
Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

(Ephesians 6:10–13)

Introduction

The Korean War, which commenced on 25 June 1950 and ended three years later (27 July 1953), caught the United States military unprepared. In the first six months, the United States suffered devastating defeats, resulting in thousands of deaths. Retreat became the order of the day. Things looked hopeless.

In *This Kind of War*, author T. R. Fehrenbach evaluates why this was so. His conclusion is that the US army was poorly prepared for war. Having come out of the victories of World War II, the US military machine let down its guard, including diminishing supplies of weapons and poor preparation of the standing army. Further, it did not take seriously the threatening overtones of the Communists in North Korea and China.

The author notes that, when the US army engaged in warfare, many of the soldiers were not prepared for the hardships they would encounter. “Many of America’s youth, in the Army, faced horror badly because they had never been told they would have to face horror, or that horror is very normal in our insane world. It had not been ground into them that they would have to obey their officers, even if the orders got them killed.”

But then General Matthew Ridgway took control. He told his troops of soldiers that they would no longer retreat but would hold their ground and then would advance. And so they did. The author noted in this regard, “The problem is not that Americans are soft but that they simply will not face what war is all about until they have had their teeth kicked in. They will not face the fact that the military professionals ... still know better than anyone else how a war is won.”

These soldiers paid attention to their leadership, and they went home. I’m glad, for my dad was in the army during that war.

It was a war involving a lot flesh and blood. It was horrible. It was devastating. But as bad and as intense as that *was*, the Christian church finds herself in an even more intense war, as Paul describes in Ephesians 6. We need to prepare for it, and we need to do so by listening to the inspired professional, the apostle Paul. After all, he wrote at the bidding of his

Commander in Chief, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our instructions from them are simple: Be strengthened to stand.

The apostle was chained to the soldier assigned to him under his house arrest (6:20). In this case, Paul truly had a captive audience. And I mean that literally. For it seems that Paul did not see himself as captive to Rome, but rather as a “prisoner of the Lord” (3:1; 4:1). He saw beyond his Roman guard to the greater enemy, the devil and his devils – the sworn enemies of Christ and of his people.

Out of this difficult scenario, Paul wrote these most important words with reference to the Christian’s warfare. They are as relevant today as they were in first-century Ephesus.

Paul was aware of the Christian and the church’s struggle against such flesh-and-blood problems. But, as Paul will argue, these struggles are not the most intense battle that is raging. Behind these very real flesh-and-blood struggles is another real struggle. We are in a cosmic conflict. We are wrestling against the devil and his devils. According to Paul, the Christian individually, but more importantly, Christians *corporately*, are really up against it. What shall we do? How can we succeed against such a powerful enemy? What does God expect of us? Clearly, from this text, God expects for us to *stand*.

In this study, we commence a series within this series of expositions of this magnificent epistle to the Ephesians – a series on Christian warfare.

Having instructed the church concerning her wonderful privileges and opportunities, and having exhorted the church concerning her great responsibilities, Paul concludes with a vital explanation of her vulnerabilities coupled with encouragement about her possibilities. As important and relevant as it was for this church some two thousand years ago, it remains so in our day. We too are up against it, and we too have the ability to stand up against it.

We need to patiently work through this passage. It may take us some time. As much as I would like to move quickly through this alarming section, I do not pastorally feel that that is the responsible thing to do. This is such an important issue that we need to extract all the principled and practical lessons that we can from this.

Seventeenth-century Anglican clergyman, William Gurnall, wrote a three-volume, 1,200-page book on these chapters, titled, *The Christian in Complete Armour*. (Its full title is, *The Christian in Complete Armour: A Treatise Of the Saints’ War against the Devil, wherein a Discovery is made of that grand Enemy of God and his People, in his Policies, Power, Seat of his Empire, Wickedness, and chief design he hath against the Saints. A Magazine Opened, from whence the Christian is furnished with Spiritual Arms for the Battle, helped on with his Armour, and taught the use of his Weapon: together with the happy issue of the whole War.*) John Newton said of this book, “If I might read only one book beside the Bible, I would choose *The Christian in Complete Armour*.”

Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached 26 sermons from vv. 10–13, and another 26 sermons from vv. 14–20. Clearly, there is a wealth of essential teaching here for the Christian!

As a general outline, we could divide these verses into three broad sections:

1. The General Exhortation: Stand Strong (vv. 10–13)
2. The Particular Application: How to Stand Strong (vv. 14–17)
3. The Prayerful Supplication: How to Keep Standing Strong (vv. 18–20)

In this study, we will gain an overview of this passage while focusing much on the truth of v. 10, where we are encouraged that we have *strength to stand*.

The Exhortations

This closing passage is one grand exhortation. The Christian—the *church*—is told to be prepared for something, and therefore they are to be prepared to *do* something. Specifically, the church is exhorted to be strengthened to stand in the midst of the struggles of the evil day—that is, in those days which the evil especially attacks. Some days are worse than others!

I recently received a phone call from a pastor friend in another church. I could immediately tell that something was wrong. When I asked how he was doing, he let out a long sigh—a sigh that I, as a pastor, recognised. He told me that he had just received a very nasty letter from a church member who needed to be disciplined. He told me of at least three other families who had moved from the front row to the back door, and who were on the verge of leaving. He was facing a particularly bad day.

To his credit, as we spoke, he spoke himself, through the gospel, out of discouragement.

The Expectations behind the Exhortations

There are several important expectations that are implied in this text.

Expect a Struggle

First, the overriding point of this text is that we should expect a struggle. This is clearly Paul's point. We must “be strong” (v. 10) because the struggles are certain. And the struggles are sure to be fierce and long. Don't wait until you get kicked in the teeth before you become alert to the warfare in which you are engaged!

When you were translated out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, you were added to the devil's most wanted list.

Oftentimes, when a person is first converted, he embraces the gospel with great joy (see Matthew 13:20). There is a sense of relief as the forgiveness of sins is embraced. But I often

counsel new converts to realise that it won't be long before tribulation or persecution arises. The believer must be prepared for this if he will stand when the difficulties strike.

It is important to recognise some things about the enemy we face.

First, the devil and his devils are real Paul describes our enemy in v. 12: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." He "would not have his readers underestimate the power of the forces that are against them," writes Foulkes. Or, in the words of Stott, "the enemy we face is greater than the enemy we see."

Paul uses several words, all which point us to celestial, cosmic powers. He is speaking of the devil and his demons. These are ever present, though thankfully none of them, including the devil is omnipresent, omnipotent or omniscient. They are created beings and are therefore are limited. Yet they are real, and they are a threat. And therein lies the problem.

In his classic work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis pointed out that the devil secures a foothold in the church when the church is either obsessed with his existence or when it denies his existence. I fear that many in the church are agnostic about the devil's existence, and therefore he is gaining victories.

The instructed Christian understands that, though our struggles *are* clearly often with flesh and blood (that is, we are often in conflict with those whom we see), ultimately we know that our struggles are with unseen forces who are at work behind the bodies.

In marriage, bodies are responsible for the wrongs, but there are evil creatures and evil belief systems from them that assault the marriage covenant. For example, these evil creatures may assault a tendency to forgiveness. Forgiveness is supernatural, and that is why it feels weird when we bless rather than bitterly belittle and/or bludgeon.

In conflict between children and parents, bodies are very much involved, and yet the evil one strives to mar the testimony of Christ and the gospel through godless approaches to discipline, restoration, etc.

In conflicts in the workplace, bodies – flesh and blood – are very prevalent, and yet the evil ones use conflict to assault the adornment of the gospel and to tempt those who are wronged to respond wrongly and those who are wrong to self-justify rather than to humbly ask for forgiveness.

In conflicts in the church, bodies are very much involved, and yet behind the bodies are attitudes, worldviews and behaviours masterminded by the evil one to create discontent and destructive divisions. Included in this are those who are flesh and blood and yet who are agents of Satan – messengers of darkness masquerading as messengers of light. These

spread false teachings with a view to weakening the church from all that she could otherwise be.

Second, we must be aware that the devil and his devils are relentless. Four times, Paul uses the word “against” in v. 12. He could have said “for we wrestle against” and then listed the four nemesis. But he didn’t. Rather, he said “against” before each of the manifestations of this enemy. He did so to make the point that we really are *up against it*.

We are at war—in very real hand-to-hand conflict (“wrestle”). It is all or nothing. It is a battle for our soul. But more so, it is a battle for the heart and soul of the church.

While we do not battle flesh and blood, our enemies certainly *look* like flesh and blood! All Paul has instructed *is* very much flesh and blood. Most of the things that he has exhorted has to do with people. He has written to Jews and Gentiles. He has charged people to bear with one another (4:2). He has addressed lewdness, uncleanness, fornication, lying, stealing, anger, corrupt words, forgiving one another, walking in love, walking as children of light, drunkenness, submissions, husbands, wives, children, parents, servants and masters. These are all very fleshy and bloody.

Paul was not a Gnostic who dismissed the material, physical world as irrelevant and meaningless. But recognised that there is a lot more that is going on than meets the eye. He recognised that, behind the problems with those who are flesh and blood, there is a cosmic motivation that aims to destroy the harmony and the biblical unity of the Body of Christ. As Boice says, “the enemy we face is greater even than the enemy we see.” And if we keep this in mind, we will be able to stand together rather than apart from each other as aggressive polar opposites. We will work at reconciling with one another rather than digging in and holding our own personal piece of territory. Rather, we will be careful to stand together to guard the *corporate* piece of territory for God’s kingdom. In fact, it would not be hard to prove that it is in the area of relationships that the greatest struggles come. If relationships go sour in the life of a believer, or if believers do not prioritise right relationships, then the devil gets a gap for grievous sin.

We need to be prepared for the horrors of Christian warfare. We need to expect very real struggles in flesh and blood relationships. These struggles will take place between ethnic groups, and between us and our former colleagues. Struggles will arise in the church, in the family and in the workplace. We need to expect that our faith, and therefore the faith of the church, will be assaulted. We need to expect that ugliness will arise in the church.

Expect Schemes

Second, we need to expect schemes. We must stand strong “that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (v. 11b). “Wiles” speaks of methods or schemes, of trickery (see 4:14). These wiles are manifold. They surround us. We need to be watchful of the

spiritual landmines that are all around: heresies, seductions, material allurements, self-pity, blameshifting, self-justification, redefining good and evil, coming at us when we are tired, weak in body, temptations to pride, etc. He has an almost unlimited array In his arsenal, and we must always be prepared.

Expect to Struggle

We must also expect *to* struggle. I am not exactly repeating myself. Earlier, we were told to expect *a* struggle. But we are also expected *to* struggle. That is, effort is required of us.

Thayer says that “wrestle” speaks of “a contest decided when the victor is able to hold his opponent down with his hand on his neck.” It speaks, in other words, of hand-to-hand battle, or sword-to-bayonet fighting.

The Greek terms translated “put on” (v. 11) and “take up” (v. 13) are in an imperative mood. That is, they imply effort. Though there is a passivity, we must actively experience the passivity! The Christian, having been brought into union with Christ, and having been provided access to this vast strength, is responsible to respond.

This is not the nonsense of let go and let God. Rather, this is human responsibility and divine grace held in biblical tension. The Christian realises that the battle is the Lord’s. At the same time, he is fully aware that he is responsible to do something.

Under the old covenant, the Lord promised Israel a land of their own. But the Promised Land would not be inherited without effort. The conquest of Canaan required effort. The Israelites needed to pick up sword and shield and go to battle in order to inherit what God had promised.

The Christian life is neither painless nor passive. It is one that involves partnership with the Lord. We must read and study Scripture. We must be persistent in prayer. We must prioritise the gathering of the saints. We must exert effort to have the strength to stand.

Expect Strength

Next, we must expect strength: “Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (v. 11).

The US military may have failed to provide what the soldier on the ground required to win their battles, but the captain of our salvation will not fail. It is our privilege to be strengthened in and by the Lord and by his vast strength.

The exhortation assumes God’s sovereignty. It assumes God’s initiative. It assumes God’s involvement. This exhortation is God’s invitation to stand, to persevere, to remain faithful to Christ and to his gospel.

The doctrinal undergirding is that of the believer's union with Christ. "In the light of who you are in Christ, avail yourself of the benefits." You are seated with him; therefore, stand with him. You were raised by and with him; therefore, rely on him. In sum, "confession of our helplessness prepares us – even compels us – to don the weapons of spiritual warfare. Confession of our helplessness apart from God must precede putting on our armor lest our preparation be perceived as righteous works we do that qualify us to resist Satan." (Chapell)

Expect to Stand

We should expect to stand. The ultimate exhortation in this passage is that the believers in Ephesus will "stand" (vv. 11, 13, 14). Stott comments, "the apostle's concern is for Christian stability. Wobbly Christians who have no firm foothold in Christ are an easy prey for the devil."

The church is to hold its ground. This is not a call to stand idle, but to stand firm against the schemes of the devil that attempt to dislodge our faith and obedience. During the Korean War, the American military was constantly forced to retreat. But this came to an end. North Korea was eventually pushed back above the 38th parallel. But as history, and recent news, shows, clearly they are not happy to stay there. In fact, they want to have a united Korea – under their dominion.

Church, we are to stand our ground. We are not to give up what has been given to us. We have been given assurance of salvation (chapters 1–2), uniqueness as a corporate entity (chapters 2–3), and a renewed mind and therefore a renewed manner of living (chapter 4). We have been enabled to walk as children of God, revealing the light of our Father (chapter 5). We have been given a radical relationship in marriage and in the home and at work (chapters 5–6). We need to stand our ground in these things.

This is why Paul "finally" addressed this matter here before signing his name and sending this epistle to the body of believers in Ephesus. "Finally" does not mean "one last thing." Paul is writing, "In the light of all that I have said, this is essential if it will be experienced. If you do not keep this before you then you will not hold your ground in all that precedes this. You as a body of believers need to pay heed to this final exhortation if you will succeed in all the previous exhortations." If we will experience all Paul has already promised, we must do what he writes here. "Strengthened by the triune God, you need to stand. Don't budge, don't retreat, don't give an inch to the evil one nor to his evil ones. Don't let go of these truths that are yours."

Expect the Saviour

In all of this, we must expect the Saviour. The church is commanded to "put on the complete armour of God" (v. 11). This is necessary if we will stand. It is necessary if we will be

strengthened by the Lord, for we are to be suited with the Lord himself. “It is God’s own armour, that which he himself wears” (Stott).

We will look at this more closely in future studies, but as Paul writes here, he likely has in mind Isaiah 59:15ff, where the Lord himself comes in armour to fight for his people. The Lord joins his church in the war against the enemy. To put on the armour of God is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is saying, “Look to Christ. Keep believing the gospel. He has promised to save you from your sins.” Our sovereign Saviour always does.

We are to be “clothed” in Christ. We are to “put on Christ” (see Romans 13:11–14). As we “sink into” (the literal meaning of “put on”) who we are in Christ, we will be strengthened for the struggle.

We need to master chapters 1 & 2. The doctrines of salvation and of our union with Christ are essential. The battle is won or lost in the mind. Preach Christ and his gospel to yourself. Let us preach this gospel to ourselves, as a church, daily. Get together with this gospel purpose in mind: to encourage and exhort one another daily to believe, to love this gospel to the point that it influences our behaviour.

Expect to Succeed

Verses 11a and 13b tell us to expect to succeed. We are “able” to stand. “Having done all,” we will indeed stand. Calvin says, “We must prepare our minds for the battle. A promise of victory is, indeed, involved in the exhortation *that you might be able*.” How could you not when you are clothed in Christ? How can you fail to succeed when you have such a Saviour (see Jude 24–25; John 18:1–9; 10:27–30)?

Let’s conclude with some important observations/applications this overview.

This Exhortation is a Command

This exhortation is a command, and therefore it is to be taken seriously. And it is to be taken seriously repeatedly. Again, quoting *This Kind of War*, “He who supposes all men to be brave at all times... does not realize that the courage of troops must be reborn daily.”

The command is a complex one, in this sense: The Christian church is commanded to be strengthened by the Lord, and this comes about by putting on the whole armour of God for the purpose of standing for Christ, his gospel, and his church. And we are to do so in the evil day. May God help each of us to obey this command.

This Exhortation is a Caution

Obviously, the church faces an enemy, the church is in a struggle. The church really is up against it. And we need to know this.

This Exhortation is a Comfort

It is as if Paul is saying to this church, “Be encouraged with the knowledge that Christ is here for you: His strength—his vast strength—is available to you.” Our circumstances may not change, but *we* can change. Our circumstances may not change, but we can *stand* our ground.

In a nutshell, this passage provides great comfort to the Christian, and therefore to the corporate body of Christians. It does so because the command reminds us of the promise of all that we have in Christ. It reminds us of his immense power. And once we realise this, once we grasp the reality of our union with him, we realise that we have all that we need to persevere in our evil day, come when it will, come what may.

Let us heed these words of Wood: “The body of Christ must be united and built up so as to be ready for the inevitable encounter with evil. Each believer needs to be prepared for the fight.”

Having believed the gospel, and therefore having experienced its power (1:18–23; 2:1–6; 3:14–21), we are empowered by this same gospel to continue to stand in the gospel and to stand for the gospel. May God help you – may God help us all – to be strengthened to stand in the struggle, a struggle to the advancement of God’s kingdom for the glory of his name.

AMEN