strengthen you.

Stay with it. You're in the Word. You're praying. You're going to church. You're listening to the preaching of the Word. You don't feel strong. Don't worry about it. Believe that he is going to strengthen you.

Because that's the last thing I would say to you is don't believe the weakness you feel. Because the strength that God provides is not a strength that helps us to be emotionally stable.

It's not a strength for us to feel better about the things we're going through. It's not a strength for us to be able to endure it in such a way that we've just whooped it or something like that. It's a strength that helps us to get through the day connected to God for the glory of Christ.

[31 : 27] We all feel weak. The point is not to feel strong.

The point is to be strong. And what does that look like? We had Hurricane Ike come our direction when we lived in Lufkin, Texas.

And right out there in the front yard was this massive oak tree. And the wind was blowing and blowing and blowing and blowing. And you could see the ground swell as the tree was being kind of pushed by that wind.

And I thought for sure it was just going to snap and pull the thing right out. But it didn't. It held. And I think about that a lot. And I think to myself, that's the image. Strength is that we're still rooted in Christ when it's all over.

And I can't always measure that or test it or examine it and put it in something so that we can all go like, oh yeah, there is strength.

[32 : 35] That's what strength was. I have to wait until it's all over. I have to wait until the storm is gone and look back and see I'm still deeply rooted in Christ. And what that looks like to me, or at least for me, is that there have been days.

There have been days that all the struggle and the difficulty of life from family to illness has poured into our life.

And I throw myself down on the bed at the end of the day, exhausted and tired, wondering how do we make it through the day.

And morning comes. And there's nothing I would rather do than just lay there and close my eyes and act like the day is not here. And my foot hits the floor.

And about all I can muster out is, God help me. And eventually, I'm up, going and doing.

[33 : 46] And maybe like you, that day turns out nastier than it was the day before. Something else piles on top. You lay down at night and you think to yourself, there's no way I can do another day.

An alarm goes off the next day. The foot hits the floor and you go, God, help me. That is strength.

Do you want to know why that is strength? Do you want to know why that is the Lord strengthening us? Because there's not a one of us on our own, apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, that would run to God and pray for help just because we're nice people and good people.

As a matter of fact, the Bible teaches us that we were born enemies of God and that we're God-haters at heart.

And so, if you find yourself weak, weak, weak feeling, and yet you throw your foot over and you say, God, help me get through this day, and you do it again the next day and again the next day and again the next day, that is right there the proof that He is strengthening you to get from day to day.

[35 : 13] Yeah, but why don't I feel strong? Why do I have to keep praying like that? Because He wants you to stay connected to Him. Now, I don't think that there's a strength in which God takes and all of a sudden we feel like we can do it on our own.

That would never be strength. That would be a denial of God. I mean, look at the work that He's done in your life.

And though you feel weak, believe He is strong. Without this strength, without this strength, we can't live the Christian life.

We can't do the things He's called us to do. And we certainly can't do it in the midst of the difficulty that comes our way. And yet He brings that difficulty to us.

Old Puritan William Grenall wrote this. He says, In other words, He kicks them out of the nest in order for the sun to help to strengthen up their wings.

[36 : 35] Christ tries His children by their courage that dare to look on the face of death and danger for His sake.

He's the one that brings to us the difficulties. He brings to us the demands to try us, to get us prepared and strengthened and ready to follow Him to be able to face death and danger for His sake.

My prayer is that God would use His Word in your life and that He would strengthen you. And I would say to you today that if you find yourself in a moment of weakness, in a moment where things have been going crazy, then get after the means of grace and throw yourself into prayer, throw yourself into reading His Word and believe and wait and hang on.

And if you find yourself saying, I don't want anything to do with the strength of God, then let me just say to you, if you are going to try to live in your own strength, then you're going to find yourself as an enemy of Christ.

And as an enemy of Christ, having broken His law, you will suffer under His punishment for eternity.

[38 : 03] But it doesn't have to be that way. You can come to Christ and be saved today. May the Lord give us strength that we need. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray.