

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 17, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Ephesians 6:10-20 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle 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. ¹³ Therefore 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. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 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. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

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. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (NIV 2011)

“Stand Strong in the Lord”

Sports fans are in heaven right now. Baseball is getting near the playoffs. Professional and college football seasons are just getting started. Volleyball is in full gear. Basketball is just around the corner. If you aren't a sports fan, you probably can't wait to turn the calendar so you can get a break from at least one of those sports. There is something, however, that I think non-sports-enthusiasts have a better handle on than hardcore supporters. We can call it the mom perspective on sports. At the start of any competition, fans are giddy with excitement. They see the stadiums or arenas full of spectators. Bands and music are blaring. They know the athletes are pumped to get started. And yet, mom is wondering what is going to happen to those competitors. Will there be someone bigger, faster, stronger who will inflict harm on a student who is just out to have some fun? Will competition cause them to get involved in more than they can handle? Commitment to the team prevent them from realizing when they're in over their heads?

To be honest, those athletes share both those perspectives. Like the fans, they are pumped up and ready to push themselves to the limit. But like those moms, they have some nervousness that isn't obvious to spectators. They wonder if they will get hurt. Will their preparation and training be enough? Or will they encounter an opponent who can catch them off guard? Will they be exposed and humiliated?

If you can see both sides – if you can understand the excitement of a great athletic battle and yet realize there is at least a little bit of uneasiness – then you are ready for these

words from Ephesians chapter 6. The Apostle Paul is wrapping up some important teaching to a group of Christians gathered together in a city called Ephesus, a city on the west coast of modern day Turkey. He has had some very powerful and encouraging words for these fellow Christians. And now it is time to leave them with some words of encouragement that will help them remember the key things he had been teaching. He does it in a memorable way, like a coach giving a moving pep talk or a general firing up his troops right before battle. And this is what he wants them and us to remember: "Stand Strong in the Lord."

After everything Paul has laid out for God's people in the Book of Ephesians, he has one final thing: "**Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.**" (Ephesians 6:10) Then the Apostle explains how to find that divine strength and power: "**Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.**" (Ephesians 6:11) God's people have what they need. You are equipped. In your infinitely powerful God, you have all the strength needed to stand strong. You can be confident to go into battle. There are no tricks. There are no secrets. You have God's victory. You have God's protection. You are ready for this.

We know there are struggles in life. We can't help notice what is going on in our country and all over the world. Conflicts seem to be all around us. Even at church, we hesitate bringing up certain subjects, because we can't assume the person next to us agrees with us. And in our world today, we can't just discuss our differences. We have to argue and ridicule and let our emotions get out of control. So we are aware of conflicts all around us.

As much as those type of conflicts drain us of energy and cause us near constant stress, those aren't the biggest dangers in our lives. Those are the ones that aren't even obvious. God gives us this spiritual danger advisory: "**For our struggle 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.**" (Ephesians 6:12) We can't help thinking about being able to pay our bills and have a little financial security. Health scares and emergencies with our loved ones demand our attention. Safety and happiness of family require our plans. Once all of that is relatively under control, then we can start thinking about our future, where we are going, what we want to do, what goals and dreams we hope to pursue.

But what happens when you have a dangerous enemy out to get you and you aren't even aware he's got you in his crosshairs. You are Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941 the day before a surprise military strike by the Imperial Japanese navy Air Service. Ephesians warns us about our dangerous enemy. It is not a mortal, human enemy. We are facing the powerful forces of evil. Even if the danger is there, somewhere in the back of our minds, that doesn't mean we are really ready. You've been going to church. You have known God's Word since you started attending Sunday School at a young age. You occasionally have time to do a devotion and read your Bible. You should be able to handle any situation out there.

From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, from World War I to World War II, the tactics of warfare shifted dramatically. Your enemy is the devil. The Bible tells you that you need to "**take your stand against the devil's schemes.**" (Ephesians 6:11) He adapts and

changes and shifts in his methods to gain a strategic advantage over his enemy. That would be you. He's got real forces at his disposal and thousands of years of experience attacking God's people.

You will face a struggle. Your day of evil will come. But you don't know how the devil will attack or when. Job was struck with personal tragedy. He stood firm when his possessions and family were taken away. He didn't sin even when robbed of his health. But when abandoned by his wife and pestered by corrupting influence of his friends, Job started to break down. Joseph was faithfully carrying out his duties when Potiphar's wife tried to lure him into temptation. David was minding his own business when lust gripped his heart. Caught off guard, he was defeated by the devil's attacks of adultery, covering his tracks with a brazen murder of Bathsheba's husband. Peter pledged to remain a rock for Jesus. But then in the courtyard found himself denying his teacher and Savior.

You can imagine a Marine on duty in the Middle East might be tempted to skimp on a few items to lighten that 60 to 80 pounds of gear. The past nine times he didn't need all of his equipment. So it is unlikely he will need everything for the tenth time. So he won't carry his full combat load. It might not be the tenth time or even the eleventh or twelfth time that he needs that extra ammunition or water, those night vision optics or chemical weapons defense. But complacency is the number one killer. God's people need to be realistic. You need to be equipped. You need to be able to rely on more than yourself. You can't fight this battle alone and have any hope of victory. Your defeat is guaranteed from relying on yourself.

Jesus came into this world fully conscious of the devil's schemes and attacks. He went head first into battle against him. He never let up his awareness and consciousness of evil and temptation all around him. His entire earthly life was one big struggle. And that struggle took him straight to the cross. There, Jesus engaged in an epic battle **"against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."** (Ephesians 6:12) Jesus could be completely confident in that struggle because he had been perfectly obedient to the Father's plan. He took his stand when he came out of the grave on Easter victorious over death and the devil.

There's a difference between what God is telling you when he says "be strong" and what a coach or military commander is saying. This is a point Christians often get confused about. We filter these encouragements from God through our normal existence and understand something that is almost the opposite of what God really means. If you are caught off guard, God doesn't just want you to improve your preparedness. If you are nervous, God doesn't give want you to start flexing and get your adrenaline pumping. He wants you to look to him. He is your strength. He is your power. And even more than that, he is your victory.

Now that means you can be confident to face any attack because the victory is already assured. You are equipped with Christ's perfect obedience. It's there for you. Now, all that's left to do is: **"Therefore 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.” (Ephesians 6:13) Because of what Jesus already did, you can stand strong in the Lord.

The Bible tells us how to stand strong. God tells you to buckle the belt of truth around yourself. For a Roman soldier this was the heavy belt or girdle around the middle of the body used for protection and to keep longer robes from slowing feet down. The devil will employ lies and deception to get you to fall. The truth of God’s Word will protect you far better than what you think and what you feel and the opinions of others.

The devil will directly and indirectly attack your heart when troubles take their toll in your life. The devil will plant doubts in your heart whether or not God still loves you. He will drive you to look inside and despair of who you are and what you’ve done. That’s when you need the shield of righteousness. The war for your soul cost the Son of God his very life. You are clothed with Christ’s perfection no matter what you look like or how you feel about yourself.

The gospel of peace gives you readiness. You can be poised and ready to take your stand against the tempter when you have the peace Jesus established between your heart and your God. God provides you the gospel peace to keep you from getting pinned down by strife and conflict.

The Shield of Faith. This type of Roman shield would have been large enough to protect a soldier’s entire body. He could hold it in front of him, crouch down under it, or throw it behind him to meet an attack from that direction. Christians know the projectiles of problems and pessimism and atheistic criticism lobbed our way by the devil aren’t totally neutralized if they don’t take us out on first strike. They can embed themselves and spread until we are engulfed in doubt, pride, or unbelief. The truth of Christianity that has been passed down from Jesus to the Apostles from generation to generation is your shield.

Your suit of armor would not be complete without the helmet of salvation. The salvation Jesus won for you covers and protects you. His rescue from punishment of hell and deliverance from sin’s guilt wards you from the assaults of the devil.

And God protects you with the sword of the Spirit. When you are busy with God’s Word and constantly growing in the truth of Scripture, your sword will become sharper and deadlier so Satan cannot make you his victim. You will actually be able to rescue victims from his grasp.

Some of the most stirring and memorable movies have inspirational speeches to players or troops who are about to put themselves in harm’s way. They inspire boldness and courage while acknowledging the risks. God isn’t giving you a pep talk. He is gifting you with protection. He doesn’t inspire boldness and courage by telling you to look deep inside. Look to the cross and the empty grave for the assurance that the victory is already yours. So stand strong. Recognize the danger. Equip yourself for battle. Be bold. Be courageous. Your victorious Lord is with you, at your side, fighting your battles for you. Stand strong in the Lord. Amen

+ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Amen. +