

### “Be Strong in the Lord”

About 2000 years ago, at the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry along with the work of his disciples and apostles, that area of the world was enjoying what has been termed the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. But peace was not something that just happened. In the years leading up to this period, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire had done a great deal of work with its military. The Roman soldier at the time was a formidable force. The Roman soldier was well-trained, well-equipped, and had perfected military techniques. The Roman army had successfully expanded the borders of the area under Roman control, and was powerful enough to maintain peace through the sprawling empire.

We just sang a hymn (Onward, Christian Soldiers, CW 537) that compares the Christian life to the work of a soldier. And appropriately so, as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians offers encouragement to Christians in a way that draws attention to the Roman soldiers the Ephesians would have known. Our sermon text today speaks to us as Christian Soldiers, and tells us, “Be strong in the Lord.” And it shares with us two specific actions that we are to take: put on the Lord’s armor, and pray.

Like many of Paul’s epistles or letters to Christian congregations, the book of Ephesians can be divided into two parts. The first part deals with God’s plan of salvation. It describes how God planned our salvation in eternity, carried out his plan in time, and how that plan will come to completion in heaven. Paul describes in detail how salvation is by grace alone, that is, we have not deserved any of God’s goodness to us. Only because of God’s love for us did Jesus come to be our Savior from sin.

The second part of Ephesians builds on that good news. It describes how God’s people respond to God’s love, his grace, and the salvation that he gives to us. Paul speaks in specific terms to husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters about living in God’s love. Near the very end of that second part of the book comes our text for this morning. “**Finally,**” he says, “**be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.**” In other words, here, in conclusion, is what you need to stay firm in the faith and to live as a Christian.

But notice immediately that Paul doesn’t just say, “be strong.” He says, “Be strong in the Lord. Be strong in his mighty power.” We do not remain strong because of our own power or might. We remain strong when we stay connected to God’s strength and to God’s power. While the Roman soldiers had to rely on their own prowess and preparation, we do not. We rely on God. And the differences go even deeper. Our enemies are very different as well. The Roman soldiers faced other soldiers, other men. Flesh and blood went against flesh and blood. But not us. Paul explains, “**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.**” The enemies of Christian soldiers are spiritual enemies. They are Satan and his fellow demons, powerful spiritual forces that try to harm our spiritual well-being. They try to lie and deceive us. They try to accuse us with our sins, to make us think that God does not love us but must be angry with us. The devil is all too pleased when we rely on our own works, or when we despair of all hope, or when we listen to people instead of listening to God.

But God has an answer. Through Jesus Christ, God has given us all that we need to withstand the devil’s attacks and to defend ourselves against his demons. So he says, “Put it on. **Put on the full armor of God.**” Don’t underestimate the enemy or think that you can face them alone. Don’t fail to make use of every tool that God has given you in this battle. Think of how foolish it would have been for the Roman soldier to go into battle without some piece of his armor! Why go into battle more vulnerable than you have to be? How much more so when the stakes are not just earthly life, but our eternal salvation!

So God has given us what we need to stand, to remain firm in our faith and to continue to live our lives out of love for our Savior. Even on those days when the forces of evil attack us the hardest, the armor of God allows us to stand against their assaults.

Now, in spite of the picture on the front cover of your worship folder today, what Paul describes here as the armor of God is not the medieval suit of armor that covers an entire body in metal. No, the Roman soldier's defenses allowed him to move quickly and easily while still being protected. We won't spend much time trying to explain the connections between specific parts of the armor and the spiritual truth that Paul ascribes to them. In fact, in another Scripture verse, Paul speaks of love as a breastplate, while in these verses it is the breastplate of righteousness. In other words, let's not get too caught up in the details. Let's simply recognize that the soldier's full armor was vital for his protection, just as all of these gifts of God are vital for our struggle against evil.

So put on the belt of truth, that you are prepared to battle against the devil's lies. We find that truth in one place, where God has revealed it to us, his Holy Bible. Put on the breastplate of righteousness so that none of the devil's accusations may harm you. This, of course, is Christ's righteousness, which he has given to you. Instead of a soldier's sandals, prepare your feet with the readiness of the gospel of peace. This is the sure knowledge that your sins are forgiven, and so you are at peace with God. He is not your enemy, and you are not his enemy. Carry with you the shield of faith, ready to deflect all of the devil's attacks. Faith says that it is not your own works that have value before God, but Christ's work on your behalf. The helmet you wear is the helmet of salvation, which guards against despair or any suggestion that there is no hope, or that the battle is not worth fighting. And, finally, pick up the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Rely on his Word, and not on the word of any man.

Do you see what putting on the full armor of God looks like in your lives? It means each and every day turning to God and his Word, being fed regularly by his sacrament of Holy Communion. It looks like participating in worship services and Bible studies or Sunday School. It looks like having devotional time daily. It means taking to heart God's Word with its warnings and with its assurances.

And there is one more weapon that God gives you in the battle. Paul says, **"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 saints."** If your strength depends on God, shouldn't we be asking him for that strength? Shouldn't we call on him in all our troubles? As we are strengthened by the Spirit in God's Word, we will pray on all sorts of occasions and bring to God prayers for all that affects us. "Be alert and keep on praying" reminds us to heed Jesus words also, **"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."** (Matthew 26:41). Do not fall asleep as the devil goes about his work. Stay alert to his lies and empty promises, to his deceit and temptations. And in particular, pray for all the saints, all of your brothers and sisters in the faith, that they too might remain strong and stand against the devil.

Paul closes this section of Ephesians with this encouragement: **"Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, 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."** This is not a selfish request on the part of Paul. With these words, Paul is reinforcing once again the importance of God's Word and especially the gospel in the lives of people. He was called to preach and proclaim that gospel, and in spite of the challenges, he appreciated prayers that he would faithfully do the work before him.

We, too, ought to pray for those who proclaim the gospel. Let us pray for missionaries who carry God's Word to foreign lands, and for missionaries who reach the lost in their communities here at home. Pray for our pastors, and for all pastors as they proclaim that they might do so boldly and faithfully.

You are not a Roman soldier, but you are in a battle, a battle for the salvation of your soul. God has laid before you all the tools, all that you need. You are a Christian soldier. Put on the armor of God, be alert, and pray.

The Text: Ephesians 6:10–20 (NIV84)

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, <sup>15</sup> and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup> Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. <sup>18</sup> 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 saints.

<sup>19</sup> Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, <sup>20</sup> for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.