

Strong in the Lord

M. W. Bassford, 2-12-12

As we saw during our Lord's Supper lesson, the power of Jesus is quite literally supernatural. During His ministry, He did things that no unaided human can do, and His miraculous actions established that His spiritual promises were true too. Because this is so, we have no reason to doubt that the power of Jesus can work in our lives as well.

In fact, this is something that the apostle Paul encourages in Ephesians 6:10. As all of us know, being a Christian is not the easiest thing in the world. Sometimes, we feel like we are under siege spiritually, that every day brings another assault against our faith and our happiness. If our perception is that we can't make it on our own, that's exactly right. If it were possible for us to please God without help, Jesus would never have had to die on the cross.

Instead, friends, every single Christian who makes it to heaven is going to make it through God's grace and Jesus' help. Without them, we're doomed. With them, we cannot fail. However, this doesn't mean that we can put our lives on spiritual autopilot and wait for Jesus to do it all. There are churches out there that teach this. They claim that people who have been properly sanctified by Jesus can go for years without sinning. Of course, there's nothing in the Bible that teaches this. What's more, I suspect that a study of these people's lives would disprove their claim anyway.

This tells us, then, that we must strike a spiritual balance. On the one hand, we can't look to make it on our own without God's help. On the other hand, we can't expect Him to do all the heavy lifting for us while we relax. As always, the Scripture helps us strike this balance by telling us how we can expect the power of Jesus to work in us. He doesn't allow us to be lazy, but He will give us the help we need. Let's see how this works as we learn to be strong in the Lord.

Finding the Lord's Strength

Paul gives us some basic ideas about how to put the power of Jesus to work in our lives, and even why it's necessary to do so, in Ephesians 6:11-13. This section is important first of all because it tells us **HOW TO BE STRONG**. It tells us what we can expect from God, and by implication, what we can't expect. Right on the heels of Paul's injunction in v. 10 to be strong in the Lord, he exhorts us to put on the whole armor of God. Clearly, Paul hasn't switched contexts in two verses. Instead, the way that we become strong is by donning that heavenly armor.

This is an extremely important spiritual idea. Armor is not a soldier. Armor is a tool that a soldier uses to become effective. Without armor, the soldier is reduced to fighting with rocks and tree branches and whatever else he can scrounge up. He can't compete against someone who is properly equipped. However, without the soldier, the armor sits there in a pile and doesn't accomplish anything. The soldier does the fighting, but the armor helps him win.

This, friends, is the help that we can expect from God, no more and no less. God still expects us to fight our own spiritual battles. However, He will supply us with the equipment that we need to win, and as long as we wield that equipment properly, we will win. Could God do more than that? Could He make us into robots that don't have any choice but to obey Him? He could, but that wouldn't help us develop properly, and it wouldn't glorify Him. Only the free-willed soldier who chooses to fight and win can bring honor to His name. That's what He wants from us.

In the next section, Paul tells us **WHY WE NEED GOD'S STRENGTH**. If we were fighting earthly foes, we could use earthly weapons in the battle. I suspect that some of the members here own enough firearms that they could easily equip the rest of us, although I probably still couldn't be trusted to hit a target without divine intervention. However, that's not the conflict that we're faced with. We're not fighting al-Qaida or the Taliban. We're fighting the devil and his minions, foes that no sword can cut and no gun can shoot. Earthly weapons are useless against them.

Instead, if we're fighting a spiritual battle, we need to equip ourselves with spiritual armaments, and the only One who can give us these unearthly weapons is God. Their impact may not be visible in the material world, but without them, we will die the invisible death of the spirit that so many have died before us. Our enemies are that deadly. However, when we are properly equipped, we can fight the forces of evil to a standstill.

The Armor of God

When we have all of this equipment assembled together, it constitutes the whole armor of God. By the way, in the hymn "Soldiers of Christ, Arise", when we sing about "the panoply of God", this is what we're singing about. A panoply is an entire head-to-toe suit of armor. In fact, the word in the Greek in vs. 13 is *panoplia*. If we translate that, we get "whole armor". If we transliterate it, we get "panoply." Charles Wesley knew that, and he put it in the hymn.

We learn what comprises the panoply of God in Ephesians 6:14-17. The first element of this martial array is **THE BELT OF TRUTH**. Scholars tell us that the role of the belt in an ancient suit of armor wasn't just to hold the soldier's pants up. Instead, we might think of it as an equipment harness. Without it, a lot of other important things are unsupported and fall to the ground. In the Christian panoply, truth fills this essential role.

As far as I can tell, this isn't talking about the extrinsic truth of the gospel. After all, we'll be seeing the word of God assigned another function in a few verses. Instead, this is talking about the basic honesty that must be intrinsic to

the Christian. We must be truthful in what we tell others, we must be truthful about what we read in the Scripture, and we must tell the truth to ourselves about who we are. These are not ideas that are common in the world. Many outsiders will just as soon lie to you as look at you, and there are just as many others whose entire lives are founded on self-deception. If we want to go to heaven, we can't be like that. Everything in our lives must be based on truth.

Next, we must put on **THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS**. In the time of Paul, full suits of armor like we think of knights wearing hadn't been invented yet. Instead, the primary piece of body armor that a soldier wore was the breastplate. Its role was to serve as the last line of defense. If the soldier wasn't able to dodge an enemy's attack or block it with his shield, he depended on his breastplate to turn the blow and keep it from hurting him.

In the same way, friends, it is our sense of righteousness that is our last line of defense. This conception of what is right and wrong can't be based on what we think. The devil is easily able to find the weak spots in an untrained conscience and use that to destroy us. Instead, our sense of ought must be trained by the word of God. God has told us what is right, and we need to make obedience to Him into our second nature. I can think of times in my life when the devil got me down to my last line of defense, when I decided not to do something I wanted to do simply because I knew it wasn't right. This isn't the kind of defense that we can prepare on the spot. The devil doesn't usually give us the opportunity to do a word study before we decide whether we're going to sin. Our best protection is to be trained already.

The Christian must also be equipped with **THE SANDALS OF READINESS**. Unlike most of the other items on this list, we are familiar with the basis of the metaphor here. We know why we wear shoes. They protect the feet, and they enable us to walk where we otherwise would not go for fear of hurting ourselves. When I was a little kid living in New Jersey, my parents had a number of holly trees growing in the backyard. If I didn't have any shoes on, I didn't go anywhere near those holly trees, because I'd get my feet full of holly stickers. With shoes, I went wherever I wanted.

The spiritual equivalent of these sandals is probably the hardest thing to figure out in this context. It's not the gospel. As I observed a moment ago, we're going to see the gospel clearly identified in a little bit. Instead, as best as I can figure, the sandals are the readiness or the preparation that is imparted by the gospel. Here's how this works. Christians who don't know very much about the Scripture usually don't understand what God wants them to do, and they aren't motivated to do it. I've known brethren before who were afraid of getting an opportunity to study with an outsider, because they didn't know what to say if an opportunity did arise. In other words, they were kind of like five-year-old me, too afraid of holly stickers to go out in the backyard. On the other hand, though, if we do know the Scripture, we aren't afraid of the obstacles in the spiritual terrain. We are ready and able to serve God wherever He may need us.

Next, Paul wants us to be sure to pick up **THE SHIELD OF FAITH**. As we see from the picture on the screen, the Roman legionnaire's shield wasn't any kind of itty bitty buckler. Instead, it was huge. It covered him from shoulder to knee, and he could move it around to protect against threats to any other body part. Furthermore, as you may notice, the shield is rectangular rather than oval. This made it possible for soldiers in a formation to hold their shields against one another's without any gaps. Soldiers in the rear ranks could lift their shields overhead, essentially forming a roof made of shields for the entire formation. This was called a *testudo*, which is Latin for "turtle", and the Romans used it to protect their units whenever they came under missile attack. They got all kinds of use out of their shields.

As Christians, our shield is our faith. We all know from bitter experience that the devil is constantly launching arrows at all of us. He wants us to believe that the Bible is a lie, that we don't have to follow it to please God, that we would be happier if we didn't follow it, and a hundred other things beside. The only way that we can ward off all of these attacks is with our faith. The more we believe God, the less we believe the devil. What's more, when we put our faith together with the faith of our brethren, any one of us becomes almost invulnerable to this kind of attack. Once again, this isn't something that we can generate on our own. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

The final item of defensive gear that we encounter is **THE HELMET OF SALVATION**. Helmets, even though they look different, haven't changed much in 2000 years. Their purpose, whether for a Roman soldier or a construction worker, is to prevent injury to the head, because head injuries are so very serious. When I play first-person shooters, I go for head shots when I can, because that way, you can kill the bad guy with one shot instead of several.

What keeps the devil from one-shotting us is our salvation. Satan can still get Christians, make no mistake about it, but he has to work at it. Non-Christians, though, are dead meat. None of them stand a chance against him. This isn't because we're so much better than they are. It's because we are protected by our salvation, and they aren't.

Finally, we come to **THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT**. The sword of the Roman soldier was called a gladius. To us, it doesn't look impressive. The blade was only about two feet long. The Romans equipped their soldiers with such a seemingly small sword because they fought in a shield wall, where there wasn't room to swing a larger blade. They used the gladius for underhanded stabbing, and it was so effective at that that the Romans conquered the world.

Our offensive weapon is the word of God. Unlike some of the other points in this context, this isn't about us learning from the word. It's about us using the word directly to teach others, whether inside or outside of the church. As is true of a literal sword, the skill with which we wield the sword of the Spirit depends on the time we spend practicing with it. There is no substitute for Bible study. However, if we put that time in, we can use the word to win every battle.