

"Stand Firm."

Grace, peace, and mercy are yours from our God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Imagine the hot sun blazing down on a barren landscape in the Middle East. A military commander has told his people that in three days they will move out to begin a mission to take an enemy stronghold. Two Special Forces Operatives had returned with their assessment of the enemy's physical strength and psychological determination. This would be no ordinary battle in a very unconventional war with weapons unlike any ever seen.

As his army anxiously prepared for the invasion the commander heard from Higher Up these words: *"Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."* Joshua 1:6-9

Like a General to his troops, God wanted Joshua and his men to be confident as they were about to face the challenge for which they had prepared for 40 years. They needed to know that He would be with them through it all. Knowing and trusting that would give them the courage they would need to move into a frightening and dangerous future.

Paul has the same thing in mind for us in the reading from Ephesians we're focusing on today. ***"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."***

Today we finish our sermon series on Ephesians. Over the past number of weeks Paul

has reminded us what a wonder and blessing it is to be in Christ. This position of privilege has been given to us as a free gift of God's grace and as His children God wants us to live lives worthy of that call in Christ. We've heard him describe what that looks like as he urged us to **preserve the unity** we've been given; to be counter-cultural in the way we think and act, letting love and mercy direct our actions. He emphasized that this involves **"submitting to one another,"** that is, putting others need before our own wants and desires, and serving one another in our marriages, families, and in our congregation. Now, as he begins to wrap up his letter, he describes the challenge we face and the reason we can confidently face it.

The theme of this series has been: *"What in the world is the Church supposed to do?"* God wants us to be clear witnesses to the world of the love He has for people everywhere, the love that caused Him to send His Son to a cross for us. But Jesus Himself made it clear that the world would resist this message – as well as His messengers, you and me. So, like a good commander, Paul makes it clear who the enemy is and why how we can be prepared for it.

Paul minces no words as he declares that we are engaged in a war. He calls us to *"be strong"*, as we *wrestle* with our enemy and describes what we will need in order to *"stand firm"*. Living as God's people in this sinful world is not just a stroll down the lane, putting in time until Jesus returns. There's a war on. But it's not a war over land or politics or power. It's a war for the souls of people.

Make no mistake, living the Christian life is difficult at times. Luther said that there are at least three forces which oppose us this side of heaven, enemies which work hard to turn us away from God – the world, the devil, and our own sinful flesh. And if we accept the challenge to live as children of God we will face opposition. It will be a constant struggle. Therefore, God calls us to know our true Enemy.

Any military strategist will tell you to learn all you can about your enemy, their strengths and weaknesses. That enemy is revealed in vs. 12: ***"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.”***

Paul tells us here who the enemy is not. Our real enemy is not “*flesh and blood*”. We have soldiers around the world fighting terrorists and working to defeat something that, by all accounts, is truly terrible and evil. They need our support and prayers as they face danger each and every day. But, you know what? Ultimately, the enemy isn’t any single leader, the Taliban, or even ISIS. These may be the foot soldiers but they aren’t the real enemy.

The real struggle, the real war, is against the “***spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.***” Don’t misunderstand this. It’s easy to hear “spiritual” and think “not real.” Spiritual sounds like something that lacks substance but that’s far from the truth. Just because something is said to be spiritual and not physical doesn’t make it any less real or any less dangerous. In fact, quite the opposite.

Believe it or not poll after poll indicates that more than half of those who identify themselves as Christians believe that when the Bible speaks of the devil it is just describing a symbol of evil and not a real being. No wonder Paul is so adamant about declaring who the real enemy is. Jesus, Paul and other writers of the Bible, tell us that the devil schemes, that he’s crafty, deceitful, the “father of lies”. Satan wants nothing less than the destruction of everything God loves – especially you and me. We must never doubt that.

Unfortunately, as Christians, we spend an awful lot of time and energy battling one another and non-Christians. But we must remember that not only are our fellow Christians not the enemy, neither are unbelievers. They’re “prisoners of war” so to speak; people who have been taken captive by the devil. As collaborators they still bear responsibility for any evil acts they commit. People can’t excuse themselves by simply saying the “devil made me do it”. But in a very real way, they really are victims of the most malignant force that exists.

It’s crucial to remember that Satan is at the center of the evil in our world today. This helps us to view those who don’t know Christ with a much more compassionate heart. This is a real war with a real enemy, and Satan is that Enemy. He’s that old serpent who, in the garden

tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. He's the father of lies who boldly confronted Jesus after His baptism. He's the prince of this world who rules through deception and trickery. He's the roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Let there be no doubt, the devil is an evil and destructive being against which we must be vigilant. But on the other hand, we must remember that he has already been defeated.

That makes Paul's words also a declaration of victory. There is no doubt about this war. The outcome is certain. We may not know how long each of us will be engaged in this war (until the Lord comes back or we go to be with Him); we may not know how each skirmish will go. But we do know this – Satan is defeated and will one day be judged for the evil he has done.

And this is also important. Notice that Paul doesn't tell the Ephesians to "be strong because of their faith"; or "because of their works"; or "because of they go to church." Rather, he points us to the true POWER in our lives: **"Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might."** (v. 10) Those words take us all the way back to chapter one where Paul prayed that we would know: **"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,"** It's God's power that enables you and me to "walk worthy", to be strong, to stand firm. The power isn't from us. Any power we have is because we are in Christ through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

And finally, Paul's words are a call to arms. An army has to be equipped with the latest and best weapons of battle in order to be fully prepared for battle. Over the past few years we heard about a huge array of modern weapons. These are incredibly impressive, even frightening in the destruction they can bring upon people. But David, got it right when he wrote in Psalm 20: **"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright."** Ultimately, the victory is ours not through any human technology but through the power and name of God.

That's why Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God in verses 13-17. It's been said that

this armor can be understood as armor that God provides. I prefer to think of it as armor that is God Himself. Notice that names of those pieces of equipment – **truth, righteousness, gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God**. This is nothing less than God Himself. God says we need to clothe ourselves with Him. This is very similar to what Paul says both in Romans and in Galatians when he says: ***“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”*** We are fully covered with Christ. He is the only armor on which we can fully rely.

You are in a war...each and every day. And it isn't a conventional war by any means. Nor is it a war we're used to fighting. The enemy is deceitful, devious, and sly. And He will do anything, will stoop to any level; will try every dirty trick in the book; violate all Geneva Conventions for he wants nothing less than your soul.

But you have a God who is infinitely more powerful than the devil. As John wrote: ***“Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”*** You aren't able to stand firm against the devil on your own. But thank God you don't have to. You stand firm in the power of God who, in Christ has already defeated Satan; the victory is ours; the outcome is certain. That's why you can stand firm. And you can know that God is with you whatever you may face in this spiritual battle.