

Stand Firm with God's Strength

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[0 : 0 0] Let me begin with a question though. Hands up if you find the Christian life easy and struggle free. I asked my Bible study group the same question, they laughed as well, with their hands firmly down like this.

While the Christian life is good and worthwhile, it is not always easy, is it? We live in an imperfect world where we all have struggles, whether health or family, work or study.

But as Christians we also face another struggle or battle, don't we? The constant battle to live God's way, not the world's way. To react as Jesus would, not as the world would.

Or as Ephesians has put it, to live out our new life in Christ and not go back to our old life as Gentiles. But the battle is not only with our sinful nature, you know, the nature that wants to say those choice words when someone cuts you off on the road.

You know, that kind of impulse thing that we have to try and control, that nature that God is transforming. Our battle is also with the devil who is always tempting. You see, Paul has been helping us see the spiritual reality of who we are in Christ.

[1 : 1 7] That because of Jesus, we have a privileged place in God's plan. For in Christ, believing in Christ, we have every spiritual blessing. In Christ, we who were once no-hopers are now God's family members.

We now have peace with God and one another. In Christ, we are part of his body, the church, God's masterpiece, his pride and joy.

And then Paul was showing us how we're to walk or live in response to our privileged place, which we've been looking at over the last few weeks. And today, with our final week in Ephesians, he encourages us now to stand firm in it, in Christ.

In fact, in our opening verses, he says four times, as you can see, to stand, just so we don't miss the point. Because another spiritual reality is the devil will do everything he can to make us doubt our privileged place, that it's worth being a Christian, and to drag us away from Christ, to stop us standing firm in Christ.

The bad news is we cannot stand firm in Christ in our own strength. And the good news, of course, is we have God's strength, so we can.

[2 : 3 7] So, point one, verse ten. It's on the sheets, it'll be on the slide as well, I wasn't sure what to do with that. But verse ten, finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Do you notice whose power we're to use? It's his mighty power. Self-help books will often tell you to look within and to find, you know, dig down for inner strength to overcome the obstacles in life.

But we just don't have the strength to do that with the Christian life. I've tried it once. I was getting frustrated at how often I was losing my temper with the kids. I said to myself one morning, this was a long time ago, they're perfect now.

But I said, that's it. I'm going to be patient with them all day. Do you know how long it lasted? Less than ten minutes. We don't have the power we need, but God does, and it is mighty.

We saw before in Ephesians that God's power, the work that is already working within us to transform our sinful nature, that power, as you can see, is the same power or strength he exerted to raise Christ from the dead.

[3 : 46] So, it's pretty powerful stuff, isn't it? And so, God's power can certainly strengthen us to stand firm, can't it? How? Well, verse 11, put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.

And so, here, God's power is described in terms of God's armor. To be strengthened by God's power is to wear God's armor.

The armor he himself wore in our first reading from Isaiah, for example. And the armor he has now given us. But before we unpack how we are to wear it, notice again why we need it.

We need it not just because of the devil's schemes, or as verse 12 goes on to explain, because our battle for or because our struggle, our battle, is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

We've seen before that the heavenly realms is another way of saying the spiritual reality, the one we cannot see, but the one we know is there and often have an inkling is there. And again, Paul is helping us to see it.

[5 : 07] To see that there are evil spiritual forces led by the devil. Now, when it comes to the devil, C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Narnia series, those kids' books, he says this quite helpfully, I think.

He said, There are two equal and opposite errors into which our human race can fall about the devil. One is to disbelieve his existence.

The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in him. In other words, the first mistake people can make is just not believe the devil is real.

I've mentioned to you before this movie called The Usual Suspects with Kevin Spacey in it. It's about a shady underworld boss that no one knows if he really exists or not. And at the end of the movie, the very last line of the movie before the credits roll is this.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled is convincing the world he doesn't exist. There's quite a bit of truth in that, isn't there? Many disbelieve the devil's existence.

[6 : 09] Even as Christians, we can forget his existence. But it's a mistake to disbelieve or forget. On the other hand, though, as Lewis says, The other mistake is to have an excessive or unhealthy interest in him.

Or even as Christians, to be scared of him. Because he is defeated. Christ has won the battle at the cross. We've already seen, I showed you this verse before, that when God raised Christ powerfully from the dead, he seated Christ, notice, in the heavenly realms.

And far above every rule and authority, including the evil rules and authorities here in verse 12. Jesus is Lord.

The devil is defeated. The devil is a loser. Father, in every sense of the word. And so we need not fear him. But we do need to be aware of him. Because although he's defeated, the final nail in his coffin won't come until Jesus returns.

And so, until then, he'll try and stop us standing firm in Christ. By pulling us away from Christ. How? What are his schemes?

[7 : 20] Well, the devil's primary power is to tempt people through lies. And deception. In fact, Jesus calls him the father of lies. It's what we saw with Adam and Eve in the garden.

Do you remember? How the serpent said to them, Did God really say, Twist, twist, twist. Deception, lie. He even tempts non-Christians to persecute or oppose Christians, whispering to them, Oh, it's okay to make new laws against Christianity.

It's outdated anyway. He uses lies to tempt whomever he can to oppose Christ and drag us away from Christ.

But God has given us his armor so we can stand firm in Christ. See verse 13? Therefore, in light of this opposition, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground.

And after you have done everything, to stand. You see, we are to wear the armor God has given us, given us, so that after we've done everything, we can keep standing in it, with it rather, in Christ.

[8 : 36] So that when the day of evil or temptation comes, we can resist. Now, temptations can be stronger some days than other days, can't they? And I think we all face particular temptations that are stronger for us than for others.

I'm pretty sure you know what are stronger for you than others. But when that time comes, if we are wearing God's armor that we have at our disposal, we can stand.

So how do we armor up then? Point two, verse 14. Stand firm then with the belt of truth, buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place.

So here the first one is truth, and we're to put on truth by remembering it. I mean, that's how you wear truth, you remember truth. And truth in Ephesians, as we can see on the slide, particularly refers to the gospel, as it says there, the message of truth, the gospel.

And when we remember the truth of the gospel, we can stand firm against the devil's lies. For example, the devil might whisper, look, if God really loved you, he wouldn't make you or your loved ones suffer like this, would he?

[9 : 49] And we can remember the truth that says, actually, God loves me so much, he gave his only son to die for me, even when I was a sinner, so that I can have the guarantee of life eternal with no more suffering.

You see, by remembering that truth of the gospel, we can stand firm against the devil's lies. And so we're to armor up with truth and with righteousness.

And the breastplate of righteousness refers to two things, I think. Firstly, it means remembering that we are right with God. We are made righteous in his sight. And so if the devil tempts you to doubt, whispering lies like, God could never forgive that sin.

Or do you really think God will let you into heaven with that past? You can remember we are already right with God now. He's given us Christ's righteousness to wear so that when he looks at you, he sees Christ and his righteousness.

Your place in heaven is secure. So we can be certain and we can reply, there is now no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 07] We can stand firm against the devil's accusations. I've actually had someone at church say that to me. Andrew, I believe in Jesus, but I'm just not sure I'll make it to heaven.

I'm not sure if he'll let me in. And she was close to dying. And it was a great joy to actually read out that verse from Romans 8.1. There is now, for you right now in this room, if you believe, there is no condemnation for you.

Heaven guaranteed. In fact, someone once told me, the next time the devil reminds you of your past, remind him of his future. But putting on the breastplate of righteousness means firstly remembering we are right with God now.

And secondly, it means practicing or living out that righteousness. If he's made us right with him now, as though we are like Christ, then live like Christ.

Live rightly in life. And we saw earlier in Ephesians on the screen in chapter 4 that we had to put on the new self that's been created to be like God in, notice, true righteousness.

[12 : 13] And now, to put it on means to live it out because it goes on to say, therefore, dot, dot, dot, live like this.

Live out that righteousness. And I've given one example there. By not letting the sun go down on our anger, that is not holding a grudge. Because if we do, it will give the devil a foothold.

But if we live out our righteousness, if we don't let the sun go down, if we don't hold a grudge, then we won't give the devil a foothold. We'll stand firm, you see. One of the devil's schemes is to divide Christians.

At the moment, oh, he's been doing it for hundreds of years, but at the moment, there are different opinions around vaccination and even separate services. And so it's easy for Christians to become angry.

And I've seen it happen. To hold grudges against one another without gently talking to one another and trying to understand where each other's coming from. But if we live out our righteousness, we won't let the sun go down.

[13 : 22] We won't hold that grudge. And we won't give the devil a foothold to divide us. Instead, we'll stand firm, you see. After all these separate services are only to last a little while.

And they cannot divide our spiritual unity in Christ. Unless we let the devil do it. And so armor up with righteousness, remembering we're right with God and living it out in life.

But also armor up with gospel readiness. Verse 15. And with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. Now, while we can read too much into these bits of armor, I wonder if Paul has deliberately chosen a lot of them to match the Old Testament.

We've seen two from Isaiah already. You know, the helmet and breastplate. But also in Isaiah, we read this about the feet or the shoes. You know, this famous verse, how beautiful in the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.

The gospel. And so I take it, the shoes are about being ready to share the good news. The gospel. Or as Peter puts it, from 1 Peter, to be prepared or ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you why you're a Christian.

[14 : 44] Why you have the hope you have. Remember, the devil's schemes are about opposing Christ, which means stopping Christianity. What better way to do that than to stop people talking about Christ?

The devil would love nothing more than for Christians to keep quiet about Christ and have Christianity slowly die out.

It would be mission accomplished for him. But armoring up with gospel readiness means we'll stand against that particular scheme. And so armor up with truth, righteousness, readiness, and verse 16, in addition to all this.

Take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Someone in my Bible study group rightly said that the shield Paul has in mind here is not the small circular, you know, Captain America style shield.

It's the big Roman full body kind of shields. Full body protection. What's more, that verse, verse 16, where it says, in addition to all this, is literally in everything.

[15 : 58] Take up the shield of faith. In other words, faith is the big one. Without faith, you won't believe the truth. You won't be right with God. We won't believe the gospel's worth sharing.

We won't even have salvation. But with faith, we will be fully protected, verse 16, from all the flaming arrows.

every temptation, every temptation, the devil shoots. It protects our whole spiritual body because faith is about trusting all of God's truth and none of the devil's lies.

During the pandemic, people amongst us lost a lot of business. And for one person, things were very tight, but they said, God will provide.

In other words, they put on the shield of faith and trusted God's promise to provide, and God did. But doing that also stopped him from being tempted to doubt God's provision, God's goodness.

[17 : 03] In other words, his shield of faith helped him to stand firm in Christ. So armor up with faith, in verse 17, take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And so here, to armor up with salvation means remember the salvation we have. Not only is it secure, but it's also worth waiting for. And so we can live for the world to come rather than this world.

We can actually miss out on things in this life because of Christ, knowing that it'll be more than made up for in the next life with Christ. It's to be a brilliant light at the end of a dark tunnel that helps us to persevere as Christians.

It's why Paul himself is willing to give up his life for Christ in this world and even go to prison. That's where he's writing this from, from prison. Because he knows salvation means he'll have eternal life in the world to come.

No more prison, just paradise. So armor up with salvation and verse 17, the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. Spirit and word go together.

[18 : 17] Just like the devil works primarily through lies, the spirit strengthens primarily through truth of God's word. And it helps us to stand firm.

I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but I can remember what's happened a few times actually. But one time in particular, I can really, I was really scratching my head going, God, what on earth are you doing? What are you doing in my life?

I don't understand why you're letting this happen. Have you ever had that kind of experience where something's happening? You don't understand what God's doing? But I remember at this time, a Bible verse popped into my head.

You know, Proverbs 3, 5 and 6. I think I actually heard it to the tune of Columbia Canon because we'd been playing it with the kids. But do you remember it? Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

No, I'm not going to keep singing. Sorry, kids, I won't embarrass you. Lean not on your own understanding. Yeah. And so I thought, yeah, I don't understand it, but I'm not to lean on that.

[19 : 21] I'm to trust God. And God's word stopped me doubting God's goodness and helped me to stand firm. That's how it works, you see. So armor up with truth, righteousness, readiness, faith, salvation, and God's word.

For having put this armor on, we can stand firm. I've actually worn armor before. When Michelle and I were first married, we visited her grandparents in England and we did the tourist thing.

We went and visited some castles and at one of the castles they were having a medieval reenactment. And then after the reenactment, I got talking to the armorers and I've never done this before, but I asked, oh, can I wear some?

And they surprisingly said yes. And so here I am in the armor. They told me to pull that face. They told me to pull that face. And here's an action shot on the next slide. And they even at one point got a real sword, like a proper sword, and they fully whacked me across the chest.

I felt nothing. I mean, I could feel it, but it didn't hurt at all. The armor really works. Well, guess what? So too does God's. God's armor enables us to stand firm as Christians, as does prayer.

[20 : 39] So more briefly, point three, verse 16. And as I read this paragraph, see if you can count how many times prayer is referred to. Verse 16. Sorry, verse 18.

And pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains.

Pray that I may declare it fearlessly as I should. How many times do you get? Five with prayer plus request, six, yeah. So it's pretty important, isn't it?

It's not a piece of armor, but prayer is another way we rely on God's strength. Verse 10. By the way, prayer in the spirit just means by the spirit.

[21 : 39] Back in chapter 2, we heard how we have access to the Father by one spirit. So it's just talking about normal prayer. But we're to pray regularly.

Did you notice that? Verse 18. On all occasions with all kinds of prayers. And it says, keep on praying or literally with all perseverance.

Because if you're like me, sometimes it's hard to keep on praying. It does require perseverance. And alertness, it says. Alert to what's happening around us so we know what to pray for.

Especially when it comes to the devil's schemes. Jesus told his disciples when they're in the garden to remember, watch and pray. Keep alert and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.

We're so often prone to certain temptations as I said before. We know what they are for ourselves, don't we?

[22 : 41] And so we're to be alert when those temptations come so that we'll pray for God's help to stand firm. But we're also, verse 19, to pray for one another and for gospel proclamation.

not that we would have our shoes on ready to share the gospel, but for those whose job it is to preach the gospel like Paul, our church leaders, me, Vijay and so on, our mission partners.

As I said, the devil would love nothing more than for Christians to keep quiet and the gospel to die out. And so we're to pray the gospel continues to be proclaimed.

Why not add that to your prayers or come to Kingdom Growth Night which is happening this Wednesday to pray for our mission partners. In fact, it's by their prayers and God's armor that Paul himself can stand firm despite being in prison.

So the last verses of the letter, verse 21, Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord will tell you everything so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing.

[23 : 51] I am sending him to you for this very purpose that you may know how we are and that he may encourage you. Peace to the brothers and sisters and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with our undying love. You see, Paul is sending this guy called Tychicus to encourage them presumably by telling them that he's okay even though he's in prison.

You see, he may be in chains but more importantly he is in God's armor and he has their prayers. So he can and is standing firm.

In fact, he wants to keep preaching the gospel fearlessly and his love for Christ won't die even if he does in prison.

And he encourages us all to have this undying love too. Well, there's lots more I could say but I need to finish. During the New South Wales lockdown this year some guys in Western Sydney went shopping in Coles in their version of PPE.

[25 : 01] Here they are. I like dad jokes so I kind of like the late night shopping version. I know it's pretty lame but I'm not sure how protective they would be from COVID but the point is God's armor and our prayers are effective to protect us from the devil's schemes.

So I don't know how undying your love for Christ is at the moment. I don't know how you're faring in the battle between living Christ's way and not the world's way but by armoring up each day and continuing to pray we can stand firm.

Let's start praying now. Let's pray. Our gracious Father we do thank you for this letter of Ephesians. We thank you that it reminds us all we have in Christ.

And so help us we pray to rely on your strength to stand firm in Christ. Help us to armor up with the things you've given us like truth, faith, righteousness and the like.

And help us to pray regularly that we might continue to stand firm in Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.