

The Fight of Faith: Our Battle

Ephesians 6:10-12

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:10-12, ESV

Introduction: Spiritual Warfare – Two Errors

Landing a jet on an aircraft carrier is said to be the most difficult thing for a pilot to do, especially at night. If you come in too high, you'll miss the cable that hooks your plane, and if you come in too low, you'll crash. When a carrier is floating on the surface of the ocean and is not entirely still itself, this is an extra challenge.

In discussing the issue of spiritual warfare, we face a similar kind of dual danger and need for precision and care. Most people, including professing Christians, make the mistake of neglecting the issue of spiritual warfare altogether. They know that life is hard and that faith can be a struggle, but they fail to acknowledge, understand or seriously deal with the unseen enemy who attacks us and who helps make our spiritual lives such a struggle. They are like the carrier pilots who come in too high and miss the point needed for landing well.

On the other hand, many Christians have become so focused and obsessed with spiritual warfare, demons, demonology, exorcisms, etc. that they have gotten sucked into a very unhealthy view of spiritual warfare in the Christian life. They spend more time talking about demons and the devil than they do about God. These people are like the pilots who come in too low and hit the deck, often crashing and burning in the process.

What we need to do is allow Scripture to be our guide, taking seriously what it says and yet not going beyond what it says. We cannot have the attitude of the famous German Lutheran theologian Rudolph Bultmann, who said, "*We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.*" Neither can we become those who seek to define and describe the demonic hierarchy and territorial spirits or like those who blame the devil for everything that happens in life, as though Satan and not God was the real sovereign of the universe.

I. Our Strength

The first thing Paul says to us as he introduces the theme of spiritual warfare is, “*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*” Thus, we see that the first thing we need to battle our enemy is strength. This reminds me of the actions of the disciples at the moment of Jesus’ most intense spiritual battle, in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed. Jesus had asked them to watch and pray, but they kept falling asleep.

When Jesus saw His disciples sleeping, He said to them, “*So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*” (Matthew 26:40-41) Without strength, we will never be able to prevail against our enemy. We cannot watch and pray that we may not enter into temptation without the strength we need to be able to do so.

A. A Passive Strength

When Paul says, “Be strong,” he says it in a way that makes it clear that the strength we need does not come from us. He uses the passive voice of the verb for strengthen. In the active voice, the action of a verb is done by the subject: I ate the apple. In the passive voice, the action of the verb is done to the subject, “I was eaten by a lion.” Thus, the difference between the active and passive voice is the different between eating and being eaten, hitting and being hit, telling and being told, etc.

So, what Paul is really saying here is “Be strengthened in the Lord.” We need strength, but we are passive in the strengthening process. We cannot simply “be strong;” we must be strengthened.

B. Strength in the Lord

Specifically, we need to be strengthened in the Lord. This means that the Lord is source of our strength. We draw our strength from our personal union with Christ. It is in Him that we are strengthened. Throughout Ephesians, Paul has been emphasizing the importance of being in Christ and of the reality of the blessings we have in Him. Our spiritual blessings are all in Christ Jesus.

Specifically, we saw in chapter 1 that our redemption, forgiveness, adoption and inheritance are all in Christ, found in Him and ours by union with Him. In chapter 2, we saw that we are made alive together with Christ, raise with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places. We saw that He Himself is our peace and that the people of God are being made into a new humanity in Him. In Him, we are being built up into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Holy Spirit.

Even more specifically, this command to “be strengthened in the Lord” ties in directly with Paul’s prayer in chapter 3 for the Ephesians “*to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may*

have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

To be strengthened in the Lord is to have Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith and to comprehend the fullness of the love of Christ, that we may be filled with the fullness of God.

C. The Strength of His Might

But how powerful is our strength in the Lord? Is it strong enough to enable us to withstand our enemy, really? Yes! Paul says that we are to be strengthened in the Lord and “in the strength of his might.” So, how strong is His might?

Back in chapter 1, Paul prayed that the Ephesians would know “*what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked 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 one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*” (Eph. 1:19-23)

Jesus has been given a place of authority and power “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” The same power that raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the very highest place is the strength of His might available to strengthen us in the battle against our enemy. That very language of “rule and authority and power and dominion” is brought back here to describe our enemies in verse 12. But Jesus is far above them all!

II. Our Stand

In verse 11, Paul explains why we need to be strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of His might. He does so by giving us a second imperative: “*Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.*”

A. Why We Are Called to Stand

We need the strength of the Lord and whole armor of God so that we may be able to stand. Now that may not seem all that exciting or compelling: to be able to stand. Why not tell us that we need to be strengthened and to put on the full armor of God so that we can storm the gates of hell and set the prisoners free? Why not call us to go on the offensive and win the day in the power and might of the Lord?

Paul wants us to know how important it is for us to stand, and so he gives the command four times in four verses, once in verse 11, twice in verse 13 and again in verse 14. But why is our mission to stand?

Well, simply put, because Jesus has already won the day! He has already won the battle, conquered the enemy, stormed the gates of hell and set the prisoner free. What we do is stand our ground, the ground that Jesus has won for us.

B. What We Are Called to Stand Against

But standing is no easy task, which is why we need the strength of the Lord Jesus and the full armor of God. Standing is not easy because we are called to stand against the schemes of the devil. The language in Greek is “methodias diabolou” – which sounds like diabolical methods because it is, literally, the diabolical methods. The methods of the diabolos, the devil.

The devil is cunning, crafty, powerful, sinister, restless and deadly. His diabolical methods are many. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul warned against uncontrolled anger, which gives the devil a foothold in our lives. But the other sins Paul warns us against also give the devil the advantage over us. Our spiritual war is a war against sin, and Satan’s devices, his schemes or methods, are designed to trap us in sin. But his goal in trapping us in sin is to destroy our faith. He has many methods to do this, but one goal: trap us in sin, overwhelm us with despair, undermine our faith and destroy our confidence in Christ. Thus, our call is to stand our ground.

C. What We Need in Order to Stand

At the beginning of verse 11, Paul tells us what we need in order to stand against the schemes of the devil. The command of verse 11, “Put on the whole armor of God” is given by Paul as the explanation of how we can be strengthened enough in the Lord to be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. It is by putting on the full armor of God that we are able to take our stand.

There are three important things to note about this command, which is so centrally important to this whole section. Our call is to stand and the only way we can do that is to put on the full armor of God.

First, the command is to “put on.” This is the same language Paul used earlier in 4:24, when he said “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Paul uses this same command elsewhere and it always means basically the same thing, but Romans 13:12-14 is most helpful:

“The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and

sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (ESV)

It is clear from Romans 13 that “the armor of light” is the Lord Jesus Christ. And in Ephesians, the new self we are to put on is our new self in Christ.

Second, we must put on the whole armor. We’re going to look in more detail at the armor next week, but before we do, we need to see that all of it is vitally important. The devil is crafty and deadly. If we’re missing one piece of armor, he will be sure to strike us there.

Third, this is “the armor of God.” That means that this is the armor which God Himself gives us to wear. But it’s more than that. Isaiah 11:5 says, “*Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*” Isaiah 11 is about Christ, so this armor is His armor. Christ gives us His own armor to wear.

III. Our Struggle

To further explain why we need the full armor of God, Paul says, “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*”

The background for better understanding this verse and this whole teaching section is what happened in Ephesus when Paul brought the Gospel to the city. One of the signs and wonders that God performed through Paul as he preached the Gospel was the casting out of evil spirits, or demons. Some Jewish exorcists who saw Paul casting out demons in the name of Jesus tried to do the same, but they could not. Instead, they were overpowered by the demons.

Later, when the church was growing, many of those who had become believers confessed that they had been practicing magic, witchcraft or sorcery. They brought their magic books to Paul and burned them. The value of the burned spell books was 50,000 pieces of silver.

Then, a silversmith idol-maker named Demetrius stirred up a great mob in the city, who rioted against Paul and his companions, threatening them and shouting “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” For the people of Ephesus, Artemis, or Diana, was their ruler, the one who protected, blessed and ruled over their city.

So the church in Ephesus was familiar with demons, with magical arts that involved spiritual forces of evil and with gods, who were “the rulers” and “the authorities” in the pagan world, and whose influence Paul said was truly that of demons.

A. Not Against . . .

But the church in Ephesus also knew what it was to face very human opposition. After all, the riotous mob that almost killed Paul and other church leaders was made up of people, and the people of Ephesus likely still resented, distrusted and persecuted the church in their midst. And so, because the church knew the reality of both demonic forces and human opposition, Paul says, “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood . . .*”

We need to be reminded of the same truth today, more and more so with each passing year. As human opposition to the Gospel and the church rises and people become more openly resentful and antagonistic toward Christianity and Christians, we need to remember that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. But even within the church, as we deal with disagreements, concerns, differing personalities and attitudes, we need to remember that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. In our homes, too, with our family members, and at work, we need to realize that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood.

Paul uses this term “wrestle” because he wants us to know that our struggle is a very intense and personal one. This is up-close-and-personal, hand-to-hand combat.

B. But Against . . .

And while it is not against flesh and blood, it is actually against a much more powerful foe. Paul uses a four-fold term to describe our enemies, each of which is preceded by the word “against”:

1. *Against the rulers,*
2. *against the authorities,*
3. *against the cosmic powers over this present darkness,*
4. *against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*

Much unfortunate and unhelpful speculation has arisen over the years over these four terms. Some people have taken these four terms and turned them into an organizational hierarchy chart for the demonic world and have also speculated about territorial demons and more.

More likely than a detailed description of the demonic hierarchy, Paul is here giving us different terms to describe the same basic reality: behind the evil we see in this world, behind the entrenched darkness of thought and life, behind our own struggles against sin and unbelief lies a world of spiritual evil, of demons, evil spirits, powers and forces that array themselves against us because they have arrayed themselves against Christ.

The Ephesians had experience with these spiritual forces of evil in their days of witchcraft and also in the demonically-empowered opposition they faced within their city. But Paul wants them to know that

they also experience the opposition of these forces in their daily struggles against sin, their battles against unbelief, doubt and despair and in the personal divisions and animosity that can so easily tear apart churches and families.

Sometimes Christians like to focus on things that we perceive to be more obviously demonic or dark, like witchcraft or Satanism. And while we should obviously be concerned about these things, Paul would have us realize that the whole of our Christian lives is a struggle against Satan and his demonic forces of spiritual wickedness. Sometimes Satan works through obvious spiritual evil, but more commonly he prefers to hide his work and come at us through our own flesh or through the enticements of the world.

Paul also wants us to remember what John wrote in 1 John 5:19: *“We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”*

Conclusion: Our Exalted King

But while Paul wants us to be on our guard, to be fully armed and to take our stand, he does not want us to fight in fear but in confidence. We need to remember what Paul said in Chapter I about Christ: God *“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 one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”*

Jesus has been given as head over all things to the church, which is His body, and which includes us! Jesus has been exalted far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. If we fight this spiritual warfare without Jesus, we will suffer loss and devastation, for we are outnumbered and outgunned; our own strength is far too inadequate to win any victory. But if we will put on the whole armor of God, if we will put on the Lord Jesus Christ, if we will fight in His power, being strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of His might, then we can have confidence and we will have victory!

Remember what James said in James 4:7, which we read earlier, *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”*

The words of the Apostle Peter are a very appropriate way for us to conclude:

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” – 1 Peter 5:8-11, ESV