

Being Strong in the Lord

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Date: 28 July 1996

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[0 : 0 0] This is the final sermon in a series we've had over the last three months from Paul's letter to the Ephesians in the New Testament. I shall pray for us.

O God, we thank you for your word, which is the sword of your spirit, and we pray that your word will pierce our hearts. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Amen. John Bunyan's hero, Christian, approached the Valley of Humiliation, and as he does so, he is taken into the armory and shown all the equipment which God would provide for him on his journey.

There was a sword, a shield, a helmet, a breastplate, some shoes, and something called all prayer. He was told that there was enough for as many servants of the Lord as there are stars in the sky.

When he got into the Valley of Humiliation, he espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him. Then did Christian begin to be afraid and to cast in his mind whether to go back or to stand his ground.

[1 : 1 0] And remembering the armor that he had been given, Christian resolved to venture and stand his ground. When this fiend called Apollyon taunted Christian with the threat, Here will I spill thy soul.

He threw a flaming dart at Christian's breast, but Christian had a shield in his hand with which he caught the dart and so prevented the danger of this foul fiend. And though this fiend was strong, the equipment provided from God's armory was stronger and Christian prevailed against the attack and continued on his journey and pilgrimage.

John Bunyan understood well the importance of this passage in Ephesians chapter 6, that Christians face opposition because they are Christians.

Indeed, Bunyan, of course, was in prison for his Christian faith in a country which was supposedly Christian. The Ephesians also understood the nature of spirits and the spiritual life and indeed of opposition.

And if you read the account in the Acts of the Apostles of Paul going to Ephesus, we read about the spiritual opposition to the Christian faith and the Christian gospel, the practices of occult and so on that were happening there.

[2 : 3 4] And today as well, in recent years, there is a growing awareness of the spiritual dimension of this universe's existence. There is a spiritual opposition to the Christian church manifest in the occult practices and witchcraft, also in the horoscopes and so on.

But spiritual opposition is not just obvious or explicit or direct. Paul in this passage talks about the enemy being the wiles, of the devil.

Subtle as a serpent was the first attack of the devil in the book of Genesis on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Subtle, shrewd, cunning.

They're the words used to describe him in Genesis chapter 3. For the attacks, the spiritual attacks of the evil one are not just direct and obvious, but are indeed subtle.

His attempts to seduce us into compromising our Christian faith, as though the Christian faith needs changing from generation to generation. He attempts to deceive Christians into error, to entice into sin.

[3 : 50] Indeed, one of his great ploys is to hoodwink Christians into thinking that there is no such thing as the devil or evil forces or power at all. Paul goes on in verse 12 to describe the enemy.

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, that is, merely human, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

He's not meaning governments there, but he's meaning spiritual forces, rulers of spiritual dimensions in this universe. They're fairly general terms. No doubt, at least part of them, referred to the worship of stars and sun and moon, which in our age is growing.

The incidence of horoscopes and astrology is a spiritual evil, and there is no place for Christians to be involved in reading horoscopes or believing them and practicing the things they say.

But rather than spend our time trying to identify precisely the opposition, what is more important is the response that God gives to it.

[5 : 01] For if we understand the responses in the protection that God gives, then indeed we'll be aware of what is a spiritual opposition or attack.

So Paul begins this passage with the exhortation, be strong, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. In verse 10. He's not saying develop your own resources.

He's not saying become strong in yourself. He's not saying cultivate and find inner strength in the face of opposition. He's not saying be confident in yourself, but be strong in the Lord.

For that is where strength is found. That is where spiritual strength can be found. In the Lord. It's not strength from ourselves and our own resources, but rather it is strength from God, from the Lord.

Indeed, Paul uses three words in verse 10 for strength. Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. And the same three words are used in chapter 1.

[6 : 09] And the link tells us what the nature of the strength of the Lord is. In chapter 1, Paul is praying for the Ephesians that they will know this strength.

And he prays that they will know what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power in us who believe according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 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 age to come.

There it is clear what is spiritual power. It is the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Paul is saying be strong in that power.

That is spiritual power. The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other spiritual power in which to be strong but the strength of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christians often chase after spiritual power from all sorts of sources. But the only true spiritual power is the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[7 : 29] But that passage in chapter 1 as I read talks not just about a struggle and a battle but about a victory because the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his exaltation to heaven where he now reigns is victory.

Paul is saying be strong with the victor. Be strong in the victorious Jesus Christ. Not just align yourself to him in the battle but be on the victor's side.

Know the strength of the victory of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ to heaven. And indeed all the opposition that's described in verse 12 here in chapter 6 is subject to the power and might of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in heaven.

So though Paul is talking about spiritual battle for the Christian's life he is saying because you have the strength of the risen Lord Jesus Christ you will be and are victorious in this battle as indeed Christian was in pilgrim's progress.

So Paul then is saying appropriate the power for yourselves of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How do we do that? Paul goes on then to talk about the armour of God.

[8 : 46] The picture the image is of a soldier. He says if I get the right page take up the whole armour of God verse 13 so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day and having done everything to stand firm.

it is God's armour and not ours it belongs to him and in the Old Testament the armour of God was what God himself and his Messiah would wear and now God is offering to us his own armour for us to wear.

Notice that it's the whole armour of God. He's not saying take a bit have a helmet if you like but he's saying put it all on because you need it all.

Notice also that the armour is defensive. It's not aggressive but basically defensive. The only aggressive thing or offensive thing is the sword but all the rest is defensive because the aim is not for Christians to go out defeating evil but rather for Christians to stand firm.

Notice how important that notion is. Verse 11 Put on the whole armour of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

[10 : 11] Not so that you may be able to fight or defeat them but that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. The same in verse 13 Take up the whole armour of God so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day and having done everything to stand firm.

And verse 14 the same thing stand therefore. What Paul is on about in this passage is not Christians running around defeating evil but Christians standing firm against it.

He's concerned that Christians are steadfast strong safe in the Lord. He's not wanting wobbly Christians. He's not wanting Christians who are blown about by every wind of doctrine as he mentioned in chapter 4 but rather strong mature persevering Christian people.

What comprises all of this armour that Paul is talking about? The first thing mentioned in verse 14 is the belt of truth. Again in the Old Testament the Messiah King would wear a belt of truth and now this is offered to all Christian people.

The idea of the belt was to parallel a modern expression to roll up the shirt sleeves for action. Just like we roll up shirt sleeves as getting ready to do something putting on the belt or girding up the loins as the expression is is the same sort of idiom.

[11 : 39] People would wear long robes like this they would have a belt and they'd gird up their robes like this so that their legs are free to move and to act and to do whatever has to be done. That's the idea behind this.

And the truth the belt of truth is not so much perhaps the truth of the gospel though that's part of it but is an exercise of truth in character. Just in the couple of chapters before Paul had been talking about in the context of not being blown about by every wind of doctrine but he says rather in chapter 4 verse 15 speaking the truth in love.

So Paul is summing up what's gone on in the book so far and he's saying exercise truth in your lives and that is part of standing firm. The next bit linked to it is the breastplate of righteousness.

Again referring to the character of Christians. Righteous character will mean strong firm Christians. And again Paul is picking up what he said earlier on.

Chapter 4 he says clothe yourselves with the new self created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness. Paul is saying here that Christians who have a character of truth and righteousness will be Christians who are firm and strong in the Lord.

[12 : 59] The third part of the armour is verse 15 the readiness of the gospel of peace for your feet. I think the implication of verse 15 here is of Christians preaching the gospel in verse 15 at least in our translation.

But it seems to me that that's probably not quite what is meant. What is meant is not so much Christians going and preaching the gospel as Christians who have received the gospel and who are ready because of the gospel.

They've received it and therefore they are firm and strong. And the implication or major implication of the gospel in this letter is a gospel of peace.

That's what's described here in verse 15. And that picks up again what Paul has been arguing in chapter 2 that the gospel is the gospel that has brought peace not only between Jew and Gentile that is between all elements of humanity but between humanity and God.

That's the gospel the gospel that brings peace with each other and with God. And Paul says if you've received that gospel you are ready your shoes are ready your feet are ready you'll be standing firm in the gospel.

[14 : 15] I guess as Christians exercise the peace that the gospel brings exercise not only peace with each other but peace with God then indeed they will be standing firm.

Nextly the shield of faith a large shield there are various types of shield the word used is for a large body size shield of faith. Again faith is one of the key themes of this letter and what I hope you're seeing is that this passage here is summarizing the letter to the Ephesians.

It's Paul's conclusion. He's drawing all the threads together. Christians in Ephesus have faith he said in chapter 1 already. They are saved by grace through faith he said in chapter 2.

Faith is there giving them unity in chapter 4 and they are to attain maturity of faith later in chapter 4. How is faith a shield?

How does it work as a shield as he says in verse 16 to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one? I guess there are many times in our lives when we recognize that we have failed and we've failed God we've let him down we've been angry we've sinned in some way it's very easy to feel the accusation of failure and guilt you're not good enough for God you've failed him again faith knows that we are forgiven faith reflects the accusations and the guilt faith knows that Jesus died to forgive us and therefore though I fail and though I've let God down faith is my shield of protection so that I don't crumble under the guilt and the accusation of failure but rather I know that God has forgiven me in the Lord

[16 : 11] Jesus Christ there are many times I guess in our lives when we feel we're not good enough for God I don't have enough faith for God or I don't have enough good works for God but indeed faith knows that we can't be good enough for God but it says God accepts me by his grace and mercy and therefore it deflects the doubts and deflects the accusations and the guilt sometimes in our lives we might doubt indeed God's love for us we doubt that God really cares for us day by day and faith is the shield for that arrow as well knowing that in Jesus' death on the cross God has demonstrated above any other demonstration in world history that he loves me sometimes often we are tempted to sin we are tempted or enticed to think that this sin doesn't really matter faith says that it does and therefore we won't sometimes we're tempted into sin because we think that in that sin we'll find great exhilaration or pleasure or satisfaction faith says we find more satisfaction in

God and therefore we will not sin Jesus' own temptation in the wilderness is a great and perfect example of the shield of faith all those temptations to Jesus that the devil gave him were real temptations but Jesus' shield of faith deflected those flaming arrows because he knew that in God all God's promises would be kept and the eternal rewards there far far far outweigh any transient pleasure in sin and temptation the helmet of salvation plays a similar sort of role notice that verse 17 says take the helmet of salvation not earn it not buy it not do something in order that you can get it but take it because it's given freely for you it's God's gift salvation not something we earn but as Paul has demonstrated and argued in chapter 2 especially is given by God's grace take it and wear it and therefore you'll stand firm because you'll know that you're saved by

God's grace and not by your own feeble efforts because when we think that we might be saved by something we do and not what God does then indeed we won't be strong Christians at all because we'll be plagued with doubt have I really done enough and the answer is no but the response is salvation is a gift take it and wear it the only offensive part of the weaponry is the sword of the spirit which is the word of God at the end of verse 17 again a link back to Isaiah 11 and the Messiah notice also that the word and the spirit go together so often in Christian circles there is a division seen between the two as those spiritual Christians have gone beyond the word or those of the word deny the spirit but the two are inseparable word and spirit what Paul is saying here is that the

Bible is essential for strong Christians oh there are lots and lots of weak Christians because they don't know read understand or think about their Bibles but strong Christians will have the Bible as central in their Christian lives they will feed from it and gain strength from it Bible Christians are strong Christians and when we look around the world and wonder why in the western world sometimes the church is so weak it's most often because they're not Bible churches they've given it up for something else something easier that's not to say that the Bible is easy it's hard but it gives us spiritual strength and power and Paul is saying that if you are to be strong Christians then the Bible is to be a central and necessary part of your spiritual armour of God so often sadly Christians Christians are running after the latest fad the latest offer of spiritual power whether it's from Toronto or somewhere else but all too often it's misguided because real spiritual power is there biblically that's where it comes from it's based on the resurrection of

Jesus Christ from the dead if we're to be strong Christians we need to be Bible people all of these bits of armour are God's and given to us Paul is exhorting Christians to rely on God's strength not their own that comes out in his emphasis on praying in verse 18 praying in the spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication to that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints prayer is an expression of reliance on God notice how important it is let me paraphrase it to show you what we are mostly like verse 18 pray in the spirit sometimes with some prayer and supplication to that end keep alert and persevere sometimes in supplication for some of the saints well that's what we're like I imagine notice how important then the word all is there four times praying the spirit at all times with all prayer and supplication to that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints not just sometimes but all the time and he says pray in the spirit and he says pray in the spirit because

[22 : 33] Christians are spiritual people it doesn't mean something exotic or fanciful but rather just pray as Christian spiritual people because Christians have access to God by the spirit as Paul has already said in this letter therefore pray in the spirit let me conclude this paragraph is a fitting finale to the letter to the Ephesians the first half of the letter Paul has extolled the glory of Jesus Christ and all the blessings that are ours through him indeed he began the letter by saying that in verse 3 of chapter 1 for we've received every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus he went on to talk about the benefits of Jesus death and resurrection the salvation which is ours through his death the unity which is ours through his death and resurrection the creation of a new humanity a new Christian people a church founded in Christ's death and resurrection he spoke about the breaking down of hostility from Jesus death and resurrection and now

Paul is saying appropriate all that for yourselves take it for yourselves be strong in the Lord and in his mighty strength the second half of Paul's letter was a response to what God has done his exhortation to live worthy lives for Christ's sake to live lives of truth and righteousness and faith and humility and mutual submission to live lives of unity maturity and purity and Paul is saying here be strong in the Lord because he gives you all the resources you need to live the worthy life it's not just Paul saying okay set to it be unified be mature and be pure but he's saying not only be those things but here are the resources for you God gives them to you the armory is God's resource for us so that we live lives of unity maturity and purity as he's been exhorting in chapters four to halfway through chapter six the resources of God are sufficient they are all we need as the hymn writer says his grace all sufficient shall be my supply and appropriately that is referring to the grace of God he gives all we need the letter begins with the mark of grace

Paul when he greets the Ephesians in chapter one says to them in verse two grace to you and he ends the letter with the same note the very last verse grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ grace God saves us by his generous grace he sustains us by his generous grace and he strengthens us by his generous grace so then be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power for that is his grace to us today and every day in the end all we need to be strong to be unified to be mature to be pure to be worthy Christians to be steadfast Christians is to receive this enormous grace of

God and then in him we will lack nothing let's pray our gracious God your grace to us is indeed sufficient we pray that we will not rely on ourselves or our own weak strength but rather in your enormous power the power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to your right hand on high for his sake we pray make us strong Christians steadfast mature persevering so that we may indeed live lives worthy of him and be found on that final day to be welcomed by you for Jesus sake Amen